



Anton Wilhelm Amo: The African Philosopher in 18th Europe

February 8, 2018 by Blog Contributor

By Dwight Lewis

Anton Wilhelm Amo (c. 1700 – c. 1750) – born in West Africa, enslaved, and then gifted to the Duke of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel – became the first African to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy at a European university. He went on to teach philosophy at the Universities of Halle and Jena. On the 16th of April, 1734, at the University of Wittenberg, he defended his dissertation, *De Humanae Mentis Apatheia (On the Impassivity of the Human Mind)*, in which Amo investigates the logical inconsistencies in René Descartes' (1596 – 1650) *res cogitans* (mind) and *res extensa* (body) distinction and interaction by maintaining that (1) the mind does not sense material things nor does it (2) contain the faculty of sensing. For Amo, there is an impasse between the mind and sensation because the mind is immaterial (active) and sensation necessarily needs to occur upon something passive and material (body), which means sensation could only ever be cognized by the mind and through the body. This makes Amo ontologically more Cartesian than Descartes. For information on Amo's narrative and an English translation of his dissertation, visit [this link](#).

Amo begins the second chapter of his dissertation with a "State of Controversy" in which he positions his argument as an antithesis to Descartes and others. He begins via Descartes' response to Elisabeth dated the 21st of May, 1643. Amo quotes Descartes' reply, saying: "For as there are two things in the human soul on which all the knowledge that we are able to have of its nature depends, one of which is that it thinks, the other that, united to a body, it is able *to act* and *to suffer* together with it." Amo concludes that Descartes' distinction and union depends upon the *fact* that the mind, i.e., the soul, acts (meaning it is active) and suffers (meaning it is acted upon or passive). If this is the case, then Descartes' ontological distinction that immaterial minds are purely active and material bodies are purely passive seems, by definition, to mean something entirely different. Ontologically distinct substances, for Amo, necessitate impassivity, which is the title of his dissertation.

His *Impassivity* is grounded in the following three theses:

(1) The human mind does not sense material things: His first proof asserts that things determined from first principles have constitutive parts, meaning they are divisible, and divisible things receive passions. The body (material) has constitutive parts making it divisible and necessitating its reception of passions. Spirit things, like the mind, cannot be divided, and thus do not have constitutive parts. Therefore, sensing cannot be a part of the mind because it is not divisible; but based on the body's divisibility, the reception of sensation is a necessary condition of the living and organic body.

(2) The faculty of sensing does not belong to the mind: Secondly, Amo explains that "everything that lives necessarily senses; everything that senses necessarily lives", assuming to live and to sense as "inseparable predicates". Furthermore, "everything that lives exists, but not everything that exists lives"; thus living is not a predicate for existence, exempting the faculty of sensation from being a predicate for existence. He offers the example of a spirit and a stone explaining that neither lives but both exist. The stone, while existing, is less likely said to gain knowledge through sense impingements, meaning it doesn't have the faculty of sensing. The mind, being a spirit thing, "is always in itself understanding and operating spontaneously and intentionally toward a determinate end [i.e., an end it has determined for itself] of which it is conscious". The mind does not gain knowledge through sense impingements but through the understanding. Consequently, spirits exist like the stone but operate in/on themselves with understanding, and material things can exist and not live (i.e., not have the faculty of sensation) like a stone, or can exist and live (like a body).

In an effort to further support his claim that the mind doesn't have a faculty of sensing, Amo invokes a circulation of the blood proof, similar to Descartes' in the *Passions of the Soul* and the *Discourse on the Method*. Amo maintains that the body, through the circulation of the blood, necessarily receives the principle of life, i.e., life and the circulation of the blood are "inseparable predicates". The mind, being immaterial, could never intertwine, like the body, with the principle of life. Furthermore, since the circulation of the blood and life/sensing are "inseparable predicates" then the mind could not have the faculty of sensing. The mind's inability to sense is predicated on its activity; making it unable to receive passions – except through the understanding – because the mind cannot contain the faculty of sensing.

(3) Sensing and the faculty of sensation belong to the human body, which is organic and living: Amo's third thesis follows from the previous two, and places 'to live' and

'to sense' in the same, divisible and material subject. He asserts, "whatever can be killed necessarily lives" and "to be killed is to be deprived of life." Organically living bodies sense and possess the faculty of sensing; and then can be killed. The human body, which is living and organic, can be killed, unlike the mind. Amo's final thesis is self-evident if theses (1) and (2) are correct; and ultimately, provide evidence for his assertion that only living and organic bodies receive sensations and have the faculty of sensing. Amo, by holding faster to Descartes' ontological distinction, defines himself as more Cartesian than Descartes.

In Descartes' sailor-in-the-ship example from the Sixth Meditation, Descartes explains that the mind does not just understand or perceive pain but actually feels the pain because of its union with the body, saying, "For if this were not the case, then I, who am only a thinking thing, would not sense pain when the body is injured; rather, I would perceive the wound by means of the pure intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight whether anything in his ship is broken." For Descartes, if at the union the mind isn't active and passive, then one's mind could never know pain but only ever be aware of it. Thus, for one to know pain, the relation of one's mind to his or her body necessitates something more intimate than causal manipulation.

Amo accepts that the mind acts together with the body through the mediation of a mutual union, but he denies that the mind suffers together with the body. This commerce, not commingling, between the mind and the body does not allow the mind to *really* feel any sensations or suffering, which only occur to/on the body—which is alive. The mind perceives sensation by way of the body, which it cognizes, and applies these perceived ideas in its operations. The body does not substantially interact with the mind, even though it is essential to the mind's representation of ideas, and thus to the mind's effect on itself and its intentions. Amo is making a strong distinction between the material parts of the body, which sense and are alive, and the soul. The soul is an immaterial, spirit thing; by definition, it cannot receive any sensations and is not *alive*. So yes, the soul is only aware of what happens to Descartes' ship while the brain and body, being alive, have experiential knowledge of the ship; allowing humans to *think* that the soul is more than aware of its pain and suffering, when truly, for Amo, the soul only has ideas of bodily pains.

For Descartes, the mind and body, which are distinct substances, interact and commingle at the pineal gland, producing the passions of the soul. Amo responds with a "No." For Amo, ontologically distinct substances are necessarily distinct. Consequently, sensing necessarily belongs to the body because without a body, one cannot sense. There is *impassivity* between the mind and sensation because the mind

is immaterial and sensations necessarily need to occur upon something passive and material (the body), which means sensations could only ever be *cognized through* and occur *on* the body.

Here, one experiences the success of Amo's critique and a unique enhancement of Descartes' mind/body interaction; yet the history of philosophy has seemingly neglected Amo and he is almost non-existent in the works of his contemporaries who must have known about him—the African teaching philosophy in early 18th Century Europe. Today's philosophical community has the power to amend these and future contextual lapses by widening the definition of canonical and philosophical. What will we do?

Dwight Lewis, a Doctoral Candidate at the University of South Florida (Tampa, FL), works under Roger Ariew and Justin EH Smith in the History of Philosophy. His research focuses on concepts of human difference (e.g., race and gender), underrepresented philosophers, and early modern philosophy generally construed. He will defend his dissertation, Amo's Philosophy and Reception: from the Origins through the Encyclopédie, in the Spring of 2019.

Share this:



📁 Diversity and Inclusiveness, Research

🔗 Anton Wilhelm Amo, Descartes, Early Modern, Editor: Nathan Eckstrand, epistemology, mind-body distinction, Ontology, philosophy of mind, sensation

< You Can't Force It: Doug Anderson on American Philosophy

> Michael Cholbi on his AMA experience on /r/philosophy

1 thought on “Anton Wilhelm Amo: The African Philosopher in 18th Europe”



Clifford Sosis

February 8, 2018 at 9:27 pm | Reply
