

ANTON WILHELM AMO LECTURES

EDITED

BY

MATTHIAS KAUFMANN, RICHARD ROTTENBURG

AND REINHOLD SACKMANN

MARTIN-LUTHER-UNIVERSITÄT HALLE-WITTENBERG

HALLE (SAALE)

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DECOLONIZING THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK / N.Y.

MARTIN-LUTHER-UNIVERSITÄT HALLE-WITTENBERG

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Vorwort

In der Schriftenreihe „Anton Wilhelm Amo Lectures“ des Forschungsschwerpunkts „Gesellschaft und Kultur in Bewegung“ werden seit 2013 an der Martin-Luther-Universität gehaltene Gastvorlesungen bedeutender Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler publiziert, die unter diesem Titel von den beiden Forschungsschwerpunkten „Gesellschaft und Kultur in Bewegung“ und „Aufklärung, Religion, Wissen“ gemeinsam veranstaltet werden und Anton Wilhelm Amo gewidmet sind.

Im Jahr 1727 kam Anton Wilhelm Amo – als Kind im heutigen Ghana versklavt, dann 1707 von der Holländisch-Westindischen Gesellschaft an den Wolfenbüttler Hof Herzogs Anton Ulrich von Braunschweig und Lüneburg-Wolfenbüttel verschenkt – nach einer umfassenden Ausbildung an die Universität Halle zum Studium der Philosophie und der Rechtswissenschaften. 1729 verfasste Amo die Disputation „De iure Maurorum in Europa“, in der er die Frage erörterte, inwieweit die Freiheit oder Dienstbarkeit der von Christen gekauften „Mohren“ in Europa nach dem damals geltenden Recht gerechtfertigt sei. (Diese Schrift gilt als verschollen.)

In Wittenberg wurde Amo im Jahr 1734 mit der Inauguraldissertation „De humanae mentis apatheia. Die Apatheia der menschlichen Seele“ zum philosophiae ac liberalium artium Magister promoviert und wurde als Magister legens zugelassen. Anders als der im stoischen Umfeld prominent gewordene Terminus „Apatheia“ vermuten lässt, geht es dabei nicht um Gelassenheit oder Gleichmut der Seele. Mit dieser Schrift leistete Amo vielmehr einen eigenständigen Beitrag zur Debatte zu dem, was man im 20. Jahrhundert das Leib-Seele-Problem nannte, indem er der menschlichen Seele Empfindungen und überhaupt die Fähigkeit des Empfindens aufgrund ihrer Immaterialität radikal abspricht. Wie wir im gleich anzusprechenden Hauptwerk erfahren, befasst sich die Seele mit intentionalen Repräsentationen der vom Körper sinnlich erfassten Dinge. In ausdrückli-

cher Wendung gegen Descartes, der ja den „*Passions de l'âme*“ ein ganzes Werk gewidmet hatte, betont er, dass die Seele nicht leiden könne, was bei lebendigen Dingen dasselbe wie empfinden sei (*pati et sentire in rebus vivis sunt synonyma*) und stellt sich in seiner Psychologie somit eher in eine scholastische, wolffianische Tradition (zu den lokalen Kontroversen, die aufgegriffen werden vgl. Edeh 2003, 53f.).

Dass er indessen keineswegs ein schlichter Gefolgsmann Wolffs ist, zeigt sich in der wesentlich umfangreicheren Schrift „*De arte sobrie et accurate philosophandi. Traktat von der Kunst, nüchtern und sorgfältig zu philosophieren*“ von 1738 (vgl. u.a. Edeh 2003, 57ff.). Dort entfaltet Amo nach einem Überblick über die traditionellen Felder des Wissens, wie Jurisprudenz, Theologie und Mathematik und einer Warnung vor Pedanterie sowohl als Vielwisserei, v.a. soweit es sich um Unnützes handelt (er bezieht sich dabei auf Thomasius), seine Lehre, die der Philosophie die Aufgabe des kontinuierlichen Erkennens der Dinge und der Vervollkommnung des Menschen auf allen Gebieten, von der natürlichen Existenz bis hin zur ewigen Glückseligkeit, zuweist (*Partis Generalis Cap. II, Membrum II §§ 4-6*) und kritisiert diejenigen, die in ihr „heutzutage“ nur einen Verstandesakt ohne Verbindung zu ihrer pragmatischen Seite sehen. Philosophie ist Weisheit als Tugend und diese beweist ihren Wert in der Handlung (ebd. § 1). Nicht nur durch die Bezugnahme auf Ciceros „*De Officiis*“ in diesem Kontext zeigt sich eine Nähe zu stoischen Prinzipien (vgl. auch *Partis Generalis Cap. V Membrum I § 11*, wo als gute Wirkungsweise der Seele die Mäßigung der natürlichen Instinkte und des sinnlichen Begehrens identifiziert wird). Im umfangreicheren speziellen Teil des Werkes erläutert der „schwarze Philosoph in Halle“ seine Auffassung von den Aktivitäten der menschlichen Seele beim Vorgang des Erkennens, von der Begriffsbildung über die Reflexion, bis hin zur Logik mit samt den Regeln der Syllogistik, der Kritik und Hermeneutik. Er befindet sich dabei trotz einiger deutlicher Abweichungen – etwa seiner religiösen Fundierung der Ethik – im Umfeld der Wolffschen Schule (Edeh 2003, S. 164).

Nach einigen Jahren der Lehre als Magister legens der Philosophie und der freien Künste in Halle und Jena sah sich Anton Wilhelm Amo von seinen Gönnern verlassen (Ludewig war gestorben) und rassistischen Repressalien ausgesetzt, die ihn dazu veranlassten, im Jahr 1747 nach Afrika zurückzukehren. 1747 wird er noch als Bürger Jenas erwähnt, doch dann verschwindet seine Spur, bis auf den Bericht eines schweizer Schiffsarztes, der im Dienst der niederländischen Westafrika Compagnie den „*beroemden Heer Anthonius Guilielmus Amo Guinea Afer, Philosophiae Dr. et Artium Liberalium Magister*“ 1753 in Axim im

heutigen Ghana besuchen ging (vgl. Brentjes 1976, S. 66 u. 69, Firla 2012, Dokumente, Halle 1968, 297).

Anton Wilhelm Amo hat sich mit seiner Kritik an dunklen, rational nicht zu begründenden Gesetzen, an Rechtsauslegungen, die sich allein am Wohl der Gesetzgeber ausrichten, und der Mahnung zur Humanität in der Jurisprudenz, die im Zweifelsfall immer Vorrang vor dem strengen Recht haben soll, als ein Humanist und früher Verfechter der Menschenrechte erwiesen.

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DECOLONIZING THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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Zusammenfassung

Die Geschichte der Philosophie dekolonialisieren

In order to decolonize the history of philosophy against the fabrication of *translatio studiorum* as the unilinear path connecting Greek thought and sciences to medieval European Christianity, we need to *pluralize that history*. And to manifest in our textbooks that *translatio studiorum* is not just Jerusalem-Athens-Rome-Paris or London or Heidelberg ... but, as well: Athens-Nishapur-Bagdad-Cordoba-Fez-Timbuktu To decolonize the history of philosophy is also to take into account the *plurality of languages*, in order to consider the perspectives introduced by tongues other than European, and thus undo the “ontological nationalism” upon which rests the assumption that philosophical exercise is intrinsically tied to certain (European) languages.

Um die Geschichte der Philosophie zu entkolonialisieren bedarf es einer Pluralisierung dieser Geschichte. Dazu gehört die Revision des Konstrukts einer *translatio studiorum*, wonach es genau einen direkten Weg vom griechischen Denken hin zum europäisch-mittelalterlichen Christentum gibt. Zur Dekolonisation der Geschichte der Philosophie gehört, dass unsere Lehrbücher deutlich machen, wie *translatio studiorum* sich nicht nur auf Jerusalem-Athen-Rom-Paris oder London oder Heidelberg bezieht, sondern auch auf Athen-Nischapur-Bagdad-Cordoba-Fes-Timbuktu. Die Geschichte der Philosophie zu pluralisieren bedeutet zudem, die Pluralität der Sprachen zu berücksichtigen, um Perspektiven einzubeziehen, die in anderen als den europäischen Sprachen geäußert wurden. So lässt sich der „ontologische Nationalismus“ überwinden, auf welchem die Annahme beruht, dass philosophische Praxis intrinsisch an bestimmte (europäische) Sprachen gebunden sei.

Decolonizing the History of Philosophy

My first word will be to express my deep gratitude for this great honor and to thank everyone who made it possible for me to be here. In particular Richard Rottenburg who has introduced my work to you.

To be standing in a place where I like to think that the spirit of Wilhem Anton Amo is alive is very special to me. Immediately when I received your invitation I thought that it would be fitting to choose the topic of *another* history of philosophy, what I call a decolonized history of philosophy, as the subject of my presentation. As I will further elaborate, this topic is one that would speak to Halle University, to Berlin, and to Amo.

The decolonized history of philosophy builds on the necessity to rethink the history of philosophy as different from what has been constructed, at some point, as both history of philosophy and philosophy of history within the geography of an “Occident” which then defined and delimited itself as an exceptional insularity. The examples of Hegel, Husserl, and Levinas will be evoked here.

On February 26 and 27 2016, the second edition of an annual conference known as *Non-Western Philosophy Conference* took place at the University of Pennsylvania (U Penn). I was invited for my work on Islamic philosophy and African

philosophy. The key moment of the conference was the general discussion on the need to teach “non-western philosophies”: Indian, Chinese, etc. Two weeks later, two of the organizers of the Conference, Jay L. Garfield and Bryan W. Van Norden published, on behalf of the participants, an op-ed under the title *If Philosophy Won't Diversify, Let's Call It What It Really Is* in the *New York Times*, dated May 11, 2016.¹ The aim of the article, which generated many reactions, was to say that philosophy departments as they exist with the curricula that they generally offer have no reason to call themselves “departments of philosophy” when they should be referred to as “departments of western philosophy”.

Now there is an assumption upon which most of our textbooks in the history of philosophy are founded, which is that “western philosophy” is a tautology even if, most of the time, the necessary conclusion that “non-western philosophy”, therefore, is an oxymoron is not drawn. My point here is to bring a nuance to the simple demand that “philosophies from elsewhere” (to quote a title by Roger-Pol Droit²) should also be considered alongside “western philosophy”. I am saying that dis-location, compartmentalization and juxtaposition are not what we should be demanding. What is needed is pluralization, which is twofold: pluralize the history of philosophy; pluralize the languages of philosophy. Those are the two points I am going to further present and explain.

¹ Can be found online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/11/opinion/if-philosophy-wont-diversify-lets-call-it-what-it-really-is.html> last time accessed on March 4, 2018.

² Roger-Pol Droit (Ed.), *Philosophies d'ailleurs: les pensées indiennes, chinoises et tibétaines* (Vol.1) and *Philosophies d'ailleurs: les pensées hébraïques, arabes, persanes et égyptiennes* (Vol.2); Paris: Hermann, 2009.

Decolonizing philosophy by pluralizing its history

We should not think that the relationship between colonialism and the current assumption about the history of philosophy is mere accident, having nothing to do with the essence and the unfolding of a questioning and a knowledge whose trajectory only obeys the purely internal logic that, within the unique geography called “Europe” has given its identity and its *telos* to one type of humanity.

When Hegel during his Berlin years—and he is the figure that made me say that my presentation was somehow called by this very place near Berlin—evoked colonialism, the topic is called from within the construction of the history of philosophy. When he dismembers Africa, detaching Egypt from the continent to link it to Asia, he also decides that the Maghreb is to be separated from what he labeled “Africa proper”: he regards the region as territories at the South of *Mare Nostrum*, the Mediterranean Sea, and as such their destiny is to prolong, through colonization, a Europe whose mission is to take possession of them.³ And while delivering his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* he saluted what he saw as the premise of that enterprise when France conquered Algiers in 1830.

The same relationship between history of philosophy and colonialism is established by Husserl in his 1935 Vienna Conference when in order to summon Europe back to the sense of its unity and its *telos*, he forcefully reminded his audience that its philosophical destination sets it apart from the other “humanities”.⁴ It would be in the natural order of things, declared Husserl, that India would feel the urge to Europeanize as best as it could while a Europe fully con-

³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Vol I-III*, London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & co ltd, 1892-1896.

⁴ Edmund Husserl “*Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*” in Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, Translated with Notes and an Introduction by Quentin Lauer, Harper Torchbooks, 1965. Can be found online at: http://www.users.cloud9.net/~bradmcc/husserl_philcris.html last time accessed on March 6, 2018.

scious of itself and its identity would have no reason whatsoever to Indianize in any way.⁵

But the author whom I want to consider at some depth here is Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas is the first author who establishes a connection between philosophy, the universal and colonization, or rather decolonization. He elaborates what decolonization, the post Bandung world, means for him: it is the irruption of the Afro-Asian masses on the stage of history and the threat these Afro-Asian masses represent to the universal thereby shedding light on what the “western civilization” inherited exclusively from “the Bible and the Greeks”.⁶

Much has been published in the field of postcolonial studies in the US about the detestation Levinas had for what I have called the post Bandung world and about the relationship of his “philosophy of the other” to the “non-European other”⁷. From this rich literature, I will mainly focus on the work by John Drabinski: *Levinas and the Postcolonial. Race, Nation, Other* of 2013.⁸ And inevitably, any reading of Levinas from a postcolonial perspective would quote the declaration he made when interviewed by Raoul Mortley:

⁵ Edmund Husserl, *op .cit.*, p. 5, writes: “We get a hint of that right in our own Europe, therein lies something unique, which all other human groups, too, feel with regard to us, something that apart from all considerations of expediency, becomes a motivation for them – despite their determination to retain their spiritual autonomy- constantly to Europeanize themselves, whereas we, if we understand ourselves properly, will never, for example, Indianize ourselves.”

⁶ In his *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990 (p. 165) Levinas talks about “countless masses of Asiatic and undeveloped peoples”. In an interview with Raoul Mortley he speaks of “humanity” consisting of “the Bible and the Greeks”, in Raoul Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida*; London & New York: Routledge, 1991; p. 18.

⁷ Robert Bernasconi, “Who is My Neighbor? Who is The Other? Questioning the ‘generosity of ‘Western Thought’” in *Emanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, vol. IV, New York: Routledge, 2005.

⁸ John Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial. Race, Nation, Other*; Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

“I often say, though it’s a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest—all the exotic—is dance.”⁹

I made the precision that the questioning of Levinas’ eurocentrism and condescendence to say the least vis-à-vis other cultures evacuated, in his declaration to Mortley, from “what humanity consists of” is mainly coming from American authors. In France, generally speaking, Levinas has the status of an icon, identified with the ethical turn in philosophy that gives foundation to a politics of without-borderism and human rights. Admirers of the author of *Totality and Infinity*¹⁰, considered first and foremost as a philosopher of hospitality, would dismiss what can be called a postcolonial criticism by downplaying the importance of declarations he made in interviews. More importantly, they could argue that a question such as the one about the relationship of Levinas to the “non-European Other” is irrelevant and could even be considered a total misunderstanding of his philosophy. It could thus be argued that the “face” for Levinas is always naked, detached from cultures and appurtenances, therefore beyond the categories “European” or “non-European”.

That is indeed true but the point is that the consideration of the “non-European” is not at all external to the philosophy itself, is not just coming from declarations in interviews in which we should not be reading too much. It is, for example, at the very heart of Levinas’ *Humanism of the Other* (*Humanisme de l’autre homme*) where it becomes clear that the stage where the other’s face visits me, calls me out, makes me feel obligated is indeed different from the stage that was

⁹ Raoul Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation: Levinas, Schneider, Serres, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Derrida*; London & New York: Routledge, 1991; p. 18. It should be added that Levinas is responding here to the precise question raised by Mortley in these terms: “Couldn’t racism and also sexism find some reinforcement in the kind of view you advocate?” (op. cit., p.17).

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, Trans. Alphonso Liggins; Dordrecht, Boston & London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991.

invaded by the “Afro-Asian masses”, turning the world, after Bandung, into a— to use an expression by Levinas in *Humanism of the Other*—“saraband” of myriad cultures.¹¹ The recurrence of the theme of “dance” is to be noted here; but what should be noted above all is that those “others” are always perceived as a “mass” out of which no distinct “face” emerges. Of such a world, Levinas declares, playing on words, that because it is “dis-occidentalized” it is also “dis-oriented” as the only possible (re)orientation could come from the so “decried western civilization”.¹²

Nevertheless, Levinas claims, that the same “western civilization” is exceptional and cannot be part of the “saraband” and become just another “province” of the world to use Chakrabarty’s phrase.¹³ In Levinas’ metaphorical language this is because only “western civilization” stands vertically in the direction of the universal, which dedicates it to the anthropological vocation of understanding other cultures better than they have ever understood themselves, and to the philosophical vocation of providing the norm by which they should get orientation. The mission may no longer be to colonize: it still is to civilize.

Postcolonial criticism of Levinas has remarked that the tone is the same as in Husserl’s talk at the Vienna Conference. Given the state of the world, it is crucial that Europe be reminded of the philosophical exceptionalism which constitutes its identity and its essence. That essence remains Plato’s notion of a world of significations that are detached from languages and cultures even if there is

¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, Trans. Nidra Poller, Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003. Levinas writes: “The world created by this saraband of countless equivalent cultures, each one justifying itself in its own context, is certainly dis-Occidentalized; however, it is also disoriented.” (p. 37).

¹² *Idem*.

¹³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

one privileged culture in which that world is so to say reflected and which therefore “depreciates” all historical cultures and is called to “colonize the world.”¹⁴

Let me quote here Avram Alpert who has rightly explained that at the root of Levinas’ theses is the radical opposition he wants to establish between ethical transcendentalism (identified with Platonism and “monotheistic civilization”) and immanence in being (the lack of verticality which he attributes to the non-Greek non-bible rest of the world) that for him naturally leads to the type of paganism that gave substance to Hitlerism and Heideggerianism:

“The trouble here is not with Europe, but with the supremacy imputed to it. Ideas from European philosophers remain important, and the geographical abstraction “Europe” is not meaningless. But when thinkers argue – as Levinas himself did – that the very idea of opening to others was a European invention, or that thinkers outside Europe have nothing meaningful to contribute to philosophy, we need to respond that this is both historically inaccurate and conceptually absurd. There are both other spaces that have produced an ethics of encounter, and there are other ethics that have been produced in other spaces. The point is neither to insist on the uniqueness and power of one geography, nor is it to oppose a way of thinking simply because a cluster of thinkers in a particular region espoused it. Rather, it is to engage in comparative work that shows both similarity and difference across ethical formations.”¹⁵

“Comparative work” is the important phrase here and that should primarily mean what I have called the pluralization of the history of philosophy. More specific-

¹⁴ Denouncing the “Anti-Platonism in contemporary philosophy of signification” putting on the same level the different cultures, Levinas writes: “ For Plato there would exist a privileged culture that does approach [the world of significations] and can understand the transitory and seemingly childish nature of historical cultures; there would exist a culture that consists of depreciating purely historical cultures and in a certain way colonizing the world, beginning with the country where this revolutionary culture, this philosophy surpassing cultures, arises”. (*op. cit.*, pp.18-19).

¹⁵ Avram Alpert, “Not to be European Would not be ‘to be European still’: Undoing Eurocentrism in Levinas and Others”. In *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, vol. XXIII, No 1, 2015. A similar explanation is also given by Samuel Moyn in *Origins of*

ly it should mean the deconstruction of the uni-linear understanding of the *translatio studiorum* (transfer/translation of Greek philosophy and sciences into younger philosophies) upon which Levinas' conception ultimately rests—in other words, the reduction of that *translatio* to the route Jerusalem-Athens-Rome-Christian-West.

It is important to insist that this was a reduction and a fabrication. The Greeks themselves did not think of philosophy as their original “miracle”. Descartes, the thinker of *tabula rasa* declared about the matrix of his system, algebra, that its very name was an indication of its foreign origin—as the word comes from the Arabic *al-jabr*. And Roger Bacon, defining the phrase coined in medieval times, wrote this:

“God first revealed philosophy to his saints and gave them the laws... It was thus primarily and most completely given in the Hebrew language. It was then renewed in the Greek language, primarily by Aristotle; then in the Arabic language, primarily through Avicenna; but it was never composed in Latin and was only translated/transferred [*translata*], based on foreign languages, and the best [texts] are not translated.”¹⁶

What is said about Latin is quite remarkable given the role played by it as the language of philosophy. But what is most important is the pluralization of languages and of the trajectory of the *translatio studiorum*. The importance of Arabic as a language of philosophy and of the figure of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) is emblematic of the larger question of what Alain de Libera calls the necessary “pluralization of the field of history”,¹⁷ which means here of the languages and routes of *translatio studiorum*.

the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

¹⁶ Roger Bacon cited in *The Dictionary of the Untranslatables. A Philosophical Lexicon*, Barbara Cassin (Editor), translation edited by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, & Michael Wood, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014; p. 1149.

¹⁷ Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen-Age*, Paris: Seuil, 1991; p. 105.

Thus, the transfer and the appropriations of Greek philosophy have taken multiple routes, to Damascus, but mainly to Bagdad, to Nishapur, to Cordoba or Toledo, to Fez in Morocco or to Timbuktu in West Africa.

Let me pause here and make four remarks about Timbuktu in present day Mali as one of the many receptacles of the *translatio studiorum*.

First: The fact that Timbuktu (and other localities in the region that was known as *Bilād as-Sudān* or simply *Sudān*, meaning “the land of the black people”) was a prominent center of Islamic studies and disciplines is a direct response to Hegel’s dis-membering of Africa. The notion of the Sahara as a wall between two different worlds upon which his geographical-philosophical construction of “Africa proper” as a self-enclosed land eternally wrapped in the “dark mantle of the night” rests, is simply sheer ignorance of the actual history of which Timbuktu is a testimony.

Second: What Timbuktu testifies for is precisely a history of written erudition in the *Bilād as-Sudān* which is now becoming an important field in African Studies. Ousmane Kane refers to that field as “Timbuktu Studies” and Fallou Ngom the “*ajamization*” of Islam.¹⁸

Third: The literature on African philosophy has ignored for too long that written tradition. To decolonize the history of philosophy is also to deconstruct the ethnological identification of Africa with orality which obscures the intellectual history of large parts of the continent.

Fourth and in summary: in Timbuktu and other intellectual centers in Africa *translatio studiorum* took place, meaning that texts of Greek philosophy were, to

¹⁸ See Ousmane Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu, An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016; Fallou Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World. The Odyssey of Ajami and the Muridiyya*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

quote Alain de Libera, read and commented, leading to the conception of other texts, thus continuing “the human heritage”.¹⁹

A human heritage to be continued and not a “European humanity” with its telos and universal mission: that is the meaning of a pluralization of history which I argue for.

Decolonizing by the plurality of languages

I consider the *Dictionary of the Untranslatables. A Philosophical Lexicon* edited by Barbara Cassin an enterprise of decolonization of the history of philosophy. Because it is the project of taking apart the “ontological nationalism” represented by Heidegger for whom philosophy originally speaks Greek, and then the Greek of his time was German. To take apart ontological nationalism requires the realization of the simple fact (1) that a language is always one language among many that are all complete; (2) that when we philosophize, we do so in a given language and not in the pure *Logos*.

A quote from Edward Sapir that I consider “postcolonial” explains that:

“Few philosophers have deigned to look into the morphologies of primitive languages nor have they given the structural peculiarities of their own speech more than a passing and perfunctory attention. When one has the riddle of the universe on his hands, such pursuit seems trivial enough, yet when it begins to be suspected that at least some solutions of the great riddle are elaborately roundabout applications of the rules of Latin, or German, or English grammar, the triviality of linguistic analysis becomes less certain. To a far greater extent than the philosopher has realized, he is likely to become the dupe of his speech-forms, which is equivalent to saying that the mould of his thought, which is typically a linguistic mould, is apt to be projected into his conception of the world. Thus innocent

¹⁹ *Op. cit.* p. 100.

linguistic categories may take on the formidable appearance of cosmic absolutes. If only, therefore, to save himself from philosophic verbalism, it would be very well for the philosopher to look critically to the linguistic foundations and limitations of his thought.”²⁰

To decenter oneself by examining one’s thinking from the perspective of a radically different language, that of “the primitives”: that is here the advice of Sapir to philosophers who demand that nothing should be left unexamined. This is not different from what Edouard Glissant expresses when he declares that he writes “in the presence of all the languages of the world”.²¹ He argues that writing should presuppose the full consciousness that our thinking is inscribed in a language that is only one among many.

It is important to recall another point emphasized by Sapir, namely that all languages are complete, that it lacks nothing when it comes to expressing the world, translating thoughts and that the language is always in the process of becoming. This aspect constitutes a response to the colonial gesture of dismissing indigenous languages as defined by lack. They were said to be lacking abstract terms, to be lacking the copula “to be”, to be lacking future tenses.

The question of languages in their plurality is an important aspect of the philosophical debate in Africa. In 1956, two years before the publication of an important article on what Aristotle’s categories owed to Greek grammar by Emile Benveniste,²² Rwandan philosopher Alexis Kagame had published on the very

²⁰ Edward Sapir, “The Grammarian and his Language” in *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality*, Los Angeles & Berkeley: UC Press, 1949; p. 157.

²¹ At the Conference of Eurozine 2008. “Crosswords X Mots Croisés” Edouard Glissant declared: “De mon point de vue d’écrivain, « j’écris en présence de toutes les langues du monde », même si je n’en connais qu’une seule.” (From my perspective as a writer, “I write in the presence of all the languages of the world” even if I know only one of them).

²² Emile Benveniste, “Categories of thought and language” in *Problems in General Linguistics*, University of Miami Press, 1971.

same topic a work entitled *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'être*.²³ Since Aristotle's onto-logical categories ultimately were an "application" (to use Sapir's word) of the Greek grammar, Kagame proposed to study the linguistic-philosophic categories of our own African indigenous languages to come up with our own.

Now there are two ways of translating Sapir's advice to philosophers as I quoted it. One could be characterized as relativistic and deterministic, meaning that the language we speak and its grammar determines the unique philosophical categories of our thought. The other recognizes that our thought is relative to our linguistic mold but that there is no determinism, is made manifest by the fact that a translation is always possible. To say it using a phrase often repeated by Leibniz: our language "inclines without necessitating".²⁴

Alexis Kagame's enterprise to exhume Bantu-Rwandan philosophy of being in a way analogous and parallel to Aristotle's ontology is an illustration of the relativistic and deterministic approach to language and philosophy. The other position is manifested in the essay by Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu entitled *The Concept of Truth in the Akan language*.²⁵ In that essay Wiredu examines Tarski's definition of truth from the perspective of its translation into Akan. That examination leads him to the conclusion that the definition owes its very existence to the language in which it has been formulated. In other words, and more generally, when philosophical arguments are submitted to the "test of the for-

²³ Alexis Kagame, *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'être*, Bruxelles: Mémoires de l'Académie Royale des Sciences Coloniales, 1956.

²⁴ For example, in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Discourse on Metaphysics", §30 in *Discourse of Metaphysics and the Monadology*, Trans. George Montgomery, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005.

²⁵ Kwasi Wiredu, "The Concept of Truth in the Akan language" in *Cultural Universals and Particulars, An African Perspective*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

eign”, to borrow the title by Antoine Berman, then their dependency on language becomes clear.²⁶

The described argument is not meant to be relativism: The aim is not to oppose philosophizing in Akan on truth to defining the notion in English. The point is to philosophize in both languages, between them, from one to the other. It is to say that to philosophize is to translate.

To the vertical, “overarching” universal is thus opposed a “lateral universal” (Merleau-Ponty)²⁷ of translation, which invites to travel towards other languages, to think from language to language. That is what a truly decolonized history of philosophy should reflect.

²⁶ Antoine Berman, *L'épreuve de l'étranger*, Paris: Gallimard, 1984.

²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964; pp.119–20. He writes:

“the equipment of our social being can be dismantled and reconstructed by the voyage, as we are able to learn to speak other languages. This provides a *second way to the universal*: no longer the *overarching universal* of a strictly objective method, but a sort of *lateral universal* which we acquire through ethnological experience and its incessant testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self. It is question of constructing a general system of reference in which the point of view of the native, the point of view of the civilized man, and the mistaken views each has of the other can all find a place—that is of constituting a more comprehensive experience which becomes in principle accessible to men of a different time and country” (written in 1960).

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