

Logodicy and Africana Philosophy:

A Preliminary Sketch

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Africana philosophy emerges out of modern experiences of enslavement and colonization in which Africana peoples have found themselves racialized, demeaned, dehumanized, massacred, incarcerated, tortured, abused, and undermined in a plethora of fashions. Such experiences have engendered a variety of themes and leitmotifs prevalent in Africana thought. One of these themes is a concern with matters of legitimacy, right, and justice, as Africana peoples have had to endure illegitimate impositions that, nonetheless, are asserted as intrinsically and indubitably just by Euro-modern thinkers and institutions. Another of these leitmotifs is a relation to the divine, as the “death-bound” subjectivity endemic to Africana peoples in modernity, to use the phrase of Abdul JanMohamed, demands eschatological reflection; why go on if there is no deliverance upon the horizon?

These two themes converge in the matter of *theodicy*. Theodicy poses the question of divine justice in light of the apparent injustice of the actual world. The typical formulation asks, how can God be both omnipotent and omnibenevolent—that is, both all-powerful and good without exception—if there are ills, injustices, and evils in the world? Answers to the theodicean question are myriad, but two primary responses predominate. The first is to assert that God’s will is intrinsically and exceptionlessly good, but that the divine plan through which that will is manifest is multifarious and opaque. In other words, everything happens for a reason—indeed, for a *good* reason—but these reasons are unknowable or, at least, they are typically unknown to human beings. The second is to maintain that God’s agency is pristine, but that God has devolved some degree of power unto human beings by granting them free will. The evident ills and evils of the world are due to the wicked acts of human beings, but God is without blame since the gift of free will is regarded as the ultimate sign of divine benevolence.

These theodicean questions pose deeply critical ones for Africana thought. One primary reason for this is that Euro-modern colonialism, enslavement, and racism are historically rooted in peculiar modes of religious justification. From the 15th century papal bulls granting Portugal and Spain rights to enslave Africans and colonize the Americas, to the articulation of antiblack racism in terms of the myth of Ham, and onward, the oppression of Africana peoples has been defended on the grounds of divine will. Such justifications are further complicated by the fact that such oppression was typically wedded to evangelical efforts, in which African peoples were induced to convert to Christianity and, in many cases, threatened with violent and murderous reprisals for retaining elements of African spirituality. Euro-modern colonization of African peoples included, in short, an effort at theological colonization, bringing with it attempted efforts to impose Christian theodicean reason on Africana consciousness.

Here, it is important to note that this is no tale of a one-sided and total colonization of the Africana imaginary, the Africana *episteme*, Africana art, or Africana spirituality and

religious practice. Here Edward Blyden's observation that it is far easier to change a people's theology than their religion speaks to the significant ways in which the theological colonization of African peoples begat not a pure replacement of African religion with Euro-Christian theology but instead a creolization in which imposed Euro-Christian symbols, ideas, and practices were subject to mixtures and infusions drawing upon African inheritances. So, too, must it be noted that the process of colonization engendered a creolization of Christendom. Euro-modernity emerged as a response to crises in Christian institutions and thought engendered by the contradictions of a murderous global project in the name of evangelization. And, indeed, it was not European thinkers in isolation who affected such a shift: Christendom did not become Europe *only* because Europe's finest minds turned to critical questions of justification demanding a turn to secular efforts to legitimize colonialism. Rather, African and indigenous American thinkers, engaging philosophically with imposed Christian theologies, were active contributors to the intellectual debates that begat the shift to a secularized global colonial project. This contestation of colonial ideology, in short, can be described as a creolization of Christendom whose dialectical product was the birth of Europe and with it Europe's identitarian assertion of itself as the sole representative of civilization and modernity. The ensuing ironies are myriad, and among these are implications of the African origins of much Christian religion and theology, as well as the African origins of much European political, philosophical, and scientific modernity. The retrospective assertion of a white supremacist interpretation onto Mediterranean antiquity, somehow reconfigured into the assertion of a white Greek and Roman past asserted as historically contiguous with Euro-modernity, configured Euro-modern reason as a teleological completion of a European project for which African peoples, despite all abundant evidence to the contrary, are regarded as irrelevant.

In that sense, a simply way to put the matter is that Euro-modernity was the product of an effort, to use the phrase of Lewis Gordon, to "shift the geography of reason," though in a nefarious fashion in which the commitment to historical and philosophical truth was radically suspended. In other words, Euro-modernity conceived a European past in racial terms, and then projected that movement in such a way as to facilitate the appearance of reason in white and the invisibility of reason in color or reason in black. For Gordon, this movement was, ultimately, a theodicean one, though with the caveat that it was engendered through a secularization of theodicy. Euro-modern institutions, he argues, work according to a secular theodicy in which their status is asserted as *a priori* divine. The consequence, then, is that while the profound power of such institutions yields a number of profound ills and evils, these evils are regarded as being caused by the "problem peoples" whose illegitimate presence disrupts the otherwise intrinsically just functioning of those institutions.

Sylvia Wynter, developing her large corpus of writings on race and the origins of Euro-modernity in conversation with Gordon's work in the 1990's and early 2000's, coined a term to refer to one such secularized theodicy: *biodicy*. For Wynter, we now inhabit an episteme of 19th century origins which is bio-centric. "Man," a figure that for Wynter is not

only gendered male but is also raced white, classed bourgeois, etc., is, for such an episteme, regarded as intrinsically just. The limitation on Man's power, out of which supposedly, come the ills of the global system, is that the human beings who don't count as Man introduce chaos. The Manichaean solution, then, is to eradicate the power of these non-Men and to yoke them ever more tightly to Euro-modern institutions with unmitigated power to dictate the terms of their lives.

Biodicy, Wynter argues, is part of a "transumptive chain" linking the contemporary episteme to the episteme of Christendom. European colonialism begat an epoch in which there was a shift from the Christocentric to the biocentric. In the Christocentric, there was the schema of spiritual redemption, but in the biocentric, there is instead the schema of material redemption, in which the bourgeois figure of the "global breadwinner" is rendered as ideal. Man, then, is *homo oeconomicus*. The legitimating narrative of contemporary Euro-modern institutions on this account, then, rests in a Darwinian cosmogony read through a colonial, capitalist, and racist lens, in which the wealthy are regarded as naturally selected and the global poor as naturally "dys-selected."

Wynter calls, then, for a movement beyond the biocentric episteme. This movement she refers to as "After Man, Toward the Human." Man over-represents itself as if it were the human. To effect such a change, Wynter calls for a science of human systems erected from a liminal perspective on Euro-modernity. That is to say, for Wynter, the liminal perspective of *les damnés* is one which offers resources to decenter the episteme of Man and bring about an era of ontological sovereignty.

However, the shape of Wynter's argument suggests another term that needs to be addressed to round out this account. For early Euro-modernity preceded the Darwinian cosmogony founding the biocentric episteme. Early Euro-modernity, Wynter contends, involved the over-representation of Man as if it were the human, but did so on the model of Man as *homo politicus*, or Man-1, which precedes the epoch of *homo oeconomicus* as Man-2. If the diagnosis of Man-2 is that it has replaced a Christocentric, theodicean episteme with a biocentric, biodicean episteme, then what was the guiding principle of the episteme of Man-1? For Wynter, Man-1 was *homo politicus* who used 'His' principle of reason to overcome natural scarcity. Man-1, drawing upon an inheritance from Aristotelian philosophy and the philosophical problem of how to justify colonialism in secularized form, appealed to rationality as the force dividing those fit to rule from those condemned to natural slavery.

Given the centrality of rationality to this account, then, I propose that Wynter's argument be understood as indicating an epochal shift from theodicy to logodicy to biodicy. However, before turning to the distinct dimensions of logodicy, let us first raise a critical issue for Wynter's argument. If Wynter's argument is that the contemporary episteme is so dominated by biodicy that theodicy proper is entirely exogenous to it, then there is clearly much counter-evidence that would call this conclusion into question. That is to say, Wynter's position makes sense as a hermeneutic move to thematize the basic shape of the contemporary Euro-modern system of knowledge production, but it does not follow that all theodicy as such has vanished. Indeed, the evangelization of people in former European

colonies continues apace. In giving an account of logodicy, then, it is important to deal with the likelihood that shifts in epistemic tendencies need not be treated as total and all-encompassing upheavals, as is perhaps a tendency for some treatments found in the post-structuralist literature that Wynter is inclined to draw upon. That is to say, in our analysis, we must not presuppose that logodicy vanished once biodicy hit the scene.

So, in brief, what is logodicy? Here we have a terminological difficulty which is analytically fortuitous, for the root term, *logos*, is one that is not unambiguously rendered in English. On the one hand, *logos* means simply “word.” But there, of course, matters remain complex, insofar as one may define words in terms of what is said, on the one hand, as well as in terms of that about which it is said. That is to say, *logos* can refer to the sign, but whether it may *also* refer to the relation between the sign and its referent remains a meaningful question. On the other hand, *logos* refers to the faculty of reason or to a specialized performance of reason, namely, rationality. A similar issue here emerges, as the performance of rationality is one thing, and the compatibility of the objects of analysis with a rational approach is another. Often times, the desire for the performance of the former leads to the presumption of the latter. To speak of a “rational system,” for instance, one may be talking about a system of understanding that involves a purely rational operation of reason, or one may be talking about an arrangement of phenomena whose orderliness facilitates a rational project of understanding that arrangement. In short, if rationality is understood as making an understanding of the nature of things possible, then the ambiguity in the term also points to the tendency of some to understand rationality as being *in* the nature of such things, even before that nature is apprehended by the rational observer. Rationality can understand nature, but nature is itself rational.

This relation to the category of “nature” and the “natural” raises issues of the relationship between logodicy and its theodicean predecessor and logodicean successor. For Christocentric theodicy was, we may say, theo-naturalistic. Nature was, so to speak, rational or orderly, owing to its divine origins. God created the world in an orderly fashion, and “nature” – speaking to that order’s being “born” of such a creator – was linked in that episteme to a theodicean conception of such order. So, too, does the logic of a nature predominate in the biodicean, as there, a natural scientific biology functions as the symbolic core of the epistemic order.

As to the matter of theo-naturalism, a turn to the African philosophical origins of these concepts is instructive. Here we may look back to ancient Egyptian cosmogony. On that account, in the beginning, there was *logos*, as would be repeated in the Judaic and Christian scriptures. Here we have the fundamental ambiguity: is it that in the beginning, there was the word as a message from the divine, or is it in the beginning that there was the *orderliness* that the divine provided? The answer would appear to be the latter, insofar as for Egyptian cosmogonies, a chaotic, disorderly matter precedes *Ra*. It is the movement of *Ra* to bring *Ka* – the source of ancient Greek conceptions of *logos* – to matter, and it is the infusion of divine spirit that unifies such matter into a universe (with “verse” here, as “word,” referring, literally, back to *Ka* or *logos*).

It is important to note here that, on this ancient account, it is not clearly the case that we have a theodicean cosmogony at hand. For Ra nightly does battle with evil in the form of Apap, who is understood as being roughly equivalent in power to Ra, even though Ra emerges triumphant. Order wins, but not without contest. One could go further in reading the concept of *ma'at* as calling, ultimately, for the human project of fulfilling a divine will whose power is ultimately contingent. God can bring order to the universe in general, but achieving the orderliness of the ordered may remain a project of human institutions in pursuit of truth and justice. God, then, can be intrinsically good but not necessarily omnipotent.

Christian theo-naturalism, though, was theodicean, and “nature” was an essential component of the constitution of its theodicy. So, too, of course, was reason central to the project of Christian theo-naturalism. The key difference between Christian theodicy and Euro-modern logodicy, then, is not of an opposition between an episteme rejecting nature and reason with one embracing them. Instead, the key difference may have to do with revelation. Christocentric theodicy regards God’s goodness as revealed to humankind through prophets. God has, as it were, shared comments on the nature of things with humanity. Yet the period of Man-1 *homo politicus* was one, as Wynter contends, shaped by the Copernican Revolution in reason and the sciences. Instead of using rationality to explain the contradictions of the *revealed* wisdom of the scriptures, as was the project of scholasticism, now rationality was called upon, as Kant contended in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, to attend to itself so that absolute foundations of rationality could be avowed without avowing the presence of the divine.

In short, what much Euro-modern philosophy has sought to do – and names like Rene Descartes, Kant, and G.W.F. Hegel come to the fore as obvious examples – is to show how reason can function as an absolute. The nature of the absolute, taking inspiration from Hegel, is one that can be thematized in terms of the opacity of its contradictions. That is to say, the absolute must appear contradictory to consciousness, even though epistemic access to the truth of the absolute would show these to merely be paradoxical. But if the nature of the absolute’s epistemic access is omniscient, and it is the nature of human consciousness to always be less than the absolute and hence less than omniscient, then the absolute is that which always appears contradictory to consciousness. Here, of course, we may point to the importance of the ineffable qualities of the divine and the tendency of religious communities to affirm that the experience of the divine is aesthetic rather than rational. For rationality demands that the object of analysis be conducive to rational examination, and the absolute, as necessarily contradictory, would hence lie beyond what rationality can apprehend.

But this yields peculiar dynamics if reason itself is supposed to take the place of the divine. For that logic is one in which reason as the divine object of inquiry should be able to show itself. In other words, to view the absolute logos as contradictory and ineffable would appear directly counter to its nature as logos. Reason should be knowable through reason. In the way that theodicy cleaves into explanations centering on either the opacity of God’s plan or the inconvenient interventions of human freedom, logodicy has a parallel fulcrum.

Logodicean responses either seek to demonstrate why reason's ultimate power is unknowable to reason – that is, why reason must veil its awesome presence – or to demonstrate why certain errors undermine reason's power and, in turn, to seek to eradicate the sources of such error.

Here it is important to note that Euro-modern logodicy is not without historical bedfellows whose tendency stopped short of the logodicean. I have in mind, particularly, the 17th century Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob. For Yacob, God is the source of nature; the world functions according to the natural, and the natural is that universal spirit or orderliness that makes the world subject to rational examination. Reason is an endowment of that God upon humanity, such that human beings can use reason to apprehend the nature of the universe. However, human reason is by its nature fallible. Hence, reason shows the limits of reason, because to understand its nature is to understand why it is subject to failure. In that sense, Yacob's position is perhaps theodicean in the sense that it attributes many of the world's ills to the power of humankind to err, but it is not logodicean because it does not avow the possibility of reason sublimating its nature to become a divine absolute. Descartes, writing on similar matters in the same century, would go further in the logodicean direction. For Descartes, God appears as the ideal form of the ego cogito, such that an ideal thinking consciousness would appear to be one and the same as divine omniscience. This leaves the possibility that, through a strenuously rational method, human reason could attain the status of divinity. Glimpses of similar schema abound in Kant and Hegel and much of the rest of the Euro-modern philosophical canon.

What are the full contours of logodicy? I will leave these to the side for now, to take them up again in future investigations. Let me here close this brief paper by focusing on logodicy's relationship to Africana philosophy.

For Africana philosophy – and here I follow Gordon in using this term to refer to modern thought rather than to any form of philosophy linked to peoples we would now call African – logodicy emerges on the scene as already troublesome. The turn to Aristotelian conceptions of rational animals and natural slaves was the movement, simply put, of organic intellectuals of European colonialism like Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and John Locke who were seeking to find a rationalist philosophical anthropology that could justify conquest and slaughter *in extremis*. The myth of non-European peoples as irrational peoples was thus set afoot. A consequence, then, was that a preoccupation of Africana philosophy has been what Gordon terms “the metacritique of reason.” Euro-modern philosophy is concerned with the critique of reason as an emancipatory project in which the attainment of absolute rationality would dispense with the need for tradition and all other elements of human life deemed incompatible with the modern. But Africana philosophy poses the metacritique of reason in relation to its two other leitmotifs: the question of philosophical anthropology and the question of liberation. Simply put, Euro-modern philosophy avows that reason defines what it means to be a human being and that people of color in general and/or black/African people in particular are defined in antithesis to reason. The plain irony is that it has been, in relative terms, typical of African and Afro-diasporic populations

to respond to racist dehumanization thoughtfully, and typical of Euro-modern thought to abandon reason in favor of racist passions and deceptions when needed. This is not to say, though, that the latter does not typically stick to the ratiocinative; rather, it is to draw out that it often does so through an infection of its premises with racist presuppositions. Where such presuppositions are called into question, it is often the affective, performative dimensions of Euro-modern reason that predominate in “resolving” such contradictions. In other words, it often matters more that some reason “looks white” and other reason “looks black” than whether the latter is more reasonable than the former. Hence, Frantz Fanon classically confronted the problem of being a man whose only weapon was reason but of facing a world in which reason fled the room whenever he entered.

In short, Africana philosophy is typically canny of two problematics. One, if Euro-modern philosophical anthropology is premised on a conjunction of racism and rationality, then it is not necessarily the case that reason in black, including the effort at moral suasion, is sufficient to demonstrate the folly of racism and the humanity of black people. In other words, for the white racist, black people reasoning poses little to no impediment to the *a priori* commitment to regarding blacks as irrational and inhuman; it will be explained away as not being reason at all, or at least as being an exception from the overwhelming norm. Two, if reason is insufficient to cancel modern dehumanization, then it may also be insufficient to bring about liberation. A caveat is crucial here, as this does not mean that, for Africana philosophy, liberation is ultimately a matter of force rather than reason. Rather, it means that the types and modes of reason necessary for liberation is a live question – it is not reason in general but liberatory modes of reason in particular that become a pressing matter of concern. And, of course, this question returns us to the matter alluded to at the outset of epistemic decolonization. That is, a central element of the Africana metacritique of reason pertains to how reason can liberate black people from the imposition of forms of reason designed to initiate and/or extend forms of Euro-modern coloniality. This would figure to include the question of how to liberate Africana thought from logodicean tendencies that may have been imposed.

To state this issue is to raise an interesting one for the metacritique of reason. If one takes the Euro-modern critiques of reason seriously, one eventually finds them turning toward the metacritical. For instance, while Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* functions within the framework of a critique of reason, metacritical questions emerge if its argument is read in light of his later *Critique of Practical Reason* or *Critique of Judgment*. Euro-modern reason ultimately must deal with the metacritique of reason because fidelity to reason as an ideal demands it. However, Euro-modern philosophy makes its metacritical moves from a standpoint in which its humanity is presumed and in which its aims are, I argue, emancipatory rather than liberatory. As I will use the terms, emancipation emerges where freedom is *granted* in order to *recognize* maturation into full adult status. “Man” was thus an emancipatory ideal whose *adult* status was an issue for Euro-Modernity; Man was the world’s grown-up individual, Civilization its grown up society. Kant was concerned with overcoming a self-imposed nonage, that is, with Europe being able to assume its adult status. Liberation, by contrast, is when one frees oneself from domination. Christendom

was peripheral in the world-system of the 14th century, but it was not dominated. Hence, its project of global domination in the 15th century onward was, ultimately, emancipatory but not liberatory. It sought to be recognized as the world's absolute adult.

On an emancipatory model, then, the metacritique of reason may have certain limitations. If the purpose of the metacritique is *to return reason to its absolute status* – to help it overcome adolescent growing pains by way of a rite of passage in which its contradictions are accounted for – then ultimately that metacritique may be in position to disrupt logodicy but not to undermine it. Here I have in mind thinkers like Edmund Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre, for whom something like logodicy was clearly a philosophical issue. The argument thus far sketched could be reconfigured to demonstrate its similarities to the argument of Husserl's *Formal and Transcendental Logic* or to the anxieties of Sartre's autobiographical *The Words*. But the question ultimately becomes this: do these metacritical directions, in problematizing logos and logodicy, seek to do so to bring about the liberation of a people, or do they do so merely to emancipate logos so that it can act like an adult? Notice I do not say this to imply the irrelevance or undesirability of the emancipatory metacritique of reason. Rather, the issue is that there may be much more to the metacritique once one a) opens the Pandora's box of issues raised by a specifically *liberatory* metacritique of reason and b) acknowledges the possibility that there may be logodicean foundations to the emancipatory metacritique of reason that rigors rationality alone may be insufficient to counter-balance.

This suggests why Africana philosophy may be peculiarly well-suited to excavate the logodicean terrain of modern thought. It offers a perspective in which an epistemological colonization favoring emancipation does not over-determine the direction of reason. This is not to say that such epistemological colonization is *absent*; it is to say, rather, that mature Africana thought reflects upon such colonization and hence must account for it. There is, as well, a link here to issues around language. Logos functions always within some sort of linguistic context, although what is meant by linguistic here may be broader than many prejudices would allow. In Africana thought, one primary source of reflection is on an examination of the creolization of Euro-modern languages as these were imposed on enslaved and/or colonized populations. Although such linguistic mixture occurred in a context of radical inequality – it was not as if those in metropolitan France were being forced to learn Igbo – it nonetheless produced novel mixtures that changed the way the languages were spoken, not only in the colonies but in the metropolises. Reflection on contemporary language usage shows not only how it has been produced through mixtures, but also points to genealogies of influence and anxiety under the thumb of imposed ideals. Many words retained simply because they reflected the preferential option for the dominator's tongue, but without the consequence that *only* that tongue would be present in the contemporary admixtures. Hence, the parallel in philosophy is quite clear: Africana philosophers have been creolized by Euro-modern thought since the beginning, and so too have they been engaged in the project of creolizing it. Such creolization raises, then, the issue of faithful and unfaithful relations to the idols of Euro-modern epistemes. This implies that one may find theodicy, logodicy, and biodicy in Africana thought. But it also implies that there a) revealing ways in which these are creolized and made funky, such that they

may, ultimately, transcend their theo/logo/bio-dicean foundations, and b) extensive efforts to identify, criticize, and move beyond these foundations that one simply does not find in the Euro-modern tradition as such.

In short, in this paper I have sought to give a brief, preliminary sketch of the phenomenon known as logodicy and to show why examining it in terms of the relationship between Africana and Euro-modern philosophy is a generative framework to begin with. The work of drawing out the contours of this phenomenon and of showing how various figures and traditions in Africana philosophy (of the past, present, and future) have addressed or could address these matters remains as a future project. Let me close, then, by simply stating the argument that I believe this paper has sketched, albeit indirectly. First, logodicy is a profound philosophical problem. Second, Africana philosophy in particular has this problem in its crosshairs, and by giving name to it, I hope to help ongoing projects of Africana thought to coalesce around the commonalities of their concerns in this regard. Third, since any rigorous philosophical project would need, ultimately, to grapple with the logodicean problem, then the study of Africana philosophy is, in modern times, indispensable to the project of rigorous philosophy full stop.