Anton Wilhelm Amo: Basic Writings

Introduction

Anton Wilhelm Amo is a philosopher far more often mentioned than studied. Interest in him has generally been motivated by his remarkable biography: taken from West Africa to Amsterdam as a small boy, he was brought to Germany soon thereafter to work as a servant in the court of Duke Anton Ulrich of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel. He was baptised in 1707, and in 1727 matriculated at the University of Halle. Two years later he defended a thesis *On the Right of Moors in Europe*, arguing against the legality of slavery under the Roman Law practiced in Germany. This treatise, as far as is known, is no longer extant (and may never have existed in written form at all). One year later Amo would matriculate at the University of Wittenberg, and there, in 1734 would publish his best-known work, the inaugural dissertation *On the Impassivity of the Human Mind*.

In this work, Amo forcefully defends a radically dualist account of the relationship between mind and body, one that differs from Descartes’s own dualism by denying that the soul or mind can undergo any passions whatsoever, while arguing that the motions and changes that occur within the body must be explained entirely in terms of mechanical causes. That same year he would compose a thesis for defense by the student Johannes Theodosius Meiner, *A Philosophical Disputation concerning a Distinct Idea of those Things occurring either in the Mind or in our Living and Organic Body*, and would himself preside at the defense. He would compose a final treatise in 1738, *On the Art of Soberly and Correctly Philosophizing*, and the following year would begin teaching at the University of Jena. In 1747 a libellous and racist poem was published to smear Amo’s reputation by a certain Johann Ernst Phillipi, and, under circumstances that remain unclear, in 1748 he would return to West Africa. In 1752, the French traveller David-Henri Gallandat reports meeting Amo in the town of Axim, in present-day Ghana, and notes that the philosopher is respected there as a learned philosopher and, curiously, astrologer and soothsayer.

Amo’s contributions are mentioned in a few secondary sources already in Amo’s lifetime, and Gallandat’s report appears in the journal of a Dutch scientific society in 1782. On the basis of these, the well-known philosopher and physical anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach devotes a significant portion of a 1787 essay ‘On Negroes’ to Amo’s life and work. In 1808
the Belgian cleric and abolitionist Henri Grégoire writes elogiously of Amo in his work *On the Literature of the Negroes*. In the 20th century, in turn, Amo will frequently be referenced by authors working in the African and African-American intellectual traditions, not least W. E. B. DuBois and Kwame Nkrumah. The definitive scholarship on Amo’s life and work would come from East Germany, where in the 1960s and 1970s the scholar Burchard Brentjes would in a series of publications, and often in collaboration with Ghanaian scholars and institutions, exhaustively document the African philosopher’s life and work.

Unfortunately, though with some noteworthy exceptions, Amo’s remarkable life has tended to gain far more attention than the content of his work itself. Very little is known or understood about what Amo in fact believed, and still less about the intellectual context in which these commitments took shape. Ironically, those who seek to honor Amo simply by invoking his name end up treating him as a mere curiosity, as if philosophers and historians were still stuck in the moment in which racists such as David Hume issued public challenges to produce a single example of a ‘Negro of accomplishment’, and anti-racists such as Grégoire responded with well-meaning but still rather paternalistic lists of such examples. Far better to leave that historical moment behind, and to pay attention to what Amo in fact has to say, to who he was and to the social world he inhabited.

1. The Life of Anton Wilhelm Amo

To date no scholar has traced with any certainty Amo's family roots in West Africa. There are at least two people bearing the name 'Amo' or some variant in what is now central south Ghana in the years immediately surrounding the transit of Anton Wilhelm Amo to Germany at the beginning of the 18th century. Whether or not the philosopher is related to them, learning who they are already helps us to gain a clearer understanding of the world from which Amo emerges.

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1 As Hannelore Heckmann comments: “The little attention [Amo] has received in literature shows that he has been treated… as a datum to comment on the 18th-century discussion of the equality of the races, the origin of the human species, and slavery.” See Heckmann, “Anton Wilhelm Amo (ca. 1707-ca. 1756): On the Reception of a Black Philosopher,” in *The Lessing Yearbook*, vol. 22 (1990): 149-158, 155.
Amo Takyi, who flourished at the end of the 17th century, is identified in several European sources as a Commendian king, from the state known by Europeans at the time as 'Little Comendo', and, in local Akan languages, as 'Ekki Tekki'.

'Tekki' was a common toponymic family name. We find the variants 'Tekki Amo', 'Amo-Tecki', 'Tekki-Amo', and 'Tekki Amovi', all belonging to the same person.

Tekki Ankan, known today as 'Kuma Takyi', and sometimes identified in historical sources as 'Little Taggee', was the enemy of Amo Takyi, pitted against him in the Komenda Wars, which took place between 1694 and 1700 in a struggle for trade dominance between the Dutch West India Company and the British Royal African Company.

Kuma Takyi played a major role in the Komenda Wars, switching from the Dutch to the English sides between the second (1696) and the third (1698) Komenda Wars. It was during this period that British dominance was growing, and Dutch power waning, in West Africa. Kuma Takyi was named King of Eguavo in 1700, shifting regional power to the British, which then began to slip again at the time of Kuma Takyi's death in 1704. Amo Takyi appears to have remained allied with the Dutch against his enemy Kuma Takyi, and to have lost his life.

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2 See The Modern Part of an Universal History, from the Earliest Account of Time. Compiled from Original Writers, By the Authors of the Antient Part, vol. XVII, London: S. Richardson, T. Osborne, C. Hitch et al., 1760, Book XVII., Chap. VII, Sect. I, "Contains the Origin of the French, Portuguese, Dutch, and English Commerce, on the Coast of Guinea, and more particularly on the Gold Coast: Description of the Kingdom of Commendo," 39. "As this country is divided into two distinct provinces, we shall begin by describing Little Commendo. This province, says Artus, is by the Portuguese called Aldea das Terras, and by the natives Ekki Tekki."

3 On these variants, see Christina Brauner, Kompanien, Könige und caboceers: Interkulturelle Diplomatie an Gold- und Sklavenküste im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert, Leipzig: Böhlau Verlag, 2015, 350.

4 Willem Bosman, Nauwkeurige Beschryving van de Guineze Goud-Tand-en Slave-Kust, Utrecht: Anthony Schouten, 1704, 35. "[W]y souden ooch geen gelegentheyd hebben gehad om op nieuw iets dadelijks te beginnen ten ware de Vyanden ons sulks selber niet hadden aan de hend gegeven want die onder malkanderen verschil krijgende begonden sig van een te scheyden komende des Konings Broeder Tekki Ankan, tegenwoordig Koning van Commany [Komenda], met de Acaniste [Akan] Volkeren."
in a battle that was decisive for the shift of power from the Dutch to the British in the Region. A 1760 English source tells of Amo Takyi's military valor, and of the significance of the battle in which he lost his life:

This unlucky accident dispirited the troops, and made them fall into confusion; for Tekki Amo was the soul and vital principle of his army. The English pushed the advantage; and the loss of one man made fortune change sides, and declare against the Commendians. They were routed with great slaughter, a prodigious number of prisoners were taken; which, with the booty, more than indemnified the English in the expence of the whole war. In consequence of this victory, Tekki Ankan mounted the throne of Commendo.⁵

Willem Bosman, in his 1704 description of travels through Guinea, translated into English the following year, tells of an earlier victory of Amo Takyi that had, with its awesome excess of violence, evidently impressed the Dutch:

The Commanians ow'd this Signal Victory to their General, Amo-Tecki, a Negroe, who in Valour equall'd, if not exceeded their Murther'd King. Notwithstanding we had been hitherto perfectly Neuter, The Negroe-General sent a civil Message to our Governor, together with several of the Sculls of his Vanquished Enemies, in Token that he had resolved to live and die in the Service of the Hollan'ders; his Messenger was civilly received, and after Thanks, and Presents to the General, dismissed.⁶

Given that Anton Wilhelm Amo was sent first to Amsterdam, it is possible that he, as Amo Takyi's son, was sent away for education in Holland, as a result of his father's enduring allegiance to that country. The timing of Amo's departure for Amsterdam, between 1703 and 1706, follows the general pattern of decline and retreat from Africa back to Holland described, and indeed lived, by Bosman, the principal chronicler of the decline of his own country's power in the region. Bosman returns from Guinea to Holland in 1702 and publishes his Nauwkeurige Beschrywing in 1704. Another indication of A. W. Amo's possible

⁵ The Modern Part of an Universal History, 47-48.
⁶ William Bosman, A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts, London: Knapton, 1705, 37-38.
relationship to Amo Takyi is offered by the historian Harvey M. Feinberg, who describes a complicated series of events in the 1730s. These involve a certain Tekki, who is exiled to Suriname, though not as a slave, on June 24, 1732. This is of possible interest, since the travel report by Gallandat, written in the early 1750s but published, tells us that A. W. Amo's brother had been sent to Suriname, as a slave, during Amo's sojourn in Germany.

Captain Thomas Phillips, a British slave trader and commander of the slave ship Hannibal, was on the other side of the Anglo-Dutch divide from Bosman. He made a voyage to Guinea in 1693 and 1694 which would be used over the following several decades as an authoritative source of information on the region. He reports having personally known a 'Captain Amo' at Fort Sebastian during the time of his travels. Amo Takyi seems to be a distinct person from this Captain Amo. In a 1748 German account of Phillips's voyages the Amo in question is described as a 'Kabaschir du Château' (presumably, the Fort San Sebastian). A 'caboceer' or, in Portuguese, a cabociero, is a "headman or official appointed by the chiefs of coastal West African states, who is responsible for capturing and transporting slaves from the interior.

The same German account tells us an interesting story of Captain Amo's daughter:

One day there took place a remarkable marriage. The cannoneer of the castle, exhausted by his wife and unhappy with her conduct, drove her from his house in order to take in another, who was the daughter of Captain Amo, a caboceer of the castle. The ceremony consisted only in a feast that he gave for the officers and for some of his black relatives, and a dress that he gave as a present to his new companion. And with that they were man and wife. But the young woman, who was no more than twelve years old, and who had little affection for her husband, would never consent to go to bed with him, and the canoneer became very angry. However, having considered that violence would be of little use, on the ship he bought three or four ells of red taffeta, which he showed to his wife, promising to give them to her as a reward if she would give herself to him and

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obey him. The beauty of the tafetta removed all difficulties, for the following morning the wife was wearing her tafetta, and the both of them were good friends.9

Gallandat mentions that Amo found his father and a sister (perhaps one of several) when he returned to West Africa around 1750. Supposing the story reported here took place in 1694, the twelve-year-old girl would have been roughly twenty years old when A. W. Amo was born. This makes it perfectly plausible that the girl is indeed the philosopher's mother, and that Captain Amo is his father. According to Feinberg, the ‘Caboceer Ammoe' designated his nephew Mysang as his rightful heir. When the former failed to return from a trip to Whydah, several parties claimed his inheritance, but a certain Director General Butler at the court of Elmina Castle determined that Mysang was 'de regte en eenige ervgenaam', the rightful and exclusive heir.10 This would seem to exclude the possibility that the caboceer had had any sons of his own, except that, as Feinberg clarifies, the Akan followed strict rules of matrilineal inheritance, and even if he did have sons he would have been rule-bound to designate the son of his sister. If this is what happened, and the caboceer is in fact the philosopher's father, we might imagine a situation in which inheritance rules left the future Anton Wilhelm without an inheritance, and with few options other than to travel to Europe for training in the clergy.

Was Anton Wilhelm Amo the son of a powerful slave-trader, or of an even more powerful warrior-king? Any claim that he was the one or the other is pure speculation: useful, perhaps, for taking stock of the possibilities, of who he might have been, but speculation nonetheless. An enduring problem in Amo scholarship however has been the tendency to fill in biographical details where the documentary sources leave nothing but questions. Thus for example the Ghanaian scholar William E. Abraham has contributed much to our understanding of Amo's life and work. Too often however he reports conjecture as fact, even when there is manifestly no documentary material that could corroborate what he claims. Thus for example he writes that, "in his boyhood, Amo had met Leibniz, who was researching ducal history at Wolfenbüttel." It would be a major breakthrough for research on Amo if such a meeting were known to have occurred, but unfortunately the most that can be established is that Amo and Leibniz were in fact in Wolfenbüttel at the same time. Abraham writes that

9 Allgemeine Historie, 403.
Amo studied at the Ritterakademie in Wolfenbüttel between 1717 and 1720, though no documents exist to show this.

Perhaps most significantly, he claims with apparent certainty that Amo was sent to the Netherlands in 1706 as a free Christian child, at the request of an African preacher, for the purpose of training as a missionary. In fact, there is significant scholarly dispute about the circumstances of Amo's arrival in Europe. It is true that at least one other Ghanian, Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein (c. 1717-1747), received missionary training in the Netherlands around the same time. But Capitein was himself initially taken as a slave, and sold to the Dutch captain Arnold Steenhart in 1725. It was only after Capitein was given as a gift to a representative of the Dutch West India Company that he eventually found himself transported to The Hague with new evangelical purposes projected onto him. Crucially, also, we know with certainty that Amo was baptized at the Salzthal Chapel in Wolfenbüttel in 1707. This makes it nearly certain that he was transported to Europe as an unbaptized 'Moor', which might lead one to suppose that he was originally sent to Europe intended for a life of slavery. On the other hand, as Norbert Lochner points out, if Amo had not been transported to Europe with the agreement of his parents, it is unlikely that his name would have been known upon arrival, and just as unlikely that he would have known where to return to, as he eventually does late in life after a long career in Germany.\textsuperscript{11} In sum, we simply do not know the circumstances of Amo's transit to Europe. If we consider only the documentary evidence of his own life, both the possibility that he was sent as a slave, and the possibility that he was sent for the purpose of education as a clergyman, seem to bear roughly equal weight. When we consider, however, his likely family relations in his home country, that he was probably the son of a powerful king or of a captain who also wielded significant power, both of whom were closely allied with the Dutch, the probability seems to grow significantly that he was sent to Amsterdam as a free child.

These biographical considerations are significant, not least because they help us to make plausible conjectures about the motivation and content of Amo's lost work, the legal

disseration *On the Right of Moors in Europe*, defended in November, 1729. According to a summary written a decade later by Johann Peter von Ludewig, in this work Amo "showed from laws and histories that the kings of the Moors were enfeoffed under the Roman Emperor, and that each of them had to obtain a royal patent."\(^{12}\) This system, Ludewig notes, continued until the time of the Emperor Justinian. To the extent that German law is based on Roman law, the implication seems to be, the recognition of sub-Saharan Africans in Europe as subjects of recognized sovereigns, and therefore as securing for these people the right to freedom, seems to have constituted the basic argument of this work. In this Amo's work is starkly different from that of his countryman Capitein, who in his *On Slavery, Not Contrary to Christian Freedom* of 1742 argued that slavery has both a legal and moral foundation within Christendom, and that there is no obligation of manumission for slaves who have been baptised.\(^{13}\)

What little we know about this work informs us, already, that before Amo had turned to the study of metaphysical questions, he was actively interested in theorizing about the plight of members of a group to which he belonged in the society in which he had been raised up. He was interested in the theoretical problem of freedom and slavery, but also in contributing to a problem that bore directly on his own life and that for better or worse contributed to the constitution of his identity. His argument was that human equality, within limits, can be established on the basis of a shared history that extends back to an original imperial recognition of equality, and that it is this history, rather than current political divisions or the perception of salient physiological differences, that must determine the current status of Africans in Europe. As we will see, there are important connections between this position, and the one he will eventually take up in his theory of the relationship between mind and body.


But let us attempt to trace out, in whatever detail is possible on the basis of the documentary evidence, the important moments in Amo's life. Nothing is known with certainty prior to his arrival in Wolfenbüttel, whether as a servant, an employee, or a sort of foster child of Duke Anton Ulrich of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (Tsar Peter the Great of Russia, as we will discuss later, had some years earlier legally adopted as his son Abram Petrovich Gannibal, who had been purchased for him as a slave). The first clear mention of his existence is an entry in the register of the Salzthal Chapel, indicating that he was baptised on 29 July, 1707.\textsuperscript{14} Between 1716 and 1721, roughly Amo's teenage years, notes with calculations written on them indicate that he was engaged in financial transactions on behalf of the Wolfenbüttel Hof, and that he was likely himself being remunerated for this work.\textsuperscript{15} On 23 April, 1720, we have the first document written by Amo's own hand: a signed and dated receipt for money he has received.\textsuperscript{16}

Some more years go by, without a trace of our young philosopher. The 1720 note was written in Latin, and it is indeed to suppose, along with Abraham, that Amo had by this time acquired his literacy, and indeed his Latinity, studying at the Wolfenbüttel Ritterakademie. It is also possible that he was educated by private tutors at the Hof itself. The next documentary source shows him enrolling, seven years later on 9 June, 1727, at the University of Halle.\textsuperscript{17} It is, again, written in his own hand, in Latin: "Antonius Guilielmus Cognominatus Amo. Aethiops." In a separate column, where other students have given the names of German cities, Amo writes: "Ab Aximo in Guinea." Taken together, these fragmentary bits of information show that 'Ethiopian' here is, in keeping with its common usage at the time, not meant to indicate that Amo originates from the country or region of Ethiopia, for he tells us explicitly that he comes from Guinea. Abram Petrovich Gannibal, whose life course is parallel to Amo's in significant ways, was long held to be 'Ethiopian' as well, and it is only very recent evidence

\textsuperscript{14} Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv Wolfenbüttel (NSW), KB. 1 Abt. 1332, 84; Burchard Brentjes, \textit{Antonius Guilielmus Amo Afer aus Axim in Ghana. Student, Doktor der Philosophie, Magister legens an den Universitäten Halle, Wittenberg, Jena, 1727-1747. Dokumente / Autographe / Belege (DAB)}, Halle: Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 1968, 1.

\textsuperscript{15} NSW 17 III Alt. 120, 123; DAB 2.

\textsuperscript{16} NSW 3 Alt. Fb. 2, Nr. 1; DAB 3.

\textsuperscript{17} Universitätsarchiv Halle: Matrikel der Universität, Rep. 4 Sektion XVII Nr. 5 Bd. 3 Lfd. Nr. 488; DAB 4.
that has shown him to in fact have come from Cameroon. It is clear that many Europeans had only the vaguest understanding of African geography, and that some may have conceived all of West Africa south of the Sahel as included within Ethiopia. In the encomium written by the rector of the University of Wittenberg, Johann Gottfried Kraus, included as an appendix to Amo's 1734 *On the Impassivity of the Human Mind*, we read that Amo "first saw the light of day in the furthest part of Africa, looking toward the East." The Beninese philosopher Paulin Hountondji speculates that here Kraus is confusing Axim, which is in today's Ghana and which Amo explicitly identifies as lying in Guinea, with the city of Axum in Ethiopia, which had already been well-known in antiquity.¹⁸

There may however be a deeper reason for the identification of Amo, and indeed of Gannibal, as 'Ethiopian', one that we can understand by considering, briefly, the life and legacy of their predecessor, the African author Juan Latino (1518-1596), who flourished in the Spanish Renaissance. Latino is principally known for his 1573 poem, the *Austriadis carmen*, which celebrates the Habsburg victory against the Ottomans in the 1571 battle of Lepanto.

According to Baltasar Fra-Molinero, Latino's adopted surname itself, as the child of slaves of the Duke of Sessa who lacked a surname of their own, is a marker of his struggle for legitimacy within the world of European Christian learning: "Being eloquent in the language of orthodoxy --Latin-- seemed to Juan Latino the best way to assure his rightful place in the human fold."¹⁹ And it was in virtue of his cultivated Latinity, in turn, that the Black author could claim to be 'Ethiopian', in the very special sense in which this designation was understood in the Christian imagination in the Renaissance:

> Latinity underlined the difference between being African and being Ethiopian. In the *Austriadis carmen* the words African, Moor and Turk are made mutually exchangable. Africa is the northern part of the continent, the space that ever since Roman times has had to be conquered from people who rejected the Pax Romana and its Latinity, now

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represent by King Philip II of Spain and the Catholic imperial order. Ethiopia, on the other hand, is the promise of Christian universality.\(^{20}\)

Fra-Molinero concludes: "By calling himself an Ethiopian, Juan Latino proclaimed his black skin in classical terms but also established his connection with the Christian religion."\(^{21}\) Now of course we cannot expect the experience of Amo, or of Gannibal, to be the same as Latino's more than a century before and at the other extreme of the European continent. And yet, at least in Amo's case, the importance of Christian baptism and of mastery of Latin for overcoming obstacles in European society, do seem to echo the far better known biography of his Spanish forerunner. Latino's life was memorialized in the comedic play by Diego Jiménez de Enciso, entitled simply *Juan Latino* and composed around 1620 (likely only printed, however, in 1652). This playwright was treasured by Miguel de Cervantes and other more prominent Spanish men of letters, and it is at least possible that his work was known in Germany a century later, or at least that some of its central themes were transmitted indirectly. In *Juan Latino* the playwright portrays his subject humanely, as a moral agent with unique problems and challenges, rather than as a stock character. He also presents his Black subject, as Fra-Molinero writes, "as a model of assimilation in contrast with the descendants of converso Jews and Moriscos."\(^{22}\) A Jewish character in the play small-heartedly protests against Latino's occupation of a university chair, while another character, an unbaptised Moor, fights against the victory of Christianity in Spain. The play, in short, is rife with bigotry, just not against the Black Christian author of Latin poetry. Jiménez de Enciso does derive much of the comedic force for his play from the dynamics of the interracial marriage, but the comedy here may be interpreted no less difficulty as social satire than as based on the conceit that such marriage is intrinsically ridiculous.

Amo was also the subject of a minor comical work, published by Johann Ernst Philippi in 1747.\(^{23}\) Philippi's work is a poem and not a play, and here as in *Juan Latino* the humor is

\(^{20}\) Fra-Molinero, "Juan Latino and His Racial Difference," 343-344.

\(^{21}\) Fra-Molinero, "Juan Latino and His Racial Difference," 336.

\(^{22}\) Fra-Molinero, "Juan Latino and His Racial Difference," 331.

\(^{23}\) Johann Ernst Philippi, *Belustigende Poetische Schaubühne, und auf derselben I.*

*Ein Pförrlicher Student, Hanß Düüchel aus Norden, nebst Zwölff seiner lustigen Cameraden. II. Die Academische Scheinjungfer, als ein Muster aller Cocketten. III. Herrn M. Amo, eines*
derived from Amo's love for a German woman, a certain Astrine. Unlike Latino's case, both the historical person and the character in the play, the love expressed by Amo the fictional character (and perhaps the real Amo too) is unrequited, and the poem seems to condemn him for even considering that he might hope to be loved by her. And yet Philippi's work does seem to show at least some continuity with the earlier play, and at least a plausible argument could be made that its author, like Jiménez de Enciso, is at least attempting social satire, rather than a straightforward attack on Amo, as has generally been supposed. Interestingly, in Peter the Great's Moor, Aleksandr Pushkin's unfinished 1827 novel about his own great-grandfather Gannibal, the central element revolves, once again, around the question of the suitability of a 'Moor' for requited love from a European woman.24 "Am I really fated to live out my life in solitude," Pushkin's fictional Gannibal wonders, "without knowing the greatest pleasures and the most solemn duties of a man, just because I was born beneath the fifteenth parallel?" This is the great Russian author writing in the early 19th century about his own African ancestor, yet he is continuing a theme that we already saw in 17th-century Spanish theatre, and that also, evidently, appears in Philippi's poem in Germany in the mid-18th century. Seen in this broad context, it seems somewhat hasty to conclude, with Burchard Brentjes, that the work in question is a mere Spottgedicht,25 a libellous or insult-mongering poem, rather than being rooted in a particular genre that, however tinged with the racism of its time, is also concerned with investigating and engaging with this racism, portraying its African protagonist as a complicated human being with sincere and individual hopes and desires.

Like Latino, Amo's social identity seems to have been forged in contrast with that of two other problematic groups: Jews and Moors (although Amo is sometimes himself identified as a 'baptised Moor', when this term is used alone, without a modifier, it is fairly plainly a synonym of 'Turk' or 'Muslim'). We do not know much at all about Amo's views on Islam. In

gelehrten Mohren, galanter Liebes-Antrag an eine schöne Brünette, Madem. Astrine. IV. Der Mademoiselle Astrine, Parodische Antwort auf solchen Antrag eines verliebten Mohren.
Cöthen, in der Cörnerischen Buchhandlung, 1747.

24 Translation ours. The Russian title of Pushkin's work, Arap Petra Velikogo, shows again the vagueness and fluidity of the ethnoracial categories in question: in Russian a 'Moor' is an arap, a variant of the word 'Arab'.
25 DAB 284.
the 1739 *Tractatus* he does specify in the section on 'Theology' he clarifies in a note that he is only speaking here of Christian theology. "The Theology of the Gentiles is one thing, that of the Turks another, and so on for the diversity of nations."\(^{26}\) We know, by contrast, that at least in his personal life he developed a close friendship with a Jewish medical student at Halle, Moses Abraham Wolff, who studied philosophy with Amo in the mid-1730s before obtaining his degree in 1737. The two were so close, in fact, that Amo composed an elogious poem for Wolff, which was included at the end of his dissertation *On the Treatment of Diseases Suppressed by an Unknown Cause.*\(^{27}\) This was evidently a deep and important friendship, and as Steven and Henry Schwarzschild note, although in his poem Amo "may be only a conventional phrase-monger, referring to Wolff's immediate kin[, i]t is, however, hard not to discern… a broader concern also – that Wolff's fellow-Jews, like Amo’s own fellow-blacks, together finally achieve the human and social dignity of which they have so long been robbed."\(^{28}\)

We will return later in this Introduction to consider the special political circumstances at the University of Halle that made it possible for Jews to study there, and indeed to be taught


\(^{27}\) DAB 54. The poem consists in seven lines with three rhymed couplets:

"Dein aufgeweckter Geist im klugen meditiren,
Und unermüdter Fleiss im gründlichen Studiren,
Hoch Edler, macht dass Du in der Gelehrten Orden
Ein Stern, ein heller Stern, der estern Grösse worden,
Der immer heller wird in neuer Ehren-Schein.
So einen grossen Lohn giebt Weissheit ihren Sohnen.
Dich und die Deinigen in lauter Segen kröhnen.
--Dises sezet seinem hochgeehrtesten Freunde glückwunschend hinzu.
Anton Wilhelm Amo.
Von Guinea in Africa, der Philosophie und Freyen Künste Magister legens."

philosophy by an African professor. For now it is enough to note that, unlike the fictional Juan Latino, Amo was not envied or resented by his Jewish colleague, even if in important respects the obstacles Jews faced in early-18th-century Germany were greater than those faced by Black Christians. Amo was an 'Ethiopian', like Latino and like Gannibal, with all the special historical resonances that term had, and like Juan Latino he proved this in part by his elective membership in the brotherhood of Latinity.

We have taken a long but necessary digression to consider the possible significances of Amo's self-identification as 'Ethiopian' in the 1727 student registry of the University of Halle. But let us return now to the documented moments of Amo's early career. We next see a sign of him in a short report in the *Wöchentliche Hallische Frage- und Anzeigungs-Nachrichten* of 28 November, 1729, presumably written by Johann Peter von Ludewig.\(^{29}\) The author tells us that a 'baptised Moor' who had previously been in the service of the Duke of Wolfenbüttel, had proved to be a very good student and, after mastering Latin, had gone on to study 'public and private law'. He was accordingly authorised to hold a public disputation.\(^{30}\) "So that the argument of the disputation should be appropriate to his situation," Ludewig continues, "the topic *De iure Maurorum*, or the law of Moors, was chosen."\(^{31}\) He goes on to summarize what is evidently an anti-slavery argument:

> [I]t was shown from books and from history that the kings of the Moors were enfeoffed by the Roman Emperor, and that every one of them had to obtain a royal patent from him, which Justinian also issued, but it was also investigated how far the freedom or servitude of Moors bought by Christians in Europe extends, according to the usual laws.\(^{32}\)

This is a very rich description of what may have been an important intervention in early modern European debates about slavery, but we will limit ourselves to two brief comments here. First, the fact that Ludewig describes the topic as appropriate to Amo's own situation

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\(^{29}\) *Wöchentliche Hallische Frage- und Anzeigungs-Nachrichten*, No. XVIII, 28 November, 1729, 272-273; DAB 5-6.

\(^{30}\) *Wöchentliche Hallische Frage- und Anzeigungs-Nachrichten*, 272; DAB 5.


suggests that he had himself been a slave of the Wolfenbüttel Hof, though from what little is said here we see no evidence that he remains one still in 1729. A second interesting aspect of Ludewig's description is the clear fact that the topic was imposed on Amo, that he did not choose it himself. This detail, in turn, suggests that there may in fact have been no text at all, and thus that the commonly held view that Amo's first work has gone 'missing' is misplaced. The *De iure Maurorum in Europa* is consistently described as a *disputatio* and not as a *dissertatio*. As will be discussed in a later section, it was very common at academic defenses for the defender to display his argumentative ability by defending an argument given to him by someone else. In fact, as we will see, Amo is himself the author of a text attributed to a certain Johannes Theodosius Meiner, who in fact only defended the text, as a student of Amo. In the case of the *De iure Maurorum in Europa*, there is no mention of an author of a text that Amo may have been given to defend, nor of a text that Amo himself wrote. This supposed work may in fact be only a part of the oral history of the University of Halle, whose written trace never extended beyond the summary of the oral defense as reported by Ludewig.

The following year, on 2 September, 1730, we find the name of "Anton Wilhelm Amo, von Guinea in Africa," in the immatriculation list of the University of Wittenberg.\(^{33}\) It is not clear why he moves here from Halle, and although it is in the context of Halle Wolffianism and medical philosophy that Amo's basic philosophical outlook is shaped, it will be in Wittenberg that Amo will complete his most important philosophical works. The two universities share a complex history with one another, both of them lying at the heart of the Lutheran intellectual world. Wittenberg received many exiles from Halle after Christian Wolff was driven from Halle in 1722 and the now-dominant Pietists sought to eliminate enduring traces of his intellectual influence.

Barely a month after his arrival, on 17 October, 1730, there is an official notice in the decanal registry of the Wittenberg philosophy faculty of Amo's promotion to the rank of Magister. He is identified, here, as "Antonius Wilhelmus Amo, Aximo-Guineensis ex Africa, Maurus."\(^{34}\) This mention is followed by nearly three years of silence, after which, in the *Hamburgische*

\(^{33}\) Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Sachsen-Anhalt: Wittenberger Matrikel. Bd. 8 Bl. 139; DAB 7.

\(^{34}\) Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Halle: Dekanatsbuch Philosophische Fakultät Wittenberg Bd. 4, 74; DAB 8.
Berichte von Neuesten gelehrten Sachen of June, 1733, we are offered perhaps the most vivid account of any single event in Amo's life. On 10 May of that year, Amo was selected to serve as commander of a group of marshalls at the University of Wittenberg for a parade in honor of the visit of the elector of Saxony. "Herr Amo, an African," we learn, "stood in the middle, as the commander of the entire corps, dressed in black, holding his own baton in his hand, and over his vest was outfitted with a wide white ribbon on which the elector's seal was magnificently displayed in gold with black silk mingled in." His majesty, we learn, was so impressed with the display of the marshalls, with Amo at their helm, that he took his hat off to salute them. The following Monday, all of the students of Wittenberg, whose marshalls are chosen from among the seniors, march to the Wittenberg castle to recite their poems of praise [Gratulations-Carmen] to the elector. Again, Amo is the commander of the whole group, and he is the first among them to recite a poem. He is wearing the same uniform as before. When the ceremony is over, we are told, Amo and six of his marshalls return home, "and as this solemn act pleased his royal highness very much, ... he arranged to give to the students six eplers of Rhein wine." We are unlikely to find any more revealing account of Amo the human being than this: extroverted, ambitious, conformist, and presumably very likeable. At the same time, we can only speculate as to how his incessant identification by others as an African, a Moor, and so on, shaped his social identity.

On April of the following year, 1734, Amo defends his major philosophical work, On the Impassivity of the Human Mind, and is promoted to the rank of Magister legens. In the decanal register of the Wittenberg philosophy faculty, in an entry dated 16 April, we find among those added ad numerum Magistrorum Legentium: "M. Antonius Amo, Guinea-Afer." Both the significance of this rank, as well as the argument and importance of the work on the basis of which he earned it, will be discussed later in the Introduction.

36 Hamburgische Berichte, 366-367; DAB 9-10.
37 Hamburgische Berichte, 368; DAB 11.
38 Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Halle: Dekanatsbuch Philosophische Fakultät Wittenberg, Bd. 4, 606; DAB 35.
The following month, on 29 May, an important new moment in Amo's career: he presides the
disputation of Johann Theodosius Meiner, on a text entitled *Philosophical Disputation
containing a Distinct Idea of Those Things that Constitue Either the Mind or Our Living and
Organic Body*. We conventionally refer to this work as 'the Meiner Dissertation', but in fact,
while Meiner is the one who defended it, clear signs within the text reveal that Amo not only
presided at its defense, but also wrote the work himself. As will be discussed later in the
Introduction, this was not so unconventional as it may seem: dissertation advisers often gave
their students the arguments they were obligated to defend. This is the origin of the idea of
'defending a thesis': the 'thesis' is not a body of work produced by the student himself, but
rather a claim made by someone more advanced and prominent in the field. The 'Meiner
Dissertation' repeats many of the same claims as the *Impassivity*, and indeed refers to this
earlier work as being 'ours' ('nostro', where the first-person plural stands in for the singular).
The fact that it was defended by Meiner so quickly after Amo had been promoted to the rank
of Magister legens indicates that it was this promotion that also gave him the privilege to
preside such defenses, and also that he was eager to begin working in an advisorial capacity
and, by this means, to propagate his own philosophical views.

Two years go by. On 21 July, 1736, Amo is now back at the University of Halle, this time as a
*Dozent* in the philosophy faculty. This time he is described in the decanal register of the
faculty as "Antonius Wilhelmus Amo, philosophiae ac liberalium artium Magister, ex Africæ
province litorali Guinea ortur [Anton Wilhelm Amo, Master of philosophy and the liberal
arts, originating from the coastal province of Africa, Guinea]." He is still routinely identified
by his unusual place of origin, but now his academic accomplishments come first. It is briefly
mentioned in the register that Amo had originally studied at Halle before going to Wittenberg,
and also, significantly, that taking him on as a *Dozent* would be a great favor to him, as he has
recently been deprived of 'his most serene patron' and is now quite destitute. This is evidently
a reference to Duke August Wilhelm of Wolfenbüttel, though he had in fact died five years
earlier, in 1731 (his father, Duke Anton Ulrich, who had been Amo's first patron, died in
1714). It is not clear why the consequences of the duke's death are only mentioned now, as if
they amounted to a new turn of events in Amo's life, but in any case this note provides us with

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Africa, und daselbst aus Guinea gebürtig, ein Genuiner-Mohr, aber ein bescheidener und
ehrbarer Philosophus mit Vergnügen und nach seiner Art publice opponirt."
the first sign of what will be a constant throughout the rest of Amo's life in Germany: an
evident lack of financial support from the noble family that had initially brought him up and
that had, for whatever reason, invested in and supported his education. From now on, Amo is
on his own.

Some months later, on 6 November, there is a report in the *Wöchentliche Hallische Anzeigen*,
likely by the same Johann Peter von Ludewig who had first written of Amo in 1729, telling us
of Amo's participation in the defense of a medical dissertation by Johann Zacharias Petsche
entitled *Selected Anatomical Observations*. Ludewig relates that at the defense, "Herr
Magister Amo, from Africa, and born in Guinea, a genuine Moor, but an unpretentious and
reputable philosopher, publicly opposed [Petsche] after his fashion and with pleasure." This
encounter is interesting for a number of reasons. The fact that Amo had what was evidently a
formal role in the defense of a medical dissertation shows that he had taken a more active
interest in medicine, perhaps further developing the medical themes and questions that were
already clearly present in his two earlier works. As we will discuss later, the boundary
between the philosophical and medical faculties at Halle had long been very porous, and it
was in fact very typical for physicians there to engage with philosophical questions, as the
famous Georg Ernst Stahl had in his polemic against Leibniz, published under the title
*Negotium Otiosum* in 1720, and vice versa. Petsche is identified on the title page of the
*Selected Anatomical Observations* as both the author of the text and as the respondent, and the
physician and professor of natural philosophy Michael Alberti is identified as presiding. Yet
Amo's otherwise uncredited role of offering 'public opposition' appears to be an official one.
The work itself, as its title suggests, really is a collection of observations on anatomy based on
the study of cadavers, focused principally on osteology, myology, and the reproductive
system. There does not seem to be much 'philosophy', in our understanding of the term. But
this was not the understanding that reigned at Halle, nor evidently one that confined Amo's
range of interests.

41 *Wöchentliche Hallische Anzeigen*, 6 November, 1736, 719; DAB 53.
Another year passes. On 4 October, 1737, Amo's friend and former student, Moses Abraham Wolff, defends his medical dissertation *On the Treatment of Diseases Suppressed by an Unknown Cause*, to which Amo appends his congratulatory poem, cited above. It is likely that Amo was in attendance at the defense, as was Wolff's advisor Friedrich Hoffmann. The latter occupied the first chair in medicine at the University of Halle, and was a career-long adversary of G. E. Stahl, who occupied the second chair. Hoffmann was an important proponent of iatromechanism, or the medical study of the human being on the basis of a model of the human body as a machine. Amo's association with Hoffmann at Halle places him at the heart of a number of important medical-philosophical debates of great importance both for understanding the legacy of mechanism and vitalism in 18th-century Germany, as well as for understanding the institutional history of the University of Halle. We will return to these questions later. Here we will content ourselves with noting that Amo's friend Wolff would go on to a fairly unexceptional medical career in Berlin. If their friendship was an enduring one, this could in part explain a later unsubstantiated report made by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, to be discussed below, that during another of his 'silent' periods in the 1740s, Amo too would find himself in Berlin. Future research on Wolff's career might turn up hints of encounters there with Amo.

The following year, in 1738, Amo is mentioned by Carl Günther Ludovici, in a book about Wolffian philosophy (that is, the philosophy of Christian Wolff, not of Moses Abraham Wolff) entitled *An Extensive Outline of a Complete History of the Wolffian Philosophy*. Amo is cited as "one of the most prominent Wolffians," alongside several others, and brief mention is made of the 'Meiner Dissertation', written by Amo and defended by Meiner in Wittenberg four years earlier. 1738 was also the year of publication of Amo's most mature

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43 See Moses Abraham Wolff, *De Morborum inconsulta ratione suppressorum revocatione*, Halle, 1737.


and by far most lengthy philosophical work, the *Treatise on the Art of Soberly and Accurately Philosophising*. We will offer a summary of this work's central concerns and arguments below. Here we will note that this is a work that was long in the making, and it is best understood as part of a trilogy that also includes the *Impassivity* and the 'Meiner Dissertation'. Amo alludes to these works on several occasions in the *Treatise*. The first apparent mention of Amo's magnum opus occurs a year earlier than its publication, on 4 March, 1737, when he submits it to the dean of the philosophy faculty for clearance by the censors. In the decanal register on that date we find the note: "M. Amo scriptum logicum censurae submissit."47

When Amo next appears it is mid-Summer, 1739, and he is now in Jena. He has written a letter, on 27 June, to the members of the philosophy faculty there, introducing himself.48 He tells them that he is indigent, but also that he is very industrious. No mention is made of his previous noble connections in Wolfenbüttel. He gains a particularly strong supporter in the dean of the faculty, Friedrich Andreas Hallbauer, who writes a note to his colleagues on 29 June, two days after Amo's initial introduction, presenting various options for the 'nostrification', or the transfer of credentials from one university to another, for this impoverished philosopher: “[H]e would either have to be nostrified at no cost, or the cost should be suspended until such time as he gains earnings here; or he should be permitted provisionally to teach, until we can see whether he receives steady applause, in which case he should be allowed to be officially nostrified.”49 Hallbauer concludes, “I will be pleased if you are of the same view,”50 and indeed most of his colleagues are. One professor at Jena, identified only as “Wideburg,” presents a number of reasons why Amo’s request should be supported, even before those of other applicants: “(1) in his early childhood he was taken from another part of the world; (2) he has turned from paganism to the Christian religion; (3) he has been entirely cut off and abandoned by his family and their associates; and thus (4) possesses nothing other than what he earns through his own industriousness. Since he does not wish to beg, but rather seeks to feed himself in an honest way, we should plainly help him

48 Universitätsarchiv Jena: Bestand M 97 Dekanatsakten III Bl. 64; DAB 276.
49 Universitätsarchiv Jena: Bestand M 97 Dekanatsakten III Bl. 63r.; DAB 277.
50 Universitätsarchiv Jena: Bestand M 97 Dekanatsakten III Bl. 63r.; DAB 277.
to the extent possible.”\textsuperscript{51}

An arrangement is worked out, and on 17 July Amo presents his first lesson plan for a lecture course in the Michaelmas term, 1739. It includes a curious mixture of topics, listed in his own handwriting, such as “[p]arts of the more elegant and curious philosophy; physiognomy; chiromancy; geomancy, commonly known as the art of divination; purely natural astrology, which is opposed to cryptography; dechifratory, or the art of deciphering, which is opposed to the superstitions of the common people and of the ancients, cut down and rejected by all people, and to those things that are the less commend ed by their ambiguity.”\textsuperscript{52} Here Amo is evidently attempting to draw in as many students as possible, and to gain their ‘applausum’, which functioned roughly as an 18th-century equivalent to high teaching evaluations for nontenured faculty today.

At Jena Amo advertises competence in quite a diverse range of topics, and it might surprise us to see chiromancy and astrology included in a philosophy course at a purportedly enlightened German university in the early 18\textsuperscript{th} century. But this variety shows, in part, the real need to ensure broad popular appeal for a university lecturer with a precarious institutional status.\textsuperscript{53} Moreover, in the description Amo repeatedly emphasizes that his approach to topics such as astrology is what we would describe as ‘naturalistic’: like Leibniz and many others, Amo is signaling his opposition to the superstitious use of astrology for purposes of fortune-telling, while still considering the possible influence of the celestial bodies in terrestrial affairs as a legitimate path of inquiry.

\textsuperscript{51} Universitätsarchiv Jena: Bestand M 97 Dekanatsakten III Bl. 63v.; DAB 278.
\textsuperscript{52} Universitätsarchiv Jena: Bestand M 97 Bl. 95; DAB 280.
\textsuperscript{53} In a notice of late 1740, the director of the philosophy faculty at the University of Jena, Friedrich Andreas Hallbauer, gives a picture of Amo’s predicament at that institution, and of the need for the newly hired lecturer to win the favor of his students: “On July 8 Mister Anton Wilhem Amo, the African, a Moor brought up by the eminent Duke of Brunswick, was given a response to the letter he sent on the 29th of the previous month, namely, that his nostrification will be granted, but that he must pay the requisite money, namely, 10 taler for Easter and the same amount for Michaelmas, in the coming year, 1740, if he is able to earn it by teaching and is able to gain applause. He is very happy with this.”
It would not be surprising if Gallandat, in his report on his encounter with Amo after his return to West Africa, were to overlook some of these distinctions in his interpretation of Amo’s work as that of a ‘soothsayer’ [Gelukzegger]. It is interesting to speculate here on the extent to which Amo's intellectual activity remained the same in Africa as it had been in Germany. Did he adapt his astrology and divination to the local context, invoking divinities and deploying traditional incantations that would have been familiar to his African clients? Or did he attempt to import European divinatory practices? Did he cater mainly to European clients in Africa, who might have shared the same broad intellectual background as his students in Jena? Or did he move between cultures, while still recognising the common, indeed universal, concerns at the heart of both European and African traditions of astrology and divination? It is remarkable, whatever the case may be, to think that the skills Amo had cultivated as a philosophy teacher in an 18th-century German university might have proved useful in his later career as an African soothsayer, and evidence indeed that the intellectual traditions embodied in these two cultural practices might not be as radically different as we ordinarily take them to be.

Nearly a year passes. Then, on 5 May, 1740, we have one of the most poignant traces left behind by Amo. He has written a dedication in a book belonging to his friend, and likely his student, G. Achenwall. It is a quotation from Epictetus: "He is wise who accommodates himself to necessity, and is conscious of divine things." He signs it "Antonius Guilielmus Amo Afer, Philos. et Art. Liberal. Magister Legens." We can only speculate about the circumstances that motivated Amo to invoke this morsel of Stoic wisdom, and about whether it had as much to do with his own plight as with Achenwall's, for whom it was intended. After many years of manifesting his own freedom, of struggling and advancing, could Amo have begun to resign himself to the limits imposed on his freedom, simply, first of all, by the fact of being a mortal human being, and, second of all, an African, now somewhat stranded in Europe, abandoned by his former patrons, and struggling to make ends meet as a philosopher? This is the very last direct trace we have of Amo's life.

Seven years will go by without a mention, until, on 23 October, 1747, we find an advertisement for Philippi's parodical poem in the *Wöchentliche Hallische Anzeigen*. Where

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54 Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen: Cod. Ms. hist. lit. 48f. Bl. 78; DAB 281.
55 *Wöchentliche Hallische Anzeigen*, 23 October, 1747, 692.
is Amo? Is he in Halle now, to feel the pain of this send-up of his life? Is he somewhere, now, with the real-life Astrine? Is he in Berlin? Has he already returned to Guinea? Brentjes argues that the damage inflicted by the poem was itself the precipitating cause for Amo's return to Africa, but we have absolutely no way to establish this with any certainty. In this Introduction, we have already exhaustively presented all of the documentary traces left over the course of Amo's life. Any other details that might be filled in are, for the time being, in the absence of any further discoveries, speculation and nothing more.

2. The History of Amo Scholarship

It is difficult, or perhaps impossible, to determine the boundary between documentary evidence from Amo's life, on the one hand, and literature on Amo on the other. Texts of the latter sort grow gradually out of texts of the former sort, with new details, generally unsupported by documentary evidence, added little, followed next by another layer of interpretation of the details both real and invented.

We might identify, as a first text about Amo the person, rather than a text simply reporting this or that newsworthy moment in Amo's life, the entry by Johann Heinrich Zedler in the *Grosses Universallexicon* of 1751. It reads, in its entirety:

Amo (Anton Wilhelm), a baptized Moor, originally from Guinea in Africa. His Highness the Elector of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, at his own expense, sent Amo to study philosophy and law for some years at Halle. In the year 1729, in the month of November, he defended a dissertation in law, with the Chancellor von Ludwig presiding, entitled *De jure Maurorum in Europa*, or on the law of Moors. In this work he showed from laws and histories that the kings of the Moors were enfeoffed under the Roman Emperor, and that each of them had to obtain a royal patent, which Justinian also issued. After this, he investigates how far the freedom or servitude of baptized Moors in Europe extends according to the usual laws (see Ludwig's *Universal-Historie*, Part 5, p. 251). From this he obtained the Master's degree, and for some time gave private lessons in Halle (see Dreyhaupt's *Beschreibung des Saalkreises*, Part II, p. 28). He must however have subsequently visited the University of Wittenberg, since we possess from him a *Disputationem philosophicam, continenter ideam distinctam eorum, quae competunt vel menti vel corpori nostro vivo & organico*, which he publicly
defended as *praeses* in Wittenberg on 29 May, 1734. In this dissertation he refers several times to another dissertation he defended, the *Dissertatio de humana [sic] mentis apatheia*.\(^{56}\)

This is, so to speak, the *Urtext* of Amo scholarship, with subsequent early sources building off of it, filling it out, or spinning out variations. An interesting text of 1755 by Johann Christoph von Dreyhaupt (who had already written about Amo, as Zedler notes above), places Amo's career at Halle within the context of that university's openness to members of ethnic and religious minority groups. Dreyhaupt writes that

a baptised Moor by the name of Anton Wilhlm Amo, whose fees had been paid for some years by His Majesty the Elector of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, was permitted to study philosophy and law here; in November, 1729, under the presidency of Chancellor von Ludewig, he defended a legal dissertation *de jure Maurorum in Europa*, subsequently being promoted to the degree of Magister Philosophiae, and for some time afterwards gave private lessons. Not to mention that various native-born and foreigners of the Jewish nation studied medicine here and were promoted to the degree of doctor, among whom were found some particularly talented and learned subjects.\(^{57}\)

Dreyhaupt's purpose here is evidently little more than to catalog the various exotic specimens that the exceptional intellectual climate of Halle had attracted. On the same page he goes on to mention a certain Indian named Soltan Gün Achmet from Ahmedabad, and an Arab of Damascus named Salomon Negri, who had both come to Halle as well.


\(^{57}\) Johann Christoph von Dreyhaupt, *Pagus Neletici et Nudzici oder Ausführliche diplomatisch-historische Beschreibung*, II. Teil, Halle, 1755, 28; DAB 296.
What we have been calling the travel report of Henri-David Gallandat is in fact a summary, published in Dutch in 1782 by Isaac Winkelman,\(^{58}\) of a report that was transmitted to him, likely by Gallandat himself, of a meeting between Gallandat and Amo in the early 1750s. Gallandat, Amo’s last known interlocutor, may also have been the last to give a straightforward account of Amo’s intellectual undertakings. Practically all we learn from him is that after his return to the city of Axim, in his home country, the philosopher “lived as a hermit, and was reputed to be a soothsayer. He spoke various languages—Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, High and Low German, was very learned in astrology and astronomy, and was a great philosopher.”\(^{59}\) This description suggests, as already discussed above, that Amo had taken up a social role in his late life in Africa that was in some respects analogous to that of a philosopher in Europe. It also suggests that he had acquired or re-acquired the Nzema language to which he would have been exposed in early childhood, as he would not have been able to gain the reputation ascribed to him without the ability to communicate with local people. It may be, also, that Gallandat is simply recording, and perhaps partially misunderstanding, Amo’s account to him of his earlier career in Germany.

The report published by Winkelman is followed five years later by a fairly substantial treatment of Amo's life and legacy from the influential physical anthropologist and philosopher Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, the author of one of the earliest works on racial classification, *On the Innate Variety of the Human Species* of 1775. In his 1787 article 'On Negroes' in the *Magazine for the Latest from Physics and Natural History*, Blumenbach reports that Amo "had proven himself advantageously in both his writings and as a docent, and afterwards came to Berlin as council to the Royal Prussian Court [königl. preuss. Hofrath]."\(^{60}\) This is the earliest known reference to Amo's time in Berlin. It is hoped that research in the Prussian archives might turn up more evidence. If he was in fact active in high-level court politics, it is impossible that he should have left no trace there. But it seems to us more likely, in the absence of any new discoveries, that Blumenbach is simply mistaken. His claim will subsequently be echoed, on occasion, by other commentators, including the


\(^{59}\) Winkelman, 19-20.

abolitionist Henri Grégoire and, later, William E. Abraham, though evidently on the basis of nothing more than what Blumenbach himself says.

Grégoire writes, in his 1808 work *On the Literature of Negroes*, the longest description to date of Amo’s work, and it is highly admirable. But it is almost entirely a pastiche of earlier sources, including those of Gallandat and Blumenbach. Grégoire does however give some indication of having read at least the *Impassivity*, and he summarizes Amo’s philosophical project there with extreme concision, as follows: Amo, he writes, “seeks to establish the differences of phenomena between beings that exist without life, and those that have life. A stone exists, but is not alive.”61 We will return shortly to look somewhat more sustainedly at Amo’s analysis of the difference between a stone and a living being; what is important to note at this point is that Grégoire’s principal purpose is simply to testify that Amo lived and wrote, and therefore that the claims of so many of his contemporaries, that no one of African heritage had ever made any noteworthy intellectual accomplishments, was patently false.62

There are scattered mentions of Amo over the following century. Beginning in the early 20th century, a conscious effort begins, particularly in the Anglophone world, to cultivate a distinct tradition of philosophy as practiced by members of the African diaspora, in which the particular historical legacy of this diaspora is expressed and examined. Earlier figures, who did not and could not have identified with such a tradition, are retroactively conscripted. Thus W. E. B. DuBois makes passing mention of Amo in his 1939 work *Black Folk, Then and

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62 Infamously, in 1753 or the year after David Hume made the following addition to his 1748 essay, “Of National Character”: “Not to mention our colonies, there are Negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity, tho' low people, without education, will start up amonst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.”
Now: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race. And the same year Amo is mentioned in a summary article in the Negro History Bulletin entitled "Negroes in the Field of Philosophy." In 1955 the eminent African-American scholar Charles Leander Hill publishes a careful study of the Impassivity along with a fairly thorough biographical survey of Amo's life. For unclear reasons, he publishes the article under the title "William Ladd, The Black Philosopher from Guinea." There is no subsequent mention of anyone named William Ladd in the article; from the very beginning Hill speaks only of Amo.

There will be a marked shift in writing on Amo over the course of the mid-20th century: from someone who is, so to speak, mentioned, to someone who is used: conscripted as an early representative of diverse intellectual traditions of importance to the authors invoking Amo’s name, not least Marxism, African nationalism, and various hybrids of these. An illustrative example of such an approach can be found in the work of Kwame Nkrumah, the Ghanaian political leader and African nationalist thinker, who published his influential work, Consciencism in 1964 in an attempt to fuse the core doctrines of Marxist-Leninist philosophy with what he saw as some of the basic elements of traditional African thought.

Unsurprisingly, Nkrumah goes to some lengths to refute philosophical idealism, “the self-devouring cormorant of philosophy.” He distinguishes between two varieties: one that is based in some theory or other of perception, a variety he associates with Berkeley and Leibniz; and one that is motivated by some degree of solipsism, which he associates with Descartes. Nkrumah sees the incipient solipsism contained in Descartes’s cogito argument as

66 As Nkrumah explains, “philosophical consciencism… will give the theoretical basis for an ideology whose aim shall be to contain the African experience of Islamic and Euro-Christian presence as well as the experience of the traditional African society, and, by gestation, employ them for the harmonious growth and development of that society.” See Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution, second edition, New York: Monthly Review, 1970, 70.
67 Nkrumah, Consciencism, 18.
based on the fallacy of supposing that, insofar as one can imagine oneself without any bodily 
member in particular, one can therefore imagine oneself as entirely non-bodily, and therefore 
as essentially a thinking thing. Nkrumah appears to believe that Amo, by contrast, rejected the 
Cartesian account of the mind in favour of a view according to which the mind, in order to 
accommodate ideas of extended things, must itself be extended, which is to say it must be 
physically located within at least a portion of the body:

The eighteenth-century African philosopher from Ghana, Anthony William Amo, who 
taught in the German Universities of Halle, Jena and Wittenberg, pointed out in his *De 
Humanae Mentis Apatheia* that idealism was enmeshed in contradictions. The mind, 
he says, was conceived by idealism as a pure, active, unextended substance. Ideas, the 
alleged constituents of physical objects, were held to be only in the mind, and to be 
incapable of existence outside it. Amo's question here was how the ideas, largely those 
of physical objects, many of which were ideas of extension, could subsist in the mind; 
since physical objects were actually extended, if they were really ideas, some ideas 
must be actually extended. And if all ideas must be in the mind, it became hard to 
resist the conclusion that the mind itself was extended, in order to be a spatial 
receptacle for its extended ideas.68

Subsequently, Nkrumah attributes to Descartes the view that, when the body is harmed, the 
‘pain’ that the mind feels can only ever be accounted for as an intellectual cognizance, and 
subsequent mental distress, of the fully separate mind. Nkrumah sees Amo by contrast as 
having explicitly argued against this view in the *Impassivity*:

Descartes... tried to solve the mind-body problem by resorting to a kind of parallelism. 
He instituted parallel occurrences, and thus explained pain as that grief which the soul 
felt at the damage to its body. On this point, as on several others, Descartes was 
assailed by the critical acumen of the Ghanaian philosopher Anthony William Amo. 
According to Amo, all that the soul could do on Descartes' terms is to take cognizance 
of the fact that there is a hole in its body or a contusion on it, and unless knowledge is 
itself painful, the mind could not be said to grieve thereat.”69

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69 Nkrumah, *Consciencism*, 87.
Nkrumah has, then, attributed to Amo two anti-Cartesian views: first, that the mind must be extended in order to accommodate ideas of extended things; and, second, that the mind must somehow be more integrated with the body than Descartes is able to admit, in order for it to properly be said to feel pain when the body is injured, rather than simply to take cognizance of the injury.\(^70\)

Amo cites or discusses Descartes on five distinct occasions in the *Impassivity*. The first occurrence is for corroboration of his own view that the soul cannot undergo passion through contact, since whatever touches or is touched is a body.\(^71\) The second occurrence also invokes Descartes approvingly, in order to draw a distinction between the way ideas are formed in the mind of God and of other thinking substances that lack a “very tight bond and commerce with the body.” Amo denies here that there could be any representation in God’s mind, “since

\(^{70}\) William E. Abraham, like Nkrumah, sees Amo's *Apatheia* as principally a critique of Cartesian dualism, and he confirms Nkrumah’s account of Amo’s criticism of Descartes on the experience of pain. "Amo claimed confusion," Abraham writes, "in Descartes' presentation of the thesis that it was the function of an organ to receive sensible forms (e.g. by feeling) while to judge forms when received (e.g. by taking cognizance of what is felt) was the function of the mind. Yet taking cognizance of bodily pain or contact should not require the mind itself to feel pain or contact, or sense anything at all. A faculty of sense is not an apposite feature of minds. Hence, Amo denied that the mind could feel, urging that sense organs were only a medium, but not an instrument, in a theoretical conception of the occurrence of sensing. In this theory, without sense organs, there would be no sensing; and the entity with the faculty of sense should be the entity comprising living organs, namely the body."


representation supposes the absence of the thing to be represented.” Instead, God’s non-sensory thoughts about created substances are ones, presumably, that concern the concept of these substances directly, as fully present to God’s mind. The third occurrence appears to be an invocation of Descartes, again, in order to clarify the notion of ‘internal senses’, defining these as “passions or affections of the soul.” However, subsequently Amo will set up the difference between his own view and Descartes’s precisely on this point: he denies that there can be passions of the soul at all, since all sensation occurs only in “the living and organic body.” Amo cites an important letter to Princess Elisabeth, in which Descartes explains that “there are two things in the human soul on which all the cognition 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.” Here Amo states his opposition starkly: “In reply to these words we caution and dissent: we concede that the mind acts together with the body by the mediation of a mutual union. But we deny that it suffers together with the body.” In his final reference to Descartes, Amo again criticizes him, not so much for holding the wrong view of whether or not the soul may experience passions, but rather for contradicting himself on this matter: by his own lights, Amo thinks, Descartes is in truth compelled to share Amo’s own view that the soul, to the extent that it is defined as a thinking thing, cannot undergo passions, since “thinking is an action of the mind, not a passion.”

In sum, Amo does indeed criticize Descartes in the Impassivity, but not at all for the reasons Nkrumah and others have held. Amo does not criticize Descartes for conceiving the mind as excessively distinct from the body, but rather as not nearly distinct enough. Far from rejecting Cartesian dualism, on the contrary Amo offers a radicalized version of it. For him, all sensation is ‘suffering’ in living beings, which is to say undergoing passion. But if the mind can do nothing but think, then it follows that it can undergo no passions at all. It follows, in turn, that the sensation of pain is something that occurs entirely within the body, while if the mind is involved at all this will be through a simple cognizance of the pain the body is feeling. In other words, the objection that Nkrumah believes Amo is levelling against Descartes, that the mind cannot feel pain, is one that could more rightly be raised against Amo himself.

By far the greatest single contribution to Amo scholarship in the 20th century was made by

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the East German scholar Burchard Brentjes, who spent most of his career as an Arabist, and was implicated politically in organisations dedicated to boosting solidarity and fraternity between Eastern Bloc countries and the Arab world. Brentjes was also a close friend of Nkrumah's, and hosted him personally on visits to East Berlin in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1968 Brentjes, together with a team of East German scholars based at Halle, publishes an exhaustively complete collection of direct reproductions of the original published works of Amo, together with reproductions of all published and handwritten sources relating to his life and work. This remains the principal source for Amo research today. That same year Brentjes causes to be published an English edition of Amo's works, which is accurate enough but which lacks a critical apparatus, and sometimes also lacks sensitivity to the philosophical meaning of the terms and concepts Amo deploys.\textsuperscript{73} A French edition would follow in 1976, which shares in the same strengths and weaknesses as the English.\textsuperscript{74}

That same year, Brentjes would publish his own monographic study, \textit{Anton Wilhelm Amo: der schwarze Philosoph in Halle}.\textsuperscript{75} This is a useful guide to Amo's life and work, and it draws on Brentjes's own extensive knowledge of the archival sources. It is also fairly laden with Marxist-Leninist ideology that does not help us to get any closer to our subject, and tends often to zoom out to wide-focused considerations of the historical and economic dynamics of the African slave trade. Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of Brentjes's study comes from the field work that he carried out during the time he himself spent in Ghana in the early 1970s. In this connection he interviewed people from Axim who believed themselves to be descendants of Amo's family (in particular, of his sister, since Amo himself had no children), and who had preserved memories of Amo's life in that region through oral transmission. This sort of participant-observation in oral cultures, Brentjes understood, can be a part of research in the history of philosophy, and indeed must be, when this history is understood to include traditions, such as those that embody African philosophy, with different institutions and

\textsuperscript{73} Anton Wilhelm Amo, \textit{Antonius Guilielmus Amo: Translation of His Works}, English translation Dortothea Siegmund-Schultze, Halle, 1968.

\textsuperscript{74} Antoine Guillaume Amo, \textit{Oeuvres d'Antoine Guillaume Amo}, French translation Ulrich Ricken and Auguste Cornu, Halle, 1976.

mechanisms of transmission than those familiar in Europe.

There has been considerable debate over the past century as to what precisely constitutes a contribution to or an instance of African philosophy. On a certain definition, Amo’s work cannot be considered such a contribution, since he plainly had his intellectual formation within the context of the European intellectual tradition. Thus the Ghanaian scholar Kwame Gyekye writes:

The cultural or social basis (or relevance) of the philosophical enterprise seems to indicate that if a philosophy produced by a modern African has no basis in the culture and experience of African peoples, then it cannot appropriately claim to be an African philosophy, even though it was created by an African philosopher. Thus, the philosophical works of the eminent Ghanaian thinker Anton Wilhelm Amo, who distinguished himself by his philosophical acumen in Germany in the eighteenth century, cannot be regarded as African philosophy.\textsuperscript{76}

Other scholars, however, have with varying degrees of explicitness attempted to identify distinctively African contours. Thus Kwasi Wiredu represents Amo’s contribution to philosophy as principally a rejection and critique of Descartes’s dualistic ontology, arguing further that Amo’s strength lies in his points of disagreement with Descartes, and his weakness in his points of agreement. Cartesian dualism is “a conceptual inconsistency dear to much Western metaphysics,” while Amo’s critique of it, Wiredu speculates, may come from residual commitments that he absorbed from his early life surrounded by fellow members of the Akan culture. “May it not be,” Wiredu asks, “that some recess of Amo’s consciousness was impregnated by the concept of mind implicit in the language and thought of the Akans?” He continues:

\begin{quote}
[I]n the Akan conceptual framework, insofar as this can be determined from the Akan language and corpus of communal beliefs,\textsuperscript{77} the feeling of a sensation does not fall
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{77} Among the declarations in the influential resolution made by the Commission on Philosophy at the Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, held in Rome in 1959, is the
within the domain of the mental, if by ‘mental’ we mean ‘having to do with the mind’. Mind is intellectual not sensate. This is obvious even at the pre-analytical level of Akan discourse. The Akan word for mind is *adwene*, and I would be most surprised to meet an Akan who thinks one feels a sensation—a pain, for instance— with his or her *adwene*. No! You feel a pain with your *honam* (flesh), not with your *adwene*.

This is a very intriguing speculation, but what if a more proximate source of Amo’s particular philosophical commitments can be located? In fact, properly understood Amo’s position is not really a critique of Cartesian dualism at all. Rather, it is a critique of a philosophical position that was much very influential in the precise context in which Amo worked in the 1730s in Halle and Wittenberg: namely, the vitalism of Georg Ernst Stahl.

3. The Intellectual and Political Context at Halle and Wittenberg

An important physician and moralist philosopher associated with the school of German Pietists, Stahl had argued in works such as the *Theoria medica vera* of 1708 and the *Negotium otiosum* of 1720 that the soul is directly implicated in the states of the body, as an immediate cause and motor, so to speak, of bodily change.

Does this account, if correct, mean that Amo’s African identity played no role in the philosophical commitments he took up? By no means. In fact Amo’s anti-Stahlianism took shape within a very specific context in Halle, in which the liberal Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy took on a political significance in a sectarian battle against the conservative Stahlians and other Pietists. The somewhat unorthodox popularizer of G. W. Leibniz’s philosophy, Christian Wolff, had been ousted from his chair at the University of Halle in

idea “that the African philosopher must base his inquiries upon the fundamental certainty that the Western philosophic approach is not the only possible one; and therefore… that the African philosopher should learn from the traditions, tales, myths, and proverbs of his people, so as to draw from them the laws of a true African wisdom complementary to the other forms of human wisdom to bring out the specific categories of African thought.” Here, Wiredu is implementing this very approach.

1723, after which his adversary Joachim Lange imposed a version of Pietism as the dominant philosophical current at the university. However subterranean currents of Wolffianism endured at Halle, particularly among students. Amo, who arrived there four years after Wolff’s ouster, appears to have been one such student.

Amo’s particular version of dualism, as spelled out in his 1734 *Impassivity*, makes perfect sense if we see it as a *parti-pris* for the Leibnizian-Wolffian camp against the Stahlians. Moreover, Amo’s affiliation with this camp would have made particular sense for an African philosopher working in Germany in the early 18th century, in so far as it provides the resources for a properly egalitarian and anti-racist philosophical anthropology. We do not need to go back to the intellectual context of Akan culture in West Africa, and to oppose it to Western rationalist metaphysics, in order to make sense of Amo’s philosophy. It is enough to understand the much more local divisions between different philosophical positions to which Amo was exposed in the learned world of Lower Saxony.

It will be useful to consider this 1734 description of the intellectual landscape of the University of Halle from Nikolaus Hironymus Gundling, a renowned professor and legal theorist at that university:

> The medical men have ranged themselves into two sects these days, if we can speak in such terms. First there are the Mechanists, and second the Stahlians. Of them the former endeavour to maintain that the vital actions in the human body originate and for the most part act in health as in sickness mechanically, and by the use of the body’s physiology. They say even that the medicaments applied act in a mechanical way in the body; and hence that the soul contributes little or nothing to all this. To this, the Stahlians state the opposite view: namely that the human soul is the prime mover in the body, and that the body through its physiological structure is only a mobile instrument; also that the medicaments applied are only stimulants which prompt the soul to motion.”

This passage has been cited by other scholars, including Brentjes and Abraham, attempting to understand the intellectual background out of which Amo emerges. It is indeed very revealing, but the explanatory notes Gundling provides are perhaps more so. He observes that both sects, the Stahlians and the mechanists, admit of two further varieties: the ‘excessive’ and the ‘subtle’. The subtle thinkers on both sides refrain from attributing everything that happens in the body either to the bodily structure or to the soul alone. They take a ‘middle road’, holding both that “in a certain respect, the soul concurs, and necessarily also the body contributes a great deal. Among the mechanists the excessive thinkers by contrast wish to hear nothing at all about the soul, while the excessive Stahlians exclude even the concurrence of the mechanical structure in vital actions from their explanations of at least human physiological processes and motions. Gundling says that the more reasonable of the Stahlians would not exclude the mechanical structure of the body from ordinary physiological explanation, though in the case of pathology they are inclined to look to the ‘passions of the soul’ in order to account, for example, for the etiology of fevers—thus to the very thing Amo’s *Impassivity* is dedicated to denying.

Finally, in the note Gundling remarks that while mechanical medicine has its greatest following in Holland, while in German the school centers around the work of Friedrich Hoffmann, “a father of hundreds of reasonable and, for the most part, famous physicians, not only in Germany, but also in other places.” One of these physicians, as already discussed above, is Amo’s close friend Moses Abraham Wolff, whose medical dissertation was supervised by Hoffmann, and to which Amo himself appended a dedicatory poem. This triangulated encounter shows that Amo and Hoffmann were not only contemporaries at Halle, but indeed that they were part of the same circles and supported the same sort of work among students at Halle—Wolff, for example, took philosophy courses from Amo alongside his course of medical study with Hoffmann.

Hoffmann and Leibniz both published treatises arguing for the causal autonomy of created substances at nearly the same time, and evidently as a result of their attention to a recent controversy on this topic between Günther Christoph Schelhammer and Johann Christoph Sturm. Leibniz’s reflections issued in the famous *De ipsa natura* of 1698, while the young Halle physician and mechanist’s view was developed in his 1699 work, the *De natura morborum medicatrice mechanica*. Thus from early on, Leibniz and Hoffmann agree, to cite François Duchesneau, that the mechanical structure is “the deep source of causal
determinations in organic bodies, as well as the requisite without which one could not imagine the unfolding of the vital functions within a natural, complex mechanism” (155).

Leibniz expresses broad agreement with Hoffmann in a letter of September 17, 1699, but also presses Hoffmann to discern whether he might agree that there are metaphysical principles, monads, that in the end may be said to ground the mechanism of the body.

This question goes far beyond the scope of Hoffmann’s concerns, but it perhaps helps to define Leibniz’s role, or indeed his absence, in physiological and medical debates in Halle, Wittenberg, and elsewhere, throughout the first half of the 18th century. He was indeed known, and his name was broadly associated with the anti-Stahlian camp. But a figure such as Hoffmann, or indeed Amo, would nonetheless not consider it necessary to invoke the name of Leibniz in order to establish his own position against the broadly Stahlian view of the mind-body relation. This is because Leibniz’s own concerns, already dating back to his interaction with Hoffmann, went well beyond what the physiologists saw it as their purview to discuss. Leibniz defended the broadly mechanical account of the functioning of the living body, and saw it as crucial to argue that all vital functions can be accounted for in terms of the structure of the animal body alone. But Leibniz goes well beyond this point of agreement with Hoffmann and others by arguing that the structure must be understood as a literally infinitely complex system of natural machines within natural machines, without end, and that this infinite structure in turn be seen as the bodily or phenomenal result of the perceptual activity of immaterial monads.80 In any case the important thing to note here is that well before Leibniz enters into controversy with Stahl, after reading the latter’s 1708 work, the *Theoria medica vera*, he has already had extensive contact with a Halle physician who was an opponent of Stahl and would later be a supporter of Amo, and he has already more or less expressed support for this anti-Stahlian’s mechanist program in medicine and physiology.

The controversy that begins in 1709 between Leibniz and Stahl centers around the basic question of the role of the soul in the body, in general, but also particularly in pathological processes, in fetal development, and in other phenomena of particular interest to the physician.

[…] Vital motions are directed and executed by the soul’s action alone: they are truly organic acts instituted by a superior active cause in the corporeal instruments in order to produce certain effects, not only generically determined and specifically necessary, but in a most special way, particularly and subtly proportioned to fit the requirements flowing from the various time circumstances and accidental external causes.81

Why does Amo not mention Stahl or Hoffmann, either in the Impassivity or in the Meiner dissertation, if in fact it is his purpose to take up a side in the opposition between these two figures? It is important here to note that while his intellectual ties to Halle appear to have remained strong, from September, 1730, Amo would be officially matriculated at the University of Wittenberg, and it is there also that he would eventually defend his own dissertation in April, 1734. It is likely that he had been pressured out of Halle by at least a temporary rise in the influence of the conservative faction there, and in this connection it would have been inadvisable to position himself in his dissertation by reference, either positive or negative, to any works published by Halle professors. Of the twelve authors cited in the Impassivity, eight of them are more or less contemporary German thinkers. Of these eight, three are affiliated with the University of Wittenberg, where the dissertation is defended: Johann Gottfried von Berger, who published his Physiologia medica sive de natura humana in Wittenberg in 1702; Christian Vater, who published his Physiologia experimentalis there in 1712; and Gottfried Loescher, the author of the 1728 Physica theoretica et experimentalis compendiosa, who was also the president of Amo’s dissertation defense. In 1723, Loescher had published a massive work of experimental philosophy, outlining various experiments with air pumps, hydrometers, barometers, and other devices, and extensively citing Hooke, Boyle, Huygens, and other such renowned figures of the new, mechanically oriented applied natural philosophy.82

81 Ibid., I, Brevis repetitio, §18, 428-429.
82 See Martin Gotthelf Loescher, Academische Arbet in physischen, chymischen und anatomischen Wissenschaften, Wittenberg : Gerdesiche Witw., 1723.
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