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Amo's Critique of Descartes' Philosophy of Mind

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Anton Wilhelm Amo was carried, in missionary-related circumstances, to Holland from his birth place in Axim, Ghana, then the Gold Coast, sometime in the first decade of the eighteenth century at the age of about three. He was soon afterwards donated to a German prince (Duke Anton Ulrich of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel), who brought him up with the kindness and solicitude of a step-grandfather. At college he studied such subjects as philosophy, physiology, medicine, jurisprudence, history, and some other less orthodox ones, in all of which he shone brightly. He became a respected professor of philosophy and wrote a number of works, among which was *The Rights of Negroes in Europe*. In 1959 William E. Abraham, on the suggestion of Kwame Nkrumah, then President of Ghana, and I, as a fellow traveler of the former, searched in libraries in Europe and could not find this work. Unfortunately, it may be lost. Some of his other works are, however, extant, including his inaugural dissertation, *The Apatheia of the Human Mind* (1734), translated from the Latin by Abraham, which is the subject of this discussion. Amo returned home around 1748 in somewhat unhappy circumstances (see chapter 11 in this volume). Incredibly, he was able, with but sparse local documentation, to trace his family.

In 1978, at a UNESCO-sponsored conference in Accra, Ghana, in commemoration of the matriculation of Amo (in the organizing of which I had a considerable part) an appreciative delegation of members of his family (or, more strictly, lineage) headed by the chief of his town was received amidst color and pomp.

It is impossible not to perceive in Amo a relentless quest for knowledge and excellence. There is an anecdote that as a child he overheard his patron arguing with a visitor who questioned the mental capacity of black people. Perhaps he consciously offered his own life and work as one answer.

The *Apatheia* is a vigorous critique of Descartes' conception of the mind, which is interesting in itself. But to me, it has a special, or I might say, a tantalizing interest, which I will explain before long. The main contention of the dissertation is that, contrary to Descartes, there is neither the faculty nor the phenomenon of sensation in the human mind, these only being appropriate to the body. But let us start with Amo's characterization of the mind, which he develops first from its general and then from its ''species'' nature. In its general nature, mind, according to Amo, is *spirit*, by which he means: ''whatever substance is purely active, immaterial and

always gains understanding through itself (i.e. directly), and acts from self-motion and with intention in regard to an end and goal of which it is conscious to itself'' (Amo 1968: 66). ''As regards its species,'' the human mind is an immaterial substance, which ''inheres'' in the body as a subject and uses it as an instrument and as a medium (ibid. 69). In respect of immateriality, all spirits are the same. But the human mind is an incarnate spirit and different in this regard from unincarnate spirits. The latter species of spirits do not have knowledge through ideas, for an idea is defined as ''the instantaneous action of our mind, by which it represents to itself things perceived before through the senses and the sensory organs'' (ibid. 68). But ''God and other spirits placed outside matter are entirely destitute of sensation, sensory organs and an organic living body.'' In God, in particular, ''representation is impossible for otherwise there would occur in God a representation of the future, past, and in general of absent things, whereas . . . all things are directly present in his knowledge, and hence there cannot be any representation in him, since representation presupposes the absence of what must be represented'' (ibid.). In our case, however, ''our own mind knows and operates through ideas on account of the closest link with the body and its intercourse with it'' (ibid.).

It would be quite a subtle inquiry to explore the further implications of Amo's remarks about God's mode of knowing. For example, in what sense, if any, is the concept of knowledge applicable to the state of a mind to which ''all things are directly present''? We must, however, let the divine conundrum hang on high, for our present project revolves around only human cognition. And with respect to that, Amo seems to hold positions that are Cartesian enough. There is the supposition, first, that our cognition involves the activity of an immaterial substance; second, that (at least in some cases) the process involves the mediation of ''ideas,'' and, third, that there is an ''intercourse'' between mind and body. What, then, one might ask, is the great difference between Amo and Descartes?

The difference arises from Amo's conception of the mind as *purely active* and of sensation as *purely passive*. Sensation is necessarily bound up with materiality, whilst mind is, in its very essence, immaterial. Knowledge by ideation is knowledge through sensation. The problem is to determine what the role of mind is, or can be, in such a process. Does the mind itself *feel* the sensations in cognition by ideation? If so, then the faculty of sensation will be a faculty of the mind itself. To Amo's dismay, Descartes seems to hold exactly such a view. Quoting from Descartes' *Correspondence* (part 1, letter XXIX – Amo's reference), he notes that Descartes speaks of there being ''two factors in the human soul on which depends the whole cognition which we can have concerning its nature, of which one is the part that thinks and the other that which, united to the body, moves it and feels with it.'' It is against this view of Descartes that Amo's thesis that ''Man has sensation of material objects not as regards his mind but as regards his organic and living body'' is ''asserted'' and ''defended'' in the dissertation. The Cartesian position under fire is expressed even more clearly in the Sixth Meditation, where Descartes says:

> I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but . . . I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when

> the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. (1984: 56)

It is not the idea, per se, of the union of mind and body that Amo finds insufferable philosophically. For him, the error lies beyond that, in the notion that something that is supposed to be nothing but a thinking thing could *feel* pain, as opposed to merely apprehending the fact of the pain intellectually. In opposition to this, Amo's view is that in sensible perception ''the act of understanding'' should not be confused with ''the business of feeling'' (1968: 74; note that, as a matter of his usage, ''sensation, feeling, sensing are for me [Amo] synonyms,'' p. 71). This is not to say that, on Amo's view, it is inappropriate to suppose that persons, on occasion, feel pain. They do indeed, on his view; but, on that view, a person cannot be said to be, *à la* Descartes, ''nothing but a thinking thing.'' ''There are two *essential* parts of man, mind and body'' (Amo 1968: 69; my italics).

This difference between Amo and Descartes on the nature of the ego is profound. In the Cartesian view the ego does not need a body in order to exist, even upon this earth. It does, by Cartesian inference, have a body; but that is, metaphysically speaking, accidental. Anyone even vaguely mindful of the dependence of some, at least, of our conscious states on physiological conditions must have premonitions of paradox in the face of the Cartesian view. Descartes had enough common sense to acknowledge the two-way interrelationships between mental and physiological functions, and enough intellectual honesty to recognize that he had a problem on his hands. But the most charitable evaluation still cannot credit him with a clue. It is generally supposed that the problem here is that of explaining how an immaterial substance can enter into a two-way or even one-way interaction with a material one. But if the material parts of our being are an accident, there is the logically prior problem of how the existence of the *essential* can come to depend in any way on the *inessential*. Amo's more even-handed dualism, although not escaping the problem of how the immaterial mind can be in union with the material body, is quite evidently exempt from this last.

Amo's view, then, is that a living person is *necessarily* both a thinking and a sensing being. The thinking belongs to the mind, but the sensing to the body. Descartes, on the other hand, seems to want to have it both ways. The I, the self, the ego, is an immaterial substance and ''consists solely in the faculty of thinking,'' but, nevertheless, he supposes it to have the faculty of sensory experience. Indeed, in the Sixth Meditation Descartes insists not only on this but also on the idea that sensible experiencing is not something that is done by a part of the mind, but rather by the mind as an indivisible whole: ''As for the faculties of willing, of understanding, of sensible perception and so on, these cannot be termed parts of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, and understands and has sensory perceptions'' (1984: 59). When Descartes talks like this, says Amo, ''he openly contradicts himself'' (Amo 1968: 73). The argument is that, since the mind, being spirit, is immaterial, it cannot admit of a sensible faculty or the feeling of sensations, which result from contact of our bodily organs with material objects. This he takes to be plain from the definitions of sensation and the faculty of sensation. ''Sensation,'' he says, ''is in general the result of the sensory organs obstructing the

sensible properties of material objects immediately present'' and the faculty of sensation is ''such a disposition of our organic and living body as by whose mediation all animal being is affected by material and sensible objects'' (ibid. 71).

Does this mean that in sensible perception, such, for example, as in the seeing of a triangular ashtray on a polished brown table, there is not an essential involvement of the mind? Amo's answer is, in effect, that the mind is involved, but at the level of recognition not of ''feeling.'' This emerges – with, admittedly, a certain unaccustomed diminution of clarity – in his further explanations of the notions of ''sensation'' and ''idea'': ''Sensation is considered to be either logical or physical. When logical all sensation is either mediate or immediate. People call that an idea . . . when physical, all sensation is either pleasant or unpleasant'' (ibid.). The notion of a logical sensation seems to be intended to capture the conceptual aspect of what goes on when there is a perception of the kind represented by our ashtray example. Given the virtually unlimited broadness of the usage of words like ''sensation'' and ''idea'' in much of the Western philosophical tradition under which Amo is laboring, the apparent incongruity of the idea of a *logical* sensation might be passed over. What Amo would seem to be trying to get at is the element of conceptualization in sensible perception of the sort under consideration. This impression is strengthened by the following remark about ideas: ''Idea is a composite entity, for there is an idea when the mind makes present to itself a sensation pre-existing in the body, and thereby brings the feeling before the mind'' (ibid. 74). Now, Amo insists that to bring the ''feeling'' or sensation before the mind is not to feel it. Accordingly, there can be nothing else for the mind to be conversant with, when it ''makes present to itself a sensation,'' than its conceptual identity. On this showing, the ''feeling'' dimension of a sensation is its physical, and the conceptual dimension its ''logical,'' aspect. We might, perhaps, call the ''feeling'' component of sensation its physiological aspect, though this is not intended to denude it of what might be called brute consciousness. It is exactly this aspect of sensible experience that Amo is excluding from the province of mind.

Some of the reasoning behind this exclusion has already become apparent. But there is a further angle to his argumentation, which has to do with the purely active character of mind and the purely passive character of ''feeling.'' As is clear from our earliest quotations from Amo, mind (spirit), for him, is, by definition, purely active and admits of no passivity. But to ''feel'' (given the explanation of the concept of feeling at work here) is to be *affected* by a material object. To be affected in this way is to be passive. Therefore, the mind cannot be said to feel. But what if a thinking spirit is affected by another thinking spirit? In such a case, however, Amo maintains that ''spontaneity or freedom of action remains preserved, as does also the faculty of response'' (ibid. 68). There is a certain amount of elaboration of this basic argument (ibid. 67, 68, 69), but it is doubtful if this particular phase of his argumentation adds much to his case against Descartes.

How strong is that case? Recall that both Amo and Descartes share the persuasion that mind is a kind of substance and, further, that it is an immaterial one. Upon this common premiss it seems clear that logic is on the side of Amo. The idea that an immaterial substance can have a sensible faculty and through it feel sensations is an inconsistency that runs through not only Cartesian dualism but also

through all kinds of idealisms in the history of Western philosophy. The proof of the inconsistency is, I think, essentially as Amo has laid it out above.

However, both Amo and Descartes face the threat of shipwreck in their common dualism. They are exposed to objections on at least three points. There is, first, the fundamental assumption, which, by the way, dualism shares with materialism, that the mind is a substance or an entity of some kind. This, in my opinion, is the deepest incoherence in the philosophy of mind. There is, second, the idea that the substance in question is a spiritual one. Unhappily, no clarification of the notion of a spiritual substance ever seems forthcoming, barring the purely negative and maximally unenlightening one to the effect that a spiritual substance is one that is not material. And, third, there is the suggestion that this immaterial substance somehow resides within the material body. Indeed, regarding the last point, the minutest twist in some of Amo's own arguments would have sufficed to derail it. If, as Amo validly argues, a spiritual entity cannot be in *contact* with a material body, then neither, on exactly the same ground, can a spiritual entity be incarnated in the human flesh. It hardly needs to be pointed out that we are dealing here with a conceptual inconsistency dear to much Western metaphysics, secular as well as theological. (This is not the place to pursue these issues, but I might mention that I have ventured some thoughts on them with respect to the philosophy of mind in ''The Concept of Mind with Particular Reference to the Language and Thought of the Akans'' in Floistad 1983, esp. sections III–V.)

Our finding, then, is that Amo's strength lies in his disagreements, and his weakness in his agreements, with Descartes. But for me, this is not the end of the matter. A question that has always forced itself upon me is: why was Amo so keenly opposed to ascribing the feeling of sensations to the mind in spite of his acceptance of the basic tenets of the dualistic philosophy of mind? I have not been able to erase the following hypothesis, though speculative in the extreme, from all the recesses of my consciousness. May it not be that some recess of Amo's consciousness was impregnated by the concept of mind implicit in the language and thought of the Akans, the ethnic group among whom he was born and initially raised before being taken away in tenderest infancy? As I have argued in the paper cited in the last paragraph, in the Akan conceptual framework, insofar as this can be determined from the Akan language and corpus of communal beliefs, the feeling of a sensation does not fall within the domain of the mental, if by ''mental'' we mean something like ''having to do with the mind.'' Mind is intellectual not sensate. This is obvious even at the pre-analytical level of Akan discourse. The Akan word for mind is *adwene*, and I would be most surprised to meet an Akan who thinks that one feels a sensation – a pain, for instance – with his or her *adwene*. No! You feel a pain with your *honam* (flesh), not with your *adwene*. The latter is just for thinking. And this is exactly what Amo seems to have been arguing as far as his thesis of *apatheia* is concerned.

The principal issue here, of course, is not whether the Akan conception is or is not valid, but whether there may have been traces of it in Amo's theory of *apatheia*. Admittedly, he was heavily influenced by the dualistic ideas current in his time and place of sojourn. The puzzle is why he was so insistent on the absence of the faculty of ''feeling'' in the mind, an idea that was out of tune with that intellectual milieu

and in tune with that of his homeland. A philosopher supplies the ratiocinative basis of his views in his own pages, and that is what is germane to their cognitive evaluation. But when puzzles such as the one just mentioned arise, it is legitimate to be curious about their psychological provenance. Inevitably, one must inquire into circumstances transcending his pages. Granted that we are on shaky ground here, it may still not be altogether irrelevant to note in this connection that, even though Amo was removed from his motherland in his infancy, he retained an uncompromising sense of pride in his origins, usually adding to his name the title ''Afer'' (the African). Did he, perhaps, retain more than pride from his place of origin? Certainly, somebody without a deep mental and emotional identification with his origins might well have been at a loss as to the whereabouts of his family when he returned home after more than 40 years of unbroken oceanic separation dating back to his infancy. Perhaps, then, the non-sensate conception of mind was a kind of ''cultural survival'' in Amo's psyche, kept in place by the sheer depth of his attachment to his motherland.

That, to be sure, is just speculation. But an issue that must evoke more than mere speculation is the following. Amo was an African and a philosopher. Therefore, he was an African philosopher. But does his work fall within African philosophy? The question sounds simple, but it may not have a simple answer. If his philosophical thinking had conscious or even unconscious African cultural traces, in part or in whole, its African identity might be proportionately capable of being validated. The speculation we have indulged in above, however, does not give us anything much to go by. It does not follow, though, on pain of the sin of denying the antecedent, that if his philosophy showed no such traces, then it could not have an African belonging. Other grounds of such belonging are possible. For example, was his philosophy – again, in part or in whole – motivated by African concerns? If it was, then to that degree and in respect of the appropriate parts, it might have a just claim to an African standing. We know that Amo did have explicit African concerns: witness the very title of his lost work *The Rights of Negroes in Europe*. But a lost work is a lost potential of proof.

Even so, there is a criterion of African identity, more basic than any of the foregoing that still remains open. To be part of an intellectual tradition, a given thought content need only be taken up and used therein. If Amo's work engages the sustained interest of contemporary workers in African philosophy, it will become part of that tradition of philosophy by dint of use or assimilation. The fact alone of his origins may help the process, but is not decisive. In fact, the work of an alien can become part of modern African philosophy by the same criterion of use or assimilation. The prospects, in the case of Amo, are by no means negligible. The Department of Philosophy at the University of Ghana has a dedication to Amo, and Nigeria can boast of a William Amo Centre for African Philosophy at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

These considerations prompt another reflection of the greatest contemporary significance. In principle, the question raised about the African standing of Amo's work can be raised about the work of any present-day African philosopher. Her work does not automatically acquire a place in the African tradition because of her racial identity. There are, as must be apparent from the last two paragraphs, a

number of sufficient conditions for determining this issue of status. The one most relevant to the present paragraph is a matter of linkage. If the work links up with elements of the African tradition, its claims for a place in it are legitimate, irrespective of the nature of its content. Let it be about the philosophical intricacies of quantum cosmology. No matter, the criterion still holds; which is important, for this is one of the ways in which a tradition may expand and develop. The multiplicity of criteria of belonging underlies the possibility and also, indeed, the desirability, of a wide-ranging division of labor among the individual workers in a tradition. The optimal flourishing of the tradition itself, however, requires the confluence of all the various ways of forging its identity.

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Further reading

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