APA STUDIES | The American Philosophical Association

Philosophy and the Black Experience

SPRING 2026 VOLUME 25 | NUMBER 2

ISSN 2834-4413

APA STUDIES ON

Philosophy and the Black Experience

ANTHONY SEAN NEAL AND BJÖRN FRETER, CO-EDITORS

VOLUME 25 | NUMBER 2 | SPRING 2026

FROM THE EDITORS

Björn Freter
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

Anthony Sean Neal
MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY

Dear Colleagues,

These remain unsettled and turbulent times in which we live. Much of what we had hoped was achieved—secured and seemingly irreversible—has, in recent past, proven fragile. Certainly, many of our readers have long feared, have long known this might happen. Yet the transition from possibility to reality remains—for many of us—shocking, frustrating, unsettling.

But what this transition—or rather transgression—is not, and must not be, is the end of our philosophical work. We must continue to celebrate Black philosophy: to think it through, to understand it, to situate it in context, to value it, to bring its voices into conversation with one another, and to engage them critically.

This issue will, we hope, offer the right materials for this task.

On the one hand, we present the work of the great philosopher Teodros Kiros. We are delighted to contribute to the wider dissemination of his work. The reader will find three articles, a review, and, finally, an interview with Kiros. Kiros's body of work is formidable. In this issue, we focus on his understanding of rationality, mind, and Black consciousness, as well as his thorough engagement with the Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob. The articles convey some of his fundamental ideas, while the review and the interview also allow readers to get to know the rather practical aspects and implications of Kiros's thought.

In addition, there is reason to celebrate one of the editors of the journal. Anthony Neal has been appointed to a full professorship of philosophy at Mississippi State University. As we all know, such positions are still rarely held by Black philosophers. Neal's work is already extensive and constantly evolving—his writings build on one another in fascinating ways. To honor the significant achievements of this esteemed colleague, we offer in this issue a brief commentary on one of the most important concepts in Neal's work: the freedom gaze.

Colleagues, let us share what we carry in our hearts. Reach out to us with your thoughts—whether in the form of an academic paper, a reflection, a brief notice, or a narrative. We want to listen, and we want to share your voices. We cannot give up, we shall not give up, and we will not give up.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

APA Studies on Philosophy and the Black Experience is published by the Committee on the Status of Black Philosophers. Authors are encouraged to submit original articles and book reviews on any topic in philosophy that makes a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors welcome submissions written from any philosophical tradition, as long as they make a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors especially welcome submissions dealing with philosophical issues and problems in African American and Africana philosophy.

All article submissions should be between ten and twenty pages (double spaced) in length, and book reviews should be between five and seven pages (double spaced) in length. All submissions must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and *The Chicago Manual of Style* formatting. All submissions should be accompanied by a short biography of the author. Please send submissions electronically to apa.philbe.newsletter@gmail.com.

DEADLINES

Fall issues: May 1
Spring issues: December 1

CO-EDITORS

Anthony Sean Neal, apa.philbe.newsletter@gmail.com
Björn Freter, bfreterb@gmail.com

FORMATTING GUIDELINES

- The *APA Studies* adhere to *The Chicago Manual of Style*.
- Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use *italics* instead of underlining. Use an "em dash" (—) instead of a double hyphen (--).

- Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style:

  John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971), 90.

  See Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" *Noûs* 34 (2000): 31–55.

ARTICLES

Freedom Gazing: Anthony Neal on the Modern African American Freedom Struggle

Björn Freter
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

This short contribution is prompted by the fact that my dear co-editor, Anthony Neal, has been appointed to the rank of full professor—a well-deserved honor that remains shockingly rare for Black philosophers. This text is a reworking of a contribution to a panel honoring him at the APA Eastern Division Conference in Baltimore in January 2026. It aims to briefly portray one of the most important and thoughtful concepts Anthony Neal has developed in his work to date.

Freedom gaze is a central concept in Neal's philosophy. The freedom gaze is a mode of looking, interpreting, and representing Black life that is oriented toward freedom rather than surveillance, discipline, or consumption. It is thus a concept that directly challenges the gaze of white supremacy. White supremacy, like every attempt to justify contempt, depends on bringing into being the very individuals it claims to despise. The supposed contemptibility of these beings allows the white supremacist to exploit them at will. In the supremacists' self-serving understanding, exploitation becomes possible without any ethical contradiction. Those deemed contemptible should not be judged by the standards of the white supremacist; they can, and indeed must, be treated according to a different ethic of inferiority. The white supremacists thus convince themselves—through staggering self-delusion and self-aggrandizement—that, despite this unresolvable ethical contradiction, they can remain humanists, Enlightenment thinkers, or champions of humanity, without appearing ridiculous to any thoughtful or serious observer.

The impoverished concept of freedom held by the white supremacist can only see its own freedom; it cannot recognize any other freedom. White supremacy leaves no room for freedom gazing. White supremacists are incapable of developing any serious concept of freedom. To see only one's own freedom is, in fact, to see no freedom at all. This gaze of supremacy reduces freedom to a repellent pretext for arbitrary action, an expression of vulgar power that never truly grasps freedom as freedom. It amounts to nothing more than self-glorification.

The freedom gaze, as developed by Neal, however, has no interest in domination, ignorance, or self-glorification. In our author's own words:

> The freedom gaze of freedom gazing is used [. . .] to describe a perceptual framework within African American culture during the modern era stemming from the experience of the American oppressive movement.[1]

Neal continues:

> The freedom gaze can be further understood as having a perception that is framed by or filtered through the desire for freedom.[2]

Neal refers to the influence of Whitehead and process philosophy, and that makes immediate sense. Process philosophy, in a broad sense, can be understood as a philosophy of *becoming*, in sharp contrast to ontological traditions from Parmenides through Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas, which focus on the essential *being*, the substance. Substance philosophy seeks to understand *what that which is, is*. Process philosophy, by contrast, seeks to understand *how that which is has become what it is*: how it is one way at one moment and another way at a different moment, and finally, how and what it will become. Process philosophy recognizes change *as* change. Change is not merely an illusion, as Parmenides assumed, but a factual reality. To acknowledge change *as* change implies that whatever is *can become otherwise*. The white supremacist gaze, or, in fact, any supremacist gaze, cannot comprehend this. White supremacy is a quasi-essentialist thought.[3] The supremacy and inferiority it asserts are treated as unchangeable, essential matters of fact. There is no space for freedom. Its thought practice—if one can call it that—is declarative: it invents, it magically forces its supremacy and the inferiority of the Other into existence. It is, at the same time, one of the most repugnant and one of the most childish ideas human beings have ever produced.

Neal, of course, keeps himself away from this essentialist nonsense. He is a process philosopher, and this philosophy conceives of reality as existing in an unceasing *status nascendi* and it denies—without collapsing into nihilism—that we must accept becoming as incomplete: *to be is to become*. We cannot rest in any final or definitive knowledge as long as we are human beings, or, to be more precise, as long as we are *human becomings*. Neal writes:

> There is not now and has there ever been an essence attached to what it means to be Black that is formed exterior to the lived experience of blackness. Because there is no essence, the individual has to come to the knowledge of blackness on their own.[4]

He later adds:

> Black skin has no essential nature. However, due to social constriction, there is an underlying essence to the experience of blackness.[5]

This emphasis on *becoming* is central to Neal's radical anti-essentialist thought. We see this again in his profound remarks on freedom:

> Peace as an ideal obtains relevance within social contexts owing to its connection to the concept of the good or a flourishing life. A life that flourishes in this context has no essential meaning but must be kept in tension with concepts such as expansion, progress, growth, and fulfillment. These concepts are usually thought to be opposite to a fragile existence or a life full of disappointment.[6]

Fragile existence, this unpretentiously and accurately characterizes white supremacy. The essentialism of white supremacy is exceptionally fragile, indeed. It must frantically suppress, obscure, and conceal anything that might contradict it—and, just to be clear, there is an overabundance of it.

The freedom gaze, by contrast, is *not fragile*, and it is *not static*. "Freedom is movement,"[7] writes Neal. It is—one might say—resilient and is itself an expression of becoming. The freedom gaze looks for the *becoming* as the process-philosophical counterpart to the static and fragile essentialism of white supremacy. The freedom gaze perceives Black human beings emphatically as agents, as acting, creating, producing *human beings*, i.e., *human becomings*.

The freedom gaze is not only a philosophical and phenomenological concept. It is so much more; it also contains an ethical and political meaning. Freedom gazers are not interested in how Black life is watched, judged, or categorized by anyone else. They seek to understand how Black life understands itself, narrates itself, and celebrates its own freedom—the foundational freedom from which it originates and toward which it guides. The importance of this gaze is clear.

It is hardly surprising that such a gaze cannot be neutral—and indeed, it need not be. It does *not* seek to document essences. Freedom gazing refuses all whitened—thus static, thus quasi-essential—ways of seeing. It is rooted in Black experience, it is oriented towards Black experience, oriented toward Black self-understanding, and does not require white approval. It is a gaze of Black human beings upon themselves as the human beings they are, not as others have predetermined they should be. Neal writes:

> In a world where people are intentionally dehumanized, the very act of knowing themselves as human involves a great philosophically reflective effort. To do so involves resisting and outright rejecting all frameworks used by the otherworld to describe them.[8]

This is a process of self-determination and self-examination, of self-becoming. The freedom gaze stands apart from whiteness, untouched and unmoved by it. Neal writes:

> I know that in this world, as it is currently socially constructed, it is necessary for me to reject many of the frameworks held by others if I am to come close to my potential in my becoming just as they reached the unforeseen heights achieved during the modern era. Also, as an inheritor, I am identifying as a member of a family or a people, Black people.[9]

Neal shows how Black art—music, photography, literature—practices the freedom gaze. Black life is expressing Black life to Black life. It is not the responsibility of Black scholars to explain themselves to a white audience. Freedom gaze is Black-centered; it affirms Black life, self-legitimization, and becoming.

Neal's book is a gift: it provides clarity, passion, and unapologetic philosophy. It offers philosophers of all backgrounds a tool to fight the forces of white supremacy from their own positions, illuminating Africana philosophy historically, process-philosophically, and culturally. We need to engage seriously with the work of Anthony Neal. I am deeply grateful for the lessons he has given us and for the works that continue to teach us. Dear Anthony, thank you!

NOTES

1. Anthony Neal, *Philosophy and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle. A Freedom Gaze* (Lexington, 2022), 7.
2. Neal, *Philosophy and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, 7.
3. We want to emphasize that "quasi" must be added here to eliminate any appearance that there is an essence.
4. Neal, *Philosophy and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, 25.
5. Neal, *Philosophy and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, 67.
6. Neal, *Philosophy and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, 13.
7. Neal, *Philosophy and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, 10.
8. Neal, *Philosophy and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, 6.
9. Neal, *Philosophy and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, 2.

Teodros Kiros, Philosophizing Towards Unity: Some Introductory Remarks on His Works

Björn Freter
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

Teodros Kiros has produced an immense body of work, and we are pleased to be able to honor it here. The Ethiopian philosopher has worked in many areas, from Kemetian thought and early Ethiopian philosophy to issues of human dignity and the philosophy of consciousness. Kiros is a global philosopher whose wide-ranging philosophical education is always oriented toward fostering better forms of human coexistence. He consistently resists the narrowing and exclusion characteristic of, for instance, reductionist

models of consciousness or ethnophilosophical perspectives on African philosophy.

Let us take a brief look at his understanding of consciousness. Kiros argues that the "Hard Problem of Consciousness" (as David Chalmers has called it) is neither new nor uniquely Western. He shows that ancient Kemetian philosophy already understood consciousness as primary, as non-material, and foundational to reality. Kiros explains that consciousness is understood as self-originating awareness that precedes and generates matter, rather than emerging from the brain. The Kemetian ontology presents consciousness as holistic and composite, consisting of the Ka (life force), Ba (personality), Ib (ethical heart), and Ren (identity). Ontology is thus, unsurprisingly, immediately connected with ethics. Our thoughts and actions are guided by Maat, and living rightly aligns the individual with cosmic harmony. It is reminiscent of the Confucian dao, the logos of the Stoics, the idea of ubuntu as emerged from South Africa, the Buddhist dharma, and the Manichaean practice of liberating Light. Kiros argues that modern philosophy and neuroscience—after a centuries-long lover affair with materialism—are circling back to these ancient insights. Analytic idealism or panpsychism, for instance, are challenging the materialist reductionisms and suggest understanding consciousness as fundamental rather than derivative. Kiros brings modern research into dialogue with Kemetian thought, proposing that several enduring problems in theories of consciousness are not inherent to the phenomenon itself but are artifacts of an ill-suited conceptual approach—one that can be corrected by revisiting Kemetian thought.[1]

In a very similar way Kiros connects the cardiocentricity of early Ethiopian philosopher of Zera Yacob with contemporary questions. It is the heart—not the brain—that is the primary seat of reason, wisdom, and moral intelligence. In these traditions, the heart symbolizes rationality itself: humans reason with the heart, not merely feel through it. The Ancient Egyptians were cardiocentrists as well. They revered the heart as the source of wisdom and discarded the brain as insignificant. Zera Yacob dissolves the mind-body dichotomy: the heart is both a physical organ and a transcendental source of thought, i.e., a source of moral insight. In his rationality of the human heart, emotion, intuition, and moral reflection coincide.

Reading Teodros Kiros is an intellectual adventure. May our readers venture into his work—whether anew or for the first time. It will be well worth the effort.

NOTE

1. If you wish to engage more deeply with Kiros's thought, look out for the forthcoming book by Fekade Abebe, *Reason, Resistance, and Responsibility: The Philosophy of Teodros Kiros*, which we hope will be published soon.

Reflection on Consciousness in Kemet and in Modern Science

Teodros Kiros
BERKLEE COLLEGE

I will present my reflections in three parts.[1] The first part is on consciousness according to the Kemetu thinkers; the second part moves on to consciousness in modern science; and the third part outlines ethical and epistemological implications in contemporary philosophy. There are supposedly about two hundred theories of consciousness, of which about one hundred are materialistic. I will choose prominent ones to understand the issues concerning consciousness for the purposes of this short paper.

PART ONE

THE ARGUMENT

I define consciousness as an awareness of some kind that is self-originating and vastly present as a non-physical and non-temporal "something" that is not a thing. It is an immediate awareness of thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and the sensing of the presence of objects. The ancient Kemetu thinkers understood consciousness as I have defined it and grasped its implications for Black Consciousness—or so I will propose. For the Kemetu thinkers, consciousness is the source of matter, and the material and the non- material cannot be separated. Nun is the material out of which the non-material, such as the first god, Atum-Ra, emerged. Yet the material and non-material are inseparable, as are consciousness and matter, including Nun itself. Nun itself is conscious as the material creator of the non- material. That consciousness seems to be the originator of matter, insofar as the quasi-material Nun itself is conscious. On this view, the function of Nun is also the function of its parts, such as consciousness. Modern science is now reinventing the wheel and arguing that consciousness, following the Kemetu thinkers, is primary, and not matter, as we have thought since the fifteenth century, the beginning of modern philosophies of consciousness. I suggest that Black Consciousness is a variant of the ancient and modern views of consciousness. What is more, the modern discussion of consciousness is informed by the accomplishments of the Kemetu thinkers, and Black Consciousness itself is an inheritor of African ancestors, the founders of philosophy. The restoration of African dignity can be exacted only after a full excavation of the historicity of Kemetian consciousness, and this essay is a modest contribution to that project. Decoloniality demands that African historical consciousness in Kemet be fully retrieved by scholarly work at the highest level of rigor and precision. The humanity of Africans can be vindicated only by the unfurling of human consciousness sedimented in *Ib*, the Heart, as the penetrating intelligence and the stream of consciousness for the species. Kemet is the source of that insight. I have argued for this thesis in *Zera Yacob's Inauguration of Modernity and Cardiocentrism*.[2]

CONSCIOUSNESS IN KEMET

A philosophical analysis of Kemet and consciousness reveals a system where consciousness is not merely a mental function but a holistic and cosmic force, deeply intertwined with the principles of Ma'at (cosmic order) and Heka (sacred power). Ancient Kemetic thought views consciousness as a process of aligning personal will and moral life with universal truth and justice to achieve both individual and collective liberation. This is supported by the belief in multiple aspects of the self (like the ka and ba) and the "Tree of Life" concept, which outlines a spiritual journey of evolution and self-transformation. The core components of consciousness are:

- Ma'at: the centerpiece of consciousness and the fulcrum of balance, order, and rightness.
- Heka: the animation of creation and beginning.
- Consciousness as a process.
- Interconnectedness.
- Holistic self: The Kemetic view of the self is not a simple mind/body duality but includes multiple components (like ka, ba, and cibit) that represent different aspects of a person's being.

The road of consciousness must articulate intention and the alignment of body and mind, such that the Word is crowned as the ultimate house of consciousness. Finally, it is important to realize that consciousness aims at realizing the liberation of the self and the collective liberation of people of African descent, and at reclaiming African consciousness. Consciousness is a composite and not a simple unity. It is a composite made of the ka (a person's life force), which is immortal; the ba, the unique personality; the Ib, the heart, which is measured against the feather of Ma'at to determine the righteous life of a person; and the ren, the identity and essence of a person. This philosophical analysis of Kemetian consciousness highlights several key points. Consciousness is holistic and not a product of the brain, an isolated and limited physical organ. It is a holistic composite made of inseparable parts, such as the body, soul, and spirit. A person is also a composite made of ba, ka, sheut, ren, and Ib. The conscious person is precisely this holistic composition. As an ethical composite, it informs and guides persons considered moral subjects. The public sphere is inhabited by individuals who are ethically disciplined and committed to collective liberation. Ma'at guides action. Action is directed by thought, and thought is inhabited by Ma'at. Action and thought interpenetrate as individuals seek to live their lives not thoughtlessly but thoughtfully and to achieve transcendence in the form of immortality by aligning truth and order, as Ma'at demands.[3] Consciousness for the Kemetu thinkers is embodied in a person in whom matter and spirit are united, and is a fundamental reality that emerges out of Nun, which itself is a quasi-material composite that produces Nun as a quasi-material source, which creates itself, and it itself is a composite of mind and matter. As Theophile Obenga, a foremost specialist on Kemet, puts it,

> But today we choose between spirit and matter: we become materialistic[,] or we are spiritualist between the two. The West (that is Western Europe), who decided chose matter over spirit; this was not the case in ancient Egypt. Pharaonic civilization[,] combined something that can be described as matter and spirit, sometimes both at once. That was why they could construct the pyramids, with just the mind[,] you can not[,] and with just matter, you cannot either. We must combine both . . . unfortunately[,] it is something that does not exist today.[4]

This special kind of spirituality is anchored in matter. Like Nun itself, which created itself and then created the spiritual world, of which consciousness is an instantiation, matter itself is endowed as conscious. All beings, and not only human beings, are conscious. Atoms, molecules, trees, and mountains are conscious of this radical view. All those beings and non-beings with whom we share the world are conscious. This particular form of existence is a generous gift given to humanity by the Kemetu thinkers, and following them, this broad understanding of consciousness is shared by Chinese, Indian, and Mayan thinkers, as I argued in *Self-Definition: A Philosophical Inquiry from the Global South and Global North*.[5]

PART TWO

MODERN SCIENCE

Among the analysts of consciousness are the eliminativists, reductionists, integrationists, idealists, pan-psychists, and others. All of them agree that consciousness exists, but they disagree about its nature. All these theorists, inspired by Quine, are using the instrumentalist resources of science to explain the structure of the universe and understand the nature of all that is there, or the ontological structure of being in the world. We shall see below that whereas the eliminativists, reductionists, and integrationists are ontologically committed to science, Kastrup, Chalmers, and Hoffman critique it and show the limitations of science.

(1) Eliminativism about Consciousness[6]

Daniel Dennett is the leading proponent of this view. For him, consciousness does not have an independent existence. In fact, it should be eliminated from science. It is a product of the brain. When we completely understand the functions of the brain, we might also learn that consciousness is merely that part of the brain which we do not yet comprehend. The eliminativists want to vanish thought as totally illusory, without any trace of existence, whereas tables and other objects assert their existence by simply being there to be documented by our sense organs. It is the sense organs that bring matter into existence. Thought is inert in this process.

(2) Reductionism

Reductionists, like eliminativists, explain consciousness entirely in terms of brain activity. On this view, our sense that reality exists is generated by the brain itself, which produces consciousness as awareness of experience. Like

the eliminativists, they too want to vanish thought. Thought itself, they contend, is created by the brain. It does not exist autonomously. It is the firing of neurons that may be producing consciousness.

(3) Integrationists

The proponents of integration theory argue that consciousness explores how various cognitive processes combine to form a unified experience of awareness. For these theorists, consciousness is not a singular entity but an interplay of different mental functions, such as perception, memory, and attention. It is a composite and not a simple unity. The key concepts of this theory are the following:

- Modularity of mind: Different cognitive functions operate independently but integrate to create conscious experience.
- Global workspace theory proposes that consciousness arises when information is broadcast to various cognitive systems, allowing for integration and access.
- Neural correlates research often focuses on identifying brain regions involved in integrating sensory information and cognitive processes.

On this view, the brain is the storehouse of sensory information and complex cognitive activities, which neuroscientists are busily excavating. They contend further that the brain is the storehouse of information and that the brain is really a recording machine. All the data that enters its domain as experience becomes the home of memory. Memory exists precisely because the brain tirelessly accumulates sensory data and then stores it as memory. The information thus stored by the brain is then systematically integrated. The integrationists argue that all of our awareness is nothing more than information gathered and stored in the brain. The brain is a recording machine, out of which memory is created. Once we understand how the brain works, we will then understand what consciousness is, and yet, as Noam Chomsky argues, we know very little about the brain.

(4) Analytic Idealism

The leading advocate of idealism is Kastrup. The idealists argue that our beliefs and thoughts themselves are produced by consciousness. I think there is a chair there only because my consciousness produces it. The chair is there only because I believe that it is there. Kastrup writes that he

> elaborates on a modern, analytic version of the ontology of idealism, according to which (a) phenomenal consciousness, as an ontological category, is fundamental; and (b) everything else in nature can ultimately be reduced to, or grounded in, patterns of excitation of phenomenal consciousness. [. . .] [The] key challenge is then to explain how the seemingly distinct phenomenal inner lives of different subjects of experience can arise within this fundamentally unitary phenomenal field. [. . .] Along the way, a variety of other challenges are addressed, such as: how we can reconcile idealism with the fact that we all inhabit a common external world; why this world unfolds independently of our personal volition or imagination; why there are such tight correlations between measured patterns of brain activity and reports of experience; etc.
>
> [The core idea] can be summarized thus: we, as well as all other living organisms, are *dissociated alters* of universal phenomenal consciousness, analogously to how a person with dissociative identity disorder (DID) manifests multiple disjoint centers of subjectivity also called "alters." We, and all other living organisms, are surrounded by the transpersonal phenomenal activity of universal consciousness, which unfolds beyond the dissociative boundary of our respective alter. The inanimate world we perceive around us is the extrinsic appearance—i.e. the phenomenal image imprinted from across our dissociative boundary—of this activity. The living organisms we share the world with are the extrinsic appearances of other alters.[7]

This dense passage requires unpacking, as it is distilling complex matters in an abstract for a journal. Following Kant, Kastrup embraces the distinctions between phenomenon and noumenon, appearance and essence. The "I" is always a reference to the visible and the invisible parts of the self. Thus, consciousness itself is the noumenon, and the brain, as part of the body, is only an appearance. You and I, therefore, are appearances with unmanifest essence. You and I again are dissociated alters—centers of subjectivity, products of the unfurling of consciousness. Subjectivity cannot be fully understood because a major part of it is not only unconscious but also unknowable, as part of the noumenon. This point has been brilliantly argued by Noam Chomsky. Along these divisions, David Chalmers and Donald Hoffman introduce an analysis of "the hard problem of consciousness" Bernardo Kastrup argues that the "hard problem" of consciousness is a conceptual problem rooted in assuming the physical world is fundamental. His solution, presented in *The Idea of the World*,[8] is a form of idealism in which reality is fundamentally mental: a single, universal consciousness that dissociates into individual minds. From this perspective, what we call physical matter is simply how this universal consciousness appears from an "outside" or dissociated viewpoint, thereby dissolving the problem of how a physical brain could produce subjective experience. The problem is conceptual: physicality itself is mental; consciousness is a universal field; the solution can dissolve the problem.

(5) Pan-psychism

The pan-psychists argue that consciousness is fundamental and that all things—physical and all beings—are conscious, including atoms and the qualia in our minds. Donald Hoffman closely follows this argument but modifies it considerably. For him, consciousness could be mapped

out mathematically. Hoffman's theory proposes that our perception of reality is a "virtual reality" constructed by our brain for survival, and that the true reality is not what we see. This is based on his Interface Theory of Perception (ITP), which likens perception to the icons on a computer desktop—useful for interaction but not a true representation of the underlying code. He also argues for Conscious Realism, which suggests that consciousness, not matter, is the fundamental reality, with conscious agents as the basic building blocks of the universe. The key components of Hoffman's theory are:

- Interface Theory of Perception (ITP): Our senses do not show us reality as it is, but provide a simplified user interface. For example, the "redness" of a tomato is not an intrinsic property, but a representation that helps us decide whether to eat it or not.

- Fitness Beats Truth (FBT) theorem: This theorem, derived from mathematical modeling, suggests that natural selection favors strategies that are useful for survival and reproduction over those that accurately perceive reality.

- Conscious Realism: This theory argues that reality is fundamentally conscious, not material. It posits that the universe is made of "conscious agents" that are the fundamental building blocks of existence.

- Consciousness as fundamental: Hoffman's work suggests a universe where consciousness is primary, and what we perceive as the physical world (space, time, objects) emerges from a deeper, conscious reality.

The implications and criticisms are well known:

- Perception as a useful fiction: What we perceive is a useful fiction, and the goal of evolution was not to find truth but to find what is useful for survival.

- Critics' arguments: Critics argue that the theory is self-refuting because it relies on science, which assumes the truth of our perceptions of physical reality. Others find it overly complex or claim it does not provide new insights.

Rupert Sheldrake, agreeing with the pan-psychists, contends that there is what he calls morphic resonance, which explains the inner workings of consciousness. This theory suggests that memory and behavior are not solely confined to individual organisms but are influenced by a collective memory shared across species. For Sheldrake, this collective memory can affect biological processes and behaviors, proposing that organisms inherit habits from their predecessors, which he believes could explain phenomena like telepathy and the "sense of being stared at." In all his ongoing work, Sheldrake also explores the idea that consciousness may not be limited to humans or even animals. He has posited that self-organizing systems, including stars and galaxies, might possess some form of consciousness, suggesting a holistic view of nature where everything is interconnected. His theories challenge conventional scientific perspectives, leading to both intrigue and criticism within the scientific community. This theory shares family resemblances with Kastrup and with David Chalmers, the proponent of the "hard problem of consciousness." David Chalmers distinguishes between what he calls the easy problems of consciousness, which involve understanding cognitive functions and behaviors, and the hard problem, which addresses why and how subjective experiences arise from physical processes in the brain. The key points of the argument are that even if we fully understand how the brain functions, this does not explain why we have experiences or what it feels like to have them. He further proposes that consciousness might require a new fundamental theory, potentially supporting a form of dualism in which mental states are distinct from physical states.

PART THREE

SOME ETHICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

I will present my reflections in two parts: (A) Universality and (B) Particularity/Black Consciousness.

(A) Universality

If consciousness is a single unity of the physical (matter) and the non-physical, and is a self-created attribute of beings and non-beings, as the Kemetu thinkers compellingly argued, and as Kastrup, Sheldrake, and Chalmers, representing the scientific mood of modernity, have added, then all of us—humans and non-humans—are conscious and capable of knowing the nature of all that is there. We are capable of at least knowing that consciousness is there, outside of space and time, mystically guiding all our wills and desires. This awareness is not a simple matter. Platonic non-changing forms and Kant's impenetrable noumenon are all manifestations of consciousness. Plato and Kant both posited consciousness as unknowable by the human mind. They are not contending that it does not exist. It does, but outside of space and time, although it created space and time. It has, however, created us with limited capacities. One such limitation is the inability of the human mind to know a thing in itself, that is, consciousness, which Plato called the Form and Kant the Noumenon.

Consciousness is a universal experience of awareness for humans. This is, as modern science is uncovering, also true of physical objects. In all that is there is consciousness, but with our limited physical organs, we do not have the capacity to know the inner workings of consciousness. The work of Donald Hoffman is an ongoing attempt to penetrate consciousness and map it by the resources of perception. But insofar as consciousness itself is enveloped in the unconscious, the project of knowing consciousness is even more complicated, despite Hoffman's ongoing efforts to map out the inner content of consciousness. Consciousness will remain mystical, as the great traditions of Kemet, India, China, and the Mayan civilizations allege. What is apparent is that consciousness itself is known to itself but not to us

humans. Of course, consciousness has endowed us with intellects to seek to know it, to search for it, as Zera Yacob contended.[9] In this, modern science must be hailed for its commitment to unfurl the content of consciousness itself with humility. There are insurmountable complications, however. The first and fundamental question is: What exactly is consciousness, and what does it mean to be conscious? What is clear is that matter itself seems to be conscious, and that explains why physical objects themselves seem to be conscious, that is, aware of being in space/time, since they are extended and in time.

However, saying that physical objects are extant and conscious does not mean that we know what consciousness is. What we can say with conditional certainty is that just because we are conscious that we exist in space and time, although we do not know what space and time are, it does not mean that we also know what consciousness itself is, other than assuming that there is something "out there" which cannot be detected by the senses but is always there. There is something outside of time and space, which is moving everything, including us and all those beings with whom we share the world. Consciousness is self-moving, and it also moves us within the world in which we experience multiple events in space and time. Perhaps consciousness is guiding the body by embedding itself in the human heart and enabling the heart to give life to the body by pumping blood as a physical organ, but equally mystically sending insights and wisdom to the human brain, where insights are processed and vented out as language in the language faculty. Consciousness does its work outside time/space by making the human heart its dwelling place. That is perhaps why the Kemetu thinkers revered the heart and mummified it. Consciousness gives life to the body from the outside but then reenters the human body to empower the mind as the originator of insights and wisdom. The search for this infinite consciousness is also vigorously pursued by the East Indian sages of the Upanishads. Consider the following passages from this angle:

> "When there is some other thing, then the one can see the other, the one can smell the other, the one can taste the other, the one can speak to the other, the one can hear the other, the one can think of the other, the one can touch the other, and the one can perceive the other.["]
>
> "He becomes the one ocean, he becomes the sole seer! This, Your Majesty, is the world of *brahman*." So did Yajnavalkya instruct him. "This is his highest goal! This is his highest attainment! This is his highest world! This is his highest bliss! On just a fraction of this bliss do other creatures live."[10]

Note that this eloquent passage is a search for a unified infinite consciousness for whom the separateness of consciousness must necessarily be transcended so that we can relocate the dwelling place and the cleared field and home of the confused self, further disturbed by the separations of race, gender, and sex. The Upanishads despair that the Self is disturbing itself and becoming the source of human suffering because Atman and Brahman can be unified only in infinite consciousness—that is, if they renounce separateness that pits human against human in defense of race, gender, and sex. Appearances, although all that there could ever be, conceal a single Self whose habitat is the cosmos that belongs to no one but itself, since it created itself out of Nun, as the ancient Egyptians speculated, and the Upanishads implicitly affirm. In Chinese metaphysical speculations, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu also engage themselves through the veil of the Way for Lao Tzu and the notion of the Unbounded Self for Chuang Tzu. A passage from Lao Tzu asserts:

> The way [= Dao] is empty, yet use will not drain it.
>
> Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad creatures.[11]

Chuang Tzu adds:

> Your life has a limit but knowledge has none. If you use what is limited to pursue what has no limit, you will be in danger. If you understand this and still strive for knowledge, you will be in danger for certain![12]

Clearly, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, like the Kemetu thinkers before them, are looking for a home for the lost soul. That home is infinite consciousness and not the self-confining and bound linguistic subject of modernity. They, too, are looking for infinite consciousness.

(B) Particularity: Black Consciousness

Ma'at is ultimately the source of the ethical life for Kemet. Below, I will seek to present the interiority of Ma'at as the origin of ethical life for us humans and its ethical implications. Consciousness seems to have immortalized itself in the lifestyles of the Kemetian rulers, who sought to embody it in their souls and leadership practices. For the Greeks, the universe was ordered by Logos, by the rational word. It is this order that Plato used in his *Republic*, when he constructed an ideal city out of Logos. This principle was later translated into "In the beginning was Logos, and the Logos was God" (John 1:1). Jesus himself was Logos; in marked contrast, for the ancient Egyptians, the organizing principle of Logos was replaced by the organizing principle of Ma'at. The Egyptian city was ruled by kings who personified Ma'at. The human heart, which was worshipped by the Egyptians, and which they considered the seat of thinking, was also the seat of Ma'at. The pharaohs were expected to rule with Ma'at. The pharaoh's greatness was measured by the quality and quantity of the Ma'at that he or she internalized. After death, their hearts would be weighed by the scale of Ma'at, the scale of justice. When famines occurred and deep inequalities became a way of life, it was the duty of the rulers to uphold Ma'at and measure the depth and extent of the suffering. Not that this practice was perfectly upheld, particularly when nature overwhelmed the rulers' ideals, but there was at least an absolute and objective standard by which social and political life was judged and measured. Whereas Ma'at singled out the self as capable of stepping out of its ego-shell and embracing other egos outside itself, the corresponding famine and hunger situations forced the actual Egyptian

not to embrace the other but to destroy other selves. It is these particular moments of despair and anguish that killed the enabling moments of patience, justice, and love, Ma'at's feminized principles. The Egyptian self was thus denuded of its potential grandeur, which would make many Afrocentrists (intent on proving the moral superiority of the African self) cry in despair. The attempts by Egypt's leaders and people to internalize the limiting conditions of Ma'at prove the Afrocentric hypothesis that there was a particularly Egyptianized/Africanized effort at internalizing moral greatness, but it was not institutionalized in Egyptian life in the way that the capitalist form was in seventeenth-century Europe and beyond. The moral form of life that Ma'at promised remained on paper, as nothing more than an ideal. African thinkers did not take the trouble to embody this ideal in the lifeblood of institutions. In short, the moral form did not produce a corresponding economic form—in contrast to the capitalist economic form, which did produce a corresponding moral form and institutionalized the latter in far-reaching structures of state and civil society. That is the task that I should like to impose on myself. What modernity requires is something like Ma'at, nourished by Ib, to cultivate humans with character. The threat of inevitable doom has yet to be heeded, and capitalism itself continues to marvel at its resiliency in creating crises and immediately correcting them, thereby proving its "naturalness" and making it easy for its proponents to present it to the world as a God-chosen economic form. Any attempt to counter it with something like Ma'at is dismissed as a pipedream. No sane person is expected to take Ma'at seriously. And the fact that its geographical origin is an African civilization conveniently leads many to dismiss Ma'at as irrelevant and wishful thinking. Ma'at as a moral form is considerably deeper than the passing moral sentiments that the Scottish moral philosophers proposed. Generosity, justice, uprightness, tolerance, wisdom, and loving patience go directly against our natural proclivity to injustice, dishonesty, intolerance, close-mindedness, ignorance, and hate. These vices, which have been used to build empires and economic forms that support the visions of the rich and powerful, seem to fit the ready-to-hand tapestry of our makeup, which by now has become so second-nature that no Ma'at is going to dissemble it. In contemporary life, revitalizing the features of Ma'at requires nothing less than manufacturing a new human being. We must create human beings who can act generously, patiently, tolerantly, and lovingly. We do not have such human beings in sufficient numbers to construct an economic form that values justice, uprightness, wisdom, tolerance, and loving patience. Taking the virtues singly, the following picture emerges. Let us begin with generosity.

Generosity is a virtue. It means that one is willing to give without receiving or is willing to give without the deliberate intent of receiving anything, where receiving is only incidental. The generous person gives a particular good A to person B, and person B does not simply receive A as a matter of course. B receives A with profound respect for the giver, and even plans, if she can, to one day reciprocate not in the same way, but in some way. The reciprocity need not be of equal goods (where equality is measured by money). What makes the act morally compelling is the desire to reciprocate, and not the quantity of the reciprocity. One of the central pillars of Ma'at as an economic form is the cultivation of a human self-willing and able to act generously in the relational moral regime of giving and receiving, or simply giving without receiving, or receiving with a profound sense of gratitude and respect.

Justice is one of the features of Ma'at and is also a potential source of a moral economy appropriate for the African condition. As Aristotle taught, one does not become just merely by abstractly knowing what justice is; rather, one becomes just by doing just things. The puzzling question is this: if one does not know what justice is, then how can one know what just things are, so that one could choose only just things and not others? The question is not easy to answer. But an example might give us a sense of what Aristotle means. It is Christmas evening, and a family is gathering for dinner; the table is set for ten people. Among the popular dishes are five pies, and shortly before the guests arrive, one of the family members has been asked to cut the pies into exact sizes, so that no single person would feel that they have mistakenly picked one of the smallest pies. The task of the pie-cutter is to ensure that justice is served and that all the pies are cut evenly and fairly. What must this person do? That is the moral question. At a minimum, the person must be just to perform just action, and in this instance, justice means nothing more than cutting the pieces equally to the best of one's ability. The pies must be cut with moral imagination and with intuitive mathematical precision. There is a spiritual dimension to the science of measurement, which could have been simply done with a measuring rope. That possibility, however convenient, is not elegant. Rather, the expectations are that (1) the person is going to make an effort to be precise, because their intention is to be just, and (2) that their eyes are just, or that they pray that they would be. (1) and (2) are the requirements; the rest is left to moral imagination. The person cuts the pies, and it turns out that all the pieces appear to be equal. When the guests arrive, they randomly pick the pieces and appear to be satisfied. What we have here is a display of justice in the Aristotelian sense, in which justice is defined as an activity that is guided by a measure of equality, and equality itself is manifest in the attempt at being fair to everyone—in this case, an attempt to be fair to the guests, without their ever knowing that they are being worked on. They judge the event as illuminated by justice and as uplifting. Generalizing to a higher level, what we can say is that any economic form must be guided by justice and that all the commodities that human beings should want must be distributed according to such a standard, the standard of justice as fairness. Given justice as fairness, commodity A can be distributed between persons B and C in such an equitable way that B and C share commodity A by getting the same amount at any time, any place, and for a good reason.

Compassion is another feature of Ma'at. It is, indeed, one of the cardinal moral forms for the new moral economy that I am theorizing here. Compassion is to moral economy as greed is to capitalism. One cannot imagine capitalism without the salient principle of greed, and similarly, one cannot imagine moral economy without the originary principle of compassion. The modern world, being what it is, is divided by class, race, gender, ethnicity, and groups.

Out of these divisions, it is class division that is the most decisive, as it is also the one that seems to be so natural that we cannot surmount the pain and agony that it produces. In a class-divided world, compassion is the least present, since there is no compelling reason for individuals to be compassionate if they are not naturally so or so inclined. In such cases, though, compassion can be learned, either by example or directly through teaching. An example may elucidate the place of compassion in moral economy. It is summer, and exhaustingly hot. People that you encounter are hot-tempered too. Everybody is on edge, including you. You happen to be a coffee-lover, so there you are, standing behind a long line of people to get your fix. The heat has made you impatient, and you are ready to explode at anything around you. You are naturally generous, but not on this day. Shortly before you leave the coffee shop, a homeless person smiles at you and tries to talk to you, hoping that you will understand the purpose of the conversation. Of course, you understand, but you ignore him and walk by. But then something bothers you, and you come back to the coffee shop and generously give the man what he wanted. You are proud of yourself, because you have done what generosity demands: you have controlled your temper and performed the morally correct action. Surely, you say to yourself, it was not easy, but you did it. Now you wonder what all this means and why you did it. The answer is obvious. Indeed, it is because you are really a compassionate human being. You had no obligation to pay attention to that person. He is not related to you, he is not an ex-friend whom fortune turned against, nor did you do it in order to be a media hero. Your action is morally worthy only because you have internalized compassion. To you, compassion comes quite naturally. It is part of your moral frame. Any repeated action becomes a habit. So compassionate action comes habitually to you. You rarely fight it. Rather, you exuberantly let it lead your way, as it eventually did on that hot and difficult day. Even on that day, you conquered the temptation of doubt and excessive self- love by the moral force of compassion. That is why you corrected yourself when you were briefly but powerfully tempted by forgetfulness and returned to do the morally right thing. Compassion is morally compelling when it is extended to a total other, who has nothing to do with our lives beyond awaiting our moral attention. It is much easier to be compassionate toward a loved one, a friend, a relative, or even an acquaintance; harder is the task when the subject is a real other, such as that person by the coffee shop. For any action to be morally worthy, the motive must be pure, and the purity is measured by the quality and quantity of the compassion that is extended to any needy human being, uncontaminated by external motives such as love, friendship, acquaintance, and relation. It is in this particular way that I am arguing that compassion serves Ma'at.

Tolerance is another crucial feature of moral economy. In fact, it could easily be argued that it is an indispensable organizing principle that works in tandem with loving-kindness. Just as we cannot love a person—except illusorily—without respecting this person, so we cannot live with one another without tolerating each other's needs, habits, likes, and dislikes. In the economic sphere, tolerance is subtly pertinent. We cannot readily sense its inner workings unless we pay attention to its musings at the workplace, as we interact with one another as managers and workers. Consider the following example to underscore the point. There is this worker who does things in ways that many people find annoying. She customarily comes late to work; she procrastinates; she spreads papers, cans, and foodstuffs all around her; sometimes she cannot even find herself amidst the dirt, the pile, and the dust. Yet, and this is the point, whatever tasks she performs are carried out as flawlessly as is humanly possible. Her supervisor has agonized over what to do with her and has often contemplated firing her. Lulled by the elegance of her work and his loving-kindness toward her, he decides to keep her. He has promised himself to erase those occasional thoughts of getting rid of her. As he told one of his friends, he has learned, not very easily, the ways of tolerance as a principle of management, as an approach to dealing with workers who will not and cannot change their habits. I consider this manager very wise and skilled at the art of management. He decided that it was better to change himself, as hard as it was, than to expect the worker to change. The structure of his thoughts could be put syllogistically:

> Y can change his way. X cannot change easily.
>
> Therefore, Y must change for the sake of Z.

Y is the manager. X is the worker. Z is the organization where Y and X work. In this situation, Z was saved precisely because the manager internalized tolerance and loving-kindness as the organizing principles of the organization. Y controlled his ego and chose to advance the interests of Z over and against his own private needs. He did not fire X, nor did he insist that X must change. He must have intuitively and empirically concluded that it is pointless to expect X to change, nor would it benefit Z to lose X, since X is an intelligent and skilled worker. Where tolerance is habitually practiced at workplaces, it becomes an indispensable good that can save many enterprises the unnecessary costs arising from hiring and firing workers, including the distress of their families and loved ones. Tolerance can easily remedy the situation. If it is easier for managers than for excellent workers to change, then it is the managers who must do so for the sake of a functional and democratic moral economy.

The Egyptians held the human heart at a level beyond any other organ, and this decision is not an accident. While modern medicine treats the brain as the cognitive organ that originates and processes thoughts, the Egyptians treated the human heart as the seat of thinking. To the Egyptians, the human heart had both a physical and a transcendental function. Its physical function is pumping blood, and its transcendental function is moral thought. Ma'at was guided by the human heart. The heart is the home of thought-impulses, or what we loosely call feelings. The Egyptians accorded weight to the heart's transcendental function. They reasoned that thoughts originate in the heart, are processed by the brain, and are emitted as language. Some thoughts are expressed as speech, and others are buried in the depths of the unconscious, beyond language, in the realm of the inexpressible. It is the Egyptian insight

about the heart as the seat of thinking—particularly moral thinking—that gives the heart a central place in moral economy. The citizens of the new moral economy must be encouraged to practice what they intuitively know: that moral thinking is both thinking outside of the self and the attempt at reaching the unknown and perhaps unknowable other. This difficult task of embracing another person's concerns as one's very own is precisely the territory that the human heart undertakes. The brain indeed processes those thoughts, moral and otherwise, which originate in that regime of transcendental thought, but the depth of the need to embrace the other, to think for the other and with the other, are practices in moral thinking that we feel deeply in our hearts; the will propels us toward action, and the brain organizes the sequences of what must be done. The new moral economy must make the heart the initiator of action, and citizens must be encouraged to take the language of the heart (namely, feeling) much more seriously. Where these intuitively felt and lived thoughts are temporarily absent from our busy lives, they must be made present by being remembered and recollected as the citizens' habits, on the basis of systematic education at schools, madrassas, churches, and other institutions of modern society. The new moral economy desperately needs thoughtful human beings. A functioning moral economy not only needs leaders who follow the ways of Ma'at; more importantly, it needs citizens who practice what they feel in their hearts, or who at the minimum know intuitively that that is what they must do if they are to preserve the human species. Ma'at shows us the way, and the human heart demonstrates the value of the practice, as the Kemetu thinkers taught. Of course, what is difficult is the institutionalization of Ma'at as a regulatory ideal that could reform individual behavior. Social movements are composed of individuals who can be guided by a universal ethical principle such as Ma'at.

CONCLUSION

Black social consciousness is an inheritor of a universal consciousness such as Ma'at, from which contemporary voices of Black Consciousness can draw, learn, and share with the world. We should also pay tribute to the Kemetu thinkers who initiated the first movement and to certain voices of modern science for articulating further, with the instrumental resources of the natural sciences.

NOTES

1. This essay has been edited for publication. Any added notes are explicitly identified as such; all additions are by Björn Freter.
2. See Teodros Kiros, *Zera Yacob's Inauguration of Modernity and Cardiocentrism* (Lexington, 2024) [note added].
3. See Carole R. Fontaine, "A Modern Look at Ancient Wisdom: The Instruction of Ptahhotep Revisited." *Biblical Archaeologist* 44, no. 3 (1981): 155–60; Ian E. Wickramasekera II, "Early Psychological Knowledge," in *History of Psychology*, ed. Thomas Leahey, Spencer Greer, Thierry Lefrançois, J. Reiner, Ian Wickramasekera II, Eric Wilmarth (Constellation, 2014), 15–42; Louis Vico Zabkar, *A Study of the Ba Concept in Ancient Egyptian Texts* (University of Chicago Press, 1968).
4. Théophile Obenga, "Egyptology & Its Origin: The Role of African Science," transcribed lecture, January 19, 2017, on *Sesh Medew Netcher*, available at https://seshmedewnetcher.com/egyptology-its-origin-the-role-of-african-science-by-professor-theophile-obenga/. See also Théophile Obenga, *Afeni ke nefer* (Présence Africaine, 1989); Théophile Obenga, *African Philosophy: The Pharaonic Period: 2780–330 BC*, trans. from French bu Ayi Kwei Armah, Per Ankh, 2004 [1990]; and Karl Josef Hochegger (ed.), *Africa in Antiquity: The Arts of Ancient Nubia and the Sudan: Proceedings of the Symposium Held in Conjunction with the Exhibition, Brooklyn, September 29–October 1, 1978 (Walter de Gruyter, 1979)*.
5. See Teodros Kiros, *Self-Definition: A Philosophical Inquiry from the Global South and Global North* (Lexington, 2021) [note added].
6. See Mark Sprevak and Elizabeth Irvine, "Eliminativism About Consciousness," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Consciousness*, ed. Uriah Kriegel (Oxford University Press, 2020), 348–70.
7. Bernadro Kastrup, *Analytic Idealism: A Consciousness-only Ontology*, dissertation, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, 2019, 141 [note added].
8. Bernardo Kastrup, *The Idea of the World: A Multi-Disciplinary Argument for the Mental Nature of Reality.* (Iff Books, 2019) [note added].
9. See Kiros, *Zera Yacob's Inauguration of Modernity* [note added].
10. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.31-32 = *The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (Oxford University Press, 1998), 117 [note added].
11. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (Penguin Books, 1963), 60 = I.IV [note added].
12. The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, trans. Burton Watson (Columbia University Press), 3 = 50 [note added].

The Primacy of Mind: Ancient Kemetian Ontology and the Modern Hard Problem of Consciousness

Teodros Kiros
BERKLEE COLLEGE

This contribution is forthcoming as a public lecture at Berklee College of Music.

INTRODUCTION

We are often told that the history of philosophy began in Greece and that the "Hard Problem" of consciousness is a modern invention of the twenty-first century. But what if I told you that the answers modern scientists are desperately seeking—using supercomputers and quantum physics—were already carved into stone along the banks of the Nile five thousand years ago? Today, we are not just exploring the mind; we are reclaiming an ancient future.

I will present my reflections in two parts. First, we will explore consciousness according to **Kemetu** thinkers; second, we will examine how these ancient insights parallel modern scientific inquiries into the nature of the mind.

THE ARGUMENT

I define consciousness as a self-originating awareness—a non-physical, non-temporal presence that is not a "thing" in the material sense. It is the immediate awareness of thoughts, beliefs, and experiences, as well as the sensing of objects. It is my proposition that the ancient Kemetu thinkers understood consciousness in exactly this way.

For these thinkers, consciousness is the source of matter. They held that the material and the non-material are inseparable. Consider **Nun**: the primordial waters or the "material" out of which the first god, **Atum-Ra**, emerged. Nun and Atum-Ra are inseparable, just as consciousness and matter are one. Nun is itself conscious—the material creator of the non-material. In this view, consciousness is the originator of matter, and the function of the whole (Nun) is reflected in the function of its parts.

Modern science is now "reinventing the wheel." After centuries of materialist thought dating back to the seventeenth century, science is returning to the idea that consciousness is primary, not matter. I will conclude by suggesting that **Black Consciousness** is a modern variant of these ancient views—an inheritor of the African ancestors who were the true founders of philosophy.

PART ONE: CONSCIOUSNESS IN KEMET

A philosophical analysis of Kemet reveals a worldview where the inner life and the outer cosmos were deeply interconnected. Kemetian thought suggests that consciousness is not a mere byproduct of the brain, but a multifaceted entity tied to both the spiritual and material worlds. This stands in stark contrast to Western traditions and continues to influence African-centered psychology today.

In the Kemetian view, consciousness is a **composite**, not a simple unity. It consists of the following:

The Ka: The immortal life force.

The Ba: The unique personality or soul.

The Ib: The heart, which is weighed against te, the feather of **Maat**, to determine a person's righteousness.

The Ren: The identity and essence of a person.

PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE

This Kemetian analysis highlights that consciousness is **holistic**. It is not trapped within the brain; rather, it is a composite of inseparable parts: body, soul, and spirit.

Furthermore, it is an **Ethical Composite**. It guides the individual as a moral subject. In this worldview, the public sphere is inhabited by individuals who are ethically disciplined by **Maat** (truth, balance, and order). Action is directed by thought, and thought is inhabited by Maat. For the Kemetu, action and thought interpenetrate; one seeks to live "thoughtfully" to achieve transcendence and immortality by aligning one's life with the cosmic order.

PART TWO: MODERN SCIENCE AND THE NATURE OF MIND

In modern analytical philosophy, we find several camps: the **eliminativists, reductionists, integrationists, idealists, and panpsychists.** While they all acknowledge that consciousness exists as a phenomenon, they remain in deep conflict regarding its fundamental nature.

1. THE LANDSCAPE OF MODERN THEORIES

Eliminativism: Led by thinkers like Daniel Dennett, this view suggests that subjective "thought" is an illusion. Eliminativists argue that consciousness should be removed from scientific vocabulary once we fully map the brain's functions.

Reductionism: These theorists argue that consciousness is strictly a byproduct of biological hardware. To a reductionist, "mind" is simply the firing of neurons.

Integrationism: This school sees consciousness as an interplay of information—perception, memory, and attention—being broadcast across the brain's "Global Workspace."

Idealism: In direct opposition to the materialists, idealists argue that consciousness is the primary producer of reality. The world exists because consciousness produces the perception of it.

Panpsychism: This view posits that consciousness is a fundamental feature of the universe, present in all things—from complex human minds down to the smallest atoms and **qualia**.

2. CHALLENGING THE FOUNDATION: THE "HARD PROBLEM"

Thinkers like **Bernardo Kastrup** and **Donald Hoffman** have shaken the foundations of science by addressing the **"Hard Problem of Consciousness"**—the question of *why* physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experience.

Analytic Idealism (Kastrup): Kastrup argues that there is only one universal consciousness. We, as individuals, are "dissociated alters" of this single cosmic mind. The brain does not create consciousness; rather, the brain is simply what a mental process looks like from a dissociated viewpoint.

The Interface Theory (Hoffman): Hoffman proposes that evolution did not design our senses to show us "Truth," but to help us survive. Our perception of space, time, and matter is merely a "useful fiction"—a user interface—that hides a deeper reality of "conscious agents."

PART THREE: BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AS AN INHERITANCE

I conclude with the suggestion that **Black Consciousness** is a modern variant of these ancient and contemporary views. Beyond a mere political or social movement, Black Consciousness is an ontological realization—a return to the understanding that consciousness is primary.

The modern scientific discussion, led by the likes of Kastrup and Hoffman, is—perhaps unknowingly—informed by the original accomplishments of the **Kemetu** thinkers. We must recognize that Black Consciousness itself is the inheritor of our African ancestors, who were the true founders of philosophy.

THE SYNTHESIS

When we look at the Kemetian **Maat**, we see a framework for what Hoffman might call "conscious agents" living in alignment. When we look at **Nun**, we see the "Universal Consciousness" that Kastrup describes. The "Hard Problem" that modern science is currently struggling to solve was resolved thousands of years ago on the banks of the Nile: they knew that the material and non-material are inseparable.

To embrace Black Consciousness today is to reclaim this holistic worldview. It is to move away from the reductionism that seeks to limit our existence to biological functions. Instead, we return to a view where:

The Self is a composite: We are not just bodies, but life-force, personality, and essence.

Ethics and Thought are one: Our consciousness is an active engagement with Truth and Order.

Ancestry is Continuity: Our current awareness is a link in a non-temporal chain of wisdom.

CONCLUSION

In the end, we find that modern science isn't moving forward into a void—it is finally walking back to the source. Ancient Kemet taught us that consciousness is the source of matter; modern science is finally catching up to this "ancient future."

When we align the ethics of **Maat** with the mathematics of the modern mind, we realize that Black Consciousness is more than a social identity; it is a return to the fundamental truth of the universe. We are not biological accidents trying to be conscious; we are consciousness itself, experiencing the beautiful, material dance of being human. Our ancestors didn't just found philosophy—they mastered the light of the mind that we are all just beginning to see.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *The Egyptian Philosophers: Ancient African Voices from Imhotep to Akhenaten* (African American Images, 2000).

Chalmers, David J., "Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2, no. 3 (1995): 200–19. [Note added by BF].

Dennett, Daniel C., *Consciousness Explained* (Little, Brown and Co., 1991).

Hoffman, Donald D., *The Case Against Reality: Why Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

James, George G. M., *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy* (Philosophical Library, 1954).

Kastrup, Bernardo, *The Idea of the World: A Multi-disciplinary Argument for the Mental Nature of Reality* (Iff Books, 2019).

Karenga, Maulana, *Maat, The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics* (University of Sankore Press, 2006).

Obenga, Thompson, *African Philosophy: The Pharaonic Period: 2780–330 BC* (Per Ankh, 2004).

Zera Yacob and the Rationality of the Human Heart

Teodros Kiros

BERKLEE COLLEGE

To the ancient Egyptians and following them to Zera Yacob, a seventeenth-century Ethiopian Rationalist, the heart is a symbol of Wisdom broadly understood, and a symbol of Reason or Rationality, analytically understood.

> That is:
> The Heart is a symbol of Reason.
> Humans can reason.
> They reason with the Heart.

The ancient Egyptians mummified the human heart and sucked out the brain. The heart captured their imagination and stimulated their reasoning power and their wisdom. It is said that hearts were lifted and soaked in wines and herbs, preserved for worship by saints. Aztec priests captured the hearts of their enemies and "offered them to their God's." The Egyptians were cardiocentrists. They considered the brain worthless, whereas they worshipped the heart. The human heart also fascinated the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Plato, however, was much more concerned with the wisdom of the Soul than he was with the heart. In *The Republic*, he divides the soul into three inseparable parts, the Rational, the Spirited, and the Desiring, and primacy of governance is given to Rationality, a foundational attribute of the Soul. Plato was a cerebocentrist. Aristotle, his brilliant student, parts company from his teacher. As the son of a biologist, and influenced by his father, and accustomed to shrewd observation, he dissected and studied animal hearts, his *Historia Animalum* and *De Partibus Animalum*, are a wealth of empirical evidence and detailed documentation of the structure and function of the heart. He disagreed with Plato that the heart is a cushion by arguing that, in fact, the heart is the seat of the soul, therefore, the seat of wisdom and rationality.

The human heart, this industrious and muscular pump, the size of a fist, which beats 100,000 times, and pumps 2,000 gallons of blood, through 60,000 miles of blood vessels, and which in a life time will beat more than 2.5 billion times, is also the site of penetrating intelligence and the seat of wisdom and generator of not merely irrational feelings but passionate thought impulses. It is the heart that carves out the right moral path and the originator of thought impulses in the form of emotion. It is the ultimate house of what we moderns have come to call moral intelligence. The heart, as part of the body, is indeed a diligent blood pumper, and as the seat of the soul, it originates thought impulses. Thus, the heart has both a scientific function and a transcendental function; the heart is both a physical/material and a non-physical/transcendental organ. The body and mind dichotomy, which raged in the seventeenth century, was made prominent by Descartes, who claimed that the body and the mind cannot possibly interact, and that the body is merely sensations, and the mind a thinking organ.

However, in contrast, Zera Yacob orchestrated a Copernican revolution by arguing that Leb (Heart) (in Geez, a classical Ethiopian language) is in fact both the seat of emotion and the seat of thoughts. That the dichotomy between the body and mind is overcome inside the heart, the seat of the soul. Zera Yacob's resolution of the dichotomy is his view that the heart is part of the body, as a blood pumper, and part of the non-bodily, the penetrating intelligence which originates and dissects thoughts, and directs them to the brain, where thought impulses are processed and linguistically articulated, thereby facilitating communication and producing discourses. For Zera Yacob, a spiritual/ religious thinker, the transcendental function is given by God to persons so that they can think wisely and act rationally. From this angle, one can develop a modality of rationality.

One is wise, therefore potentially rational, when one uses the God-given penetrating intelligence and puts oneself on a moral path, guided by self-generated limiting conditions of discourse and action. I presuppose this particular view of Zera Yacobian rationality, and I am calling it the Rationality of the Human Heart (RH), which I distinguish from the popularly modern Scientific Rationality (SR). I will briefly contrast these modalities of rationality. I do not wish to draw the line too deeply. I allow the possibility of SR, when it is not purely instrumental and calculative, to draw from RH, also. After all, scientists have hearts also and not all rationalists consult their hearts, either. When science is instrumental (calculating), then the distinctions that I have drawn are plausible. When science is not instrumental, then the dichotomy that I have drawn is unnecessary. RH and SR could work in tandem when ideal speaking and acting subjects choose wisely and efficiently.

In the moral/rational sphere, the speaking and acting subjects consult the heart prayerfully and humbly before intervening in the flow of life to realize their possibilities and life chances. They think deeply before they act to correct an injustice or articulate a vision of the good life boldly but humbly. The penetrating human intelligence located in the human heart, as we learn from Zera Yacob propels us when it is functioning transcendentally, to change the consciousness of the world and address human miseries-miseries which SR for the most part ignores as permanent features of the natural world. It is at this level that SR and RH give us irreconcilable articulations of the human condition.

Generally, I contend that SR is not motivated by the goal of becoming wise. The goal is efficiency, practical results, and maximizing profit and benefit in workplaces. RH is centrally guided by the vision of wisdom, or at least, valuing wisdom, and seeking to become wise and make wise decisions. If one is religiously inclined and is a believer, the quest for wisdom is accompanied by a committed passion to reach God prayerfully, so that one's speech and action are purely motivated by Zera Yacobian Hassasa (looking for, searching God) and Hatata (praying and meditating). For Zera Yacob, the possibility of becoming wise, at a certain point in one's impermanent life, requires a steady company of God. In short, one must have faith in this Transcendental power, located in the Heart, in order to realize wisdom and rationality simultaneously. SR, on the other hand, is not guided, unless one wishes to do so, to engage in Hatata. All that the person has to do is use rationality to produce efficient accounts.

A plan of life is felt in the heart as a thought impulse, and the relevant principles of what to do originate there, as the subject intensely feels the thought impulses. In this sense the heart produces intelligent life plans and seeks to realize them. As it does so, it wears a meditative and prayerful mood to empower the urge of its agency. These plans of life and principles of moral action are knowledge-producing moments for speaking and acting subjects. They are productive of Noesis. Following Zera Yacob, I would like to modestly contend that the heart is as wise/rational as are the speaking and acting subjects who consult Noesis, which is located in the human heart, originating thought impulses and seeking to express in language, so that it could share its possibilities with others with whom it shares the world.

Whereas SR restricts itself to the relationship between means and ends to produce efficient and cost-effective outcomes, RH seeks to change the consciousness of the world to minimize, and if possible, eliminate unnecessary human suffering, such as poverty, diseases, and exploitation in workplaces. RH is committed to the idea of making means and ends themselves rational.

When we consult the heart, and say, it is from the heart, what we mean is: the feelings which ground the thought impulses are authentic; that the subject intuitively feels that she must act; that the thought impulses are sincere; that the thought impulses are deeply felt; that the speaking and acting subject has carefully distinguished authentic thoughts from inauthentic ones intuitively; that her intuition is informed by guidance originating from the companionship of the Transcendent through Hassasa and Hatata; that the speaking subject means what she says and acts in accordance with what she feels, following an intuition penetrated by wisdom, and finally, the thought impulses provoke moral action, they compel the speaking subject to act in the world, to change human consciousness.

SR and RH could further be contrasted in the following ways. The most salient features of SR are: (a) Humans are desiring beings, that is their natural constitution, therefore, (b) humans are economic animals and their psychological and material needs can be satisfied by the relationship between means and ends, (c) the desires of these beings must somehow be satisfied, even at the expense of destroying the environment, as drilling oil, deforestation, coal mining and others attest, and yet we continue ignoring the consequences as long as money and wealth are procured, and the masses are somehow minimally satisfied, and revolts and revolutions are systematically averted.

In direct contrast to SR, (a) the human is a potentially peaceful and justice loving, but this potential has to be patiently evoked out of the recesses of the unconscious where it is covered by desire, (b) humans are in fact caring and sensitive beings, evident in the language of the heart, if they are inclined to consult the heart before they act, a capacity, that critical education could unravel, patiently and

lovingly, (c) humans are drawn to mystery, which includes the possibility of discovering a Transcendental power, such as God to put them on the right moral paths, and change the consciousness of the world, (d) humans, when correctly challenged and critically enlightened, can and are willing to explore extraordinary possibilities motivated by the power of the intuition to discover the Good on their own. The Good is inside them, and consulting the heart with a reflective, meditative mood could get them there. Following Zera Yacob, I modestly contend that the possibility of the best in each and every one of us begins with engaging in Hassasa and Hatata as self-imposed moral projects propelled by the quest for moral excellence as a lifelong quest for cultivating new habits covered by the weight of SR, which has become our second nature.

RH has the power to redeem us all from ourselves, from the slumber of our sleep, our callousness and indifference. These are turbulent times. Indifference is the signifier of our age. Game playing is the name of our alienated human relations. Marketing everything is our new nature. We play people, as opposed to caring for them and helping them, when we can. We even like to say, sadly, "do not be emotional." By saying so, we think that to be emotional is to be foolish, thoughtless, when the opposite is the case, that emotions themselves are thought impulses, and that it is only when we feel that we think, that we encounter the company of God, if we are religious in that particular sense, or we become one with Brahma, the Imperishable in Hinduism.

To be rational and wise is, in fact, the power that makes it possible for us to thank all those who serve us, our house cleaners, our maids, our babysitters, all those whose lives can be changed only when we listen and are guided by the Heart, the seat of thinking. When we listen to the heart, the site of thought, we will not suffer from the pangs of thoughtlessness and indifference and internalized cruelty. RH awakens us from indifference and helplessness, as the first step of organizing the world to participate in peaceful marches, informed participation in social movements, where hearts meet hearts, and wisdom interacts with wisdom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors of this journal thank the editorial team of *Intellectus* for permission to reprint this article, which originally appeared in *Intellectus* 1.1 (2022): 108–11. Minor errors have been corrected without further notice.

BOOK REVIEW

Courage and Love. A Review of George Yancy: A Critical Introduction

Kimberly Ducey, Clevis Headley, Joe R. Feagin (eds.): *George Yancy: A Critical Introduction* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). ISBN13: 9781538137482. ISBN10: 1538137488.

Reviewed by Teodros Kiros
BERKLEE COLLEGE

As all the extraordinary contributors attest, George Yancy is a gifted philosopher. Importantly, Yancy is not a philosopher because he has mastered the Western philosophical tradition. That is too constraining and provincial. He is a professional philosopher by virtue of his Africanity, since what we call philosophy, a reflective activity, was founded by the opulent Kemetian (falsely called Egyptian) philosophers thousands of years ago. That is part of Yancy's living heritage. Yancy writes as a free black philosopher, rooted in his Africanity, the source of humanity, and who has extricated white supremacy from his soul, as Cornel West demands from all black people. Yancy has freed himself from the virus of white supremacy. Yancy is a philosopher of philosophers who continues to practice this activity lovingly and responsibly as the love of wisdom demands in both a broad sense and a narrow sense. In the broad sense, Yancy practices philosophy that seeks that which is common to our human endeavors to make sense of the world, to understand the limits of human knowledge, and to understand our place in the cosmos. In a narrower sense, he has chosen to examine the idea of race by developing commanding philosophical categories that empower his audience to tarry with him by thinking with him, to tarry with him by engaging in philosophy as a reflection on the catastrophes experienced by all those who have been dehumanized by racism. However, Yancy is particularly engaged with the continuous tragedy of anti-Black racism in the US and beyond. Yancy's philosophical concerns make him a synthetic philosopher of the best kind, who thinks and writes in ways that combine philosophical concepts with a personal, narrative structure that never fails to evade the human face of philosophy.

The categories which I will use to review this impressive book are (1) Blemish, (2) Tarrying, (3) Rap Music, (4) Parrhesia, (5) The White Gaze, (6) Decoherence/Shame, and (7) Suffering. Each of these categories, while not exhaustive, are integral to Yancy's philosophical work. Each category has been explored by various contributors in this important book.

(1) BLEMISH

Whereas the black person recognizes the white person as a person, the white person is unwilling and perhaps incapable of recognizing the black person as a human being, as Ryan J. Johnson and Biko Mandela Gray have argued convincingly. It is this absence of recognition that makes the black person a problem, a condition which the black

person rejects as Yancy continues to argue courageously throughout the body of his work. Yancy's analysis disrupts the white person's attempt to mark and "fix" blackness as a blemish and as a problem. For Yancy, whiteness is the problem because of its dependence on conceptualizing blackness as a problem when it is not. "White innocence" is the blemish that the white person must cleanse from their being if they are to become fully human.

(2) TARRYING

When Yancy analyzes the blemish, he does so with the genuine philosopher's tools of love and sensitivity. This point is clear as delineated in the contribution by Becky Vartabedian, Selihom Andarge, and others. Yancy invites the white person to think with him, to tarry with him about whiteness as falsely innocent, as the refusal to examine the white self, to dissect what it means to be white in the world. Yancy challenges his audience to aim at self-transformation through the analysis of the self and the subsequent possibility of transformation when white "innocence" is confronted, and the historical weight and stain of white privilege is disowned and dismantled by the activity of thinking and collective action toward the end of radical transformation. That is Yancy's hope. Tarrying must lead not simply to contemplation but to actual, painful decision-making to change the white self and become fully human.

(3) RAP MUSIC

Harry A. Nethery deploys Yancy's work to argue that rap music itself is a mode of tarrying, and here the mode of communication is music guided by words that address white audiences to think about what they are doing when they possess white privilege uncritically as a justification of greed and the fear of black people and hold false claims of "superiority." Yancy's emphasis upon tarrying within this context is deployed to demonstrate the power of the Black gaze as it is expressed through rap music, and how this powerful musical genre can function as a challenge to white arrogance and privilege.

(4) PARRHESIA

Yancy has consistently addressed the race idea with enviable courage, as he participates in Parrhesia, and truth-telling, as Tom Sparrow and Kathy Glass have perceptively argued in their respective contributions. Glass situates Yancy within the tradition of Frederick Douglass's bold speech practices, and Sparrow discusses how, as a white philosopher, he is challenged by Yancy's courageous speech to critically engage his own whiteness, to seek to perform "Whiteness differently," not as privilege but as a problem which must be overcome. Inspired by Yancy, all the white scholars within this text are painfully aware of what they have inherited and how they must transform themselves individually and collectively.

(5) WHITENESS AND THE WHITE GAZE

All the contributors are aware of Yancy's powerful theorization of whiteness as the transcendental norm, where to be white, according to this racist logic, is to be human as such. Whiteness is an explicit and implicit site of celebration that one was born white, although whiteness designates a skin color which is nothing more than a differentiation from blackness, which is the original color of the first human as it emerged in Africa six to seven million years ago, and the Cro-Magnon man, a differentiation of the Grimaldi man, who moved to Europe and Asia fifty thousand years ago, as Cheikh Anta Diop has documented in *Civilization and Barbarism*.[1]

Whiteness cannot recognize its blackness. Instead, it celebrates whiteness so that it can shamelessly exploit its status as socially privileged. Whiteness, on this score, is founded and fortified by greed and fear of recognizing that it is just as human as any other that came out of Black Africa.

(6) DECOHERENCE

Anthony Paul Smith has argued that the incoherence of whiteness as an expression of one's humanity leads to shame. This contingent and problematic condition can be remedied if whiteness, which is mediated by the white gaze, is troubled and can be transcended by white people to do the necessary work. This is particularly the case in the academic sphere, where white professors are the majority, a privilege which they accept unapologetically as if it is a natural fact, the way it is supposed to be. This situation needs to be decohered and decolonized by blacks, browns, yellows, and others to make the situation visible by demanding and fighting for their right to be present within these human spaces, where they can teach new knowledge and interrogate and change the curriculum, which is currently saturated with the white gaze and white privilege. This new knowledge can just as easily be taught by whites, as Paul Smith compellingly argues, following Yancy's relentless questioning of this naturalized public sphere, is rarely addressed. Unearned privilege must be unsutured. And those who carry its banner must be prepared to face backlash, as Yancy himself did and continues to face. White people must be prepared deal with the consequences of fighting against their own white privilege and power. And like Yancy, they must do so without being silenced. That is what it means to exemplify Black courage, Black counter-hegemonic practices, and the Black exercise of decoherence and denaturalizing the contingency of Black oppression.

(7) SUFFERING

In *Dear White America*, Yancy urged "White America to listen with Love."[2] In this letter, Yancy is generous, penetrating, sensitive, compassionate, patient, and understanding. He is prepared to critique with analytic precision, clarity, and, when appropriate, intensity. Passion without precision is empty, and precision without passion is blind. The passionate thinker must first see widely, deeply, and relevantly, and then choose among an array of problems that they must rigorously examine with precision and purpose. That is why Yancy has chosen the idea of race as a lifetime project by which he is known as the consistently brilliant philosopher of race on behalf of the human condition. Yancy's penetrating analysis is admired by the philosophically sensitive and engaging contributors to this volume, which suitably honors him, and the editors have done a masterful job of producing this serious work.

In all his writings, Yancy presents himself as a model to us all, to all those who want to change the world, burdened

by any gaze that might function hegemonically: the Black Gaze, the White Gaze, the Brown Gaze, the Class Gaze, the Sexual Gaze. Yancy is critically aware that these gazes in their violent forms must be faced head-on, because they are there in the world enacting violence, with the White Gaze occupying an arbitrary locus of power from which it continues to dominate the world in tandem with barbaric capitalism. As Yancy reveals through his powerful writings, gifted with style, analytic precision, and contagious passion, hate and revenge have no place in our collective human family.

Yancy has chosen suffering as a mode of teaching, a mode of tarrying with all those victims of hegemonic ideologies. When he is not listened to, when he is savagely attacked, he does not express revenge, or attack in return. He continues to radically love and teach.

He weeps, like Christ before him. Weeping, like praying, is a mode of philosophizing. Those who cannot hear could perhaps be moved to question themselves and their privileges when they are confronted with tears. Weeping is a revolutionary activity, the activity of the heart, where genuine and precise thoughts originate. The weeping philosopher is, after all, the philosopher of the Heart, where thoughts that move and move others percolate in the silence of solitude and the sounds of collective human action on the streets and hopefully the corridors of academia, where Yancy, the courageous thinker, resides tirelessly. Rap music adds music to the tears so that we can weep collectively. Tarrying with Yancy and truly listening to his message has a similar structural invocation. Hail to the contributors who have honored Yancy as a leading philosopher, the voice of radical love, in spite of the continued abuse and shootings of black bodies. Indeed, despite all of this, Yancy's piercing analysis is guided by love and precision.

I joined forces with Yancy within my own work, *Self-Definition: A Philosophical Inquiry from The Global South and Global North*.[3] There, I call for a new world. We are both looking for the human, for a Human Gaze, to displace all the other gazes which have been imposed on us humans when we are, each in our own way, seeking to complete ourselves as integral parts of the Indivisible whole that the great sages of Kemet, the sages of the *Upanishads* and Chuang Tzu, the philosopher of infinite consciousness, dreamt about.

In closing, I would like to thank all the contributors to this volume for all they taught me through the verves, critical imaginations, and brilliance of their reflections on the work of George Yancy's writings. And a special congratulations to the editors who produced this masterpiece of meaningful scholarship for our troubled time.

NOTES

1. See Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism. An Authentic Anthropology*, trans. from the French by Yaa-Lengi Meema Ngemi, ed. by Harold J. Salemson and Marjolijn de Jager, Lawrence Hill, 1991 [1981].
2. See George Yancy, "Dear White America," *The New York Times*, December 25, 2015, https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/24/dear-white-america/.
3. See Teodros Kiros, *Self-Definition: A Philosophical Inquiry from the Global South and Global North* (Lexington, 2021).

INTERVIEW

The Challenge of Ethiopian Rationality for African Philosophy: A Conversation with Ethiopian Philosopher Teodros Kiros

The conversation was conducted (remotely) by Bjorn Freter on January 9, 2025, in Baltimore, MD. This interview has been edited for length and clarity, with explanatory notes added by Björn Freter.

Teodros Kiros is a leading authority on moral philosophy and a leading voice in African philosophy. He is a professor of philosophy at Harvard Summer School and has been a W. E. B. Du Bois Fellow at Harvard University for the past twenty years and has been nominated three times for Berklee's Distinguished Faculty Award. He is, furthermore, the producer and host of the internationally acclaimed television program "African Ascent," an essayist for leading websites, a columnist for leading newspapers, and has published hundreds of articles in refereed journals and online.

Björn Freter: Welcome, dear Teodros! It is such a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak with you about your work. Thank you very much for being with us here today!

The first question I always ask in this interview series is about your understanding of African philosophy. What do you think of the ongoing work on defining African philosophy? Do you consider this to be for the benefit or the detriment of African philosophy? Does the question "What is African philosophy?" perpetuate a tradition of ignorance about African philosophy, or do you consider it an important question that should continue to be explored?

Teodros Kiros: This is an excellent question. Professor Fekade Abebe, who is preparing a book on me called *Reason, Resistance and Responsibility,* noticed something repeatedly in my thirty-year search for attempting to define African philosophy. In a review that I did on Professor Masolo's work, *Africa in Search of Identity*, I complained—very mildly, but complained nevertheless—that the giants in African philosophy, beginning with Zera Yacob, that Africans must not be making major efforts to dig out and to know what is within the continent on the scholarly spectrum. I introduced Zera Yacob to the world stage in 2005 following the irreplaceable contributions of the Canadian Jesuit philosopher Claude Sumner, whom I met in Ethiopia accidentally about twenty-five years ago, and who famously described himself to the charm of the world as Canadian by birth and Ethiopian by choice.[1] He meant it; he inhabited that proposition by living in Ethiopia for about forty-five years. He who singularly excavated an old manuscript that he found, rotting and getting dusty, in one of our Ethiopian national libraries. When he opened the manuscript—reading and writing in reasonably fluent Ge'ez[2]—he discovered that it was very short, I believe, about twenty-seven pages long. His eyes sparkled with

both joy and astonishment at the realization that such a text existed in Ethiopia, one that Ethiopian scholars themselves had not yet discovered. He brought this to light, and he must have produced six or seven volumes with meticulous Jesuitic discipline that does not even overlook the place of a comma, a period, or a semicolon in the construction of sentences, and produced massive works.[3] [. . .] I'm sure, considering Masolo's age and expertise, that he must have known about Claude Sumner. He must have somehow heard about his voluminous contributions. However, in his major work, *Africa in Search of Identity*, neither Claude Sumner nor Zera Yacob is even mentioned. And, as I said, this led me to complain that Africa must not be making major efforts to uncover and understand what exists within the continent on the scholarly spectrum. This is unforgivable. This major work of Masolo should not have appeared without the due respect and recognition that should have been given to Claude Sumner. This complaint that I made kept on haunting me, and it kept on appearing in almost all my books, particularly the books that I committed to the philosophizing in Africa, or, roughly speaking, African philosophy, whatever that may mean, since the term itself already presupposes a particular conception of philosophy. As an African, as a Latin American, as an Asian, it assumes that there is something that is particular about these philosophies, which incidentally is not a property, for example, that is attributed to Western philosophy. We simply speak about philosophy when we are dealing with it. Dealing with the nature of philosophy, its concern, its epistemologies, its ontologies, so on and so on. But when it does come to African philosophy, there is a tendency to otherize it by making it a particular, almost exotic, almost undefinable, almost strange. I reacted very strongly to this by attempting to make a modest contribution to correct this flaw. And as such, I want to speak about philosophy, per se, within which, then, the contribution of Africans as philosophers could be appended. They need not necessarily be defined as African philosophers. It's enough if they are simply recognized as philosophers born on the continent of Africa. [. . .] So, my self-imposed mission has been to streamline the contributions of what we call African philosophy to be part and parcel of philosophy itself.

BF: I see. I want to follow up about something you said. There is this gap in Masolo's work, and then he's not the only one where we can find this gap. The early traditions of philosophy, especially when it comes to the African oral traditions, are often not considered, but why is that the case?

TK: Mildly speaking, and to speak responsibly within human limitations, I'm willing to venture a possible explanation which might not be translated into something acceptable. There is a tendency, I have noticed, in thinking about the continent to recognize the contributions of North Africa, most particularly Ethiopia, as not an integral part of what is being called African philosophy, which is a major mistake. I attribute that to a combination of factors, one of which is tribalism within the continent. There are those Africans, whom I have interacted with as colleagues, who are having a difficult time understanding and accepting Ethiopia, which is the birthplace of humankind. There is a dominant trend among Africans to isolate the contributions of Ethiopia from the rest of the wayside and concentrate only on the southern part of the continent. It's conceivable that, in Masolo's imagination, the contribution of Ethiopians must not have been, in his mind, sufficiently African to command his attention. That's one hypothesis.

The second hypothesis may simply be an extension of the following trend that I noticed. Namely, that African philosophers do not recognize other African philosophers. They tend to judge the contributions of African philosophers by the yardstick of European philosophers, the so-called greats. And in that, in the quest for identity, it is conceivable that Professor Masolo might have probably used, let's say, analyticity as a yardstick by which philosophical contributions are measured. And in that, the contributions of Zera Yacob and Claude Sumner could have possibly not been sufficiently analytical to qualify as philosophical and then be examined as elements of Africa's search for identity.

The third and final reason, which is the mildest, the softest, and the most humane one, is that as a researcher, Professor Masolo, although this is very hard to believe, claims that he did not hear of either Zera Yacob or Claude Sumner.

BF: I understand. I'm rather confused by the hypothesis that Ethiopia might not be considered African. Does it have to do with Ethiopia's early Christian traditions? Ethiopia is one of the few African traditions for which we have access to written texts from periods significantly earlier than, say, 1900—though Egypt is another prominent example. When I began studying African philosophy, I was excited to discover these older sources, but I also noticed that they are rarely used or cited. Why is Ethiopia's position treated as special, and why is it often sidelined by other African philosophers? Can you offer any explanation for that?

TR: I think it's an extension of the first hypothesis that they advanced. It may be the case. A genuine belief on the part of Africans that given the geographical location of Ethiopia within the continent and its proximity to what is called the Middle East—but mind you, there isn't such a thing as a Middle East, there is only an Africa—that the older African thinkers might have probably been, as Wiredu would say, colonized by these belief systems integrated it into their understanding of what African philosophy is. [. . .] If you looked at my first book on Zera Yacob, which was published in 2005,[4] Kwasi Wiredu's name looms large, and he contends in a review that this work is going to be a mighty contribution to redefining the nature of African philosophy. Implicit in that judgment, his respect, his adulation of Ethiopian contribution, so there you have a pan-Africanist, a brilliant mind, who wasn't in the business of tribalizing the contributions of African thinkers, but taking texts such as the text by Zera Yacob as mighty attempts at redefining African philosophy. It's in that book that I made a modest attempt to show that what we call reason is not necessarily only a European practice, but that in the works of Zera Yacob, it looms large, it plays a major role. Of course, Kwasi Wiredu, the father of analytic philosophy in Africa, was drawn to the analytic rigor of the text and the reflections that were bestowed on it, both by Claude Sammler, my predecessor, and my modest attempts to

contribute. Masolo and Wiredu are members of the same generation, and it cannot be an accident that one ignored the text, and the other one treated it as a major analytic contribution to the idea of the birth of African philosophy. It may be a taste of the inclinations, tastes, prejudices, and habits of different philosophers. Not all philosophers like the same kinds of tea.

BF: It seems that Zera Yacob and his text should fundamentally shift the European understanding of their alleged supremacy when it comes to rationally based philosophy. Zera Yacob provides par excellence that idea of reason is not a privilege of Western society, not that I've ever believed that. But it is quite surprising, or rather, quite annoying, that virtually no one of my European colleagues or my American colleagues who do work in these areas knows Zera Yacob and his rationalist approach when Cartesian rationality is so well known—not only by Western colleagues, but also by African colleagues. Maybe this will happen, maybe the new outstanding edition of the hatata will do that![5] That I, even today, when I give lectures on African philosophy, am still asked by my colleagues whether African philosophy really exists is embarrassing—and this ignorance must stop. I have rarely, if ever, met an African colleague who has not had a solid understanding of prominent Western traditions.

Could you maybe tell us a little bit about Ethiopian philosophy? Maybe there are some foundational traits you find in there. Maybe you can give us some comments on the history of Ethiopian philosophy. They are, apart from Zera Yacob, some other figures, and some of them we find more data or more details about others. We only know very little about it, but maybe you can tell us a little bit about what you consider to be important events within the development of Ethiopian philosophy.

TK: Let me first comment on the remarkable observations that you have made, as a European philosopher yourself, namely, this haunting question, which is still prevalent in 2025: Is there an African philosophy? This is consistent with my observations that you encounter at professional conferences: When you mention African philosophy, those European Centricians themselves are still not convinced that there is one, and they think that African philosophy has yet to be defined and thus legitimized. If we take the claims of Cheikh Anta Diop[6] and, following him, the brilliant philologist and philosopher [Théophile] Obenga[7] have convincingly, with empirical evidence, demonstrated to the world that philosophy, this particular practice of the mind, was in fact developed about 3,500 years ago. It's not an accident that this leisurely activity, called philosophy, originated. In the practices of opulence. The thinkers were sufficiently comfortable because they were not busy working in the pyramids. They were sitting in leisurely spaces. This is said to their credit, not to diminish them. Very much like Kant in Königsberg or Descartes at the Sorbonne, wondering whether he exists or not. The Kemet thinkers must have asked similar questions, and they looked up at the sky, the mountains and valleys, and the Nile surrounding them. They must have been compelled to think deeply about the structure and the origin of the universe and the planet on which they found themselves, which led them to practice philosophy. What we call philosophy originated in Kemet, which is geographically located in Egypt about 3,500 years ago. [. . .] Not the question, "Is there an African philosophy?" should lead us; it is not about the quest of looking for an African philosophy but about the examination of its contents, its form, and its thinkers. The primary criticism that I would like to wage is, in fact, not against European philosophers; to be honest, it's against African philosophers themselves, who have not done their homework. Relating it to the three hypotheses that I gave, they chose ignorance over knowledge; they chose not to include the contributions of Zera Yakob in their master texts. How could Europeans respect Africans as thinkers if we ourselves are not recognizing our own resources and our own thinkers, and instead very quickly rush to racial complaints, when the primary complaints belong to the African academic elites? [. . .] There are even Ethiopians who doubted that Zera Yacob's text is an Ethiopian one. This was a raging event that this was a forged text that was produced by a European priest who lived in Ethiopia for a few years and then sent that text to a translator in Europe.[8] The reason for this? The existence of reason. It is very similar to Hegel's contention when he was glamorized by Kemet. What did he say? Egypt cannot possibly be an African nation. It must necessarily be an extension of Europe.[9]

BF: It seems that if there is, in the eyes of the Western world, something beautiful in the world, there's something impressive in the world, it must be from the West, in one way or another. It cannot be from someone else; it cannot be from somewhere else. The man who said that Africa has no history eventually finds history, and his reaction is: Well, this is Egypt, it is not African proper.[10] It is thus quite frustrating to hear that even Ethiopians would doubt Zera Yacob.

KT: The Ethiopians themselves are denying that this particular text was a contribution to rationality, to the place of reason. These are major, brilliant Ethiopian scholars who contented it. [. . .] You'll notice when my book comes out, I treated them with absolute neglect; I did nothing. The question was not sufficiently rigorous and sufficiently important for me to waste my time. [. . .] On the bright side, I want to go on record and pay homage and express my deep gratitude to four major philosophers. Namely, Padget Henry, Lewis Gordon, and, of course, Neil Roberts and, later, George Yancy. They trusted me sufficiently, praised my work, and encouraged me. I couldn't have written the second book on Zera Yacob were it not for a conversation that I had with Neil Roberts, who not only liked my first book on Zera Yacob but actually taught it in his seminars. He told me that he doesn't think that I'm done with Zera Yacob. I took that as a challenge, and then I proceeded to write a second book on Zera Yacob. And at the expense of bragging, it came out of me like a river. I wrote the book in two and a half months, ten to fifteen hours a day, called *Zera Yacob's Inauguration of Modernity and Cardiocentrism*.[11]

BF: I'm glad that you had that conversation with Professor Roberts.

TK: These Africans, these Caribbean thinkers, who took great pride in their Africanity, my own brothers and sisters in Ethiopia, are the ones who gave me the green light to make this modest contribution about this lost philosopher I wanted the world to know about. My gratitude goes to these four philosophers, George Yancy in particular, who took a risk with this work, because he had already published another major work of mine on Self-Definition in 2019.[12] When I burdened him with the work on Zera Yacob, he readily gave me an opportunity, which is very rare in the history of publications, to produce a second book by the same press. I am very grateful to these philosophers. I want the world to know this as well.

BF: I am very grateful that Professor Yancy encouraged you to do that!

We have talked about the special position of Ethiopia. Something that I have picked up here and there at conferences, but not so much in publications, is that Ethiopia, from the viewpoint of Western academics, is understood in a way that makes it more European because of its Christian theological traditions. We have mentioned this before. This is, of course, yet another strange appropriation by the West: a re-narration in which something is not understood as having developed further in the West, but as something that originated there—indeed, as something that had to have originated there. Is there anything you would say that makes Ethiopia special within Africa because of the influence of Christian thinkers or Christian theologians?

KT: That's an excellent question, and of course, the best person who could address this question is Zera Yakob himself. As you know, in the seventeenth century, when Zera Yakob was forced to go into exile, because he was secretly and not so secretly questioning the Jesuits' presence in Ethiopia, who, among other things, insisted on rebaptizing the Ethiopian priesthood, not to say the entire population. The modalities of Christianity they practiced, which were natively developed, were, in Jesuit eyes, not considered sufficiently spiritually deep. And yet, although they acknowledged this, they still appreciated Ethiopia's acceptance of Christianity through the work of an Assyrian traveler named Frumentius,[13] who, after surviving a shipwreck, arrived in Ethiopia and introduced Christianity, which was then accepted by the Ethiopian emperor at the time, namely, Ezana.[14]

Zera Yakob was insisting that Ethiopia had its own version of Christianity. And in his understanding, there was no need for rebaptisms. In fact, in his short essay, the idea of the spiritual relationship between the self and the transcendence is autonomous, is personal, is private, and in that it cannot be mediated by priests. No matter what these priests claim to be, they are the voices and ambassadors of God and so on. The spiritual practice called Christianity is, to Zera Yacob—a private practice. [. . .] This is the birthplace of Zera Yakob's contention, that the self could guide itself if and only if—this is very much like Descartes thought about it later—it uses this inherent intellectual ability called reasoning, called thinking, that it has been given. No institution, no priest, no pope could possibly replace this inherent self that has to look for God, to meditate about the nature of God. This led Zera Yacob to develop two methods of thinking which he called hatata [in Ge'ez: ሐታታ], making meaning, very much like Heidegger later, making meaning, looking for something, searching for something, and that which the self is looking for, is searching for is what could be called God. And secondly, the second method he called *hassasa* [in Ge'ez: ሐሳሳ], meaning contemplation, meditation. The ontological structure, the ontological nature of this transcendent that has given the self the capacity to think, the capacity to reason, autonomously, by making mistakes, going through tears and sorrows and disappointments, and remain committed to the searching,[15] to *hassasa*, to remain committed to contemplating about the nature of the being to which it is praying. All of which is, in the end, to simply say that Zara Yacob is contending that there is a particular kind of Christianity that has originated in Ethiopia, and which is cultivating itself, which does not require any external interventions because the Ethiopians were already developing a relationship with God.

BF: I see. When you say that Ethiopian Christianity developed autonomously, do you think that helps explain something difficult to understand in Zera Yacob, namely, that although he is a Christian and knows Jesus, he does not regard him as the Messiah?

KT: Correct. Right, you captured it. That's exactly right. He is very critical of Christianity, extremely critical. As critical as, as critical as he is of the homegrown practices of Christianity by Ethiopians insofar as they are unreasonable. His understanding of God is that God is the embodiment of reason. It's the St. Anselmian argument. For him, God is greater than that which one cannot imagine. And in that the relationship, the attempt at developing a relationship with this God, is greater than what one cannot imagine, cannot possibly contaminate itself by becoming attracted to second-rate interventions on the part of human beings, to rebaptize and re-Christianize in Ethiopia. The first quest, the hassasa and hatata that is practiced by the self, is to declare autonomy. That is his argument. And this is very similar, if you notice, to the first argument in Descartes, in *Meditations*, after he went through a series of doubts: Who created me? Is it my parents? Is it me? Is it other human beings? And then he was forced in the end to say, it couldn't possibly be me, nor could it possibly be my parents, because that would lead to a vicious cycle. We cannot land on any first principle. I might have been created by something more perfect than me, but something more perfect than me is not equivalent to that which is perfect, to that who is greater than whom than one cannot imagine. He names that which is greater than anything he can imagine, God. Zera Yacob had similar arguments in his mind. He too asked the question: It's certain that I exist, but who do I attribute this existence to? Did I give the property of existence to myself? Was it given to me by a more perfect being? Was it given to me by my parents? No, it couldn't have been in any of these three. I would have to presuppose that there is an intelligence, a supreme intelligence, greater than which one cannot imagine, that must have given me existence. And he insists on the use of these principles to justify Christian practices, and by this yardstick, he contended that Ethiopian Christians themselves were not sufficiently Christian.

BF: That's a brilliant answer; thank you very much.

The title of the journal in which we are doing this interview is the *APA Studies for Philosophy and Black Experience*. What do you think about the relationship between African American philosophy and African philosophy? Do you think that there's something like a shared Black experience? Or do you have a particular understanding of what African and African philosophy is, or what they should philosophize about? And lastly, what's your opinion about a dialogue between African and African American philosophy? Is that something where you feel this is already happening? Or is there still more inaugural work to be done?

KT: I think there's more inaugural work to be done in this way. Remember, I thanked George Yancy, who is a premier African American philosopher, for giving me an opportunity to publish a book on Zera Yacob in his major series. Implicit in that gesture, implicit in that kindness, is an attempt on the part of George Yancy, representing his generation, to recognize an umbilical cord that cannot be severed between Kemet, a symbol of Africa, Ethiopia, and the presence of African American thinkers in this continent. Implicit in that gesture is a recognition that we cannot imagine an African American tradition outside of Africanity. Of course, there are major contributions that are distinctly African American that I respect, particularly in the areas of musicality that took the African roots of music beyond an African imagination and created something distinct, something unique that Africans of the continent must learn from. But at the same time, its major thinkers, such as Du Bois, who chose to die in Ghana, tell you that African American thinkers of each generation and of this present generation did not cut that tie with Africa. No matter how hard they try. Beyond declaring racial similarities in skin color. That is rather trivial to me. It is the history, the struggles, that are being recognized. When African Americans attempt to, quite rightly so, trace their roots, as Du Bois did, to connect. In this sense, more work needs to be done in highlighting and excavating these deep connections between Africanity and African Americanity. This umbilical cord cannot be cut. Very much like a French, a Belgian, or a Swede cannot possibly be uprooted from his or her Europeanity. One is French, one is Swedish, and one is German—just because they all have a European background. African Americans should be allowed the same privileges. This is not being blindly nationalistic. This is an attempt at being historically accurate. My work, all my work, particularly *Self-Definition*, made desperate attempts to give a documentation of the birth of the idea, of the identity of the self. All the way from Kemet to the modern period, without even for a moment hesitating and refusing to be obstructed by these masks of race, gender, and sex. I make sincere attempts to build a bridge between the contributions of the Global South and the Global North. Convinced that we are merely documenting the history of the struggles of the human species, in which Africa, as part of the Global South, is as important as Europe is as part of the Global North. This has been my lifelong work. [. . .]

BF: And this work needs to be more widely known! I was confined in my thoughts without even knowing that I was. That is, for a philosopher, pretty much the worst that can happen. Of course, one cannot know every tradition, but the more you become aware of how much you do not know, the more appropriately you can situate or position yourself. It helps to abandon this fatal attitude of speaking beyond one's confinement—something that has been quite devastating for philosophy. Just think of Kant. Kant talks about the human reason. And when you read it as a philosophy student, you think he talks about the human being, about you, and everyone else. But he does not. He doesn't talk about the human being; he talks about white, privileged, heterosexual men. He doesn't talk about women, poor people, or black people. Western traditions have established this beautifully insane salto mortale in their head that they have developed universal philosophical insights, for example, during the Enlightenment. Philosophers, too often, continue to keep this fantasy alive and pretend that Kant's project of Enlightenment was meant for all human beings. It was never meant for the human being, but for a highly specific elite—and the decisive criterion for inclusion in that elite was sufficient similarity to Kant, to be relevant to the development and purpose of his philosophy. The Enlightenment is—allegedly—the movement in Europe where we found out that everybody should be equal, but this has never been seriously put into reality. Western Enlightenment, be it European or American, is not about everyone. I wish I had learned from an Ethiopian philosopher from the seventeenth century; I think it would have prevented me from committing, again and again, Eurocentrist fallacies.

There is one more thing I would like to ask you about. One of your many important contributions that we have not yet discussed is a more systematic one. I am referring to your approach to African philosophy as a humanistic African philosophy, and in particular to your conceptualization of human dignity. Could you elaborate a little bit on this? What do you mean by human dignity, and especially what do you mean when you talk about its universality? [. . .]

KT: Here, I'm deeply indebted, among other philosophers, to the Anglo-American philosopher, who was also my mentor, John Rawls. [. . .] I had moved from Kent State University, where I did my PhD in political philosophy, to Cambridge, and then on one early morning, I had seen the pictures of John Rawls—I sat right next to him at Dunkin Donuts in Cambridge. [He] introduced me to the Kantian and Aristotelian idea of the veil of ignorance, which he used as a motivating device to encourage human beings to think universally about human dignity by systematically stripping away historically embedded commitments to race, gender, and sex, and by asking them to think instead in terms of legislating for all members of humankind, each entitled to basic liberties and basic freedoms. I took this idea of the device of the veil of ignorance and wrote my first book, which was an exercise in analytic moral philosophy long before I discovered Zera Yacob.[16] I was trained in the Kantian analytic tradition of logicism, that is, thinking propositionally, after you establish certain premises, to then draw appropriate conclusions which the premises allow you to. And so, following this technique of thinking, of reasoning, and acknowledging what I learned from John Rawls, I took these two principles of justice, which were uncovered under the services of the veil of ignorance in which you are stripped of race, gender, and sex so that you

wouldn't only think of yourself partially and then avoid the possibility of thinking universally, to the African condition. I argued that the relationship between what John Rawls called liberty and equality should be reversed. Rawls contended that the first principle should be the principle of liberty and the second the principle of equality; I reversed this order. Not that he approved of it. When I showed him the book, he simply nodded. That was my first book (I think I was twenty-nine at the time), but he did not endorse it. I had dared to traverse a sacrosanct relationship between the two principles of justice. I did this because of my Africanity, I think, because for me, I cannot move to think about liberty before satisfying the necessary and sufficient condition of seeing to it that all human beings are treated in Kantian terms as dignities and not as means that powerholders could come and exploit.

I revisited these Rawlsian attractions that developed my thinking about justice in terms of relationships between the two principles of justice, the principle of liberty, and the principle of equality, after I discovered Cheikh Anta Diop. He introduced me to the contributions of the Kemetu thinkers, and then I landed on the moral device of ma'at. Ma'at is symbolized by a female figure that integrates compassion, truth, sincerity, and uprightness. And then I revisited my attraction to the articulation of the necessary and sufficient conditions that must be satisfied in order for human dignities to be recognized through the principle of ma'at, in which it is contended that the leaders of ancient Egypt, of ancient Kemet, the pharaohs were the only ones who embodied ma'at, who integrated into their governing principles, the role of compassion, the role of empathy, the role of uprightness, the role of truth speaking and who would be given new hearts when they die. The Kemetu were defying mortality and defying the space and time paradigm, as it were. I'm now writing a new book called *Consciousness*, in which I'm re-examining the ontology of ancient Kemet, namely, the attraction to this inseparability of matter and consciousness. I took this principle of ma'at and contended that any ruler who rules the members of humankind must be guided by these central pillars of ma'at, compassion, empathy, truth-speaking, and uprightness. When you do so, you cannot help but think in terms of the paramount importance of human dignity. You cannot live in a world in which the income and wealth gaps are so absurd that you, in principle, are violating the necessary conditions that must be satisfied for human beings to live a dignified life—namely, access to food, shelter, and clothing. I called them the minimally human components that must be satisfied, so that human beings could wake up every morning with food, shelter, and clothing procured as something that is perpetually present.

BF: This human minimum, is that something you've taken from Henry Odera Oruka?[17] Or do you mean it in a different sense?

KT: I took it from Oruka, but I worked it out, I think, in a radically different direction. There is also implicit in my articulation of the satisfaction of the minimally human, and there is Marx, there is the abolition of capitalism, there is a critic of capitalism, implicit in the call for the articulation of that minimally human. The maximally human for me would have to be what I call the Zera Yacob's reconfiguration, reunderstanding of reason, namely, that reason is not only a calculative device, but it's a spiritual device. I distinguish in my earlier work on Zera Yacob between what I call the rationality of science and the rationality of the human heart.[18]

BF: Thank you! Let me ask some brief questions. What do you think are the most important desiderata in philosophy?

KT: Human dignity is one of them. We need major works on human dignity, on what it is that we must do in order to create environments in which Africans as human beings could live a dignified life, and then demand more from them to be self-sufficient, to be self-caring, to be self-motivated. But we cannot demand this from human beings, as some of these conservatives do, without giving them the fundamental equipment that John Rawls contended, namely, justice as fairness.

BF: It feels somewhat unsettling that this is still something that is to be desired.

KT: It's coming back again! The Conservatives in this nation are still blaming the poor blacks and arguing that they must be genetically deformed, not to feed themselves but shoot each other in the ghetto. Well, have you done the prior work? Namely, have you created appropriate environments for these human beings? A nice house, a one-bedroom house that they could own, in which they could live, in a good neighborhood, instead of throwing them in huge buildings with three hundred people without any garden. . . . You consider this progress? In fact, you're contributing to human darkness!

BF: I agree. These people basically do what is necessary so that the stereotypes they have in their minds will become a reality. What is a human being supposed to do if they live in these conditions? Well, this human being might not be a happy, content human being wanting to contribute to the social good.

KT: How could they? Look at some of these buildings! I cannot imagine myself living in them like sardines! I'm going to wake up and think: It's horrible. This is modernity's idea of development. Instead of building little houses on huge lands so that they could also farm in the backyard and grow their own food. There are many possibilities.

BF: The resources are there; we just have a very strange way to allocate who has what. I think in a world where we have billionaires, or maybe soon even trillionaires, this is a foundational wrong. That should not be. That is, in itself, wrong. This inequality is a foundational contradiction to anything that can be regarded as dignity. It is Plato's pleonexia.

Let me come to my very last question. What would be a reading that you would recommend for our readers, be it from African philosophy or from African American philosophy? Is there something that you feel more people need to read?

KT: Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*. Foundational text. Let's take that text seriously. Let's read it carefully. And then build on it. That's my recommendation. I would also like to add the works of Cornell West. He is at the top of the list of people whom I admire!

BF: Thank you! Cheikh Anta Diop's work is certainly problematic—but, in a way, which does not matter as this book makes you think! It does something for you!

KT: Yes, it doesn't matter if there are mistakes. Let's first read the work and then critique it. Kant gave the transcendental conditions, namely, the conditions under which something is either right or wrong. I love him for that. Forget his bigotry and so on! Kant is one of my major idols as an architectural thinker. I'm also an architect. I give that credit to Kant, not even to Hegel. He has given us the transcendental conditions!

BF: I understand when you say architectural thinker, I might disagree outside of that, as, in my understanding, it might be a bit dubious what he put into that architectural structure.

KT: It's quite all right. We'll forgive him. Human beings are flawed. All of us are flawed. We just have illusions about ourselves.

BF: Haha, I don't think I can do that—but of course it's nice to end our conversation on such a conciliatory note! Thank you so much.

KT: Thank you. I tried my best!

NOTES

1. See Teodros Kiros, "Claude Sumner's Classical Ethiopian Philosophy," *Northeast African Studies* 3, no. 2 (1996): 39–52.
2. See Fasil Merawi and Binyam Mekonnen, "Language and Indigenization: Ge'ez as a Foundation of Ethiopian Philosophy," *Oxford Public Philosophy*, s.a. (accessed January 20, 2026), https://www.oxfordpublicphilosophy.com/africana/language-and-indigenization.
3. These works are:

   Claude Sumner, *Ethiopian Philosophy, vol. I: The Book of the Wise Philosophers* (Commercial Printing Press, 1974).

   Claude Sumner, *Ethiopian Philosophy, vol. II: The Treatise of Zera Yaeqob and Walda Ḥeywät: Text and Authorship* (Commercial Printing Press, 1976).

   Claude Sumner, *Ethiopian Philosophy, vol. III: The Treatise of Zera Yaeqob and Walda Ḥeywät: An Analysis* (Commercial Printing Press, 1978).

   Claude Sumner, *Ethiopian Philosophy, vol. IV: The Life and Maxims of Skandes* (Commercial Printing Press, 1974).

   Claude Sumner, *Ethiopian Philosophy, vol. V: The Fisalgwos* (Commercial Printing Press, 1976).
4. See Teodros Kiros, *Zera Yacob. Rationality of the Human Heart* (Red Sea Press, 1992).
5. See Zera Yaqob and Walda Heywat, *The Hatata Inquiries: Two Texts of Seventeenth-Century African Philosophy from Ethiopia about Reason, the Creator, and Our Ethical Responsibilities*, ed. Ralph Lee, Mehari Worku, and Wendy Laura Belcher (de Gruyter, 2023).
6. See Cheikh Anta Diop, *Civilization or Barbarism. An Authentic Anthropology*, trans. from the French by Yaa-Lengi Meema Ngemi, ed. by Harold J. Salemson and Marjolijn de Jager, Lawrence Hill, 1991 [1981].
7. See Théophile Obenga, *African Philosophy: The Pharaonic Period: 2780–330 BC*, trans. from French bu Ayi Kwei Armah, Per Ankh, 2004 [1990].
8. The idea of the forgery was introduced by Carlo Conti Rossini in 1916. He suggested that the hatata were written by Giusta da Urbino, an Italian priest, in the middle of the nineteenth century (for further details see the commentary by Wendy Laura Belcher in Zera Yaqob and Walda Heywat, *Hatata Inquiries*, 17–54.
9. Hegel wrote that Egypt has to be understood as "nicht dem afrikanischen Geist zugehörig" ("not belonging to the African intellectual spirit") (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*.) In *Hegels Werke*, Vollständige Ausgabe, Bd. 9 (Duncker und Humblot, 1848), 123.
10. See Robert Bernasconi, "Hegel and Egypt's African Element," *Hegel Bulletin* 45, no. 1 (2024): 6–22.
11. See Teodros Kiros, *Zera Yacob's Inauguration of Modernity and Cardiocentrism* (Lexington, 2024).
12. See Teodros Kiros, *Self-Definition: A Philosophical Inquiry from the Global South and Global North* (Lexington, 2021).
13. See Philip Francis Esler, *Ethiopian Christianity. History, Theology, Practice* (Baylor University Press, 2019), 27–41.
14. Around 320–260 CE.
15. Björn Freter, "Onto-normative Monism in the ሐተታ (ḥāteta) of Zera Yaqob. Insights into Ethiopian Epistemology and Lessons for the Problem of Superiorism," in *African Epistemology: Essays on Being and Knowledge*, ed. Peter Aloysius Ikhane and Isaac E. Ukpokolo (Routledge, 2023), 146–48.
16. See Teodros Kiros, *Toward the Construction of a Theory of Political Action: Antonio Gramsci: Consciousness, Participation, and Hegemony* (University Press of America, 1985).
17. See Henry Odera Oruka, Practical Philosophy. In Search of an Ethical Minimum (East African Publishers, 1997).
18. See Kiros, *Zera Yacob. Rationality of the Human Heart*.