Anton Wilhelm Amo:
The African Philosopher in 18th Century Europe
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.

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(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
PHILOSOPHY COURSE DESCRIPTIONS: SUMMER 2019

Session I: May 11–May 29

PHIL 2030: Introduction to Ethics
Dr. Rosemary Kellison
100% Online
This course serves as an introduction to ethics: philosophical thinking about the question of how humans ought to live. In this course we will engage with ethics on three different levels. We will analyze a few practical moral problems, such as abortion, capital punishment, animal rights, and poverty. To enable critical examination of our own and others’ positions on such moral problems, we will explore various theoretical approaches to ethics, learning the different ways in which individuals and communities justify their moral arguments. Finally, we will consider broader, more theoretical questions regarding the nature and origin of morality itself. Fulfills Core Area C2. Required for all philosophy majors. Counts toward the philosophy minor and toward the religion minor.

PHIL 2130: Introduction to World Religions
Dr. Rosemary Kellison
100% Online
This course revolves around two central questions: how has the world shaped religion(s), and how have religions shaped the world? As we move through an introductory survey of some of the world’s major religious traditions, including indigenous religious traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and selected new religious movements, we will pay special attention to the ways in which these traditions have been shaped by historical, political, and geographical changes in the world—and will also consider how these traditions and their communities have influenced these changes. Over the course of the semester, we will seek to better understand both the significance and relevance of religion in world history and some of the important philosophical questions addressed within religious communities as well as by those who study them. This course fulfills the Core Area E-4 requirement. Required for religion-track majors and minors.

Session III: June 3–June 27

PHIL 2010: Introduction to Philosophy
Dr. Walter Riker
100% Online
In this course we will consider several central questions in philosophy. There are good prudential reasons for obeying the law—is there also a moral duty to obey it? Do we ever have a moral duty to break the law? Can we be free or responsible for our actions in a deterministic universe? Does “knowledge” require certainty, that is, that we cannot be wrong? Can we prove that God exists? If God is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful, then why does evil exist? Philosophers aren’t the only people who ask these questions, so as we consider answers to these questions, we will think about what is means to take a “philosophical” approach to a problem. Fulfills Core Area C2. Required for all philosophy majors and minors. Counts toward the religion minor.

PHIL 2020: Critical Thinking
Dr. Walter Riker
100% Online
Should we regard non-human animals as “persons”? What does religion tell us about our relationship to animals? Do we have good reason to deny that some animals have natural rights? Is it moral to keep animals in zoos? In this class you will learn to recognize and evaluate different kinds of arguments. You will then apply these skills to assessment of philosophical arguments that deal with our relationships with other animals. Fulfills Core Area B1. Required for all philosophy majors and minors. Counts toward the religion minor.

Session IV: June 28–July 25

PHIL 2030: Introduction to Ethics
Dr. Robert Lane
100% Online
Everyone has beliefs about morality, and to some extent we all agree about what actions are right and wrong; for example, we all agree that murder is wrong and that helping those less fortunate than us is right. But there are many moral questions about which people disagree: is abortion immoral? What about physician-assisted suicide? Is it wrong to spend money on expensive cars and homes when people in other parts of the world are dying from malnutrition? Do non-human animals have rights? This course will enable you critically to evaluate your own beliefs about concrete ethical issues like these. We’ll also be dealing with more theoretical questions, such as: where does morality come from? (God? society? or somewhere else?): what makes an ethical argument good or bad? and what general rules or principles ought we to live by? No prior experience in philosophy is necessary, so if you want to start thinking critically about morality, this course is a great place to begin. Fulfills Core Area C2. Required for all philosophy majors. Counts toward the philosophy minor and toward the religion minor.

PHIL 2130: Introduction to World Religions
Dr. Rosemary Kellison
100% Online
This course surveys major developments and themes in Western philosophy. Our focus will be on metaphysics, epistemology, the free will/determinism debate, ethics, and political philosophy. We’ll explore the nature of reality and how we are acquainted with reality; the relationship between our minds and bodies; whether we are free to do as we choose, or determined to act by our genes, upbringing, and environment; what makes something good, bad, right, or wrong; and, the ideal relationship between governments and citizens. Fulfills Core Area C2. Required for all philosophy majors and minors. Counts toward the religion minor.

PHILOSOPHY COURSE DESCRIPTIONS: FALL 2019

PHIL 2010: Introduction to Philosophy
William Crawford
M/W 8-9:15am
A historically framed introduction to philosophy, highlighting major developments that have defined Western philosophical inquiry. Required for the major in Philosophy. Fulfills Core Area C2. Required for all philosophy majors and minors. Counts toward the religion minor.

PHIL 2010: Introduction to Philosophy
Dr. Carmen Zinn
NEWNAN M/W 9-10:15am
This course surveys major developments and themes in Western philosophy. Our focus will be on metaphysics, epistemology, the free will/determinism debate, ethics, and political philosophy. We’ll explore the nature of reality and how we are acquainted with reality; the relationship between our minds and bodies; whether we are free to do as we choose, or determined to act by our genes, upbringing, and environment; what makes something good, bad, right, or wrong; and, the ideal relationship between governments and citizens. Fulfills Core Area C2. Required for all philosophy majors and minors. Counts toward the religion minor.

PHIL 2010: Introduction to Philosophy
TBA
M/W 11am-12:15pm
A historically framed introduction to philosophy, high-lighting major developments that have defined Western philosophical inquiry. Required for the major in Philosophy. Fulfills Core Area C2. Required for all philosophy majors and minors. Counts toward the religion minor.

PHIL 2010: Introduction to Philosophy
TBA
M/W 2-3:15pm
Same description as above.

PHIL 2010: Introduction to Philosophy
TBA
T/R 11am-12:15pm
Same description as above.

PHIL 2020: Critical Thinking
TBA
M/W 9:30-10:45am
An investigation of logical fallacies and patterns of valid reasoning in primarily oral by also written discourse. Required for the major in Philosophy. Fulfills Core Area B1. Required for all philosophy majors and minors. Counts toward the religion minor.

PHIL 2020: Critical Thinking
Dr. John V. Garner
M/W 11am-12:15pm
This course provides an introduction to logical reasoning and critical thinking. In division one, we will study the power of Socratic questioning and Aristotelian logic. We will discern the differences between deductive and non-deductive reasoning, the temptations of argumentative fallacies, and the clear and unclear uses of language. In division two, we will engage in open, critical discussion about controversial ethical-political and socio-economic questions, including the demands of charity, the purpose of a business, and the ethics of practices like marriage and voting. In division three, students will present their own research on a topic of their choice relating to the class. Overall, this course helps us understand whether we should be persuaded by others’ arguments, by the media, or by our pre-existing beliefs. It helps us to reason better, to be self-questioning, to make better arguments, and to evaluate more accurately the arguments of others. Required for philosophy or religion majors.
This course aims to sharpen your reasoning skills, and to help you to identify and avoid errors in reasoning. We'll study cognitive biases; how to construct and evaluate inductive and deductive arguments; and how to identify and avoid formal and informal mistakes in reasoning. The course will culminate in a practical application of these skills to current public policy debates. Fulfills Core Area B1. Required for all philosophy majors and minors. Counts toward the religion minor.

PHIL 2020: Critical Thinking
Same description as above.

PHIL 2030: Introduction to Ethics
What are the proper objects of moral evaluation—persons, actions, something else? What features of these objects make them morally right or wrong, or good or bad? What methods might help us tell the difference? Fulfills Core Area C2. Required for all philosophy majors. Counts toward the philosophy minor and toward the religion minor.

PHIL 2030: Introduction to Ethics
Same description as above.

PHIL 2110: Ethics and World Religions
This course revolves around two central questions: how has the world shaped religion(s), and how have religions shaped the world? As we move through an introductory survey of some of the world's major religious traditions, including indigenous religious traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and selected new religious movements, we will pay special attention to the ways in which these traditions have been shaped by historical, political, and geographical changes in the world—and will also consider how these traditions and their communities have influenced these changes. Over the course of the semester, we will seek to understand better the significance and relevance of religion in world history and some of the important philosophical questions addressed within religious communities as well as by those who study them. This course fulfills the Core Area E-4 requirement. Required for religion-track majors and minors.

PHIL 3140: Existentialism
This course examines both atheistic and religious existentialism through the texts of major existential thinkers such as Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir, Kierkegaard and Fanon. Students are encouraged to think through the big questions existentialists raise about the meaning of human existence including whether there is any purpose for our existence, whether we define ourselves, whether there are any reasons to be moral, and whether human existence is inherently meaningful. We will analyze theories in terms of the ramifications for the way we live our lives. May fulfill Philosophy track requirement or area requirements for other tracks.

PHIL 4115: Political Philosophy
We will examine assumptions about and arguments in favor of democracy as a form of rule. We will then consider several variants, potential problems, and objections. May fulfill Law and Justice track requirement or area requirements for other tracks.

PHIL 4230: Philosophy of Religion
Philosophy of religion is the study of the human condition insofar as it relates to practices of devotion or faith; or it is the philosophical study of the meaning or essence of religiosity. Unlike Sunday School or theology class, which usually take scripture or tradition as basic authorities, philosophy of religion usually examines arguments about the plausibility, truth, or significance of religious claims. Therefore, believers and non-believers, theists and atheists, scientists, priests, and psychologists may all engage in it. Traditional questions include: the possibility of God or gods; hopes for an afterlife or eternal selfhood; the possibility of miracles; political uses and abuses of religion; and religion's cultural, anthropological, or evolutionary significance. This class focuses largely on Western philosophizing about belief and religiosity. But the class should interest anyone wondering about extra-ordinary knowledge claims; about the relationship between faith, science, and the unknown; about the right or lack thereof to live by faith; or, finally, about the meaning of life in a world where religion is pervasive. Required for Religion track majors. May fulfill area requirements for other tracks.

PHIL 4300: Senior Seminar
Senior Seminar is the capstone course in the study of philosophy at UWG. The course will be conducted in a traditional seminar style, with students assuming a leadership role in the classroom. Each student will also produce an original philosophical research paper; we will spend significant time on the development, drafting, and revision of this paper. Students will present their papers at a senior seminar colloquium at the conclusion of the semester. Any student planning to graduate with a philosophy degree in summer 2020 or sooner must enroll in this senior seminar course, as it will not be offered again until fall 2020.

PHIL 4385 Special Topics: Truth and Reality
This course will examine the philosophical concepts of truth and reality. Some questions that we will investigate are: What do the words ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ mean? What, if any, is the connection between truth and reality? Can we have knowledge of a mind-independent world, or is reality in some sense mind-dependent? We will also examine various theories of truth. Who decides what is true? Is truth simply what is said to be true by convention? Could opposite statements both be true? Figures covered will range from the ancient philosophers Parmenides and Plato to contemporary philosophers including Huw Price and Susan Haack. May be taken to fulfill Philosophy Major Area requirement A.
Registration is Nearly Here!

Remember: If you are a philosophy major, you must meet with an advisor before you will be able to register for classes. If you have completed 61 or more hours, you should meet with your faculty advisor in Philosophy. If you have not yet completed 61 hours, then you should meet with someone in the Advising Center. The registration schedule is posted below. Be sure to meet with your advisor before your time to register.

Summer/Fall 2019 On-Time Registration Dates
for CURRENTLY* enrolled students.

Current Seniors & all Graduate level students – March 25
Current Juniors ss# ending in 50-99 – March 26
Current Juniors ss# ending in 00-49 – March 27
Current Sophomores ss# ending 50-99 – March 28
Current Sophomores ss# ending 00-49 – March 29
Current Freshmen ss# ending 00-49 – April 1
Current Freshmen ss# ending 50-99 – April 2
Open registration begins April 8, 2019

*Currently enrolled student are those taking courses in the current term – Spring 2019. (Students that are active but not currently enrolled, are currently serving a one term suspension, are readmitted, or are admitted as a transient—must wait until Open Registration to register.)

Philosophy Program Awards Gathering!

Keep an eye out for an announcement about the Philosophy Program’s Awards Ceremony and End-of-Year Gathering. It will take place in April, and all philosophy majors are invited to attend. The Philosophy Program will provide food and soft drinks for attendees.

At the gathering we will celebrate the close of the year, and we will also recognize several of our majors for their outstanding work in philosophy. Phi Sigma Tau will officially induct its newest members. And more!
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 an 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?