

A forgotten German philosopher: a self-critical reflection by a high school teacher on Black Lives Matter

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The German philosopher, legal scholar and polymath Dr. Antony William (Anton Wilhelm) Amo, successfully defended his PhD thesis in 1734 at the University of Wittenberg having already gained several Masters degrees. He was probably born around 1703 near Axim in what today is Ghana into the Nzema tribe of the Akan people and was sold into slavery at the age of five. Having been transported to Amsterdam by the Dutch West India Company he was subsequently given as a 'present' to Anton Ulrich, the Duke of Brunswick and Luneburg-Wolfenbüttel, who passed him onto his son August Wilhelm as a 'chamber Moor'. Thereafter, in an Enlightenment experiment to see if all human beings, even those from Africa, are really born as a tabula rasa- a blank slate, he was raised and educated within the court, in which Gottfried Leibnitz was the librarian. He was christened Anton Wilhelm Amo and later attended a Ritterschule, a school for noblemen, was obviously gifted at languages and mastered German, Dutch, French, Hebrew, Latin and Greek and presumably spoke his mother tongue Twi.

He subsequently studied law at the University of Helmstedt, as well as medicine and philosophy at the Universities of Halle and Wittenberg and he later taught at Halle, a very cosmopolitan university at that time, as well as Wittenberg and Jena. Amo was initially highly respected and influential in early Enlightenment circles in Germany and the Netherlands, following in the tradition of the controversial philosopher Christian Wolff, who

himself was inspired by Chinese philosophy, known to him in Latin translations by Pater François Noël of Confucius and Mencius. We can see this influence in Amo's notion that happiness comes through right practice and right thinking. Amo also engaged closely with the works of Rene Descartes and indirectly with John Locke. One of Amo's first significant works was a legal argument for the equal rights of Africans in Europe. In 1747, at the height of his fame, a growing climate of intolerance, anti-Enlightenment sentiments, racism and the loss of his patronage led to Amo suffering depression and he left Germany and returned to Ghana, where he was reunited with his father and sister. His reintegration was apparently not easy and he lived as a recluse working as a goldsmith until the end of his life.

Amo is best known philosophically for his theory of the relationship of the human mind to the body. His thinking was very much located in the early Enlightenment debates between notions of independent thinking and the scientific approach and pietism and religion. His theory of mind built on Descartes but departed from the French philosopher with respect to explaining the nature of sensation. He developed a representational theory of mind.

According to Amo the mind (or in German *Geist*, which means spirit and Amo clearly meant spirit) is absolutely non-material and has no physical, bodily cause. Its nature is continuous action and it is the source of what we would call agency and is the location of consciousness. He wrote (in Latin): "The human mind is: a purely actual and immaterial substance which, in exchange (*commercio*) with the living and organic body in which it belongs, understands and operates from intentions to an end of which it is self-conscious." (Amo, 1734, p. 8, cited in Meyn, 2019). The term exchange suggests an interaction between mind and body, though an asymmetrical one, in which mind is the determiner. The mind itself is not capable of experiencing sensation directly, but rather is conscious of the bodily states that respond to sensory information, forming mental representations of experience and retaining these and

giving them significance and meaning. He explains sensory perceptions as the response of the living physical organs to their fields of contact with the world. Indeed Amo's description of the whole process of perception is remarkably detailed, has close affinities to both Aristotle's and to Steiner's. Amo's philosophy defines spirit as something existent in its own right, neither the product of material processes nor of divine gift, and yet whilst mind is a category of spirit it operates in conjunction with the body; it uses the body as "an instrument and medium of its operations"(Amo 734, 8). In doing so, the mind uses ideas that have two possible origins, sense experience but also, for concepts that have no obvious empirical basis, such as justice, in what he terms reflection or non-sense-based thinking. Amo's position on the relationship between mind and body was eclectic, original, profound but also questing and incomplete. Had he continued to philosophize, had he developed his ideas further, had others constructively engaged with him in discourse, perhaps he would have significantly changed the course of philosophy significantly. Sadly, Amo's work was entirely ignored by the important thinkers who followed him in Jena, such as Schiller, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling and so on (for Amo's biography and works see Fikes, 1980, Sephocle, M., 1992, Abraham, 2004, Meyns, 2019).

I came across Amo when reading Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2018) book, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking identity-creed, country, colour, class and culture*. The connection with Appiah is obvious; Appiah is himself a philosopher, half Ghanaian, half English, resident in New York and leading writer on the notion of cosmopolitanism. I used extracts from Appiah's book, including his section on Amo in my class 12 block. We teach English as a second language in blocks in my school and the benefit of English as a foreign language is that we have no Waldorf curriculum requirements, except studying social and cultural issues using the medium of this language. In class 11 I had introduced a new block on post-colonial

literature based on short stories, centrally Petina Gappa's *Elegy for Easterly*. A third of the class were people of colour with immigration backgrounds, including a boy who came as a refugee from Afghanistan. The theme of the *African-American Experience* in classes 12/13 is determined by the local Hamburg exam board (students in Waldorf schools in Germany who want to go to university have to take the Abitur exam in 8 subjects, of which English is one of three majors). I had chosen Yaa Gyasi's (2016) novel *Home Going*. Gyasi too was born in Ghana but raised in Alabama. We had just started to work on the book, when the protests following the death of George Floyd began. The novel offers an historical panorama of biographies from mid 18th Century Ghana to the present in the USA, showing the lives of the descendants of two women in Ghana, how they are captured and transported to the United States as enslaved persons, their lives on plantations, escaping to the North and the life situation of Afro-Americans after the abolition of slavery up to the present. The novel has been widely and rightly praised for its literary merit, which makes it very suitable for learning about narrative voice and narrative structures and many other stylistic devices of the language arts. It is also this aspect that recommends it as exam material, because apart from the theme itself, the students have to be able to analyse the linguistic qualities of different text types.

We had just read the chapter in which the son of an English slave trader – the Governor of the settlement and an Asante mother - is sent to England to continue his education and to remove him from the temptations of his homoerotic feelings towards his Asante friend, when the protests began. Since the lessons were during the Covid-19-pandemic we were working online. The school uses Padlet as a platform for making links, texts and images accessible and we have daily video conferences, thus making it possible to engage in synchronous and asynchronous, on and off-line learning. Among the links I uploaded were two article from the

Guardian newspaper reporting the events and background of protests in which people in Bristol in the UK pulled down a statue of Edward Colston and rolled it into the harbour. The whole event was both symbolic and an expression of outrage. Once the statue had been toppled, recalling the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, a photographer captured the moment when one of the protesters placed his knee on the neck of the statue - a moment that few in the photograph seemed to have noticed. The statute was then dumped into the harbour at exactly the place where the slavers moored in the 17th and 18th Centuries.

Edward Colston, who was the Member of Parliament for Bristol and a major philanthropist and benefactor of the city, had made his fortune as a leading Member of the Royal African Company (RAC), which like the East India Company, had a trade monopoly by Royal Charter and was in effect the pre-colonial institution that paved the way for full colonization. Other prominent Members included John Locke the philosopher, who later changed his position on slavery, and Samuel Pepys the famous diarist. The RAC's main business was the slave trade, that infamous trading triangle; cheap industrial products and guns to Africa, slaves to America, raw materials such as sugar, cotton and tobacco from the plantations back to the factories of Britain. There were other similar shipping companies in Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Hamburg, though slave ships as such did not dock in those ports- the shipping companies owned the ships and even plantations in the Caribbean. The captains of the Bristol slave-ships were permitted to bring one or two slaves back to Bristol to supplement their income and today there are many descendants of these slaves still living in the city. For years there have been attempts to get rid of the statue of Colston and to remove his name from the city's main concert hall, but even as recently as 2017, prominent local business people and politicians managed to prevent this. There have been racial tensions in

Bristol for decades- in the 1980's my father's shop was burned out during riots. Members of the black community helped him clear up and they exchanged Christmas cards until last year.

As such one could say, the lessons and the material could not have been more relevant. And yet I had a strange feeling because the theme is so close to the living realities of many people today. Here we were busily analysing texts, writing essays and gathering points for academic achievement. In a short time I will be marking an exam on this theme with objective, clinical, detached accuracy, detailing and documenting the points they achieve for their interpretations, their analysis of the language arts, their skill with language. I ask myself; can one really use such significant biographical experiences that the students were having as the basis for measuring and assessing and awarding points? What happens to us when we do this? Isn't our empathy and emotional response being abstracted, alienated, instrumentalised and reduced to grades and then filed away? Isn't that a kind of colonialism too?

Some, perhaps many readers, including Waldorf teacher colleagues in Germany, might find that completely exaggerated. What is wrong with using such material, doesn't it show just how relevant some exam material can be. Yes and no. I would like to ask, whether and how one can separate these levels, and if we do, what do we lose in doing so? Perhaps I am being over sensitive. I could call on my pedagogical common sense and rationality and say, yes, there is no logical reason why we can't separate the instrumental from the existential. Or I can draw on my pathic, pedagogical sensitivity, my tact. Tact, as the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013) and before him the physiologist Helmholtz describe it, is a particular sense for the social, intersubjective field of the lifeworld. We develop this sense and the abilities belonging to it, like all senses, by using it. The Canadian/Dutch educator Max von Manen (1991, 2008) describes pedagogical tact as the ability to sense emergent qualities in children

and young people in order to construct learning situations that can support this process. In particular pedagogical tact is needed to support transformative learning that leads to sustained change in capacity in the whole person.

Gert Biesta (2013), the educational philosopher, says that schools have three functions; enabling socialization, which means guiding students to being the kind of people they need to be in democratic, multicultural society today, enabling qualification, which means learning dispositions, skills and knowledge to participate constructively in civil society and the world of work, and thirdly enabling subjectification. Subjectification, or becoming a subject, means being capable of making judgements and acting in an ethical and ecological way- Biesta also refers to this as *grown-up-ness*. By prescribing and controlling educational input and output throughout education, this prevents young people from becoming autonomous subjects. Subjectification cannot be taught; at best teachers can facilitate it through providing learning opportunities and supporting these with dialogue and reflection. Biesta has for years also been warning of the impact of the ‘Global Educational Measurement Industry’ (e.g. 2020), the impact of which has been to lead education to valuing primarily what it can measure. This can also lead to using grades as the primary learning motivation and to collecting grades, credit points and certificates as social capital, both of which can lead to an egotistical attitude towards learning and educates the person not towards freedom but towards dependency and paternalism.

The theme of postcolonialism is much wider than the experiences of former colonies. It has come to refer to a much wider awareness of processes of oppression and the instrumentalization of identity. Together with the insights of feminism and critical pedagogy, we have learned to develop a new sensitivity to encountering otherness (even if we have

never engaged with academic versions of these ideas). These perspective have changed the way we look at the world. Instead of looking at the world as something ‘out there’ that we can represent ‘in here’, instead to taking a spectator position and rationally analysing what we see in a detached, presumed objective way, we can try to meet the world as *other*, with openness and respect, whilst not expecting to capture, master, control and use what we find. Martha Nussbaum (2006), the philosopher, has argued that democratic education needs to enable students to learn to make judgements, develop democratic capacities and above all, cultivate narrative empathy, the ability to tell another’s story authentically. This capability is also the basis for an ethic of care, which is a central quality in education. An ethic of care depends above all on being able to listen attentively to the other. It also includes self-care, listening to one’s inner voice and needs, and cultivating the self in the sense of self-education. It means being open to and sensitive to the vulnerability of the other and to acknowledge our own vulnerability. It is an essentially inclusive gesture. An ethic of care requires us to take responsibility, firstly for our own actions, which means being critically reflective of our own dispositions, attitudes, habits of mind, assumptions, expectations and prejudices.

As Waldorf teachers we have to apply this critical pedagogy to our own practices and what informs them. We may ask ourselves whether and how we critically reflect on how inclusive our practice is really and how post-colonial our curriculum is. Assuming we have modified our curriculum from its German original model of 100 years ago, have we done so in a way that looks at its content from a post-colonial perspective in the widest sense? Is it enough to ensure that our dolls and puppets are different hair and skin colours in kindergarten, that coloured faces appear in our *blackboard* drawings (and how do we portray black faces on a blackboard) and how do we relate to the colour black? Are there female heroes and

archetypes in our stories? Do we present the Age of Discovery from the perspective of those peoples who lost their cultures, identities and their lives and tell the stories of their long journeys to emancipation? Do we valorize the influence of Islam and Asia in European culture? And when we tell about other cultures, do we stereotype them, be they Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Celts, Romans or Americans? Does our curriculum reflect an antiquated Middle European perspective rich in Grimm's Fairy Tales Norse Myths and Parsifal? And if that is not a problem for you, why not? We have questions enough about our curriculum and its not so hidden assumptions.

The questions raised by the Black Lives Matter protests go deeper than even the curriculum. The question is, can we allow these questions to be instrumentalized as 'school stuff'? Nel Noddings (2012), the American educational philosopher and feminist, has pointed out that teachers have always struggled in a field of tension between their responsibilities within an ethic of care and delivering prescribed learning outcomes, though the struggle has become very asymmetrical in the age of measurement. She makes the point that teachers have to critically reflect whether the school culture is one that fosters and lives a spirit of celebrating of difference, collaboration, inclusion. This also means offering all students tasks in which they can all develop their emergent personhood, tasks which engage them existentially, not as detached observers of social conflict and injustice, but as participants. If they also learn about narrative voice and stylistic devices whilst engaging with literature and media that offer challenging narratives, then they do so to become more effective writers and – not to be underestimated- to show them how literature, images, media affect us. Being critical includes understanding how text and image work. So we are not reading Yaa Gyasi, Kwame Appiah or Petina Gappa because they are on someone's syllabus, but because they challenge us to identify and awaken our will. If someone had read Anton Wilhelm Amo in the same spirit,

perhaps Germany and Europe would have gone down a different road. The balance between the development of the person and the acquisition of social and cultural capital has to be dynamically maintained through ongoing critical reflection. This essay was a modest attempt at doing this.

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