

# Philosophy and the Afro-American Experience

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How does philosophy relate to the Afro-American experience? This question arises primarily because of an antipathy to the ahistorical character of contemporary philosophy and the paucity of illuminating diachronic studies of the Afro-American experience.<sup>1</sup> I will try to show that certain philosophical techniques, derived from a particular conception of philosophy, can contribute to our understanding of the Afro-American experience. For lack of a better name, I shall call the application of these techniques to this experience, Afro-American philosophy. I will examine historical sources of these techniques and explore the way in which they underscore the feasibility of an Afro-American philosophy. Finally, I will attempt to show what results such a philosophy should yield.

~~The philosophical techniques requisite for an Afro-American philosophy must be derived from a lucid and credible conception of philosophy. The search for such a conception requires us to engage in a metaphilosophical discourse, in philosophical reflections on philosophy. The most impressive metaphilosophical formulations of our age which express displeasure with the ahistorical character of modern philosophy are those of Martin Heidegger, the later Wittgenstein and John Dewey.<sup>2</sup> Although the interests and reflections of these thinkers widely diverge they point to one idea essential for an Afro-American philosophy: a critical attitude toward the Cartesian philosophical world-view. The Cartesian Weltanschauung is the foundation of modern philosophy.~~

~~Briefly, the Cartesian perspective categorically distinguishes homo sapiens from the rest of the animal kingdom; posits the process of knowing as qualitatively different from all other human activities; claims mental entities, such as beliefs, desires and intentions, are separate from yet related to physical actions; and conceives language and thoughts as systems of representations which somehow "correspond" to the world.<sup>3</sup> This Cartesian picture—the first modern philosophical portrait—presents the perennial conundrums of contemporary philosophy, namely, the metaphysical nature of man, necessary truth, freedom of the will, the mind-body schism and the relation between ideas and objects, words and things. Despite gallant attempts to dissolve these problems into psychology (Hume), history (Marx) and culture (Nietzsche), the Cartesian tradition persists into the twentieth century.~~

Cartesians postulate the absolute autonomy of philosophy. They presuppose that there is a distinct set of philosophical problems independent of culture, society and history. For them, philosophy stands outside the various conventions on which people base their social practices and transcends the cultural heritages and political struggles of people. If the Cartesian viewpoint is the only valid philosophical stance, then the idea of an Afro-American philosophy would be ludicrous.<sup>4</sup>

Martin Heidegger launched the first major attack on Cartesian thought within the Continental tradition in his monumental work, *Being and Time* (1927). The task of philosophy, Heidegger suggests, is not to ascertain indubitable claims about the self and world, but rather to provide an interpretation of what it means for human beings to be.<sup>5</sup> He reconstructs Husserl's phenomenological method – a tool for conceptual description and interpretation – and applies it to the *Dasein* (Being) of the existing, thinking self.

~~For Heidegger, the preeminence of the Cartesian perspective, the predominance of epistemology in modern philosophy, is but a stage, an unfortunate one, in humankind's attitude toward *Dasein*.<sup>6</sup> This stage begins with Descartes, culminates in Kant and ends with Nietzsche; it originates with Cartesian gaiety about philosophical methodology and terminates in the grotesque, yet often alluring, Nietzschean vision. Heidegger claims the Cartesian viewpoint ultimately produces a scientific positivism that views any systematic analysis of *Dasein* meaningless and fanciful.~~

~~Besides criticizing the positivist doctrine that results from Cartesianism, Heidegger also rejects Cartesian viewpoints within the hermeneutic tradition of philosophy. Manifest in the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey, the Cartesian hermeneutic tradition claims that the understanding (*subtilitas intelligendi*) of a text, history or *Dasein* is distinct from its interpretation (*subtilitas explicandi*). Understanding refers to real meaning; interpretation to mere interpreted meaning. The Cartesian viewpoint in hermeneutics posits an unchanging meaning of a text, history or *Dasein* that is sharable owing to its reproducibility; this sharing consists of an interpreted meaning correctly corresponding to the real meaning. Correct correspondence assures the objectivity and validity of interpretation.<sup>7</sup>~~

~~Heidegger refuses to accept the traditional distinction between understanding and interpretation in Cartesian hermeneutics. He believes this quest for certainty is misguided; it attempts to overcome the historical and personal limitations of human interpretation. These limitations take the form of the inherent and inevitable circularity of interpretation:~~

~~Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted.<sup>8</sup>~~

~~For example, when interpreting a text, history or *Dasein*, we can only appeal to other interpretations we presently understand as the basis for our own interpretation. This circularity is not a vicious one because it continually provides new meaning and novel insights, while acknowledging the limits of who and what we are.~~

Heidegger claims that philosophical interpretation is an activity of understanding which makes explicit what implicitly people are. A successful interpretation gives meaning to what is originally present in an obscure, confused form. Every interpreta-

tion is grounded in a fore-having (Vorhabe), a fore-sight (Vorsicht) and a fore-conception (Vorgriff). It is always grounded in something we have, see and grasp prior to the act of interpretation; it is never free of presuppositions. In other words, all interpretative activity is rooted in historical situations and formulated in terms of a particular tradition, perspective and prejudice, owing to each individual's engagement in the world and attempt to project possibilities for the future.<sup>9</sup> Heidegger's metaphilosophical insight is: *Philosophy is the hermeneutic analysis that interprets what it means to be for personal selves who remember a past, anticipate a future and decide in the present.*

Afro-American philosophy appropriates from Heidegger the notion of philosophy as interpretation of what it means to be for people who, as a result of active engagement in the world, reconstruct their past, make choices in the present and envision possibilities for the future. ~~Yet Heidegger's conception of philosophy is inadequate. His understanding of the "historicality" (Geschichtlichkeit) of Dasein, or the way in which historical circumstances influence individuals' choices in the present, is unsatisfactory. His constitutive categories of "historicality", namely, fate, destiny and heritage, fail to incorporate the current perceptions of the historical forces which constrain human activity.~~<sup>10</sup>

~~For Heidegger, fate is the crucial category of the "historicality" of Dasein. It is an awareness of each individual's limited possibilities, of their own finitude. Destiny is an extension of fate to the level of groups, nations and humankind. Heritage is the awareness of tradition as the central determining factor in the concept of self. Yet, as the young Marcuse noted, these categories ignore crucial historical forces e.g. social position within the mode of production, racist and sexist constraints, that significantly shape and mold the kind of choices available to people.~~<sup>11</sup>

~~Heidegger overlooks these vital historical forces because he views history in personal terms, as mere "stretchedness" (Erstrecktheit) extending through time. This conception of history neglects the social and political relations between people; it ignores their communal life, past and present. Calvin Schrag perceptively observes,~~

~~Heidegger neglects, as do most existentialist thinkers, the community of selves with their common social memory which is the very stuff out of which history is made. To be sure, for Heidegger, being-in-the-world is always being-with-others, but it is the radically isolated Dasein who determines the significance of this communal world for his personal existence. The context of historical meaning arises not from the interdependent experiences and reflections of a community of selves, but from the individual projects of a solitary Dasein who is concerned for his authentic existence.~~<sup>12</sup>

Afro-American philosophy rejects Heidegger's personalistic conception of history.

The later Wittgenstein goes beyond Heidegger by investigating, in detail, various linguistic practices and illustrating how they are linked to, or constitute the basis of, particular forms of life (Lebensformen) or cultures. His philosophy becomes the description of the multi-faceted dimensions of language within distinct cultures.

Wittgenstein believes this descriptive activity is dispensable; philosophy is mere therapy for those still captured by the Cartesian picture of the world ("Philosophy is a disease of which it itself is the cure"). The endless insoluble philosophical problems that bewilder philosophers cannot be solved within the Cartesian framework and they dissolve when this framework is discarded. Any attempt to replace it with a new philo-

sophical perspective is symptomatic of the need to keep philosophy autonomous, to keep it pure.

According to Wittgenstein, philosophy has been inextricably linked to a notion of necessity. ~~Philosophers have searched for the immutable, invariable and unquestionable. They have claimed that necessity derives from the essence of things (e.g. Plato, Aristotle), the structure of our minds (e.g. Kant, Hegel), the structure of history (e.g. Spencer, Marx) and language (some linguistic philosophers and structuralist thinkers). The later Wittgenstein tries to show that the very notion of necessity is anthropocentric: necessity rests upon the contingencies of social practice. His linguistic naturalism (or conventionalism) claims that the meaning of words in our language (or norms in culture, values in society) are linked not to abstract essences or inscrutable mental phenomena, but rather to the use we give them in particular language-games we create, modify and accept. David Pears, in his notable book on Wittgenstein, succinctly states,~~

~~It is Wittgenstein's later doctrine that outside human thought and speech there are no independent, objective points of support, and meaning and necessity are preserved only in the linguistic practices which embody them. They are safe only because the practices gain a certain stability from rules. But even the rules do not provide a fixed point of reference, because they always allow divergent interpretations. What really gives the practices their stability is that we agree in our interpretations of the rules.<sup>13</sup>~~

Wittgenstein suggests that since necessity derives from human agreement on such rules and their interpretations, autonomous philosophy vanishes.<sup>14</sup> He equates this end of Cartesian philosophy with the end of philosophy *per se*. His own philosophical works, he claims, undermine the Cartesian picture of the world. Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical insight is: *Philosophy is the detailed description of linguistic [social] practices within distinct cultural ways of life.*

Despite obvious differences, Wittgenstein and Heidegger are kindred spirits. Both view philosophy as a move from the obscure to the obvious, rather than from doubt to certainty. Both attempt to discover the human conventions concealed by the Cartesian perspective, to decipher the Cartesian hieroglyphics that promote philosophical deceptions. For both thinkers, philosophy is an interpretative activity which renders the complex simple, the opaque clear and the strange familiar yet, paradoxically, each believes only the courageous will be able to accept the relatively simple truths revealed by their interpretations. To them, all philosophizing requires resolute fearlessness, fortitude and ultimately a change in living and perceiving. Afro-American philosophy subscribes to this approach.

Afro-American philosophy embodies Wittgenstein's stress on the cultural and social practices of people; it is concerned not only with the life-meaning of individuals but also the way such meaning is shaped by the cultural and social practices of a particular community. ~~Yet Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy is incomplete. It lacks a normative component. His suspicion of any justification for norms allows him to "stop doing philosophy" more easily than most of us. It is no accident that his moral thought offers common yet unoriginal ideas derived from Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Tolstoy, e.g. the good life is one patterned after the historical examples of religious figures.<sup>15</sup> As to why this life is better than others, he remains silent.~~

John Dewey's metaphilosophical views serve, for our purposes, as a form of synthesis and corrective for those of Heidegger and Wittgenstein.<sup>16</sup> He recognizes that the Cartesian picture of the world rests upon specific historical circumstances e.g. the rise of science, the need for methodological purity in philosophy, the advent of capitalist production, which fall within a certain epoch of humankind's development. He acknowledges that an anthropocentric critique of Cartesian thought breaks down traditional distinctions between philosophy and science, art and science, morality and science. Philosophy is inextricably bound to culture, society and history.

~~For Dewey, the idea of an autonomous philosophy is culturally outmoded. It must submit to the fate of its first cousin, theology. Theology was once an autonomous discipline with its own distinct set of problems, now most of these problems lie at the mercy of psychology, sociology, history and anthropology. This is the path Cartesian philosophy (and its modern variants) must follow.~~

But the normative function of philosophy remains. Philosophy becomes the critical expression of a culture, the critical thought of a society, the critical component of a discipline. It no longer contains delusions of autonomy nor illusions of disappearance. The historical hermeneutics of Heidegger and the cultural descriptions in Wittgenstein are combined with Dewey's pragmatic orientation. Dewey's metaphilosophical insight is: *Philosophy is the interpretation of a people's past for the purpose of solving specific problems presently confronting the cultural way of life from which the people come.* For Dewey, philosophy is critical in that it constantly questions tacit assumptions and unarticulated presuppositions of previous interpretations of the past; it scrutinizes the norms these interpretations endorse, the solutions they offer and the self-images they foster.

From the metaphilosophical insights of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Dewey, I shall define Afro-American philosophy in this way: *Afro-American philosophy is the interpretation of Afro-American history, highlighting the cultural heritage and political struggles, which provides desirable norms that should regulate responses to particular challenges presently confronting Afro-Americans.*<sup>17</sup> Afro-American philosophy is the application of the philosophical techniques of interpretation and justification to the Afro-American experience. The particular historical phenomena interpreted and justified by Afro-American philosophy consist of religious doctrines, political ideologies, artistic expressions and unconscious modes of behavior; such phenomena serve as raw ingredients to be utilized by Afro-American philosophy in order to interpret the Afro-American past and defend particular norms within this past.

The two basic challenges presently confronting Afro-Americans are those of self-image and self-determination. The former is the perennial human attempt to define who and what one is, the sempiternal issue of self-identity; the latter is the political struggle to gain significant control over the major institutions that regulate people's lives. These challenges are abstractly distinguishable, yet concretely inseparable. In other words, culture and politics must always be viewed in close relation to each other.<sup>18</sup>

The major function of Afro-American philosophy is to reshape the contours of Afro-American history and provide a new self-understanding of the Afro-American experience which suggests desirable guidelines for action in the present.<sup>19</sup> Afro-American philosophy attempts to make theoretically explicit what is implicit in Afro-American history to describe and demystify the cultural and social practices in this history and offer certain solutions to urgent problems besetting Afro-Americans.

Modernity is a central notion in my interpretation of the Afro-American past. I shall define it in this way: *Modernity is the descriptive notion that connotes the historical state of affairs characterized by an abundance of wealth resulting from the industrial and technological revolution and the ensuing cultural isolation and fragmentation due to a disintegration of closely-knit communities and the decline of religious systems.* Afro-American history chronicles the prolongation of the Afro-American entrance into the corridors of modernity; the long overdue reaping of the harvest they helped cultivate, the seizing of opportunities previously closed, and the bruising encounter with the emptiness, sterility and hypocrisy of contemporary life.

When Afro-Americans are viewed as passive objects of history, Afro-American history is a record of the exclusion of a distinct racial group from the economic benefits and cultural dilemmas of modernity. Politically, this exclusion has meant white ownership of Afro-American persons, possessions and progeny; severe discrimination reinforced by naked violence within a nascent industrial capitalist order; and urban enclaves of unskilled unemployables and semi-skilled workers within a liberal corporate capitalist regime. Culturally, this has meant continual Afro-American degradation and ceaseless attempts to undermine Afro-American self-esteem.

When Afro-Americans are viewed as active subjects of history, Afro-American history becomes the story of gallantly persistent struggle, of a disparate racial group fighting to enter modernity on its own terms. Politically, this struggle consists of prudential acquiescence plus courageous revolt against white paternalism; institution-building and violent rebellion within the segregated social relations of industrial capitalism; and cautious reformist strategies within the integrated social relations of "post-industrial" capitalism. Culturally, this has meant the maintenance of self-respect in the face of pervasive denigration.

~~I will attempt to order and organize some significant aspects of the Afro-American past by delineating four ideal-types which embody distinct Afro-American historical traditions of thought and behavior. These categories incorporate abstract elements of Afro-American historical reality; they are, however, derived from an empirical examination of this reality. Needless to say, they rarely appear empirically in their pure, conceptual form, but may serve as heuristic tools to confer intelligibility on Afro-American history and provide an understanding of this history by revealing its internal rationality.~~

~~The four theoretical constructs to be considered are the vitalist, rationalist, existentialist and humanist traditions in Afro-American history.<sup>20</sup> I shall try to stipulate clear definitions of these traditions so they will not be automatically associated with their previously established meanings within traditional historiography.~~

~~The Afro-American vitalist tradition lauds the uniqueness of Afro-American culture and personality. It claims a *sui generis* status for Afro-American life in regard to form and content. It stresses what qualitatively distinguishes Afro-Americans from the rest of humanity, especially what sets them apart from white Americans. This tradition contains two types: strong vitalism and weak vitalism. Strong vitalism makes ontological claims about Afro-American superiority; Afro-Americans stand above other racial groups because of their genetic makeup, divine chosenness or innate endowments. Weak vitalism makes sociological claims about Afro-American superiority; Afro-Americans stand above other racial groups because of certain values, modes of behav-~~