

Constructing the Universal: A Transcultural Challenge

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There is an approach to defending oppressed cultures which only appears to benefit them, but which ultimately ends up confining them within their particularity. The usual advocacy in favor of non-western cultures frequently falls into this trap. It values them only in the name of their right to be different, by contrast to the pretensions of western culture which claims, via a few of its most prominent representatives, to have a monopoly on universality.

Europe suffers from amnesia. All too often, it forgets how much it owes to other cultures. Europe in the extended sense, inasmuch as the Americas can be said to be a historical outgrowth of the Old World, represses in its subconscious the innumerable cultural borrowings by means of which it became what it is today. Oblivious to its origins and roots, as well as to its own failings, historical disasters, and meanderings, Europe can find no better way to describe its most spectacular successes than to present them as so many “miracles”, or more simply as *the* miracle: the Greek miracle, and by extension the European miracle, the western miracle.

But if the west is forgetful, Third Worldism is equally suspect. While it rightly denounces the false universality of western values, it does so not in order to oppose to it a true universalism with its origins elsewhere, but rather to justify a relativism regarding all cultures and their value systems.

Faced with this double temptation, halfway between the rigid universalism of Eurocentrism and the fanatical relativism of Third Worldism, we wish to propose a middle way: one which sees the universal not as a given to be taken up or rejected wholesale, but rather as an end to be promoted, the infinite horizon of a communal task which all cultures of the world must work towards.

1. Eurocentrism in All Its Forms

The Gobineau “Pill”

A discourse is always in part determined by its addressees. The speaker, or the author in the case of a written work, always to some extent fashions their words in accordance with the group of interlocutors or readers, actual or potential. If you are a professor of philosophy teaching in Africa or another region in the South, there are things that you cannot say, because they would clearly strike you as nonsense [*des sottises*]. For example, you cannot calmly recite to an audience of pupils or students a discourse which excludes them, even if it was written by a purportedly serious author. You cannot call them savages or primitives. You cannot ram the Gobineau pill or the Lévy-Bruhl pill down their throats. Of course, you can always give an account of these authors – indeed, it’s even desirable that you should do so, because your students need to know that authors like this exist. But you have to put forward a critical reading of them, a second order reading. You have to deconstruct them in

order to integrate them into a responsible discourse which, instead of naively excluding them, on the contrary identifies them as the real problem.

Nonetheless, we need to be careful, as there are other authors besides Gobineau or Lévy-Bruhl. They don't really shock us anymore, but make us laugh, like all ideologies of white superiority. But an author like Hume? A philosopher like Kant? A thinker like Hegel? A scholar like Diderot? Starting with some of their writings, you could compile a vast and impressive *sottisier*, a collection of stupid quotations. Twelve years ago, a Nigerian philosopher, the late Emmanuel Eze, published a remarkable anthology which suggests the theoretical poverty of the enlightenment movement on the problem of race, highlighting bluntly racist theses from authors usually considered to be humanists and universal spirits (Eze 1997).

1.2 Philosophical Nonsense

I won't waste time citing examples. There are plenty of them, from Hume's findings on "the natural inferiority of Negroes in comparison to whites", an inferiority which he claims to see confirmed by recent and contemporary history,¹ to the skillful alchemy of Heidegger, for whom "*philosophy is Greek in its nature*", such that "*in origin the nature of philosophy is of such a kind that it first appropriated the Greek world, and only it, in order to unfold*"² (Heidegger 1957, 15) by way of Kant's pseudo-observations on "the different human races",³ Diderot's definition of the "Negro" in volume 11 of the Encyclopedia,⁴ Hegel's allegations concerning the non-historicity of Black peoples, Husserl's tasteless joke about the Papuans,⁵ and countless other digressions.

In his remarkable book on *Philosophy and an African culture*, our Ghanaian colleague Kwasi Wiredu cites the aforementioned Hume text before commenting: "Considerable maturity is required in the African to be able to contemplate impartially Hume's disrespect for Negroes and his philosophical insights, deploring the former and acknowledging and assimilating the latter". Emmanuel Eze goes even further, as we have seen, denouncing in a militant mode what he simply calls the racism of the enlightenment thinkers.⁶

1.3 Invisible Frontiers

Nonetheless, I think it is more productive to note that neither the thinkers of the enlightenment nor the other writers cited above were writing for Africans or Papuans, nor indeed for non-whites in general. They did not suspect that they would one day find such readers, simply excluding them from the discussion from the outset. An exclusion of this kind is the only way of explaining how they could talk *such nonsense* about non-whites, remaining comfortably in the company of westerners, without the risk of provoking protests.

Sometimes, in order to correct something he had said a day or two earlier, Althusser would remark in a joking tone: "I was talking nonsense [*j'ai dit une sottise*]." By using this word to denote the aberrations of our celebrated philosophers, we are to an extent putting ourselves in their shoes, supposing them to be of good faith, and crediting them with a self-criticism which they perhaps might themselves have formulated had the occasion arisen. We plead ignorance on their behalf, so to speak; we beg indulgence, we downplay. This kind of

downplaying is necessary if we wish to continue to read Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Marx and all the others, if we don't want to relinquish the benefits of a critical assimilation of the best parts of the western tradition, if we want to exercise that indispensable *maturity* which Wiredu invites us to display.

Indeed, militant discourse has its limits, as it runs the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, as the English expression puts it. Beyond the manifestly racist talk, it's necessary to go back to that which makes it possible: the excessively narrow delimitation of the circle of interlocution; the invisible frontiers which limit to a single culture or a single race the community of participants and other stakeholders in a scholarly discussion; the false sense of security of a discourse held to be immune to all contention. By drawing attention to the demarcation, the delineation of the frontiers, the delimitation of the circle as a foundational act, we minimize the scope of such statements. By considering them as errors rather than as offences, we can see them as *nonsense*, digressions arising from a total ignorance concerning the real limits of thinking humanity.

In short, the limits of the geographical knowledge of an epoch go some way to explaining the unacceptable remarks of our philosophers. This doesn't excuse them altogether, it's true; after all, in the same epochs, other thinkers, often more obscure, made better use of the geographical knowledge available to them, resulting in radically different assessments.⁷ More troubling still, in spite of everything we know today about other cultures and other civilizations, and in spite of the lessons of history, geography and contemporary anthropology, similar remarks can still be found in works by purportedly intelligent authors.⁸ This means that existing knowledge gaps never fully explain such things, and that whatever anyone says, every author remains responsible for the use they make of the scientific legacy of their epoch and the manner in which they delimit, on this basis, their space of interlocution.⁹

Nonetheless, I think that for us as readers, it's not in our interest to get too emotional over this kind of discourse. Since we are conscious of our own true worth, our primary concern should not be to condemn these discourses about us, and less still to condemn them in an emotionally charged way. Rather, we must *explain* them. We must take the approach of delineating here and now, around us, in our own milieu and on the basis of this milieu, spaces of interlocution which include us instead of excluding us, and which expand bit by bit, in concentric circles, taking on the dimensions of the world.

Africans are thus not wrong to denounce, when called for, the racism and the ostracism of the works of several of the greatest thinkers.¹⁰ Non-westerners are not wrong to hunt down even the most trivial of prejudices among authors believed to be beyond all suspicion. In doing so, they can sometimes draw on other authors from within the western fortress who remain their objective allies.

"Post-colonial studies", very much in vogue in the Anglo-Saxon world at the moment, has made of such hunts its specialist domain. This is useful, even necessary. But it is not sufficient. For this discourse remains within the fold of the western circle of interlocution which has been dominant for centuries now. On the contrary, the essential task today is to create different circles: to map out, delimit and demarcate or, as the case may be, to reinforce alternative autonomous spaces, in Africa and elsewhere – alternative territories

which become the sites of research and creation capable of interacting with the present dominant culture on an equal footing. In other words, it is necessary to devise another form of globalization which does not amount to a single center dictating its will to the various peripheries, but which would be the common task of a plurality of centers which negotiate with one another on equal terms in order to construct a world of sharing, a more just and humane world.

2. The Temptation of Relativism

2.1. Richard Rorty in Porto-Novo

Relativism is a temptation. An ancient temptation, a permanent temptation of the human mind – but a temptation which it is possible and, I believe, necessary to resist. I cannot resist mentioning a lecture held at the Centre for African Studies in Porto-Novo in Benin in September 2002 by the late Richard Rorty under the title: “Universalist Grandeur, Romantic Depth, Pragmatist Cunning”.¹¹ Rorty correctly observes that for almost twenty-five centuries, the question of relativism has been at the heart of philosophical debate. Philosophy as a whole, as an intellectual project, originates in Plato’s reaction to the famous thesis of Protagoras: “Man is the measure of all things”. In brief, Plato could not accept the idea of saying: “To each their own truth”, or “to each people its own truth”. Philosophy emerges from his efforts to refute these relativist ideas. Rorty doesn’t believe in the slightest that this refutation succeeds, and, swimming against the current of the entire western philosophical tradition, he openly declares himself a follower of Protagoras:

Twenty-four centuries later, we are still being told that we need to guard against the temptations of relativism – that it is important to the future of civilization that we all line up on Plato's side. Since I think that there is nothing that can correct human practices except imaginative suggestions about alternative human practices, I am on Protagoras' side.

I won’t here get into a detailed discussion of Rorty’s arguments, well-known since the publication of his 1979 work *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.¹² I would simply add that in Porto-Novo, he repeated and clarified these arguments. Unfortunately, I find that the debate which followed was not up to the standard of the event itself, as it is certainly true that Richard Rorty, one of the most consistent and prominent spokespeople for contemporary American pragmatism, remains little known in Benin and in French-speaking Africa.

2.2. Postmodernism

What is true of pragmatism applies equally to what is today called postmodernism. Like everybody else, I’ve long wondered what this word actually means. What exactly is it that comes *after* modernity? The word is clearly totally meaningless if you take modernity to mean the modern age, in the sense of a historical period. After modernity, that would be – modernity again. On the other hand, things become clear if we take modernity to denote a

social project or a specific ideological figure. In this case, this project or ideological figure is characterized by the belief in progress and in the universality of the values and norms proclaimed by European culture, and by the establishing of this culture as the model for all human culture in general. It was in relation to modernity understood along these lines that Jean François Leotard published his *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). Since then, the expression has had a meteoric career, both in France and beyond, most notably in the United States. As such, we understand by postmodernism the recognition of the failure of the project of modernity and of the failure of all of its foundational beliefs, namely, universalism, progressivism, and rationalism, to cite only a few of them.¹³

In his address to the colloquium in Porto-Novo, Ioanna Kuçuradi, then president of the *Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie* (FISP), drew a highly enlightening distinction between the western debate on modernity, a reaction against the excessive valorization of modernity as a vision of the world, and the old debate on modernization which has been taking place in non-western countries since at least the beginning of the 20th century ((Kuçuradi 2003). Outside of the west, “modernization” has always been looked on as something positive. The only debate today concerns whether this modernization can be understood as synonymous with westernization, or whether it is possible to devise original strategies for it. The two debates thus do not overlap, unless we can speak of a de facto convergence between the concern of the Third World to “de-westernize” itself and the west’s current aim to devise an alternative to its own form of modernity.

In an equally enlightening way, Ioanna Kuçuradi also showed how it came about that we should talk of *rationalities* in the plural, and how the history of this plural is related to the debate between modernism and postmodernism. The disenchantment with reason, in the singular, is a completely understandable reaction to an excessively narrow conception of reason, and in particular to the positivist and scientific ideology conveyed by a famous text published eighty years ago, the *Manifesto of the Vienna Circle* (*Wiener Kreis*, by Hans Hahn, Otto Neurath, and Rudolf Carnap 1929).¹⁴ The credo of logical empiricism advocated by the circle proved unconvincing in the long run. The scope of the knowable is, in fact, not reducible to physical nature. The world of values and all the domains of human activity are equally worthy of exploration. Result: since there was a tendency to see this manifesto as the most accomplished expression of western rationality, many quickly yielded to the temptation to assert that there are other rationalities besides western rationality.

3. Universality as a Project

3.1. A Universal Demand

Yet there was no need to go as far as this. It is sufficient to recognize that within western rationality, logical neopositivism is only one way among others of understanding science as well as its objectives and its ambitions. Far from being, as the Vienna Circle claimed, **the** scientific conception of the world, logical empiricism was merely **one** conception of science among others, and merely **one** conception of rationality in general among others, even within the fold of western culture. As such, there is no reason to reject western rationality, and even less rationality in general. Rather, we must reject a narrow conception of rationality which prevailed in the west at a particular moment in time.

In his Porto-Novo lecture, Rorty, having adopted Habermas' distinction between subject-centered reason and communicative reason, and after having indicated his own preference for a conception of reason as a social construct, voiced a profound disagreement with the author of *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Habermas 1985). He could not understand how, after having clearly opted for a communicative conception of reason, Habermas could still consider universal validity as a legitimate goal for research. According to Rorty, by retaining this ideal of universal validity, Habermas made a regrettable concession to Platonist universalism, remaining caught up in the same individualist conception of reason which he otherwise rejected. Rorty's comments were a response to Habermas, who had reproached him with playing into the hands of relativism, or even romanticism.

We won't go into the details of this debate here. But if Rorty was right, his own discourse could make no claim to convince us and would have no meaning for anyone except for Rorty himself. Habermas is thus necessarily the more consistent of the two, just as Socrates more consistent than Protagoras. Conceding that reason is a social construction rather than an individual faculty changes nothing: a debate is only possible if in the game of giving and asking for reasons, the interlocutors both look towards the same horizon and raise the same claim to truth.

Nonetheless, I would like to add the following: The requirement of validity, the claim to speak the truth, and the search for universality are in no way distinctive characteristics of western culture. Valuing truth, rejecting lies and errors, and the requirement for veracity and universality are things which cross cultural boundaries. The requirement of universality is itself universal. Universality is everywhere seen as a value, a norm which must always govern our discursive practices. The fact that this norm remains an asymptotic ideal which is never attained is not sufficient to invalidate it. On the contrary, this failure presents us with a very precise task: to start over again and again; to tirelessly pursue this ideal, recognizing at each turn the limits of all knowledge held to be universal; and to identify why, how, and in what way it is necessary to correct it.

3.2. The Critique of Ethno-Philosophy

I would never have voiced my critique of ethno-philosophy if I had for an instant believed it right to say: "To each people its own philosophy". Ethno-philosophy is the particular subset of ethnology (or, to use the name preferred today, cultural anthropology) which undertakes to study the systems of thought of so-called primitive or semi-primitive peoples by treating these systems of thought as so many "philosophies".

I first employed this word in an article published in *Diogenè* in 1970 (Hountondji 1970).¹⁵ Completely independently of this, my Cameroonian colleague Marcien TOWA employed the term a little later, using it in the same critical and pejorative sense in a slim volume published in Yaoundé (Towa 1971). In a 1988 article published in a journal then edited by Abiola Irele (Hountondji 1988), I was able to show that neither Towa nor I had coined this neologism, as it had already been used at the beginning of the 1940s in the title of Kwame Nkrumah's thesis at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, a thesis that was not defended before his departure for England in 1945, but which nonetheless exists in a first

draft entitled: *Mind and Thought in primitive Society: a Study in Ethno-philosophy with special Reference to the Akan Peoples of the Gold Coast, West Africa*.¹⁶

However, it should be noted that Nkrumah, far from criticizing the project of ethno-philosophy, actually adopts the approach himself, intending to make his own contribution to it. By contrast, Marcien Towa denounces the hybrid method employed by ethno-philosophers, a method which is in fact not quite ethnological, nor quite philosophical, but which purports to be both. For my part, quite apart from this confusion of methods, I was taken aback by the theoretical presuppositions at the foundation of such an enterprise. I rejected the underlying assumption of unanimity, which perpetuates the myth of primitive unanimity according to which, within societies considered “inferior”, everyone agrees with everyone else. By contrast, I advocated a pluralist vision of societies – of all human societies, including the very smallest. I considered it more interesting to study the divergences than the agreements. And where there is in fact agreement, it would be highly worthwhile to examine how this consensus took shape at the heart of a society, instead of simply assuming from the outset that it has always existed, for all eternity.

I won't get back into the long debate which arose from this critique. I have spent a long time explaining my position in a range of articles, and especially in a volume translated into English by my Sierra Leonean colleague, the late John Conteh-Morgan (Hountondji 1997).

3.3. The Question of Writing

It is nonetheless important to recall the essential issues, still relevant today, of this debate, which as we all remember sometimes grew very heated. First, I had to work relentlessly to clear up a frequent misunderstanding: the critique of ethno-philosophy never sought to deny the existence of a body of African thought just as venerable and rigorous as western thought. On the contrary, on the one hand, in response to the simplifying and reductionist tendencies of ethnology, it sought to call attention to the pluralist, contradictory and evolutionary character of this thought, the dynamism of the intellectual traditions of pre-colonial Africa. But on the other hand, it also sought to emphasize that not all thought is necessarily philosophy, and that philosophy is one form of thought among others, a form which must be distinguished from, for example, mythological or religious thought. What characterizes this form of thought is nothing other than the project of the unlimited disclosure of truth, justice, and beauty, and the rejection of all intellectual confinement. The critique of ethno-philosophy invites us to sustain a critical and free relationship with our own cultures, as well as with all other cultures.

This appeal to freedom and insistence on individual intellectual responsibility has not always been understood, and has even irritated some readers: for example, our Ivorian colleague Koffi Niamkey, my Senegalese colleague and friend Pathé Diagne (1980) and our Beninese colleagues Olabiyi J. Yai and Dossou (1994). This is because we adopt radically different perspectives. Their principal aim was a kind of “defense and illustration” of Black African cultures so long disparaged by colonial ideology. By contrast, my own concern, beyond this necessary rehabilitation, was to ensure that we turn to ourselves and candidly pose the question: what should we do? What should we do here and now, not for the benefit of others, but above all for ourselves, not to correct or embellish our own image so unjustly

tarnished by history, but to better project ourselves into the future, better dealing with our internal contradictions in order to construct a better world more efficiently, working together with others on equal terms?

The heated discussion on the question of writing is symptomatic of this difference. For having recognized the limits of the oral tradition and the power of writing to liberate the mind from the constraints of memorization, thereby freeing it up for critical work, and for having thereby underlined the importance of writing for learning and the consolidation of a philosophical tradition, I have been accused of “a banker’s conception of philosophy” (Niamkey) or a “fetishism of writing” (François C. Dossou). Yet for me, it was not a question of whether or not to take oral literature seriously. Rather, having recognized the importance of oral literature, the question was whether we should content ourselves with it alone, or whether, on the contrary, we needed to preserve it, record it, and capitalize on it by means of writing and the techniques that come along with it, and more generally, to get the most out of the phenomenon which has been unfolding before our eyes for several decades: the passage to writing and the unprecedented cultural shift it has brought with it.

The recent work of Mamoussé Diagne brings this discussion to a close (Diagne 2006, 2007). The Senegalese philosopher does not stop at formulating hypotheses on the scope and limits of orality. He turns his attention, in a positive and loving manner, to the proverbs, tales, myths, legends, and the unsuspected wealth of African oral literature, analyzing their styles and devices with the patience of a linguist, the profundity of an anthropologist, and the rigor of a philosopher. In this way, he was able to immediately identify the devices typical of oral discourse: the dramatization of ideas, the *mise-en-scène* that operates as a “trick of oral reason” to ward off the permanent threat of forgetting. More generally, Mamoussé Diagne sets out to examine both the actual workings of oral cultures, and what could be called “the logic of orality” by analogy to the “logic of writing” so brilliantly described by the British anthropologist Goody (1986). Only at the end of this journey does he return, as if with a sigh, to the heavily debated question of the existence of a “philosophy” in traditional Africa. He returns to it only to confirm how poorly formulated this question is, and to explain why a philosophy in the strict sense would have been simply impossible in an oral civilization – a civilization, however, which is teeming with other riches, and which functions on other terms than those of the western civilization which is the historical origin of what is commonly referred to as philosophy.

It’s certainly true that the passage to writing has never had the effect of abolishing or rendering obsolete orality, the living word, dialogue, and verbal exchange. It has not put a stop to the oral tradition, which continues to develop in accordance with its own rules and to unfold its own particular history, in Africa as elsewhere. If science qua project as well as philosophy and all other theoretical disciplines necessarily take shape in writing, it is nonetheless true that all knowledge must be discussed and consolidated by uncompromising peer review processes. And once this has taken place, it can only survive and develop through being taught, passed on, appropriated by disciples and other students. All of these are processes which take place in the element of orality. The written word is nothing without the speech which reads it, cites it or comments on it aloud in an intelligible voice, the speech which carries and elevates it.

Jack Goody recognized and described in meticulous detail this extremely complex interplay between orality and writing (Goody 1987). But there is more. The unforeseen advances in computing and the new modes of communication which it is bringing about, notably via the internet, have led to the observation that we are witnessing a decisive return to orality as well as the development of a “secondary orality”, to borrow the wonderful expression of Walter J. Ong (1982).¹⁷ Nonetheless, secondary orality is still a form of writing. The transition to the internet and the adoption of new information and communication technologies in Africa does not obviate the need for an initial passage to writing and the profound mutation which this implies within our civilization of orality.

3.4 A Double Reform

In sum, the essential question is what we want to make of our present and our future. Whether we like it or not, for better or for worse, we have already brought about, or are in the process of bringing about, this passage to writing. In this new context, we would do well to appropriate in a level-headed and responsible manner the best aspects of the other cultures we have come into touch with, and at the same time, to methodologically reappropriate, with discernment and a spirit of responsibility, the best of our own cultures and ancestral traditions.

Beyond philosophy, there is something else we need to establish and develop on our own behalf in an autonomous manner: namely, science itself as an infinite task. Husserl saw the carrying out of this task as the particular vocation of “European humanity.” ‘European’ is superfluous here: this kind of restriction is only possible as long as one refuses to undertake the passage to interculturalism. It is necessary to disenclose the idea of humanity, to disenclose humanity itself. It is necessary, as Frantz Fanon put it, to “release man”. As we have seen, no culture has a monopoly on the requirement for universality. However, due to a set of circumstances yet to be clarified, it is apparent that the west has thus far succeeded better than any other civilization in transforming this requirement into a historical project.¹⁸ There is nothing to stop us from doing the same thing now in Africa. Not so as to imitate Europe or America, or to westernize ourselves in some other way, but out of love for ourselves, and as a way of effectively coming to terms with the immense challenges which confront us.

This necessary reform of knowledge must be accompanied by a reform of our ways of life and social practices. For we need only open our eyes and look around us, far and wide, to see intolerable things: the triumph, everywhere, of the most blatant injustice; the cynicism and arrogance of some of those who should be contributing the most to the consolidation of the rule of law, but who act, objectively, as its gravediggers; the patent immorality of those who are naively taken to be the guardians of morality; the most abject barbarity at the heart of civilization; and, to complete the picture, the general upheaval of values, the supreme mystification which jumbles everything up, and takes the most tremendously ugly actions and matters for beauty itself.

In this respect, we must now fight for the triumph of good sense. We must combat ethical and political relativism in all its forms, which claims to justify the unjustifiable, and combat, at the same time, certain iniquitous practices of our courts and of our entire judicial system.

“The beautiful ones are not yet born”, as the Ghanaian novelist put it (Armah 1968). Beauty has not been achieved anywhere. But if we can at least keep our own house in order, assuring a minimum of orderliness, that would already be a considerable gain. And beauty would eventually flourish.

4. Conclusion

Constructing the universal is not an easy task. We need to take authors like Rorty seriously, as well as Protagoras, to whom Rorty appeals. In doing so, we would follow the example of Plato, who, far from downplaying the arguments of the great sophist, was unsettled by them because he knew them to be irrefutable in their own fashion. Yet on the other hand, we cannot accept the confinement which inevitably arises from relativist positions. Above all, we cannot accept the obscene remarks made by some of the best apostles of universalism who sometimes, without realizing it, also confine themselves within the enclosed space of their culture or their race. We must open the doors and windows and breathe the fresh air.

In the form it has taken in Africa, ethno-philosophy has led to a similar confinement, to a suffocation of thought. In order to liberate the intellect and impose openness, in Africa and elsewhere, having taken on board Protagoras’ lesson of modesty and humanism, we must catch our breath in spite of everything, and attempt to construct the universal.

Finally, it is necessary to free our minds from the biased voices which stifle them, and to recover – beneath the dense layer of sedimented lies, behind the gibberish of judicial quibbling and beyond the villainous tricks of the courts, beyond the “joinders of causes” which authorize, in the name of law, the most criminal amalgams and the most arbitrary detentions – the authentic sense of beauty, justice and truth.

Notes

¹ In a footnote to his 1748 article “Of National Characters”, Hume writes:

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (...) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. (...) (T)here are negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of whom none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity (...). In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks few words plainly. (Cited by Ezé, 1997).

² Although it was written by Heidegger, the logic of this text barely surpasses that of Molière’s doctors (opium makes us sleep thanks to its dormitive virtue...), or that of alchemists who explain combustion by the evaporation of a mysterious substance called phlogiston.

³ In an essay published in 1775 under the title “Of the Different Human Races”, Kant declares that “all Negroes stink.” Taking this phenomenon as a given, he seeks to explain it by bringing into play notions that speak volumes about the science of the age: a profusion of iron particles in the blood, an excess compensated for by the evaporation of phosphoric acid in the net-like substance, etc.

⁴ “They are distinguished not only by their color, but they differ from other people in all their facial traits; large flat noses, fat lips and wool instead of hair, apparently constituting a new species of man. If one moves away

from the equator towards the Antarctic pole, the black lightens, but the ugliness remains: one finds the villainous people who inhabit the southern tip of Africa.”

⁵ “Man is the rational animal, and in this broad sense even the Papuan is a man and not a beast. (...) But just as man and even the Papuan represent a new stage of animal nature, i.e. as opposed to the beast, so philosophical reason represents a new stage of human nature and its reason.” Husserl, 1976.

⁶ As is surely apparent, Eze is not concerned with nuance. Wiredu’s position is more balanced. To the extent that one exercises the ‘maturity’ advocated by the Ghanaian philosopher, it is possible to recognize the considerable contribution of the enlightenment to western thought. Regarding the controversial question of race and non-European humanity, the internal contradictions and the evolution of the enlightenment movement also become apparent.

⁷ The most powerful and rigorous critique of Hume was in fact developed by one of his contemporaries – far younger than him, it’s true, but with no greater geographical knowledge at his disposal. In *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Skepticism* (1770), James Beattie emphasizes, among other things, the astonishing civilizations of the Aztecs and the Incas, already well-known in this era. Although little was known of African history at this stage, on the basis of verified facts and simple common-sense reflection, he demonstrates the absurdity of Hume’s approach. See Eze, *op. cit.*: 34-37.

⁸ In the United States in the 1990s, Black intellectuals were profoundly affected by a book claiming to “scientifically” demonstrate the differences in IQ and “cognitive capacity” of different races (Hernstein and Murray, *The Bell Curve*, 1994). Perhaps it would have been better to simply note the baselessness of the question to which the authors professed to be responding, and to have exposed in a completely detached manner the hidden logic of this kind of discourse, as well as the conditions of its success in the America of the nineties.

⁹ Raewyn Connell correctly notes that these frontiers, which I have described as invisible, are to a large extent perfectly visible in the colonial world, and that it would be worthwhile to examine the objective history of the successive shapes of the space of interlocution. An examination of this kind would indeed be of the greatest interest, as the remarkable works of Connell (2007) herself demonstrate. Nonetheless, history cannot explain everything – no more political history than the history of *epistemes*. Authors produced by the same history and placed in the same context may think differently. In doing so, they employ their personal responsibility.

¹⁰ Among other excellent studies, see Amadi Aly Dieng (1978) and the chapter “The Color of Reason: The Idea of “Race” in Kant’s Anthropology” in Eze (1997).

¹¹ This lecture was published in *Diogené* (Paris), n°202, avril-mai 2003, Paris, P.U.F., 152– 167, together with a selection of other talks from the same colloquium, and again in Houtondji 2007.

¹² Rorty 1979.

¹³ Lyotard’s book is taken here as a reference point owing to its well-known role in the reception of the word “postmodernism” and its conceptualization in France at the end of the seventies. Yet the word originally designated an aesthetic movement in architecture and other artistic disciplines. As a style of thought, it has served in the United States to designate what is also called “French theory”, including notably Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze.

¹⁴ *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung: Der Wiener Kreis*, by Hans Hahn, Otto Neurath and Rudolf Carnap. Vienna: Artur Wolf Verlag, 1929.

¹⁵ This article became the first chapter of “Philosophie africaine”, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ At the time, this manuscript was listed at the national archives in Ghana as document P. 129/63-64. I am not sure if it is still held there, but thanks to the exceptional kindness of William Abraham, a Ghanaian philosopher at the University of California in San Francisco, and one of the closest collaborators of Nkrumah, I am now in possession of a copy.

¹⁷ See Pierre Macherey, “Compte rendu de Walter J. Ong, ‘Oralité et écriture’”, Published September 10, 2014 online, <https://philolarge.hypotheses.org/1492> (accessed 02/01/2017), and Pierre-Emmanuel Brugeron, “L’oralité secondaire”, published online on October 27 2014: www.implications-philosophiques.org/actualite/loralite-secondaire (accessed 02/01/2017).

¹⁸ In this respect, we can affirm Max Weber’s observation on the singularity of the European destiny without necessarily giving way to the temptation of an essentialist commentary which, quite apart from the facts, would project a fictitious essence of western civilization. While taking note of the facts, it is necessary to recognize with Lévi-Strauss the role of historical accidents and the competition of unforeseeable circumstances in the genesis and development of these facts. Cf. Max Weber (1964), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Preface; Georges Charbonnier (1969) *Entretiens avec Lévi-Strauss*.