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."[1] Such concerns include the convergence of most Africans with the racial term "black" and its many connotations.[2] 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.[3] 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

[1] 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, *Existentia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), ch. 1.

[2] *Ibid*.

[3] 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.[4] 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 northeast 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.[5]

[4] 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. I) (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*.

[5] 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.[6]

Additionally, as Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, and Cedric Robinson have shown, there is an important missing element in this narrative of expansion.[7] 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.

[6] 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.

[7] *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.[8]

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

[8] 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.[9]

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.[10]

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

[9] 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).

[10] 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.[11]

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.[12]

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

[11] 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).

[12] 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.[13] 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.[14] 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.[15]

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

[13] 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).

[14] 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.

[15] 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.[16] 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

[16] 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."[17] 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.[18] 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."[19]

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

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

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

[19] 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.[20] 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.[21] 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.[22] In addition to being lovers of wisdom and reason, then, philosophers

[20] 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).

[21] 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).

[22] 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*.