African Philosophy's Search for Identity: Existential Considerations of a Recent Effort

by Lewis R. Gordon

These times are unprecedented in the history of Africana thought in the American academy. There are now more texts in the field than ever before, the effect of which is a shift in climate for its young scholars. I have had the good fortune, for instance, to have examined a candidate who wrote a comparative doctoral dissertation on Luo, Japanese, and cyberspace communitarianism. This period of production warrants a moment's pause to evaluate the circumstances that have led to it. Such a task is no simple one, primarily because to raise the question of the African, which for the most part entails the subtext of what Frantz Fanon calls le Noir (the black), is to uncover complex practices, practices whose fundamental leitmotif is of a humanity divided into contradictory "species."

I recall an exercise from a course I taught on black existential philosophy. I asked my students to think of images of Europe, Asia, Central America, and North America. For Europe, they imagined old, magnificent buildings; glorious art work; double decker buses in London; the Queen's guard; the Eiffel Tower and cafes in Paris; the Vatican in Rome; and so on. In Asia, the Great Wall of China
came to mind; the Taj Mahal in India; millions of people in Tokyo; acrobats; and other splendors for the imagination. In North America, when the students were asked to think of the indigenous populations, they came up with "spirituality" (a naturalism straight out of Rousseau's romantic speculations on "noble savagery"); in Central America they produced Aztecs pyramids. Then I asked them to think of Africa. The imagination took them to the savannah and to jungles, to wild animals, to many, many animals. I asked my students why they didn't think of people. Or if not of people themselves, of human artifacts--buildings, bridges, roads, etc.?

This is a classroom's tale, true, but a tale that pertains directly to the awesome task taken on by D.A. Masolo in his *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Masolo show that it takes much patience to be an Africana philosopher examining the history of African philosophy. One has to work one's way through a morass of racial insult and dehumanizing narrative. In a way, he undertakes a task that, by the prevailing racist ideology, he as a man of African descent is supposed to be incapable of doing. The text therefore has a tragic subtext of authorship, in that the author himself is the contradiction of many these positions that he meticulously, patiently, articulates and evaluates. The book thus has the effect of rolling pebbles growing into a full-scale
landslide.

Masolo's avowed thesis is that "the contestation over the definition of and claim over reason is an important center of the discourse on African philosophy" (p. 180). In one sense, then, Masolo's project is historical: to present a narrative of the contestation over the definition of and claim over reason in African philosophy. The deck is already stacked on Masolo's side, however, since the presumption here is that in articulating African reason, he will also articulate the identity of African philosophy. In other words, African philosophy's search for identity is also Africans' search for identity. At first sight, the battle over reason may seem misguided, since there is an implied problematic in the conjunction of the African with reason. Therein is the source of the problem--the subtext of the black, the savage, the primitive, the thing that steps in the door, as Fanon says in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and constantly finds Reason absent. Masolo's text has therefore an underlying project, one that comes to the fore in a powerful discussion in the penultimate chapter and conclusion of the text: What is the role of reason in African philosophy and how does African philosophy articulate its own identity when part of its identity is a critique of reason as historically constituted?

In spite of all the nuances of Masolo's readings,
the underlying motif is the dialectic between the binary of the rational and the irrational. This dialectic is traced through the various efforts to articulate both descriptions of and prescriptions for African reality by way of the philosophical resources available to thinkers who have raised the question of African philosophy. The inauguration of modern dialectics is ignominiously embodied, as we have seen, in Hegel's dismissal of Geist and consequently world-history in what is called "black Africa" today. Observe Hegel's conclusion to the section on Africa in his introduction to his *Philosophy of History*:

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitionary phase of civilization; but, as a Phoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature,
and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History. ⁴

The problem is already situated by the racist occlusion of human presence from Western conceptions of the African continent, the vestiges of which continue to this day, as my experiment with my students attests. The binary situates Reason, rationality, self, "here" (meaning of Western kind) as opposed to "nature," "irrationality," and supposedly "other" -- "there" (meaning not of Western kind). I say "supposedly" because what both my experiment with my students, and the Hegelian (as well as Nietzschean) sentiment suggest is not that it is the European's other that is located in Africa, but, as we have seen in our discussion of Fanon and philosophy of racism, no-one, nothing. ⁵

Masolo discusses the many African and Africana responses to the Hegelian occlusion, many of which ironically deploy Hegelian modes of argumentation against Hegel himself. The discussion is rich and it will unfortunately be impossible to convey the many roads trod in Masolo's painstaking, critical discussion from negritude through ethnophilosophy through antien ethnophilosophy and sage philosophy through contemporary modern, postmodern, and analytical positioning; from Marxism and phenomenology (philosophical and "religious") and existentialism to textual and genealogical
poststructuralism and neopragmatism; to the persistent problem of the question of the African as the threat of relativism. Guided by the two most influential questions at the heart of Africana (existential reality)—what I shall call the teleological and the ontological questions the text's arguments are as follows.

The teleological question focuses on the purpose of African philosophy, which Masolo correctly shows is rooted in a sentiment that is unavoidably linked to Marx's eleventh thesis of Feuerbach, where the goal is to change the current condition of a dominated Africa (in all senses of domination).

The ontological question emerges from the identity question, where Masolo focuses on the African world-view(s) and African identity. Africans, as is now well known through the work of V.Y. Mudimbe, thought I would argue that its origin is in the work of Fanon and Sartre, is an organizing identity imposed upon the multitude of peoples/cultures who live on the continent know through the lens of European modernity as Africa.6

After spending the greater part of the book examining the tension between the teleological and ontological divide, the strengths and shortcomings of nearly every effort to articulate (perscriptively) what Africans should be doing when they do philosophy, Masolo concludes,
[There is no single philosophical tradition that was tailor-made and produced like an industrial product. There is no justifiable reason, therefore, why one individual or group should try to tailor-make African philosophy by prescribing what ought to be its content, method of reasoning, and standards of truth (p. 251).

He then adds that

Like other philosophical systems and traditions, African philosophy must also be born out of its own peculiar cultural circumstances combined with a living and constructive zeal among individual African intellectuals to understand and explain the world around them.... Debate and the desire to get our concepts properly understood are two vehicles of intellectual inquiry that have helped in the establishment of philosophy as a special intellectual activity; and we have no reason to exempt African philosophy from them.

I will return to Masolo's conclusion. But first, some additional remarks.

A major difficulty of developing texts in intellectual history of any kind is the array of
resources one has to deploy. The disciplines and techniques are vast, and without question, the intellectual historian has the problem of having not only to articulate a theory, but articulate it both in the form of its purpose and its translation. The philosophical skill with which Masolo works his way through African philosophers as diverse as Pauline Hountondji, Kwame Gyekye, Kwasi Weridu, and the late Oderu Oruka, as well as Euro-philosophers like Peter Winch and W.V.O. Quine and Naom Chomsky is commendable. It is understandable, however, that with such a vast range of thinkers, dimensions of their thought that may be of relevance may be put aside in the development of the architectural scheme.

Instead of addressing such instances one by one, let us instead focus on those that pertain to the dimension of Masolo's text that relate to Fanon, since Fanon, as should now be obvious, is the voice behind all of our philosophical sketches thus far. Masolo focuses on Fanon as an existential-Marxist. Such an ascription to Fanon is not entirely inaccurate. Fanon took many Marxist stands, but he also took stands that were not Marxist, except in the sense that Marxism can be understood in its existential and philosophical focus on change. But what is missing from Masolo's discussion is another dimension of Fanon's thought, one that pertains directly to the theme of the book. Fanon argued
early in his career that one cannot construct a human science that articulates the lived-experience of the black without an appeal to sociohistorical reality—in a word, *sociogenesis*. The point about sociogeny was that whenever the black is considered, historical and cultural forces come into play. This insight is at the heart of black existential philosophy. Central existential concepts like anxiety, dread, and despair carry *historical* urgency in black existential thought. This is so for good reason: without recognizing historical and cultural factors in our theorizing, blacks would disappear. The ahistorical and the acultural are the historical and cultural impositions of whiteness. Now, at first glance, this insight may seem relative only to black existence, but instead there is another turn. Fanon argued that the European practice of science was such that to achieve objectivity it often denied the existence of the black in its construction of the human being. Universality was therefore a door available only through the exclusion of blacks. The obvious problem, however, is that the exclusion of blacks signified a de facto failure of universality; it signaled an artificial structuring of one branch of humanity into a species above another. This circumstance was an inhuman relationship, in which there were those who were below the realm of human being and consequently another group "above" humanity.
I do not wish here to examine the ethical significance of such a construction. Instead, let us note that the artificial situating of the African outside of the universal leads to a particular conception of the "scope" of reality. We see it in the discourse that emerges over African philosophy. African Philosophy is treated by many theorists as a type of suppressed prime. One has the Western logos and its logos-prime, its logos-other or logos-exterior. Yet in practice, one often speaks of the former without reference to the latter, whereas the latter always evokes the former. The white/Western philosophical reality becomes the "governing fiction," as Fanon would say, over the discourse that Africans and others have on African philosophy. Now although this governing fiction suggests at first that "real philosophy" is Western, there is a logic that can show that African philosophy is broader in scope than Western philosophy since it includes the Western in its self-articulation. In practice, Western philosophy may be a subset of African philosophy. The suppressed prime may be the set with a larger domain.

A problem with such a view, however, is that it does not account for why a subset has more hegemonic weight than the set of which it is a part. Why is Western philosophy hegemonic when it excludes other philosophies, yet African philosophy, which includes Western philosophy,
lacks such influence. Fanon's argument is that such an account always requires an appeal to an external consideration of the system or set. For the African, it is the absence of normative weight, the appeal that renders an "outside" invisible, that conditions its identity as a subset or, in less polite language, a "subspecies" of Western practices. For Fanon, this question required a critique of the tendency to center European reality and to treat realities of color as derivative realities.

What Masolo shows, in his reading of nearly every influential twentieth-century African philosopher, is that the legitimacy of the African has been articulated in a way which makes one wonder if the African-prime, formally speaking, is relevant to its own reality. The content of V.Y. Mudimbe's thought, for instance, is that Africa is invented; but the form of his thought is genealogical poststructuralism—in a word, Foucauldian.\textsuperscript{11}

Herein lies the irony. The African resources, read as non-European, appear located in the past, but the impetus for seeking out those resources is a concern for a restructured future. The Akan Sankofa bird stands behind the African's head who looks into a mirror in which Foucault, Derrida, Sartre, Heidegger, Husserl, Marx, and Hegel smile back.

What is the "identity" sought here? In a concrete sense it can be according to the taxonomy developed by Oruka, correlates of which are
ethnophilosophical identity, professional identity, political-ideological identity, and sagacious identity. But in another sense, the identity project is existentially problematic to begin with, since it calls for the project to "catch up with itself," to become one with a supposed essence, which Masolo rightly rejects as a closure that could only maintain itself at the expense of the discipline.

Our existential ascription emerges in many ways. This dimension is not immediately apparent, since Masolo wrongly situates existentialism in the "irrational." I have argues in Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism that existence raises the possibility of the nonrational, which stands between irrationality and rationality—a claim that Masolo recognizes only in John Dewey's thought. This distinction comes into focus in chapter six of Masolo's text, where he discusses what is in effect linguistic transcendentalism, where what he describes as Winch's relativism can also be regarded as the thesis that one cannot articulate meaning outside of a language, which raises a challenge to the centering of any language as an ideal mentalanguage. The transcendental turn here is an ironic one in that it undermines the very notion of a suprastructural language that takes the concrete form of any one closed system over another—in the case of Masolo's discussion, it is the problem of "magic" versus "natural science" for the claim of
"reason." But the existential turn, which undergirds even Wiredu's appeals in spite of his supposed pragmatism, has to be such that perhaps it cannot even concede reason as the goal but instead that which, among other items of consideration, must be evaluated by the activity itself. If that is so, then implicit in the existential turn in the various inquiries is more than the question of critique and dialogue, but also the question of radical critique and dialogue. If that is so, then the following observation, where Masolo criticized Hountondji's rejection of ethnosophy in place of philosophy as a body of critical literature, is rendered problematic:

And Hountondji [has a limited position] because, in trying to shatter this ontological mythologization [of ethnosophy], he creates another myth in its place: the scientific establishment of philosophical activity, the restoration of philosophy as a rigorous science (p. 203, emphasis added).¹³

Although Hountondji's neo-Marxist scientism and Derridian focus on writing fall prey to the error of theoretical decadence, where the ultimate point of criticizing other theories is that they are not the theory that one is espousing (in other words, the presumed validity of one's form of theorizing as
Theorizing-in-itself—philosophy supposedly *is* literature), I don't see how rejecting the aim of philosophy as rigorous science works as a critique here. For in effect, Masolo accuses Hountondji of not being rigorous by pursuing rigor. Recall our critique of the notion of European philosophy as *the* universal. At the heart of the critique is the European tradition's failure to embody its own goals, which included a universal description of reality. Any effort to describe reality by excluding key segments of it is a de facto fallacious application of itself. It is, in a word, not rigorous. Although "rigor" as a goal of philosophical inquiry has received some ill-repute these days, we should be careful not to confuse absence of rigor with impossibility of rigor or definitions of rigor premised upon limited or closed systems. Philosophical rigor may depend on an open-ended practice that is similar to what Masolo advocates at the end of *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Philosophical rigor may be contextually hermeneutical because, as many metaphilosophers—like Husserl, with his appeal to radicality, and Fanon, with his appeal to radical constructing of new concepts—have realized, it is sufficiently reflective and self-reflective to nihilate itself, to displace, that is, its own identity. I suspect that is what Masolo may be admitting in the end, when he says, "So while we say yes to African personality,
we ought to say yes to technological modernism; yes to the African conscience, but also yes to universal science." I don't see how this is not also an appeal to rigor in African philosophy.

African decentering of Europe should not, then, involve a failure to address the implications of its own practice. It is its mission, as perhaps it is the mission of all philosophies, always to consider that which is often hidden from thought on the most profound levels, levels that are often also, in the end, invisibly familiar.

Endnotes


6. For Mudimbe's view, see his *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) and for a criticism

8. For a collection of voices on black existential philosophy, see *Existence in Black* and *Fanon: A Critical Reader*.

9. For an example of such a schema, see Count Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. Elizabeth L. Forbes, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939). In this work, Pico locates human beings between God and angels above and animals below. Racism places a class of people in the realm of angels in relation to another class of people who are pushed down into the realm of animals, in spite of the "superior" group identifying itself as human. From the standpoint of the "inferior" group, such a group is above them and therefore above humanity, unless, of course, the "inferior" group denies its own humanity.

10. For a philosopher who argues that African philosophy is not "real philosophy," see Robin Horton's "African Traditional Thought and the Emerging African Philosophy Department: A comment on the

11. See especially Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*.


14. Cf. my discussions in *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man*, chaps. 3 and 5.