

# An Introduction to Africana Philosophy

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## Preface

This book came about through an odd series of circumstances. I was asked to write up a proposal for it while tending to the last rites for the man whose first and last name I share. Those were harrowing times. It was at the end of a year in which, through losing both my parents, I became an orphan. Proposing a text that invokes ancestors as witnesses was something I thought I would not have been able to bear. I found strength and inspiration articulating their contributions and representing this field for Cambridge University Press.

Africana philosophy has experienced growth among professional philosophers in the past two decades. Although this book explores a constellation of thought over the course of a millennium, pioneering work in the academy belongs to William R. Jones, Leonard Harris, and Lucius T. Outlaw for offering a way of writing about this field that has had enormous impact on its participants. The difference between them and their predecessors was that they brought the metaphilosophical question of African diasporic philosophy – its conditions of possibility – to the forefront of professional philosophical debates in the 1970s and 1980s. It was a privilege to enter the academy in the 1990s on the shoulders of their pioneering work. An even greater privilege is this opportunity to advance my position on the problematics they have outlined. My own work argues for the expansion of philosophical categories. Thus, when the question of introducing the field of Africana philosophy became concrete in my agreement to write this book, it became clear to me that the text itself required philosophical inquiry. How, in other words, does one introduce an area of philosophy whose basis has been a challenge to philosophy and related fields such as political theory and intellectual history?

The task at hand transcended the history of philosophy by demanding an interrogation of the distinction between historical work in philosophy and

philosophical work in the history of ideas. This is not my first encounter with such issues. I raised such questions in 1995 in the introduction to my book *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, when I argued against the tendency to reduce black thinkers to their biographies and to treat them as writers without ideas. I saw my efforts as engagements with Fanon's thought rather than writing on him. A study of Karl Jaspers who, like Fanon, was a psychiatrist who wrote philosophical work in the middle of violent events, would be remiss if it offered only a biographical account. And even if such an endeavor were announced, the author would be expected to explain and evaluate Jaspers's *thought*. A similar concern would be raised in a biographical study of John Locke, another philosopher who was also a physician.

As a study of Western philosophy would seem odd if it focused on the philosophers but not their ideas, one on Africana philosophy requires also engaging the thought raised by such a constellation of thinkers. An additional difficulty is that this project involves the examination of thought by professional philosophers and contributions by other thinkers whose identity is not necessarily that of philosophers. For some professional philosophers such a path stimulates much suspicion. I recall an emeritus colleague's recount of his experience at an august American institution in the 1950s, when he consulted the director of graduate studies (DGS) about asking Paul Tillich to be his main advisor. The DGS responded, "Why do you want to work with him? He is a thinker, not a philosopher."

Africana philosophers could not afford to abandon thought for professional recognition. The road to inclusion continues to be a rocky one, with obstacles that include the inability of professional philosophy to affect the vision of many professional philosophers. In spite of philosophical demands on the category, it continues to be a stretch for many white philosophers to see Africana philosophers as human beings, and even more so as philosophers. This form of polite racism, in which Africana philosophers are often more tolerated than engaged, has occasioned an almost neurotic situation for Africana philosophers. Is there any way of responding to such behavior by custodians of reason other than by advancing reason? Would not such a response ultimately rely more on faith or devotion than anything else? This question of human minimum affects dynamics of appearance. Who are Africana philosophers? Who counts as an Africana philosopher? Is there Africana philosophy? If so, what is it? These kinds of question presuppose an initial absence. Introducing Africana philosophy is, to use a phrase wrought

with significance in the African diasporic context, an act of unveiling. Since the thought unveiled is one that has been around for some time, the tale to be told is one of disappearance as well as reappearance. But what returns is not exactly as it has been before. There was not, after all, a panoramic discussion of African diasporic philosophy as offered here. In effect, this organization of what has been is the advancement of something new.

Africana philosophy offers the appearance of a people with the articulation of ideas. Most of them are now in the pantheon of witnesses known in this tradition of thought as the ancestors. I hope I have done justice to them.

There are those among the living to whom I owe much gratitude. The first is Hilary Gaskin for her commitment to bringing this area of research to the oldest continuous publishing house. Her faith and patience are immeasurably appreciated. I presented some of the ideas in this book at the 2006 meeting of the Philosophy Born of Struggle Society conference at the New School University and then as a public lecture hosted by the Africana Studies Department, the Philosophy Department, and the Humanities Center at Stony Brook University. Thanks to J. Everet Green and Leonard Harris for organizing the former and David Clinton Wills and the welcoming community of colleagues at Stony Brook for the latter. I also presented some of these ideas through a series of lectures as the Metcalfe Chair in Philosophy at Marquette University that year and the Political Theory Workshop at the University of Pennsylvania. I would like to thank the members of the philosophy department at Marquette, especially Michael Monahan, for their generosity and the theorists in the department of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, especially Anne Norton and Rogers Smith, for their valuable feedback. I also benefited from comments from the following scholars who read the manuscript closely: Molefi Asante, Myron Beasley, Doug Ficek, David Fryer, Leonard Harris, Paget Henry, Joan Jasak, Kenneth Knies, Anthony Monteiro, Marilyn Nissim-Sabat, Neil Roberts, Jean-Paul Rocchi, Susan Searls-Giroux, Kwasi Wiredu, and the anonymous referees at Cambridge University Press. The text also benefited from Shabbat discussions with Walter Isaac, Gregory Graham, Frank Castro, Qrescent Mason, Devon Johnson, Denene Wambach, and José Muniz.

No one, however, has read this text more closely and has offered more suggestions at every stage of the project than Tom Meyer and Jane Anna Gordon. Their eye for precision and abilities as the proverbial devil's

advocates have made them my most trusted colleagues at Temple. With Jane I am also fortunate that she has continued to be so much more, as the face I am lucky enough to see when I open my eyes each morning.

Thanks also to Mathieu, Jennifer, Sula, and Elijah Gordon for their love and patience as I devoted so much time to the completion of this book.

The two people to whom this book is dedicated are my mother and father. They have become ancestors. Through my brothers, children, and me, they continue to speak and remain loved.

# Introduction: Africana philosophy in context

Africana philosophy is a species of Africana thought, which involves theoretical questions raised by critical engagements with ideas in Africana cultures and their hybrid, mixed, or creolized forms worldwide. Since there was no reason for the people of the African continent to have considered themselves African until that identity was imposed upon them through conquest and colonization in the modern era (the sixteenth century onward), this area of thought also refers to the unique set of questions raised by the emergence of “Africans” and their diaspora here designated by the term “Africana.”<sup>1</sup> Such concerns include the convergence of most Africans with the racial term “black” and its many connotations.<sup>2</sup> Africana philosophy refers to the philosophical dimensions of this area of thought.

There is, however, perhaps no greater controversy in philosophy than its definition. As we will see even the claim to its etymological origins in the Greek language is up for debate.<sup>3</sup> This may seem rather odd since the word “philosophy” is a conjunction of the ancient Greek words *philia*, which means a form of respectful devotion, often defined as “brotherly love,” and *sophia*, which means “wisdom.” The source of controversy is that it could easily be shown, as scholars such as the Argentinean philosopher, historian, and theologian Enrique Dussel, the Irish political scientist and archaeolinguist

<sup>1</sup> For discussion see V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988); Lucius T. Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996), ch. 4; and Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), ch. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> See Théophile Obenga’s discussion of the etymology of “philosophy,” which he argues is not of Greek but African origin, in his book, *Ancient Egypt and Black Africa* (Chicago, IL: Karnak House, 1992), pp. 49–53. See also his *African Philosophy: The Pharaonic Period, 2780–330 BC* (Popenguine, Senegal: Ankh, 2004).

Martin Bernal, and the Congolese philosopher, historian, and archaeologist Théophile Obenga have demonstrated, that these words are transformed versions of ancient Phoenician and Hittite words, which in turn are varied and adopted words from the Old Kingdom of ancient Egypt.<sup>4</sup> The work of these scholars alerts us to a tendency to limit the historical reach in etymological and archaeological work. To end one's search for the origin of Western words in the Graeco-Latin classical past is to treat that world as civilizations that emerged, literally, *ex nihilo*, out of nothing or nowhere. They too had to have been built on earlier civilizations, and with that came even more archaic linguistic resources. Put differently, all languages, at least in the basic stock of organizing grammar and terms, are built on the linguistic foundations of the most primordial human languages and thus, logically, on early human beings and the geographical terrain from which they came. A prime example is the word "Egypt," which is based on the ancient Greek *Aigyptos*, which was in turn based on the Amarnan word *Hikuptah* (or *Ha[t]kaptah*), which was one of the names of what is today known as Memphis. The ancient indigenous peoples referred to the civilization that encompassed a vast region of north-east Africa as *Km.t*, today often written as *Kam*, *Kamit*, or *Kemet*, which means "black lands" or "dark lands." As we will see, this is not the only instance of the imposition of representing an entire network of kingdoms, or even an entire continent, under the name of one of its parts. Crucial here is the story that is revealed by pushing etymology a little bit further. The upshot of this call for a more radical linguistic archaeology is that it challenges an organizing myth in the study of Western intellectual history and the history of philosophy – the notion of ancient Greece as the torch from which the light of reason was brought into history and then on to the rest of humanity. The most famous example, in recent times, was Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) famous encomium and effort to draw upon the reflections of the pre-Socratics for a more direct engagement with beings themselves.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See Enrique D. Dussel, "Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 465–78; Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization (The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985, vol. 1)* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987) and *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to His Critics*, ed. Martin Bernal and David Chioni Moore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), and Obenga, *African Philosophy*.

<sup>5</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 1962). My subsequent etymological references should, thus,

Although it does not follow that the elements of a concept in the present entail the presence of the concept in the past, for concepts could exist independently and in terms of very different life challenges in their differing times, and the organization of those elements could be what was uniquely brought together by subsequent civilizations, it is also the case that some concepts echo older ones as part of an ongoing problematic governed by the precepts of mythic life. Thus, the question of how one engages reason is crucial for the understanding of the development of philosophy, in addition to understanding that its etymology suggests that such intellectual activity was not conducted in isolation.

The critics of the claim that the Greeks invented philosophy have shown that this notion was a creation of European Renaissance intellectuals, many of whom wanted a connection to a classical past that brought coherence to the rapidly changing world that was eventually created by the age of modern exploration (which began in the fifteenth century and ended by the late eighteenth century) or the scramble to reach India, which was in medieval times regarded by Mediterranean peoples as the center of the world. Being west of center, it was their hope to find a short cut around a believed-smaller globe. The commerce stimulated by the shift to the Atlantic Ocean decimated the status of the Mediterranean as a site of sea trade, and the realization of continents to the west that were not Asian led to a literally new “orientation” of those people’s perspective. Once west of the center, the new alignment created a geological and political shift in which a new “center” was born.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, as Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, and Cedric Robinson have shown, there is an important missing element in this narrative of expansion.<sup>7</sup> That element is the fact that the Mediterranean world as far north as most of the Iberian Peninsula was ruled under the name of

be distinguished from the kinds Heidegger had in mind, and although I may not always go further for the sake of brevity, the reader should at all times take these exercises as encouragement for further inquiry.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Enrique Dussel, *Beyond Philosophy: Ethics, History, Marxism, and Liberation Theology*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), especially ch. 3, “The ‘World-System’: Europe as ‘Center’ and Its ‘Periphery’ beyond Eurocentrism,” pp. 53–84.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*; Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, 2nd edn (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Cedric Robinson, *An Anthropology of Marxism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

al-Andalus by the Moors (black, brown, and “red” Muslims from Africa) for nearly eight hundred years. A crucial, and often overlooked, dimension of the fifteenth-century expansion of Christendom was that 2 January 1492 was marked by the victory of Queen Infanta Isabella I of Castile (1451–1504) and King Fernando de Aragón or King Ferdinand V of Castile (1452–1516) in *Reconquista* (reconquest), which was achieved by pushing the Moors southward back into Africa. Reconquest is an appropriate term since Iberia went from Vandals to Visigoths, who exemplified Germanic Catholic conquest until falling to the Muslim Moors. The Christian reconquest continued through an edict on 31 March expelling nearly 200,000 Jews and forcing the conversion of other non-Christians, and spread with a tide onto the African continent and into the seas, where investments paid off in the form of Columbus’s landing on the shores of the Bahamas on 12 October of the same year. Some of these events are recounted by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) in his discussion of Ferdinand:

In our own times we have Ferdinand of Aragon, the present king of Spain. This man can be called almost a new prince, since from being a weak ruler, through fame and glory he became the first king of Christendom. If you consider his deeds you will find them all very grand, and some even extraordinary. In the beginning of his reign he attacked Granada, and that enterprise was the basis of his state . . . Besides this, in order to be able to undertake great enterprises, he had recourse to a pious cruelty, always employing religion for his own purposes, chasing the Marranos out of his kingdom and seizing their property. No example of his actions could be more pathetic or more extraordinary than this. He attacked Africa under the same cloak of religion.<sup>8</sup>

The making of this new “center” was not, then, solely a commercial affair but also a military one and, subsequently, a racial-religious one, for the darker populations of people were pushed more southward in a war that continued back and forth throughout the modern world as Christianity sometimes dominated but Islam fought back well into the present. Another outcome was the mixed population of north Africa becoming dominated by lighter peoples than in its ancient and medieval past, with the consequence today of that region being considered more a part of the Middle

<sup>8</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), ch. 21, p. 76.

East than the African continental world on which it rests and in which it resides.<sup>9</sup>

This new center sought explanations for its emergence, and it did so through an increasingly eroded sense of inferiority as it looked farther westward. Now being neither East nor West, the many kingdoms and small states that comprised today's Portugal, Spain, and Italy began to develop a new consciousness, one in which "Europe," as we now understand it as a geopolitical place, was born; with that new consciousness, the notion of this new being ever having suffered a disconnection from the mechanisms of its emergence began to erode. Europeans began to forget that there was not always a Europe. As Cedric Robinson relates:

Reviewing a map of the Old World, one inevitably discovers that Europe is not a continent but a peninsular projection from a continent. It might as easily have come to be known as the Asian continent. In point of fact the continent became the locus of several civilizations, most if not all of them prior to the invention of Europe. Indeed, Europe as the marker of a distinct civilization came into being as a colonial backwater of the ancient civilizations which had appeared and flourished in Asia, the Indus Valley, the Near East, and Africa. As such it would be anachronistic, at least, to state that the development of Europe – which is normally assigned at the close of the Dark Ages (6th to 11th centuries) – required access to the non-European world. The more significant error, however, is the presumptive one: since there was no Europe, the notion of the non-European conceals the truer positivity; that is, Europe emerged from the negation of the real. In order to fabricate Europe, institutional, cultural and ideological materials were consciously smuggled into this hinterland from afar by kings and popes, episcopals, clerics, and monastic scholars. No reality, then, substantiates the imagined, autonomous European continent.<sup>10</sup>

The European began to develop a sense of the self in which there was supposedly a primal, mythical exemplification of wisdom itself, and the place

<sup>9</sup> See Mignolo, *The Darker Side*, and Dussel, "Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism" and *Beyond Philosophy*. An often overlooked element of this conflict is that the African populations also enslaved white Christians whose descendants became part of the north African Muslim populations; for discussion see e.g. Robert Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast and Italy, 1500–1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and *Golden Age of the Moor*, ed. Ivan Van Sertima (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, *An Anthropology*, p. 33.

that became the epitome of this sense of self became Hellenic civilization, a place whose foundational role took racialized form in nineteenth-century scholarship on the history of philosophy.<sup>11</sup>

We encounter at the outset a unique problem in Africana philosophy. The love of wisdom seems to have a history fraught with racial and ethnic allegiance. The notion that philosophy was a peculiarly European affair logically led to the conclusion that there was (and continues to be) something about European cultures that makes them more conducive to philosophical reflection than others. But the problem that immediately emerges is one of accounting for and supporting such a claim when the people we call Europeans were (and continue to be) constantly changing. Just as the global concept of the African emerged in the modern world, so too did the notion of the European. In many ways, as we will see, the two concepts are symbiotically related.<sup>12</sup>

The notion of Europeans' intrinsic connection to philosophy is, in other words, circular: it defines them as philosophical in the effort to determine whether they were philosophical. The effect is that the many Germanic groups who were considered barbarians to the ancient Greeks, Romans, Phoenicians, and Egyptians become realigned genealogically into the very groups who denied them membership. Thus, it really becomes the identification with ancient classical civilizations that determines the European identity instead of the link in itself from the ancient to the modern worlds.

To conclude that the kinds of intellectual activity that were called philosophical in the past and have joined the fold in the present were thus limited to one group of people, most of whom were artificially lumped together to create false notions of unity and singular identity, requires a model of humanity that does not fit the facts. The first, and most obvious one, is that philosophical activity existed in ancient China at least a few thousand

<sup>11</sup> Bernal, in *Black Athena*, outlines the scholarship that framed this interpretation of the past; but for the best-known example in philosophy, see G. W. F. Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*, with prefaces by Charles Hegel and the translator, J. Sibree, and a new introduction by C. J. Friedrich (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).

<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Wynter, one of the scholars whom we will later discuss, has written quite a bit on the shared dynamics that created Europe and Africa and the modern world. See discussions of this theme in *After Man, Towards the Human: Critical Essays on the Thought of Sylvia Wynter*, ed. B. Anthony Bogues (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2006) and *The Sylvia Wynter Reader*, ed. B. Anthony Bogues (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, forthcoming).

years before Thales of Miletos (624–526 BCE), the first known Greek philosopher, attempted to figure out the constitution of the universe. The *I Ching*, for instance, is generally believed to have been written in about 2852 BCE.<sup>13</sup> Although an objection could be made, as did Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), that ancient Chinese philosophy is more mystical and lacks a sophisticated treatment of nature, and that a similar claim holds for ancient and traditional African philosophy, I would encourage, in response, the following pedagogical experiment.<sup>14</sup> After introducing students to such works, present any collection of pre-Socratic philosophy for their perusal. I do just that when I teach courses on African philosophy, and the students immediately see the point: philosophers of color engaging with the same questions are treated as naive, simple, or mystical but ancient Greek philosophers are revered for their supposed genius, or, in Heideggerian language, their attunement with beings instead of Being. We need not, however, pick on Heidegger. Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) goes to great lengths to spell out the sophistication of nearly every effort of the pre-Socratics, and that nearly every work that comes out under the title “ancient philosophy” pretty much ignores the rest of the ancient world continues to exemplify this prejudice.<sup>15</sup>

The second fact is that the unique upheavals associated with the development of philosophy – cross-fertilization of cultures; abstract and logical reasoning; collapse in concrete manifestations of authority, which stimulates critical reflection – are all found in earlier civilizations such as Egypt/Kamit and Kush. Think, as well, of mathematics. Wherever human communities are large enough to stimulate anonymous relationships

<sup>13</sup> See *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, new edn, trans. Richard John Lynn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951). I focus on Chinese thought because Jaspers criticized it. The argument could apply to Egypt/Kamit as well, where thought often focused on problems of value and the fragments that remain are often those from ritualistic contexts. The most famous are perhaps the funeral rites prepared by Ani and now known as *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth by Day*, 2nd rev. edn, trans. Raymond O. Faulkner, introduction by Ogden Goelet, preface by Carol Andrews, and produced by James Wasserman (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2000); but see as well the twelfth-dynasty (c. 1991–1786 BCE) text *Debate between a Man Tired of Life and His Soul [ba]*, trans. R. O. Faulkner. Available online at the following URL: <http://nefertiti.iwebland.com/locmntl/hotfreebies.html>.

<sup>15</sup> See Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

between people and the organization of social life, mathematics is necessary.<sup>16</sup> Whether it is among the ancient cities of Africa, Asia, or those of the Americas, the reality is that some degree of mathematics is needed for the ongoing operations of civil society. It is difficult to imagine such development without some of the abstract problems raised even by basic mathematics, such as infinity (counting in sequence from whole numbers onward) and infinitesimality (fractions).

We have then come to a basic aspect of philosophical thought. All such thought is reflective and abstract. Philosophy emerges where problems that stimulate critical reflection come to the fore. By critical reflection I mean subjecting each assumption to conditions of evidence, rational assessment, or reason. But simply thinking about one's assumptions and prejudices, while a necessary aspect of philosophical work, is insufficient to make such thought itself philosophical. Thought transcends mere critical reflection when it begins to raise certain questions. These include, but are not limited to, "What is there? How should we conduct our lives? What can we know? How is knowledge possible? How do we know what we know? What matters most? Why is there something instead of nothing? What must be the case?" or "What is reality? What kinds of things can be otherwise? How should we organize living together?" In academic philosophy these questions are associated with specialized areas of inquiry: ontology, ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, and political philosophy. Understanding that all areas of philosophical inquiry have correlated fundamental questions should make it clear that this is not an exhaustive list. To it could be added, for example, aesthetics ("What is beautiful and what is ugly? What are the conditions for something to be transformed into the interesting – for example, a work of art?"), the philosophy of logic ("What are valid and cogent arguments, and what are their ontological, metaphysical, or epistemological implications?"), and, more familiar, the philosophy of existence ("How is life meaningful? What does it mean to emerge, to live, to exist?"). And then there is metaphilosophy

<sup>16</sup> See one of the many texts on ancient mathematics, such as Gay Robins and Charles Shute, *The Rhind Mathematical Papyrus: An Ancient Egyptian Text* (New York: Dover, 1990); Corinna Rossi, *Architecture and Mathematics in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Christopher Cullen, *Astronomy and Mathematics in Ancient China: The "Zhou Bi Suan Jing"* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Frank Swetz and T. I. Kao, *Was Pythagoras Chinese? An Examination of Right Triangle Theory in Ancient China* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977); and Richard Mankiewicz, *The Story of Mathematics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

or the philosophy of philosophy. This includes all the reflections on philosophy from antiquity to the present, such as “What is the significance of thinking? What is *this kind of thinking* which devotes itself to thinking?”

Plato, for example, in his *Symposium*, took the question of *eros* (erotic love) and transformed it into a discussion of what it means to love Socrates (the lover of wisdom or the *philosophon*). Writing through the voice of Socrates’ lover, Alcibiades, Plato, rather poignantly, argued that loving the philosopher (and by implication loving the wise or wisdom) entailed encountering that which at first appeared very ugly yet revealed an inner core so beautiful that it was “intoxicating.”<sup>17</sup> This is paradoxical because, as the term suggests, to be intoxicated is to be poisoned. And as is well known, as Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) later reminds us in his essay “Plato’s Pharmacy,” most medicines are also poisonous.<sup>18</sup> Philosophy is, in other words, something that is good for us but it is achieved through a process that is not at first appealing and often even dangerous, as revealed by the four texts that chronicle the last days of Socrates, one of which is marked by the memorable dictum, “I tell you that . . . examining both myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living.”<sup>19</sup>

This sense of philosophy as not immediately beautiful is a function of its difficulty. Philosophy requires hard work; it requires thinking in ways to which most of us are not used, and it often requires appealing to things that are not immediately evident.

Philosophers have also argued about which of the above questions is most important. We could call this the search for a *philosophia prima* or first philosophy. Depending on which one dominated which period and in which region, unique forms of philosophies have emerged. In China, for instance, the question of conduct was paramount in the thought of Confucius (*K’ung-fu-tzu*, 551–479 BCE), whereas among the Hindus and Buddhists of India concerns with reality affected questions of conduct as relevant only

<sup>17</sup> See Plato’s *Symposium* in *The Works of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 1965).

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. with introduction and notes by Barbara Johnson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

<sup>19</sup> I am of course referring to Plato’s *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, brought together, in addition to *The Works*, in *The Last Days of Socrates*, reprint edn, trans. Hugh Tredennick and ed. Harold Tarrant (London: Penguin Classics, 1993). The quotation is from the *Apology*, which appears on p. 63 of this compilation.

for achieving higher consciousness. In many African communities one would see much emphasis on conduct as well, but this would be misleading in cases where the basis of thinking about conduct flowed from an ontology in which reality itself had an originary moment of creation of all beings and ultimate value. The ontological and the axiological, or value, would be one.<sup>20</sup> And in different periods of Western civilizations the shift has gone from the good as paramount to the modern philosophical advancement of epistemology as first philosophy.<sup>21</sup> Some philosophers have mistakenly focused on only one of these questions as the only real philosophical question. This has led to views in which only ontological, epistemological, or ethical inquiries prevailed. Yet such conclusions are often contradicted by the fact that some of the best-known philosophers made no contribution to the areas chosen as the unique province of philosophy. Many political philosophers, for example, made no contributions to metaphysics or ontology; and many famous epistemologists made no contribution to ethics. And then there are the grand philosophers, such as G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), who seem to have touched on nearly every area of philosophical thought.

It could easily be shown, however, that thinking through one philosophical category or question eventually leads to another. Exploring what there is leads to the methodological question of how to go about such an inquiry, which leads to the epistemological question of the knowledge wrought from such thinking, which raises the ethical question of whether such thought ought to be pursued. We could even reflect on the beauty of such thought or on its political implications, as many critics of philosophy have charged and for which many philosophers had to provide a defense over the ages.<sup>22</sup> In addition to being lovers of wisdom and reason, then, philosophers

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Kwame Gyekye's discussion of Akan philosophy in *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, rev. edn (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. e.g. the distinction between Plato's *Republic* and René Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. See *The Works of Plato and René Descartes, Descartes' Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1952).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985) and Antonio Gramsci's *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1972) as well as the many reflections of John Dewey, such as those in his *The Reconstruction in Philosophy*, enlarged edn (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1957), and again Gyekye, *An Essay*.

are also paradoxically the greatest critics and defenders of philosophical thinking.

Philosophical thought is guided by reason. The meaning of reason is, however, a philosophical question. Most modern philosophers have attempted to fix reason through transforming it into a species of rationality. Others, such as David Hume (1711–1776), took this route and denied in *A Treatise of Human Nature* that reason could be anything else than what could be called instrumental rationality, which focuses simply on the means by which actions are achieved.<sup>23</sup> And then there are those who reject such approaches and argue that reason is the language in which things emerge as making sense. For some, such as René Descartes (1596–1650), Elisabeth von der Pfalz or Elisabeth of Bohemia or Princess Palatine (c. 1618–1680), or Quobna Ottobah Cugoano (c. 1757–c. 1803) this language is literally the thought or words of God.<sup>24</sup>

Many definitions of science are available in philosophical and scientific literature. Peter Caws, for instance, defines science as imagination constrained by evidence. To this definition we should add that scientists do not think imaginatively about everything but do so about one thing – namely, nature.<sup>25</sup> The famed contemporary physicist Sylvester James Gates agrees but adds that the concern of science is primarily descriptions of how things work. In his view the scientist is like someone who enters a house and is concerned with how it functions. The scientist does not question why the house exists, whether the house should exist, or even how to make it more beautiful. He or she simply asks how the lights are turned on, how

<sup>23</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin Classics, 1969).

<sup>24</sup> Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*; see also *Cartesian Women: Versions and Subversions of Rational Discourse in the Old Regime*, ed. Erica Harth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Jacqueline Broad, *Women Philosophers of the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Ottobah Cugoano, “Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery” and *Other Writings*, introd. and notes by Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin Classics, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Peter Caws, *Ethics from Experience* (Boston, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 1996). Some earlier efforts include *The Philosophy of Science: A Systematic Account* (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand, 1965) and *Science and the Theory of Value* (New York: Random House, 1967). See also his recent *Yorick's World: Science and the Knowing Subject* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993). For discussion of Caws's thought on science, see Lewis R. Gordon, “Making Science Reasonable: Peter Caws on Science Both Human and ‘Natural,’” *Janus Head: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology, and the Arts* 5, no. 1 (2002): 14–38.

the water flows, how the ceiling remains aloft, how the house stands up, and so forth, and in the physicist's case that house is physical reality.<sup>26</sup>

Religion, however, is concerned with questions such as who built the house (provided that the house has to have been built in the first place), for what purpose the house exists, and how we should live in the house. More, religion is concerned about what we should believe about the house and other sets of belief that follow from such beliefs. Although religion is not antipathetic to reason, it is not as reliant on reason as philosophy is. Religion, in other words, places faith in faith itself, in, by the end, what should be believed.

The poet, as one might guess, is not as constrained by evidence as the scientist or the philosopher or even the theologian. This is because, whereas the philosopher looks at reason, the scientist at nature, and the theologian at faith, the poet is guided by imagination itself without constraints beyond those internal to imaginative play.

All this leads to the following set of limits. Philosophy is guided by reason and questions that stop short of religion. It is not that philosophy cannot examine religious questions, but that it does so in philosophical terms, which means within the realm of reason. Religion, on the other hand, is willing to go where philosophy cannot, namely, within the realm of faith itself. And poetry has fewer limits. Science, on the other hand, is compelled to stop where philosophy begins. Science talks about the world (the house), but it is philosophy, ironically, that talks about science, religion, poetry, and philosophy itself. Although there is religious thought on philosophy and on poetry, it is bound by the dictates of faith, whether it is in a deity or a set of customs over the ages. Because of this, religion can speak to the part of us that wishes not to be alone in the universe. Whether it is from a voice without a speaker is a question that converges in philosophy and theology.<sup>27</sup>

Philosophical questions also pertain to conditions of possibility. These are what must be understood for there to be the emergence of a certain idea or concept. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) famously advanced such arguments

<sup>26</sup> Sylvester James Gates, Jr., "How Diversity Likely Matters in Science and Mathematics," Keynote Address, Caribbean Philosophical Association Conference (San Juan, Puerto Rico, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> These ideas can be consulted in Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*; Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940); Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).

in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) as transcendental ones, which he later, in *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), called “critical philosophy.”<sup>28</sup> They ask, “How is an idea possible?” “What ideas are necessary for the emergence of other ideas?” This famous turn in philosophy has influenced much of what most philosophers of all backgrounds have been doing since at least the nineteenth century. In part this is due to the world dominance of European civilization by that period. The influence of Kant’s thought on European thinkers meant that it would spread through places dominated by Europeans. Transcendentalism is, however, not limited to Kant’s formulations. Whereas Kant’s approach was directed at the conditions of concepts and experience, East Indian yogis were devoting their energy to the inner absence of all things meaningful that constituted, in their view, reality.

Along with the questions outlined thus far, there is one that dominates much of Africana philosophy and has become increasingly central since early modern times, namely, “What does it mean to be a human being?” Let us call the area of research associated with this question philosophical anthropology. Unlike anthropology, which is an empirical science, this area of philosophy examines problems raised by the human being as a subject of study. These problems include the difficulty of studying an object that is also the agent conducting the investigation. But more germane to our focus, philosophical anthropology is central in an area of thought that is dedicated to the understanding of beings whose humanity has been called into question or challenged in the modern era. The consequences of lost peoplehood, of denied humanness, are severe in that they lead to groups or kinds of people being treated as property (slavery), as waste to be eliminated (genocides, holocausts), as subhuman or animals (racism).

Returning to our initial question of the meaning of Africana philosophy, we have already defined Africana philosophy as an area of philosophical research that addresses the problems faced and raised by the African diaspora. Such an approach includes the centrality of philosophical anthropology. A reason for this focus is the historical fact of racism and colonialism in the modern era. Both phenomena led to the subordination of African peoples in the modern world. This degraded status involved political and

<sup>28</sup> These are well-known works by Kant. For commentary, see Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, trans. James Haden, introduction by Stephan Körner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

social scientific claims that pushed down and defined such people as lesser human beings, if as human beings at all. A peculiar set of problems emerges from this historical circumstance which, as we will see, come to the fore in Africana philosophy. These include the problem of the relation of the categories “black,” “African,” and “reason,” as well as discourses of African diasporic originality and imitation and the dynamics of Africana metaphilosophy. With regard to the last, there is a group of philosophers who see the fundamental questions of Africana philosophy to be prolegomena – that is, the conditions necessary for its possibility. (We see here the continued influence of Kant on modern philosophical thought.) Others, such as myself, have argued that Africana metaphilosophy faces the paradox that Africana philosophy is a living philosophy because many of its practitioners are willing to think beyond philosophy in ways that Kenneth Knies has characterized as “post-European science” or post-European philosophy.<sup>29</sup> The term I use in my own work, which will be discussed in the section on Africana phenomenology and existential philosophy, is a “teleological suspension of philosophy,” which, paradoxically, generates new philosophy by going beyond philosophy.<sup>30</sup>

Africana philosophy, in taking modern concerns such as race, racism, and colonialism seriously, explores problems of identity and social transformation, of the self and the social world, of consciousness and intersubjectivity, of the body and communicability, of ethics and politics, of freedom and bondage, to name several. Although stated here in couplets, it should be borne in mind that these are not necessarily opposing dualities. Their distinctions are, however, crucial for many of the debates in the field. In addressing them, other, older questions come to the fore with new meaning.

In the area of philosophy of history, the past and present raise problems of interpretation. Is the past, for instance, a set of purely contingent

<sup>29</sup> See Lewis R. Gordon, “African-American Philosophy, Race, and the Geography of Reason,” in *Not Only the Master’s Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), pp. 3–50 and Kenneth Danziger Knies, “The Idea of Post-European Science: An Essay on Phenomenology and Africana Studies,” in *Not Only the Master’s Tools*, pp. 85–106.

<sup>30</sup> I discuss this concept in more detail in Lewis R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), especially the introduction and ch. 1.

events without any overarching rationality or reason? Or, is the past a coherent movement of events whose eventual culmination is the resolution of all conflicts and contradictions? Although these questions are examined in Africana philosophy, there is also the question of how Africana philosophy is often excluded by racist attitudes toward its inclusion in the philosophical arena. And even when it is included, there is also the problem of retrospective inclusion. Putting aside the question of coherence in history, there is also the problem of whether Africana philosophy can simply be added to the history of ideas as currently constituted without seriously disrupting that field. And further, internal to Africana philosophy is the question of its own historical scope. Is it truly a peculiarly modern form of thought, as I asserted at the outset of this introduction? How coherent is it, for instance, to include ancient African thought in Africana philosophy when there was no reason for ancient Africans to have conceived of themselves as “African” in the first place? The analogue, as we have seen, would be “ancient European philosophy.” There was, however, no such thing. There was properly “ancient Athenian,” “ancient Ionian,” “ancient Macedonian,” or “ancient Roman,” “ancient Sicilian,” or “ancient Thracian” or “ancient Phoenician” philosophy. The same applies to ancient and medieval Asia. There was ancient Chinese and Indian philosophy, but there was no reason to regard them as Asian. Similarly, there was “ancient Egyptian/Kamitic,” “Axumitic,” and “Nubian” thought.

The “African” in our interpretation of ancient African thought must, then, be a modern imposition onto the past. This does not, however, mean that the cultural and historical foundations of the civilizations that have come to be known as “African” could not be those that we retrospectively consider by that name. We should, in other words, regard references to ancient African philosophy as similar to our use of the terms ancient Asian or ancient European philosophy. It is a term from the present that identifies a genealogical link to the past with the understanding that the term itself would be alien to those ancient civilizations.

These considerations of retrospective genealogical connections pertain, as well, to the history of the human species. Our species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, evolved on the African continent about 220,000 years ago and then spread across the planet at least by 50,000 years ago. What this means is that, retrospectively, nearly all of the research on the near primordial ancient past is about peoples whom we would today call Africans, who

eventually settled in the areas we now call Asia, Europe, and North and South America and came to be known as Asians, Europeans, and (Native) Americans.

We can, however, make the context of our discussion specific by focusing our discussion on the Latin word *Africanus*, which was already being used extensively by the Middle Ages. The origin of the word is uncertain. One story is that it was in honor of a black inhabitant of ancient Rome named Afer since the Romans referred to North Africa as *Africa terra* (“land of the Afri,” which is the plural for Afer). This is an unlikely story for many reasons. First, it presupposes that the presence of blacks in Rome was an unusual occurrence, which does not match the facts.<sup>31</sup> What we would today call black people have with certainty inhabited the southern Mediterranean for at least 30,000 years since they were the original groups of *Homo sapiens* who migrated there and met the Neanderthals already living there.<sup>32</sup> Second, there is admittedly something very odd about naming an entire group of conquered people after one of its members. It makes more sense that the conquered would do that with regard to the conquerors, as the indigenous people of the Caribbean had done. For instance, the 1492 encounter between the Old World and the New World resulted in a new way of looking at an old relationship, since today we think more to Cristóbal Colón for the meaning behind the modern use of the word colony, in spite of its being coined by Edmund Burke (1729–1797). I have traced its etymological roots as follows: at least from the Greek *klon*, which means “member” or “limb,” but also, without the accented “o,” means rectum. The Latin word *colonus*, meaning farmer, from which we get colony, is related to the Greek word not only in appearance but also in the historic fact that, by the time of European feudalism, farmers were mostly serfs serving landlords, and before that, as today, farms produced food for the cities but were also parts of the whole. In other words, whether in Athens, Rome, or Constantinople, farms were the periphery from which food was brought to the center; they were, in Roman terms, within their dominion. When Colón realized that the largest New World island, Hayti, had neither East Indian resources nor gold, but that the debts

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Frank M. Snowden, Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1970) and *The William Leo Hansberry African Notebook*. Vol. II: *Africa and Africans as Seen by Classical Writers*, ed. Joseph E. Harris (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Charles Finch, III, *Echoes of the Old Darkland: Themes from the African Eden* (Decatur, GA: Khenti, 1991).

for his expeditions had to be paid by other means, he literally sought profits from the blood and sweat of the indigenous people through agriculture, which entailed farmers becoming settlers but with a new set of relations since their proximity to the “center” was now remote. What is strange about this situation is that the harbinger of this new period should have so fitting a name.<sup>33</sup> After Columbus it was more likely that the conquering group produced such a dubbing as a vain testament to themselves, as rendering the conquered lands in their own image, as in the case of America, which was named after Amerigo Vespucci (1454–1512) by Martin Waldseemüller (c. 1470–c. 1522) in 1507.<sup>34</sup> This is not to say that the story is entirely impossible. We have, after all, already seen that the prevailing word Egypt has its source in only a part of ancient Kamit. But, third, there seems to be some etymological connection in the word that links it, unfortunately, to the many negative stereotypes already underway by the Middle Ages and the modern era. Although Afer was the Phoenician name of a group of indigenous people living near Carthage, based on the Phoenician word *afar*, which means “dust,” and became the Latin word for the lands on the southern side of the Mediterranean, the word is also peculiarly related to those such as “feral” (savage, wild), *ferris* (iron, which rusts). Remember that the people of Africa did not – indeed, could not – refer to themselves as such since Phoenician and Latin, or even the possible Greek source *aphrike* (“without cold”), were not from indigenous African languages, and, more, most had no reason to refer to themselves in continental terms since such an understanding of the world did not at that time exist for most, save, perhaps, the Egyptians/Kamites because of the Pharaoh Necho II’s (c. 609–593 BCE) sending an expedition of Phoenician ships around the continent in the seventh century BCE.

<sup>33</sup> See C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd edn (New York: Vintage, 1989); Tzevan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999) and Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of the “Other” and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995) for discussion of this transition. For discussion on Burke’s impact on the history of colonialism see Seamus Deane, *Foreign Affections: Essays On Edmund Burke* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> *The Cosmographiae Introductio of Martin Waldseemuller in Facsimile* (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, 1907, repr. 1969); a copy of the original 1507 text, published in Strasbourg, is available in the New York Public Library.

There was already a connection between linguistic and cosmological organizations of life across the peoples of east Africa and those eventually known as the people of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>35</sup> Those connections should be viewed as we use the terms “Latin” and “Germanic” and the more broad “Indo-European” to refer to those of Europe and western Asia. By the Middle Ages there was a growing notion of “Africa,” and the impact of trade across the continent also brought with it an exchange of ideas, especially along Judaic, Christian, and Muslim lines of thought; it was around this time that a sense of a black diasporic people began to be formed because of the Arabic and East Indian slave trades, both of which continue to this day.<sup>36</sup> The Atlantic slave trade signaled the beginning of the “modern” black diaspora and philosophical writings born from that historical development. It is in this sense, then, that Africana philosophy originates from medieval and modern contexts.

<sup>35</sup> Finch, *Echoes of the Old Darkland*; see also Finch, “From the Nile to the Niger: the Evolution of African Spiritual Concepts,” in *A Companion to African-American Studies*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), pp. 453–75. See also Graham Connah, *African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and, for a critical survey of recent debates on African civilizations, see Aaron Kamugisha, “Finally in Africa? Egypt, from Diop to Celenko,” *Race and Class* 45, no. 1 (2003): 31–60.

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of contemporary slavery see Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).