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## To Philosophize is To Learn How to Live with Others: Notes on the Works of Anton Wilhelm Amo

Avram Alpert

What is the relationship between seemingly abstract philosophical categories and the specific things that philosophers write—or, in Anton Wilhelm Amo’s case, don’t write—about race and culture in their philosophical works? There remains a stubborn philosophical tendency on this point among contemporary scholars, primarily though not exclusively in the US and Europe. This tendency is simply to discard what a philosopher has to say about these matters as if it had no effect on the philosophy itself. Most scholars are perfectly willing to debate whether or not Immanuel Kant held racist opinions, or what Kant’s views on race are, but considerably fewer are willing to ask if Kant’s general philosophy—ideas, for example, of teleology in nature or the limits of reason in epistemology—may be impacted by what he has to say about race and culture.<sup>1</sup>

This refusal to engage is unfortunate for at least two reasons. First, it should not be a controversial issue for anyone—and I think this refers to most scholars—who thinks that concepts have histories. That is, most scholars would be willing to say that democracy has a history, that race has a history, that gender has a history, that scientific objectivity has a history—that these ideas are not transhistorical, but rather evolve and develop. And it would be no surprise to see that as these concepts transform, they retain traces of the problematic positions of their times. It is crucial to say clearly that these traces are *not* determinations: nothing is fully determined by these histories because they are complex and intertwined with the variety of positions articulated in any given moment. But the traces of past ideas still carry into the present, as in, for an obvious example, the ways in which doctors in the country where I was born, the US, are still less likely (based on accrued histories of racist and gendered ideas about what pain is) to take seriously the pain of Black patients, or to appreciate that symptoms of something like a heart attack for women are different than they are for men.<sup>2</sup> But somehow, when we come to the philosopher’s own domain, there is reticence. Medical diagnosis might have roots in racialized and gendered histories, but not mind/body dualism, dialectics, or freedom. Never mind, these critics say, that early modern philosophers of freedom based their ideas on a distinction between civic and natural liberty, in which only so-called civiliz-

ed peoples had true rational freedom in their civic lives, and all others were libertines enthralled to instinct. We need not mention that when we write about how philosophers understand freedom—this central distinction is incidental! So they say.<sup>3</sup>

What is particularly frustrating about this brings me to my second reason for why the refusal of many to seriously consider race in the history of philosophy is important: because the *meaning* of this history is up for debate. I believe that it can be shown clearly that, historically-speaking, ideas have their origins in thoughts on race and culture, but I cannot say definitively what this means for the concepts. For example, what are we to do, to continue with the idea of freedom, with the fact that theories of liberty in modern philosophy are based on racist assumptions about how non-Europeans simply cannot think? Does this mean that any concept of freedom that positions it against nature and instinct is racist? Or is that claim itself the racist one, because it would enact a different kind of Eurocentrism—one that presumes that Europe alone developed such ideas of freedom? Can we develop theories of freedom that are free of cultural bias, or should we recognize that bias is an inevitable part of our freedom, and we must work within its constraints? It is because these are such difficult questions that philosophers who think about freedom today should engage its complex history.

It is in this broad context that the abstract philosophical writings of Anton Wilhelm Amo perhaps present a challenge to my interests. Although we know that he taught a variety of subjects steeped in cultural diversity, that he gave “equal standing” to different religious faiths (Menn and Smith, 22),<sup>4</sup> that he defended a thesis making an argument for the rights of Moors in Europe, and that he frequently referred to his African identity,<sup>5</sup> his extant philosophical texts are intricate studies of the mind and body with no direct references to race or culture. Moreover, these texts respond to the modern European philosopher who spoke about race and culture perhaps less than any other: René Descartes. Amo would then seem to make a distinction in his writings between topics in epistemology and metaphysics on the one hand, and the philosophy of race and culture on the other.

For the purposes of this brief essay, it is this separation that interests me—not the detailed epistemological or metaphysical claims at play in Amo’s technical treatises, no matter how interesting those may ultimately be. That is because I believe there is a meaning in the separation itself, one that I will explain below in response to Descartes. The meaning is this: that universalization occurs by going out into the world and attempting to integrate yourself with it, not by turning into one’s own mind.

Previous scholars have taken different approaches to the influence that being African in Germany might have had on Amo’s work. Kwasi Wiredu, for example, has posed the question with respect to Amo more generally as follows. If one is African and one is a philosopher, then one is an African philosopher. “But,” the question remains, “does [their] work fall within African philosophy?” I will return to a more detailed engagement with the idea of a geography of philosophy below. Kwasi Wiredu suggests that there are a “multiplicity

of criteria of belonging,” which include: 1) engaging with specific African traditions (Wiredu mentions possible Akan linguistic influence on Amo, but admits the possibility of this influence is highly speculative); 2) whether other Africans take up the philosophy, regardless of the philosophy’s origin, which has certainly been true for Amo; 3) whether the philosophy is “motivated by African concerns” such as the meaning of Amo’s place in Europe (205-6). This last is also clearly the case, as can be witnessed by the legal thesis, by Amo’s identifying as African, as well as the framing of Amo’s work by others, for example the Rector of Wittenberg, Johann Kraus, that Amo attests “by his example” to the value of African thought (see Amo, 193).

Other scholars have taken up the question with reference to Amo’s place in debates among his contemporaries about race and philosophy. Thus Justin E.H. Smith, for example, has suggested that we can understand Amo’s work as implicitly responding to debates about race and philosophy in Germany at the time. In these debates, those who took a position relating mind and body in synthesis argued that there was a link between the health of the body and the mind. Although there is nothing inherently racist about this—indeed it is largely true—it was at the time being used to racist ends to suggest that a judgment of inferiority of “black skin” could be traced back to something morally deficient in Africans and others. Smith concludes: “It would be simplistic to suppose that Amo adopted a broadly dualist and harmonist philosophy *because* he was African. . . [However, it is clear that] it was easier for an African student of philosophy to find a home [in dualistic philosophy circles]” (224). Smith here builds on a line of argument in the history of philosophy going back to at least Harry Bracken’s essays in the 1970s that argued that mind-body dualist philosophy in this era, by preserving a separate universal category of the spirit, was not susceptible to racism (Bracken’s writings, I mention as an aside, are cited as an influence by Edward Said in his 2004 classic, *Orientalism*—these histories of philosophy matter in all sorts of unsuspected places).

Smith’s interpretation is plausible, but it does not seem to me the most satisfactory way to situate Amo with respect to debates about race and philosophy. I disagree with it in part because it still seems somewhat reductive of Amo’s philosophical position to his identity, in part because one can perfectly well be a racist via mind-body dualism (saying that though the mind is pure, the body is not—something that Kant, for example, veers toward [Bernasconi 2003]), and in part because I think we can learn something from Amo’s direct engagement with Descartes as much as from the surrounding debates.

Part of what makes Descartes interesting, as I noted above, is that he is generally considered *the* philosopher of European (and arguably global) modernity, even though he is in fact somewhat unique among modern philosophers to largely avoid questions of cultural difference and contact (see for example Emmanuel Eze’s *Race and the Enlightenment*). Unlike Michel de Montaigne, Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and others, who read and wrote about colonial ethnography and non-European history extensively (if often ineptly), Descartes makes comparatively few mentions of other cultures. But as I and others have pointed out, those mentions are not insignificant.<sup>6</sup> In

fact, in the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes' famous inward turn is predicated precisely on the fact that he believes that he cannot find the truths he wants through cultural difference. He writes: "I considered how one and the same man with the very same mind, were he brought up from infancy among the French or the Germans, would become different from what he would be had he always lived among the Chinese or the Cannibals" (9-10). Because cultural relativity exists, Descartes decides that the only path to truth is to evade the outside world and turn in toward the structures of his mind.

What could we make of Amo's philosophical writings and their choice to avoid discussing race and culture in relation to this decision? Again, the answer is not entirely obvious. On the one hand, he may be affirming Descartes, showing how his own philosophy refers not to where he was born, but the philosophical culture in which he was taught. On the other, he may be criticizing Descartes, showing how it does not matter where one is brought up; what matters are the universal structures of the human mind. In this case, Descartes' inward turn meant to avoid the uncertainty of culture is a philosophical mistake: it seeks universality in the wrong place. Amo's own philosophical practice suggests that engaging with people across cultures, one does not find irreconcilable difference, but in fact a shared passion for understanding the world and the human's place within it. As noted above, this also encompassed religious diversity (Menn and Smith, 22). This is why I do not believe that Descartes is in fact the quintessential thinker of modernity, but rather the key figure in a line of contemporary thinkers who *evaded* modernity by avoiding grappling with its global conditions and connections. Amo, in this reading, shows him the error of this evasion.

We cannot decisively know, of course, if this is the case. But, as others have suggested, the very existence of Amo's legal thesis and its claim to longstanding universal rights of Africans in Europe would make it at least plausible to assert that Amo believes cultural engagements create rather than undermine the possibility of universality without erasing difference. This would suggest a provisional revision of Smith's thesis. His claim, again, is that Amo's embrace of dualism can at least partially be explained by the fact of dualism's then more universalist, anti-racist position. However, if Amo is indeed responding to Descartes, we might say that Amo's claim is against the Cartesian idea that we arrive at universal truths by turning in, and in favor of the idea that a different and richer kind of universality can be achieved through engagement without.

As I mentioned above, my argument here is thus not specific to the details of Amo's philosophical arguments. I agree with scholars of the period that his writings on the mind and body are important contributions on their own right with regard to the conversations in Germany and Europe happening more broadly at the time. Unlike in Kant, whose abstract definitions of freedom intertwine with his specific claims about the geography of freedom, or Hegel, whose abstract definitions of the dialectical process are both shaped by and respond to the history of colonialism, Amo's extant philosophical writing does not directly address these geographic, cultural, or racial concerns. And thus unlike with them, where it seems to me necessary to discuss this textual entangle-

ment, it does not seem necessary to me, at least provisionally, to try to read into Amo's specific philosophical commitments any particular history of race. Rather, it is precisely in his choice to philosophize abstractly as such that I find some particular meaning—or at least meanings to debate. Here is Amo, in a moment where the scientific codification of race and culture is transforming the world, choosing, in his philosophical works, not to take up these questions, even as other philosophers were doing this and would continue to do so for centuries, and even as he would engage these topics in his other (lost) writings. What I find intriguing is precisely this chosen separation, this strong activation of philosophy as something not solely dependent on one's race or culture or geography.

The irony, however, is that it is precisely for this reason that it matters that it is Amo saying this and not Descartes. It matters that Amo, as a man from Axim in present-day Ghana, praised by the rector of his university as being an African philosopher in the text around his dissertation, in the midst of ongoing debates about race and empire, should himself not directly address this topic in the dissertation itself. For those other than Amo, such as the Rector of Halle, or the Abbé Grégoire in his 1808 *On the Literature of Negroes*, Amo's philosophical work signified the universal power of the human mind by proving the intellectual capacities of Africans. This in itself, as Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued, smacks of a certain racism, of the idea that race as a shared factor could enable or disable philosophical capacity. As Appiah quips, "No one ever thought that because Plato or Descartes was a European, every European was capable of works of philosophical genius" (116).<sup>7</sup> For Appiah, this is a sign that race should fall away, or at least be "a feature and not a fate" as a personal characteristic. In his brief reflections on Amo, Appiah concludes by pondering the fact that Amo left Europe in the later years of his life. Perhaps it was because of racism, or perhaps because of unrequited love, he suggests. Or perhaps because Amo wanted "a place where Amo Afer [the African] could be just Amo again; where he didn't need to be *the* African." Appiah concludes, "His odyssey asks us to imagine what he seems to have yearned for: a world free of racial fixations" (134).

But, of course, to find a world free of racial fixations does not mean to find a world free of cultures and traditions. What we don't know, perhaps will never know, is if part of why Amo left is that he tired of the philosophical discussions in Germany. Perhaps he longed to know other modes of thinking and living. Or, more pointedly, one may just as well wonder if Amo returned because there was something about the philosophical discussion in Europe that he found lacking, or discomfiting. Perhaps Amo himself came to believe that the growing racial prejudice he appears to have endured was linked to thinking about the world as if there were rational philosophy headquartered in Europe and curious anthropological practices elsewhere. This was another kind of dualism, aligned with that between mind and body, now articulated between the white race and all others, and in which whites—a category slowly coming into being—alone were associated with mind. Perhaps Amo came to believe that there was more in heaven and earth than was dreamt of in dualist philosophy.

To say this, however, is not at all to say that Amo doing so would mean that he gave up on his universality. I suggested above a distinction between two types of universality—one achieved by going in and one achieved by cultural exchange. Yet another vantage on Amo’s return to Ghana then is to see it as another way of expanding the universal, rather than as a return to particulars. But rather than finding the universal in taking up a particular language of philosophy that claimed its own universality, Amo may have come to find this universalism by combining what he had learned in Europe with what he learned in Ghana.

To say this is not to suggest that either of these places has an essence to its thinking. Obviously, Amo participated in *debates* in Europe, not a single essential truth. He would have found in Ghana, as in any human culture, a great variety of differences and disagreements about the nature of life and mind. And yet, in any of the places he lived, he certainly would have found some particular stiffnesses or inflexibilities, some particular ways in which thought might have congealed in a given place or time. Souleymane Bachir Diagne puts this complex relation of universality and difference in precise terms when he writes that cultures create a “certain ‘equilibrium,’ let us say a certain ratio, between various features that can be found everywhere because together they make up the human condition. Different cultures, then, will be characterized by different ratios between the same features that they combine in separate ways” (95). I can imagine Amo as a restless explorer of how a universal set of human features may combine in ever new ways.

And, of course, he has been joined by many on this journey across time and place. Indeed, I have been inspired to make this distinction in two types of universalism as much by Amo as by the painter Ernest Mancoba. Mancoba was a Black South African painter who spent most of his adult life in Europe. In a way like Amo in the history of philosophy, Mancoba has often been erased from European histories of art because he did not conform to expectations about what it meant to be a Black African painter. On one side, he was attacked for not being “primitive” enough in his works, as he often drew on the European painting styles around him. On the other, he was criticized for remaining “too African” and not directly meeting European standards for art. In an interview later in his life, Mancoba made the following statement about this situation:

I do not believe that we Africans, any more than other people, should need (as it would not diminish racism a jot) to show the white man how good we are at speaking or writing his language, performing in his sports, learning his customs, manners and intellectual actions, or to develop ourselves along the lines of his so-called ‘universality’, to be considered as human beings and his equals. Because the true universality is a common goal on the cultural, political and spiritual horizon that will be reached only when all ethnic groups achieve, through an authentic dialogue, the many-faceted diamond shape and the full blossom of the deepest and widest human integrity. (Obrist and Mancoba, 379)

For someone from South Africa to speak of a “diamond shape,” with its terrifying history (and present) in the country, cannot be a coincidence. Mancoba seems to challenge us to see what is beautiful and useful in contacts between cultures, even as he asks us to confront the brutality of the material interests that have often been the driving force of both cultural connection and hierarchical distinction. This is the stark challenge presented by his final word: “integrity.”

I take integrity here to mean not only moral rectitude or authenticity, but also a capacity for integration, for weaving together the complex possibilities of human life into a universal justice and equality that does not erase the deprivations of the past or present, nor does it negate differences and pluralities in the future. This focus on integrity may lead us to reformulate one of the tropes of philosophy from Plato to Montaigne: that “to philosophize is to learn how to die.” Benedict Spinoza famously objected to this formula, insisting that the wisdom of the philosopher was in learning how to live (151). Amo (and Mancoba), on the reading I am offering, takes us one step farther: to philosophize is not just to learn how to live as such, but to learn how to live with others, to learn the difficult art of keeping your personal integrity while integrating your life into the lives of others.

I began this essay encouraging us take seriously the place of race and culture in the history of philosophy, not just as themes in themselves, but as integral parts of seemingly abstract philosophy itself. In my working through the texts of Amo, I tried to show that doing so would not lead us to determinate positions, but rather open up to different possible understandings of texts, as well as philosophical themes. In concluding here with the question of what it means to philosophize, I also do not mean to be determinate. At some moments, to philosophize may very well mean to learn how best to live and die alone, as a certain tradition tells us. But it is not only that. Who we are is bound up with histories and humans far beyond our own making or comprehension. Learning how to live with so much expansive weight is something that philosophy can teach us as well, if we learn to take these histories seriously.

The point of pushing on canonical questions, of asking about old ideas from new angles, is not to deracinate the past and leave us bereft of traditions. It is, rather, to learn that double movement of which Léopold Senghor wrote: “The true culture is rooting [*enracinement*] and uprooting [*déracinement*]. Rooting down to the deepest depths of one’s birth land . . . But also uprooting: opening to the rain and sun, to the contributions of foreign civilizations” (25). To achieve that kind of integrity of roots and expansions—especially with those whose expansions have threatened to destroy your roots—is no easy task. And there may, at times, be reasons to outright refuse such integration. But where it is possible, and how it may be attempted, is something that we can learn through studying the works and days of Anton Wilhelm Amo.

## Biography

**Avram Alpert** has held fellowship at the New Institute in Hamburg, Germany, and is a Lecturer in the Writing Program at Princeton University. With Sreshta Rit Premnath, he is co-editor and co-manager of programming for *Shifter Magazine*. With Meleko Mokgosi and Anthea Behm, he is co-founder of the Interdisciplinary Art and Theory Program at Jack Shainman Gallery. And with Danny Snelson and Mashinka Firunts, he is a member of the academic-artist collective, Research Service. He has held fellowships from institutions including the Mellon Foundation, the Fulbright Commission of Brazil, and the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. Dr. Alpert's has written three previous books on these themes: *The Good-Enough Life*, (Princeton University Press, 2022); *Global Origins of the Modern Self, from Montaigne to Suzuki* (SUNY Press, 2019) and *A Partial Enlightenment: What Modern Literature and Buddhism Can Teach Us About Living Well without Perfection* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

## Notes

1. In response to an anonymous reviewer's concerns, I note that I will use "race" and "culture" somewhat generally because they have been used so generally and often contradictorily throughout the centuries I discuss here. While much can be gained by understanding the specific shifts and changes in how concepts are deployed, and how they are further linked to geography, class, and gender, and while I deeply admire and support this kind of work, my concerns here are more generally about the fact that humans make group distinctions in what are often catastrophically immoral ways, and how philosophers respond to those distinctions. My main work on this, in which I cite extensively from other scholars working on these themes is: Avram Alpert, *Global Origins of the Modern Self, from Montaigne to Suzuki* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019). Readers who would like to understand my positions on these topics in greater detail, and how they relate to ongoing debates, should refer to this volume, of which this essay is a branch.
2. See, for example, Carroll (2019) and Lewis et al. (2019).
3. There are of course exceptions to this trend, such as the recent work of Stovall (2021).
4. I thank Stefanie Bognitz for pointing out the salience of this passage to me.
5. See, for example Alpert (2019, 46-53), Smith (2017, 13-17), Franklin Perkins (2004, 32-34).
6. See Stefanie Bognitz' *Anton Wilhelm Amo: Signposts of a Precarious Biography* in this issue for greater details.
7. Plato, for what it's worth, would not have considered himself part of Europe.

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