

Africana Slave Religious Thought and the Philosophy of Education

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INTRODUCTION

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty argues that Western philosophy as a discipline attempts to be the ground of all claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art or religion. As such, philosophy perceives itself as having a special understanding of the nature of knowledge and mind, making it an epistemologically centered philosophy. In which case, explains Rorty, “its central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all.”¹ Philosophy of education also embraces this overemphasis on epistemology, and as such is preoccupied with education as a problem of knowing, which is less of a core concern for Africana thought. This is illustrated by Africana thought’s focus not simply on racist epistemologies or beliefs but on their ontological content. It is with this in mind that Africana people, says Lewis Gordon, are a “black people” and hence are significantly impacted by race and racism.² Frantz Fanon, too, implies this focus of Africana thought in his comment: “I came into the world imbued with the will to find meanings in things. My spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.”³

This attempt to make Africana people, as a result of their racial membership, into beings that are without intentionality and thus possibility in the world has preoccupied Africana thought with the problem of human freedom and embodied agency. Africana thought’s philosophical concern with Africana people’s interpretation of their ontological status is premised on the view that to act meaningfully in the world is tied to how one signifies or communicates “what one is.” Thus, presupposed by Africana thought is a concept of what the human being is, which historically has its hermeneutical significance in the religious thought of African slaves in the Americas. As such, Africana thought, implicitly or explicitly privileges the spiritual domain of human existence as a category for philosophical reflection. This spiritual domain, however, finds a more secularized interpretation in Africana thought’s philosophical preoccupation with the existential problem of human agency of black people of African descent. But for this essay, I do not focus on the secularization of African slave religious thought in Africana thought. Instead, the focus is on identifying those elements that constitute Africana slave religious thought and culture as a philosophical-pedagogical discourse.

Similarly yet distinct from existential phenomenology, which rejects the naturalizing of human subjectivity and sees the significance of human consciousness in transcending the world of things, the spiritual domain, as articulated in general by Africana thought, recognizes that as human beings we are more than solely physical entities or objects of the empirical world. Spirituality is a mode of

being that involves an intentional act of reflective consciousness in which there is an awareness of one's being (to use a phrase from Sartre as a "being-for-itself"). This is a mode of being that is directed outward, and therefore points beyond itself to objects.⁴ It is a being with a point or purpose in the world. Howard Thurman, a black theologian, writes: "spirituality is the awareness of the self and its capacities, trajectories, strengths, and limitations."⁵ Dona Richards says:

Spirituality in an Africana context does not mean distant or non-human, and it certainly does not mean "saintly" or "pristine." Spirituality refers to spiritual being, to that which gives life, form, and meaning to physical realities. It is the breath of life...[Spirituality is the] apprehension of meaning in existence, and the degree to which one is motivated by meaning.⁶

As such, spirituality is a reality that is transforming. In this way, spirituality as a philosophical category is fundamental to Africana thought's conception of human freedom and liberation.

The attention given to the spiritual order of existence by Africana slave religious thought was and is significant in an anti-black world where the presence of Africana people signifies the absence of their human presence. As a result, historically, Africana people have been obligated to a vision of spirituality that allows them to choose an existential death so that they may be reborn whole as self-determining human beings. Seeing the focus on the human spirit as articulated by African slave religious thought as contributing to philosophy of education requires challenging "philosophy as epistemology" and its logocentric conception of rationality.

The qualifier "Africana" distinguishes "Africana philosophy" and with regards to the focus of this essay, "Africana philosophy of education," from "American," "French," "British," "German," "Continental" philosophy or philosophy of education. It is also a customary practice in philosophy for intellectual traditions to be grouped and enumerated according to national, geographic, cultural, racial and/or ethnic names. The use of these qualifiers is indicative of the fact that philosophical traditions and practices are bounded up in the issues, questions, life worlds and life agendas of different socio-historical groups. The qualifier "Africana," refers to persons of African descent who initiated and were or are the subject and/or object of Africana thought.⁷

Africana peoples, because of European colonialism in Africa and enslavement in the New World are globally dispersed, and as such, live in socially and culturally diverse locations, which means that "Africana" is a Diaspora term. This means that philosophizing by Africana peoples involves and is characterized by a diversity of motivations, agendas, strategies and achievements. However, it is unified in part by its focus on the spiritual order of human existence, making it distinct from traditional modern European philosophy. Also, it should be emphasized that highlighting common features does not negate the diversity in Africana thought. The advantage of this is that it counters the suggestion that Africana thought has no past historical philosophical tradition or that the African worldviews found in the slaves religious culture contributes nothing that can be considered philosophy.

It is with this in mind that first I argue that the mode of rationality that constitutes the religious cultures of African slaves, although qualitatively different from the

logocentric rationality of Western philosophy, is, nonetheless, philosophical. Second, it is the rationality of African slave religious culture, later secularized by Africana thought, that made it possible for enslaved Africans to existentially resist being reduced to an “it.” The privileging of the spiritual order, I maintain, permitted African slaves to suspend and break the hold of the ontological claims of an everyday world that was anti-black in its racist logic. This privileging allowed them to reflect or think outside that world, enabling them to remake themselves and their world, and in the process redefine their ontological status beyond the everyday dehumanizing world of racial slavery. It is in this context that I argue that the philosophical preoccupation of African slave religious thought with the spiritual order of human existence is pedagogically significant as a self and world transforming discourse.

ORALITY, ONTOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHIZING: A RESPONSE TO SKEPTICS

Skeptics raise the issue that unlike modern Western philosophy, which emerged from ancient Greek philosophy, Africana thought does not have a historical basis. One reason given in support of this view is that there is a lack of written Africana philosophical material. Hegel, Kant, and Hume thought that Africans were inferior to Europeans because they lacked this written material.

Interestingly, this argument selectively forgets that “Socrates did not write anything, although he inherited a written culture; but we know, thanks to Plato, that he philosophized.”⁸ Also, prior to Plato, Greek philosophy was not written but was orally communicated. But, the style of written presentation characteristic of philosophy beginning with Plato was structured as if it was an oral presentation. This is true of the Platonic dialogues, and of Aristotle as well as the treaties of Plotinus. And commenting on this point further, Pierre Hadot states that “the written philosophical work precisely because it is a direct or indirect echo of oral teaching, now appears to us as a set of exercises, intended to make one practice a method, rather than as a doctrinal exposition” (*PWL*, 19). Despite this, modern philosophers mistakenly interpreted the primary task of ancient philosophy as communicating “an encyclopedic knowledge in the form of a system of propositions and of concepts that would reflect more or less, the system of the world” (*PWL*, 19).

Because ancient philosophers failed to measure up to the modern standards of the systematic philosophical treaties, the focus should not only be on analyzing the structure of these ancient philosophical texts. It should also be on situating them “in the living praxis from which they emanated” (*PWL*, 19). The basic element of this “living praxis” was the oral dimension of ancient philosophy. In fact, the written philosophical works of Greco-Roman antiquity were “never completely free of the constraints imposed by oral transmission” (*PWL*, 19). The written work of ancient philosophers Hadot describes as material support for a spoken word intended to become spoken word again, as he states, “like a modern record or cassette which are only an intermediary between two events: the recording and the rehearing” (*PWL*, 19).

Ancient philosophy believed in “the ontological value of the spoken word” (*PWL*, 19). As a living and animated discourse ancient philosophy “was not principally intended to transmit information, [but] to produce a certain psychic

effect in the reader or listener” (*PWL*, 19). The emphasis on oral transmission suggests that in the ancient world philosophy was not simply intended to develop intelligence, but to transform all aspects of a person’s being — intellect, imagination, sensibility, and will. The intended consequence of oral transmission in ancient philosophy was to form people and to transform souls. That is why, says Hadot, “in Antiquity, philosophical teaching is given about all in oral form, because only living words, in dialogues, in conversations pursued for a long time, can accomplish such an action. The written work, considerable as it is, is therefore most of the time only an echo or a complement of this oral teaching” (*PWL*, 20). Thus, in cultures of African slaves, philosophizing is bound up with an orally oriented pedagogy and even more significantly, with its transformative existential ontological possibilities.

The second critical question posed in general in regard to Africana thought is whether it constitutes a legitimate philosophical discourse. This question arises because Africana thought lacks a substantial and formal focus on epistemology and logic. The implication is that epistemology and logic are what constitutes the core concerns of philosophy. In *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, Kwame Gyekye disagrees and argues that epistemological questions are secondary to more fundamental concerns about human experience, existence and conduct.⁹

Instead, it is ontology or theories of being or existence that makes up the core of what is traditional African philosophy. “African peoples, like others,” says Gyekye, “have given reflective attention to such fundamental matters as being, God, the nature of the person, destiny, evil, causality, free will.”¹⁰ This same reflective impetus distinguishes the philosophical concerns of African religious thought with questions of ultimate existence; these are fundamental questions that deal with such concerns as the meaning of life, the origins of all things, and death. The main point that Gyekye makes throughout his essay is that philosophizing is a universal intellectual activity that is basic to all human beings and cultures.

This suggests too that Africana philosophy is an intertextually embedded discursive practice, meaning that “it is not an isolated or absolutely autonomous [philosophy].”¹¹ Paget Henry maintains that “idealist views of philosophy see it [philosophy] as an affirmation of the autonomy of a thinking subject.”¹² The obsession is with philosophy as a pure or absolute discourse; thus, philosophy is seen as “a discipline that rises above the determinations of history and everyday life.”¹³ This perspective on philosophy is not consistent with the “pattern of development” of Africana philosophy in general. Henry points out that for Africana thought, philosophy is often the implied point of reference or is tacitly employed in answering questions and problems regarding the origins, ends, and truth-value of everyday activities. This suggests that foundational and teleological concerns within Africana thought tend to be addressed through nonphilosophical discourses, such as religion. The intertextuality of Africana philosophy means, “philosophy functions as a minor or auxiliary discourse.”¹⁴ As a result, Africana philosophy’s organization is usually extraneously determined by its interdiscursive connections. This implies further that Africana thought is less centralized than European philosophy whose organization is intrinsically determined.

The concerns of Africana philosophy are, for the most part, foundational, teleological, and discursive in nature. According to Henry, the discursive practices that human beings employ to make sense of themselves in the world, and the questions they ask regarding the origin of life and creation, are considered foundational. And as for teleological concerns, they are preoccupied with the problem of human purpose, with the aims of our social activities, our destiny as individuals or as collectivities, as well as questions regarding the aims or designs of creation. Any time, says Henry, that we try to answer questions that are inspired by these concerns we are raising philosophical questions, regardless of whether or not those concerns are explicitly spoken or written.

ANTIBLACK RACISM AND RATIONALITY IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

But the combining of philosophy with the qualifier Africana is perceived by skeptics as an oxymoron, because as “black people” Africans and their descendents function for the West as the breakdown of reason. The reason is because the meaning of philosophy that has dominated is complicit in efforts of dominant figures in Western philosophy to construct a self-image of the “European man” as the model of “rational man” and “civilized man.” Their preoccupation was with defining human excellence in relation to a logocentric conception of rationality; they were fixated on explicitly detailing norms or standards for reasoning correctly.

Human *telos* is identified with European man’s logocentric definition of reason, which Lucius Outlaw believes is exclusively exemplified in the history and developmental trajectory of Western European peoples. So not only did European man know what knowing was, because he was the only one to possess reason, he was the only one who could know fully. The philosophical anthropology that supported this view of reason was bound up with an anti-black racist logic.

For example, the raciological assumptions of Kant’s philosophical anthropology led him to conclude that blacks are a lower human species that is governed by the physical/causal world of external nature, that is, by emotions and passions, or in his words “natural disposition.”¹⁵ For Kant, the black is not capable of being a moral agent, is not capable of experiencing his or herself as an “ego” or “I” who thinks, or self-reflects and wills. As such, the black is without an inner life, meaning he or she is not capable of rational reflection. In *Observations on the Feeling of Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant argues that all human beings are capable of experiencing “coarse” pleasures, which do not require intellectual and moral cultivation. But that it is only the black, born without a refined intellect or character, that is incapable of experiencing the moral joys of the beautiful or of being awed by the sublime.¹⁶ “The race of Negroes,” says Kant, “are full of affect and passion, very lively, talkative and vain.”¹⁷ And that because of this “the Negroes of Africa” have never “presented anything great in art or science.” In the same vein, David Hume wrote: “I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion or even of individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences.”¹⁸ And finally, distinguishing the achievements of Egypt, which he calls “European Africa” from the blacks of Africa, Hegel perceives “Negro Africans” as without reason and

as not having the intellectual wherewithal to engage in philosophical praxis.¹⁹ He states: “Africa has no historical past of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World History.”²⁰

Because of the anti-black logic of their philosophical anthropology, Kant, Hume and Hegel as well other dominant figures in mainstream Western philosophy, take for granted that “rationality” is always “shaped by the discursive context within which it is given meaning.”²¹ As Outlaw argues, efforts to establish philosophy as epistemology have not succeeded in creating a historically [and culturally] neutral and universally binding framework for rationality.²² These efforts are not “free from the agendas of the culture within which they are situated, nor from the agendas that guide the architects and builders of such contexts, or the social practices that sustain them.”²³ This argument allows for the broadening of the definition of rationality. Once broadened, rationality is made more inclusive of the problems, issues, life worlds and life agendas, and hence the varied definitions given to rationality by non-European peoples.

RATIONALITY AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL-PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT OF AFRICANA SLAVE RELIGIOUS CULTURE

The form rationality or reason takes is bounded up with our particular heritage, with our certain way of interpreting being-in-the-world.²⁴ This allows for a contextually situated definition of rationality that is inseparable from the intentionality of human beings. In the case of Africana slave religious thought, rationality is defined within the contours of an existential-pedagogical preoccupation with the freedom of Africana slaves. Lewis Gordon says this is a notion of rationality in which ontological questions are bound up with the problem of identity, that is, with the questions: “Who are we?” “Who are Africana people?” This problem of identity is joined with the teleological problem of purpose, that is, with the question of what ought to be the strivings of Africana people. Put more simply, the question is: “What should we do?” As a teleological concern, then, identity confronts Africana peoples as a problem of moral action.²⁵ But for Africana religious thought, ontological questions of identity and the teleological questions of purpose have historically tended to be addressed through religious myth.

A myth is a story or an account of what happened and of the way things are. And myths, like all stories, amuse, instruct, encourage us to imagine, and give us meaning. In the telling and hearing of stories, myths allow humans to construct interpretive frames of reference for imagining their world and acting within it in a meaningful way. But the main difference between myths and other modes of storytelling, such as fairy tales, legends, or fables, is that myths are sacred stories. Mircea Eliade writes:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the “beginnings.” In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality — an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a creation; it relates how something was

produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural Beings. They are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the "beginning." Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness of their works. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthrough of the sacred into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really establishes the World and makes it what it is today. It is as a result of the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man himself is what he is today, a mortal, sexed, and cultural being.²⁶

Myth has typically been viewed by philosophy as irrational because the central tenant of its logocentrism is that to rationally know is to represent accurately what is outside of the mind. For example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says, "the existence of external objects is required for the possibility of a determinate consciousness of ourselves."²⁷ Later in the same passage, he says: "[I]nner experience is itself only indirect and is possible only through outer experience."²⁸ Since Kant, philosophical questions have presupposed an empirical reality. But the world of myth is not grounded in an empirical reality, because myth belongs exclusively to the sphere of illusion and non-being. As such, mythical discourses are understood not to raise philosophical concerns since only that which is, or Being, can be the object of philosophical investigation.²⁹ Myth, in other words, is perceived as the other of logos or reason and hence of philosophy. Opposed to this view, Ernest Cassirer maintained that myth is a form of reasoning, and as such can be considered an appropriate object of philosophizing.

But because mythological thinking is an effort by human beings to make sense of the world and their place in it and to participate in self-world making, mythical discourses engage in philosophizing about the existential, ontological, and teleological dimensions of the human condition. For example, Eliade argues that the function of myth in religion is to demarcate the worlds of the profane and the sacred. The profane is the world of the ordinary, of everyday mundane things, contrasted with the sacred, the world of the extraordinary. When myths manifest something as sacred, that something, whether an object or act, becomes saturated with Being, acquiring value, and in doing so becoming real. However, this is not real or true in the literal. Myths become perceived as real either by inspiring people to change the way things are or by enabling people to project their view of reality over the world, even when that world remains unchanged.³⁰ Myths do this, particularly religious myths, by privileging spirit, in which case, ordinary things become sacred and thus extraordinary. Africana religious thought conceives of spirituality in terms of force or agency rather than in terms of personal qualities. Myths have enabling capabilities that makes spirit capable of realizing the non-spiritual world and of shaping events in it. The ontological significance of this is that for Africana thought, being or existence is constructed as force, in which force is being and being is force: "This force of being resides in the creator God and is the origin of the vital force that gives creatures its being."³¹

The philosophical-pedagogical significance of the religious thought of Africana slaves, as expressed in spirituals and songs and mythic heroes is that the sacred functioned as a process of incorporating this world within the domain of the spiritual world. African slaves created a new self-world by transcending the narrow confines

of the one in which they were forced to live. They enlarged the “boundaries of their restrictive universe backward until it fused with the world of the Old Testament, and upward until it became one with the world beyond.”³² For this reason Charles Long says “religion is not a cultural system, much less rituals or performance, nor a theological language, but an orientation, a basic turning of the soul toward another defining reality.”³³ Thus in the case of slave religion he remarks: “For the soul designates not life and nothing more.... It implies that there is a life, which is more than merely being alive.”³⁴ Slaves sought to bring the spirit tangibly into this world so that they might be transformed, healed, and made whole. The “spirituals are the record of a people who found the status, the harmony, the values, the order they needed to survive by internally creating an expanded universe, by literally willing themselves reborn.”³⁵

The view of spirit as force in Africana religious thought also raises important questions as to the particular character of rationality within Africana slave cultures. Mark Johnson argues that “reasoning is a constructive imaginative activity that is based principally on metaphoric concepts.”³⁶ Thus, how slaves framed and categorized a given situation determined how they reasoned about it, and how they framed it depended on which metaphorical concepts they used. The point is that within the discursive context of mythical thinking, “reason” is also engaged in the metaphoric concepts articulated in the African slaves religious culture. This mode of rational reflection is bound up with the philosophical-pedagogical concerns of a religious culture rooted in myth that influenced Africana understanding of and preoccupation with the human spirit, and therefore with the problems of a subjugated people. It is in this context that Africana slave religious thought should be acknowledged as an act of philosophizing that contributes to defining what ought to be the humanizing aims of an education for a suffering people that have experienced the underside of European and European-American modernity.

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 8. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 20. This text will be cited as *PWL* for all subsequent references.
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17. Ibid., 56.
18. David Hume, "Of National Character" in Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 35, 37.
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34. Ibid., 14.
35. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 32.
36. Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2.