



---

Title: Postface

Author: Souleymane Bachir Diagne

Source: *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies*, vol. IV, no. 1 (Winter 2024), pp. 84-86

Published by: *Memorial University of Newfoundland*



---

## Disclaimer

The views, opinions, conclusions, findings, and recommendations expressed in this publication are strictly those of the respective author(s) and are not necessarily the views of *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies*, its editors, its editorial team, and Memorial University of Newfoundland (collectively, the “Publishers”). Authors are responsible for all content of their article(s) including accuracy of facts, statements, citations, and so on. The University gives no warranty and accepts no responsibility or liability for the accuracy or completeness of any information or materials contained herein. Under no circumstances will the Publishers, including Memorial University of Newfoundland, be held responsible or liable in any way for any claims, damages, losses, expenses, costs, or liabilities whatsoever resulting or arising directly or indirectly from any use of or inability to use the contents of this publication or from any reliance on any information or material contained herein.

## Message from the Editors

The editors welcome letters on all subjects, especially if they discuss or comment on the works published in *Janus Unbound*. Please read our Guidelines for Authors prior to submitting your manuscript.



*Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies* is published by Memorial University of Newfoundland



## Postface

Souleymane Bachir Diagne

In his book *De la littérature des nègres, ou Recherches sur leurs facultés intellectuelles, leurs qualités morales et leur littérature*, published in 1808 and translated into English in 1810 under the title *An Enquiry concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of Negroes*, abolitionist and revolutionary priest Henri Jean-Baptiste Grégoire, or Abbé Grégoire presents the case of Anton Wilhelm Amo as a perfect counter-example to the affirmation that reason—particularly philosophical reason—cannot be considered African. In a chapter, modestly titled “Amo,” Grégoire presents the Ghanaian and German philosopher as “a mind exercised in reflection” while also praising the University of Wittenberg, which recognized his talent, for proving “that concerning the difference of colour in the human species [it] did not possess those absurd prejudices of so many others who think of themselves enlightened” (1810, 173–174).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the name “Amo” has become a symbol celebrated by African intellectuals, while the former State of East Germany extolled him as another manifestation of its openness to solidarity with Africa. As a symbol, Amo’s biography and identity have long taken precedence over what Paulin Hountondji has called the need for a “systematic study” of Amo’s work independent of his biography (1983, 112). Recent publications about Amo’s thought indicate that the time for such a “systematic study” has come. In addition to this special issue, two very similar books have been published recently, one in English and one in French. The first, titled *Anton Wilhelm Amo’s Philosophical Dissertations on Mind and Body*, authored by Stephen Menn and Justin E.H. Smith, was published by Oxford University Press in 2020). The latter, published by *Présence africaine*, is titled *Anton Wilhelm Amo, une philosophie de l’implicite* (Anton Wilhelm Amo, a philosophy of the implicit). As the director of the series “*La philosophie en toutes lettres*” (Philosophy in All Letters) in which the monograph was published, I invited the author, my friend Daniel Dauvois, a specialist in René Descartes and 17th- and 18th-century philosophy, to work on a new translation and a systematic study of Amo’s two dissertations. Daniel Dauvois describes the motivation for his monograph as follows: *Amo doit être pour nous plus intéressant par l’ordinaire de sa pensée que par l’extraordinaire de sa vie* (“Amo must be more interesting for us for the ordinariness of his thought than the extraordinariness of his life” [2020, 6; 22; 264]). To say that the Ghanaian-born philosopher’s thought is “ordinary” does not ignore the groundbreaking originality of his work. Rather, it means that the work belongs to its time and place.

The significance of Amo as a philosopher *of* his time and place lies in his original perspective on the enduring problem posed by Descartes' dualism of *mens* and *corpus* and the question of the union of the *res cogitans* and a *res extensa*.

Amo's position on the question takes the following syllogistic form:  
No spirit senses material things, but the human mind is a spirit; therefore, it does not sense material things.  
Nothing can touch and be touched if not a body.  
Hence, the conclusion is that sensation and the faculty of sensing belong to the body. (Menn and Smith 2020, 153ff)

Many statements in Amo's work can be thus disposed of as syllogistic demonstrations of his core thesis. This can be presented as a conclusion derived from different arrangements of statements in his *Philosophical Dissertation on Mind and Body* (1734), all of which invariably rest upon the following premise: the impossibility of suffering, or the purely actuated nature (*mere actiosa*) of the mind. Actiosa is an important concept for which Dauvois (2020, 267ff) chooses to create *actueux* in French: central to Amo's thought is the idea that the nature of the *mens* is to be *mere actiosa*. Impassivity means that what belongs to the mind is the ideas it forms in its spontaneity (as a power of representation, a *vis representiva*) without being compelled by anything external, whereas sensations belong to the body. The question is then the interaction between the body and the mind. On that question and the premises and conclusions in Amo's work, Dauvois has conducted a careful and precise examination that reconstitutes the identities of Amo's interlocutors, who are referenced through simple allusions that he often makes without direct quotes or attributions (157ff). Reading this history of ideas and interlocutors carefully, the examination manifests that most of them were physicians of his time and not just the "great philosophers" associated with figures such as Christian Wolff and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (172ff). This adds an important dimension to the question of the African-ness of Amo's thought as it also belongs to its space and time (263-64).

Nevertheless, what Amo's work says about African philosophy must be re-affirmed. This special issue, *Spectres of Anton Wilhelm Amo: The Enlightenment Philosopher*, is committed to highlighting his enduring significance with both clarity and conviction. It emphasizes two important points. First, Amo's philosophy serves as a striking counter-example to the "absurd prejudices" of those who think of themselves enlightened, and offer a compelling argument in favor of the abolitionist cause. Second, it undoubtedly manifests the African presence in addressing philosophical problems. Isn't that what "African philosophy" means first and foremost?

## Biography

**Souleymane Bachir Diagne** is Professor of French and of Philosophy, and Director of the Institute of African Studies at Columbia University. Dr. Diagne's field of research includes history of logic, history of philosophy, Islamic philosophy, African philosophy and literature. He is the author of *African Art as philosophy: Senghor, Bergson, and the Idea of Negritude* (Seagull Books,

## Postface

2011); *Bergson postcolonial. L'élan vital dans la pensée de Senghor et de Mohamed Iqbal* (Paris; Editions du CNRS, 2011); *The Ink of the Scholars: Reflections on Philosophy in Africa* (Dakar, Codesria, 2016); and *Open to Reason: Muslim Philosophers in Conversation with Western Tradition* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2018).

## Notes

1. A new edition has been published by Routledge in 1997.

## References

- Amo, Antonius Guilielmus, 1734. *Dissertatio inauguralis de Humanae mentis apatheia. Ex officina Schlomachiana.*
- Dauvois, Daniel. 2020. *Anton Wilhelm Amo, une philosophie de l'implicite. Présence africaine.*
- Grégoire, Henri J.-B. 1810. *An Enquiry concerning the Intellectual and Moral Faculties, and Literature of Negroes*, trans. D.B. Warden. Thomas Kirk.
- Hountondji, Paulin J. 1983. *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. 2nd ed. Indiana University Press.
- Menn, Stephen and Justin E.H. Smith. 2020. *Anton Wilhelm Amo's Philosophical Dissertations on Mind and Body*. Oxford University Press.