

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE



*African metaphysics: Recovery
towards an alternative modernity?*

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modernity?

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is the product of my independent research carried out under the guidance of my supervisors. The thesis has not been submitted or presented, either in whole or in part, for the award of any degree in any university or institutional of learning. I further declare that all anti-plagiarism rules have been complied with and sources consulted or referred to have been duly acknowledged as appropriate.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Lindani Gobingca', written on a light gray background.

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Abstract

In this thesis, it is argued that the age of modernity, which was initially a Western development, has not only found its way to the global stage and reached its climax, but that there now exists a dire need for an alternative conception of *being-in-the-world*. As such, it is proposed that traditional African thought, particularly as found in pre-colonial metaphysics, can contribute to the contemporary idea of alternative modernities. Other themes discussed include the decline of metaphysics in Western thought, the effects of colonialism on African thought, and the general disenchantment of the world.

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INTRODUCTION

As its starting point, this dissertation reasserts the notion that the Western model of modern metaphysics¹ is in a state of disenchantment² due to the rise and eventual dominance of the scientific outlook which permeates modern thought. As such, there is a need to rediscover other conceptions outside the West which can contribute to the contemporary debate of an alternative modernity, less scientific and more intuitive³. With this in mind, this dissertation is one of such conceptions. It draws from traditional⁴ African Philosophy, to offer alternative metaphysical framework which can contribute to the contemporary debate on an alternative modernity. Since metaphysics is an expansive branch of philosophy, this dissertation is limited to the three categories most characteristic of philosophical speculation, namely, ontology⁵, cosmology⁶ and time⁷. Within the continent, reconstructions from various philosophical traditions such as Ancient Egyptian

¹ While a systematic definition of metaphysics will be provided in Chapter Two and Three, at this point, the concept can be thought of as denoting bodies of knowledge that are abstract and non-physical which are deduced from the presumed existence of entities beyond human sense cognition. While the modern tendency (discussed Chapter Two) is to dismiss these bodies of knowledge as mere speculation, the intention of this writing is to illustrate their function in giving human beings meaning as they interact with the real world. Without the metaphysical, it is argued throughout this writing that humans live a meaningless existence.

² In philosophy, Friedrich Schiller used the term to denote the tendency of modern rationalism to separate or dissect the parts from the whole and as such, lose the broader, more embodied view of things. Contrasting the Ancients with the Moderns, Schiller wrote, “however high Reason might soar (in Greek speculation) it always drew its subject matter lovingly after it, and however fine and sharp the divisions it made, it never mutilated”. (Schiller in Angus, 1983:141) For Max Weber, modern rationalism created an “iron cage” to which humankind is trapped in by the endless conceptions of modern rationalism.

³ Intuition is a cognitive role of human consciousness which as defined by Carl Jung, “is the function of unconscious perception which transmits images or perceptions of relations between things.” (Jung in Routledge 2016:339) Since intuition functions mostly unconsciously, its features become increasingly difficult to grasp. However, in everyday life, the intuitive of things are much clearer (Jung in Routledge 2016:339). These include looking at the world as a myriad of possibilities, looking at things from a broad perspective, picking up the world implicitly and interacting with it as such.

⁴ Tradition, throughout this dissertation, is used to denote the historical period before the systematic intrusion of what has come to be referred to as the ‘modern West’.

⁵ philosophical cosmology is a branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of the universe, a theory or doctrine describing the natural order of the universe (Cahn 2012:40).

⁶ Cosmology is a branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of the universe, a theory or doctrine describing the natural order of the universe (Cahn 2012:40).

⁷ Defined in greater detail in Chapter Three.

civilisations, the Luba people of North Africa, the Basotho and Xhosa tribes of Southern Africa are used to formulate an alternative.

The hypothesis of this dissertation is based on the idea that modernity,⁸ as we have come to know it, is in crisis. While conclusions vary as to what the crisis is, there is a common consensus that a crisis does exist. The two most common narratives relating to this predicament run as follows:

1. The crisis of Western philosophy, a collection of assertions which argue that the empirical outlook which found its highest expression in the Age of Enlightenment and by its epistemological implications,⁹ resulted historically in a singular way of viewing reality. This reality, which generally tends to either reject or maintain a skeptical stance to other world views, has resulted in a modern world without *soul*, an ontological outlook of immediate reality which is based on observable facts. Platonism, Idealism, Christian Theology, Romanticism and Critical Theory are among the most important schools to have stood against or critiqued the empirical outlook – in the case of Platonism, particularly the naturalism of the Aristotelians. Both terms (empiricism and naturalism) will be used interchangeably throughout this dissertation. It is this discussion that this dissertation will expand upon and develop.
2. The crisis of the Western political hegemony on global affairs is the second major narrative often followed. This argument, which is not discussed in this dissertation, is generally based on the fear that other “superpowers” which are not Western are a potential threat to global peace and democracy and must be observed, if not pacified, in the pursuit of freedom and human rights.

Having identified the narrative in question (point 1), this dissertation further argues that such a crisis is also a predicament of the entire world due to the lingering effects of modern Western colonialism. This work thus also extends its critique to include the Enlightenment itself, of which its “high ideals” which defined its era and, by extension the

⁸ I.e. The modern age of the 20th and 21st century.

⁹ This relates to empirical and scientific knowledge of the senses as primary in the process of information gathering.

age of modernity, did not bring about the desired results – or at least, could not have predicted its devastating consequences. For example, the Enlightenment prided itself on rationality, and humankind's innate tendency to draw upon a universal sense of reason to dictate and determine actions. However, the inhumane treatment of workers during the Industrial Revolution (and beyond) and the re-emergence of colonialism under the imperial guise along with the drive for profit at the expense of peoples of colour would come to undermine the Modern Age. Additionally, and central to this dissertation's theme, is the growth of naturalism, which does not necessarily singularly characterise the modern age, but the effects of which have been at the expense of the metaphysical and the transcendental in humankind. Another hypothesis of this dissertation is the notion that the philosophical system held by a people moreover informs their way of life and vice versa. Philosophy as it will be discussed throughout this work does not refer to an academic discipline which is removed from everyday people. Rather, philosophy will refer to the abstract principles which further shape and characterise a people. It is for this reason that ethnophilosophy is so important to this dissertation.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation is an investigation into which aspects of metaphysics have been discarded by modernity and where in traditional African thought similar metaphysical principles could be reconstructed and applied within the modern age on the continent. This is to show how contemporary metaphysical engagements could grow – and have grown – out of questions by and in the language of Africans themselves, as opposed to being imported from an external place.

Two primary contentions to such an approach are likely. The first is among those who have reservations regarding the possibility of constructing a systematic framework of thought from 'ethnophilosophical'¹⁰ beliefs among pre-modern people. In this regard, Beninese scholar Paulin Hountondji is the most prominent philosopher to have written on the subject. Critics of ethnophilosophy are mostly opposed to the method of

¹⁰ "Ethnophilosophy is the study of indigenous philosophical systems. The implicit concept is that a specific culture can have a philosophy that is not applicable and accessible to all peoples and cultures in the world." (Imbo 1998:9)

excavationism,¹¹ which denotes the retrieval and reconstruction of “lost African identities from the raw materials of African cultures”. (Chimakonam, 2020:n.p.)

The second contention to such a study can be found among the defenders of the Enlightenment and, by extension, the Modern Age. Accordingly:

The development from Aquinas through Locke and Newton represents more than four hundred years of stumbling, tortuous, prodigious effort to secularize the Western mind, i.e., to liberate man from the medieval shackles. It was the build-up toward a climax: the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment. For the first time in modern history, an authentic respect for reason became the mark of an entire culture; the trend that had been implicit in the centuries-long crusade of a handful of innovators now swept the West explicitly, reaching and inspiring educated men in every field. Reason, for so long the wave of the future, had become the animating force of the present. (Peikoff, 1982:100)

For such thinkers (such as Leonard Peikoff, Ayn Rand, Stephen Hicks, Steven Pinker, Roger Scruton and Thomas Sowell), the Enlightenment was a pivotal stage in what was considered the progressive development of humankind. They, by implication, possess a view of time and progress that is linear and thus cast a sceptical eye to the past as having inherent value for the present / future. While of course opinions vary, to such thinkers, a project such as this fails to realise that in comparison to any age that came before, the Enlightenment is by far the most advanced and progressive for humankind. While there is no denying the problems of modernity (specifically in terms of the disenchantment or ‘de-magic-ing’ of the world), there is also no denying the gifts (specifically relating to the sciences) of modernity. As such, arguments from most of these thinkers tend to focus on the “marvels of biology and modern medicine” or the ease in waste management and the efficiency of sewage systems in comparison to pre-modern times. For example, a recent case is that of Steven Pinker’s 2011 book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, in which he

¹¹ This is a derivative of the word and verb ‘excavation’, relating to the process of retrieving something lost or forgotten.

argues that the decrease in violence over the last three centuries can be traced back to the Enlightenment's argument for human rights.

As such, it is true that the Enlightenment has been beneficial to the development of the lifespan of humankind, particularly within the physical sciences. As for the metaphysical, however, or that which is not grounded on the empirical, modernity has not been particularly kind to humankind. It is for this reason, and in keeping with the above-discussed dialectical approach to modernity, that this dissertation takes as a point of focus the metaphysical as offering an alternative to modernity.

This research subsequently will offer a uniquely African philosophical perspective to the conversation regarding an alternative modernity in the 21st century. In the wake of the above-discussed "crisis of the West" and the post-colonial concern for an African normative foundation, this dissertation aims to contribute to the field of metaphysics by recovering pre-colonial assertions in metaphysics within Africa in an attempt to argue that modernity did not after all offer much progress with regards to the concept of the subject. As a result, this work is original to philosophy from an African perspective and will contribute to the broader global discussion of metaphysics which is similarly in conversation with other parts of the world.

Furthermore, this research is worth pursuing as the conversation regarding a normative basis in the wake of the subjectivist positions¹² that arose in the 20th and 21st centuries has created a space where further perspectives, other than the predominant Western paradigm, can contribute to a global philosophical discussion on the notion of what it means to *be* in the world. Beyond being merely a perspective, the outcomes of this research could enrich the theoretical field of philosophy within Africa: the practical outcomes that could arise from this study include widening the conceptual framework for the metaphysical categories discussed (namely time, being, and existence). From these, a further conception of the subject / human nature could be broadened by those who wish to take the conversation further.

¹² Generally argued to be the logical extreme of the epistemological start point that the subject or individual creates reality. As such many realities exist, hence the term relativism. See also Hicks (2001) who attributes this view point to postmodernism.

In order to achieve the above outcome, this investigation will in the first place open a discussion on the debates regarding the state of African philosophy, both as historical phenomenon and the field in its contemporary state. The purpose of this first section will be to acknowledge both the scepticism and optimism surrounding the field of African philosophy. A major text that I will draw from is Paulin Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy in *African Philosophy: Myth and Reason* (Hountondji 1982).

This section will also explore the ideas which have steered the African-based anti- and post-colonial field forward, for example, theories by Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko regarding a normative basis of consciousness for African thought. As such, it will be argued that consciousness is a normative foundation that continues the counter-enlightenment project which rejected the previously dominant Western modernist view of knowledge as purely objective and external to the thinking and perceiving subject (person).

The Second Chapter will explore the history of Western metaphysics, its rise and eventual decline with the prominence of naturalism and the modern age. In this Chapter, a historical reconstruction of the entire history of Western metaphysics is done so as to discover themes which extend themselves to the colonial project as well. Implicit in this Chapter is the idea that, the West by its own history lost its metaphysics; in more poetic terms, it lost its soul. Chapter Two is also the most narratively written among the Chapters. As such, readers may find the move from Chapters Two to Three and Four somewhat jarring in tone. Chapter Three is primarily descriptive, the intention here is to reconstruct within the African context, the metaphysics which have been lost within the West. At that point in the writing, the narrative of the West is carried over to Africa in search of an alternative modernity. Here a recovery of the metaphysical categories (ontology, cosmology and time) found during pre-colonial Africa are reconstructed. It is important to note that because of the relatively recent nature of (sub-Saharan) African Philosophy being written down, deconstructed, debated, and rewritten, the texts drawn from are considered – at least for now – the major texts of the canon of African Philosophy. There are constant conversations taking place around engagement with these texts about their

value, relevance and even accuracy as they relate to both pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa.

Finally, in the Fourth Chapter, suggestions will be made as to how these African definitions of metaphysical categories could further expand the conversation around an alternative modernity. The contribution to reconceptualising the concept of *Ubuntu* in contemporary Southern Africa by Magobe Ramose is discussed as an example of an alternative modern metaphysics which still draws from its traditional roots. Furthermore, in what may be criticised as a modernist approach to a modern problem, the work of neuropsychologist and philosopher Ian McGilchrist will be briefly alluded to as furthering the need to reimagine a metaphysical, together with a materialist, way of *being* in the world today.

Based upon the above, the overriding hypothesis guiding this investigation will be to offer a uniquely African perspective of metaphysics to the conversation around an alternative modernity.

CHAPTER ONE: THE STATE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

In this chapter, the broad field of the so-called continental¹³ African philosophy, both as a social phenomenon and a field of study, will be contextualised. With regards to the former (the social), Chapter One illustrates the important role modern European imperialism has played in the development of contemporary African thought systems. Following from this, the latter sections of the chapter include discussions on the contemporary state of African philosophy in the wake of the aforementioned imperialism.

In the framework of this dissertation, Chapter One thus provides a conceptual reference point for issues discussed in later chapters. Furthermore, this chapter should be considered as providing a definition of terms to which the entire study will continually refer.

¹³ 'Continental' philosophy refers here to philosophy as speculative, inferential and rationalist as opposed to the 'analytic' tradition which is closer to the natural sciences and thus favours a more empirical approach, relying largely on logic to develop argumentation. This dissertation falls within the continental tradition.

Since this is a philosophical study, simply defining terms does not suffice, but rather, discussing concepts does. As such, Section One of this chapter contains a brief discussion on the effect modern European colonialism has had on the continent, while Section Two discusses the state of African thought systems in the wake of colonialism.

1.1. Colonialism and Africa

As mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation follows, as one of its premises, the notion that philosophy is not divorced from socio-historical changes. As such, the developments in African thought systems and the imposition of modern European colonialism are important to briefly discuss. The form of colonialism referred to here is the one Wolfgang Reinhard refers to “as a history of ideas which constitute a developmental differential and is politically more judgmental and emotionally charged.” (Reinhard, 2008:23) As such, colonisation, concerning to this section’s context, refers to the modern state of global colonialism, or imperialism which “began in the 15th century with the Age of Discovery, led by Portuguese and Spanish explorations.” (Stuchtey, 2011:7)

Beyond simply discovering new worlds, modern Europe embarked on “a civilising mission as a secular programme intended for colonial development.” (Stuchtey, 2011:7) The motivating forces behind colonialism were varied; according to Korman’s *The Right of Conquest* (1996), including “capitalists striving for profit, the colonies as valves for overpopulation, the spirit of exploration and scientific interests which would later be used for socio-Darwinistic racialism.” (Korman, 1996:90) Furthermore, in the book, *The Lords of Humankind: European Attitudes to Other Cultures in the Imperial Age*, Kiernan points out on how “colonialism was by no means a one-dimensional affair with a simply European orientation and European discoverers.” (Kiernan, 1996:93)

Instead, he shows “[c]olonialism should be understood as a dynamic interaction in the context of which the colonial empires and the individual colonies massively influenced the historical development of each other.” (Kiernan, 1996:93) This is a dynamic which the influential modern German social philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1807) best captured in what has become known as the *Master-slave* or *Lord-bondsman* dialectic.¹⁴ As an example of

¹⁴ In Frantz Fanon’s final chapter of *Black Skins, White Masks*, titled “The Negro and Recognition”, Fanon provides

this, in his 1933 book, *The Masters and the Slaves*, Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre argued that “peacefully intermingling cultures without racism and colonial massacres in Brazil was proof of the importance of colonial paternalism and thus a successful relationship between masters and slaves.” (Freyre, 1933:41) Kiernan concurs:

The Dutch, English, Portuguese, Spanish, French and Russian colonial enterprises, which each surveyed the world in its own manner with soldiers, scientists, merchants and missionaries, all shared the common perception of the *other* on the basis of the presumed cultural superiority of the *self*. (Kiernan, 1995: 35; own emphasis)

By the turn of the 16th century, however, the mother colonies of Europe became less interested in spreading Christianity and more intent on civilizing the world through the spread of scientific rationality: “A broad European public for the first time participated politically, economically and culturally in the process of colonial expansion.” (Schnee, 2011:30) This, in turn, resulted in a major change regarding the role of native populations, where “it only made sense to allow more and more natives to actively participate and hold roles in government offices to boost economic efficiency.” (Schnee, 2011:33) It is here

an interpretation of Hegel’s Lord-bondsman dialectic by drawing from Alexandre Kojève’s famous lectures on Hegel’s work. Fanon draws from Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Mind*: “Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized.” (Hegel in Fanon, 2008:168) Fanon uses this concept of self-consciousness towards recognition as the basis of his interpretation of the dialectic, especially as it played out in the colonial context, as can be extracted from this lengthy quote:

“Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed. There is not an open conflict between white and black. One day the White Master, *without conflict*, recognized the Negro slave. But the former slave wants to *make himself recognized*. At the foundation of Hegelian dialectic there is an absolute reciprocity which must be emphasized. It is in the degree to which I go beyond my own immediate being that I apprehend the existence of the other as a natural and more than natural reality. If I close the circuit, if I prevent the accomplishment of movement in two directions, I keep the other within himself. Ultimately, I deprive him even of this being-for-itself. The only means of breaking this vicious circle that throws me back on myself is to restore to the other, through mediation and recognition, his human reality, which is different from natural reality. The other has to perform the same operation. ‘Action from one side only would be useless, because what is to happen can only be brought about by means of both...’; *‘they recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other.’*” (Fanon, 2008:168-169; author’s emphasis)

that the earliest seeds of African cultural genocide¹⁵ were planted. While the colonial project preceding this largely pushed an infusion of the Christian religion onto native cultures, post-16th century colonies were far more systematic, and included a church, an occupation and formal education (Kiernan, 1995:14). Consequently, African societies became more and more traditionally European and less traditionally localised. Chinua Achebe expressed this existential phenomenon metaphorically in his highly acclaimed 1959 novel, *Things Fall Apart*, while seven years earlier, in the book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon illustrated the ontological effects of cultural genocide. In the postcolonial context, many more authors have explicitly dealt with this theme, including J.M. Coetzee, Bessie Head, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, amongst others.

As was mentioned in the introductory section, a philosophy of a people informs a society – and vice versa. Thus, it stands to reason that the encroachment of European social standards also resulted in the reduction of a philosophical outlook unique to Africa – and here again, vice versa. While this chapter does not intend to discuss this phenomenon in detail (it will be covered in later chapters), it is important to provide a brief elucidation of the relationship between socio-historical developments and a people's philosophical outlook. In his 1986 text, *Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African literature*, Kenyan thinker Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote on the effects of imperialism on African – specifically Kenyan (Kikuyu), in his context – cultures. While the book mostly focuses on language, it is also an illustration of how socio-historical developments (specifically colonialism) impact a people's ontological framework. The following extract on the societal role of culture is from the book:

Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, *through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe*. Culture in other words is a product and a reflection of human beings communicating with one another in the very struggle to create wealth and to control it. (Wa Thiong'o, 1992:14; emphasis added)

¹⁵ Referring to the decline of uniquely African ways of social organizations and general living prior the insistence of external Western colonial practices. Moreover, cultural genocide here does not only signify the Western institutions such as schools and public vocations but also the attitude towards those who were deemed to slow to accept civilization. Frantz Fanon has written extensively on this subject.

As such, while the turn of the 19th century brought with it the earliest stages of decolonisation, the almost 400 years of foreign intervention and rule also meant African cultures were by then either fragmented or changed beyond recognition. In Fanonian post-colonial theory, this process has come to be defined as *negrification*;¹⁶ a two-way process which on one hand, is an institutionalised way of adhering to Western cultural principles, while on the other hand, referring to the ontological processes which occur within those whose *being* is *negrified*.¹⁷

Moreover, this nature of colonialism can also be identified as one of the major causes for the delayed historical development of a formal African Philosophy. The various debates as to the nature and direction of a philosophy in post-colonial Africa are a direct result of scholars trying to extricate, identify, and formulate a unique identity for a systematic framework of philosophy from the collapsed foundations of the history of modern European colonisation in Africa. Inhibited by the lack of a distinct historical intellectual trend within the continent, scholars interested in a philosophy of Africa have each posited different formulations as to a way forward.

As such, the following section is a discussion on some of these conceptualisations by some of the prominent scholars interested in the matter of a philosophy unique to Africa. While some of these discussions focus on post-colonial Africa (such as Fanon and Biko), scholars such as Bruce Janz, Souleymane Diagne and Paulin Hountondji pose questions which cover the entirety of a philosophy from Africa, regardless of the era.

1.2. African Philosophy & Colonialism

Without the event of the above-described form of modern colonialism, having to pose the question “what is African?” would perhaps have been superfluous. To repeat a point stated above, the almost 400 years of cultural degradation of the colonial project instigated, to a large extent, the identity crisis the continent has encountered after the

¹⁶ ‘Negrification’, as defined by Frantz Fanon (see specifically the chapter in *Black Skins, White Masks* titled “The Fact of Blackness”) refers to the process by which black people under colonial rule were forced to adopt European values while learning to conceive of themselves as black – as opposed to white/European, a phenomenon never noted before.

¹⁷ To be ‘negrified’ is the result of negrification / Europeanisation of a person; to express European values at the expense of native pre-colonial cultural values.

colonial era. While it can be argued that no system of thought or social identity on any continent is uniform, the relatively homogenous socio-historical progression in the West (at least prior to the modern period) has meant that these major civilisations are comparatively confident in defining their intellectual subject matter, even if it consists of disagreements and contradictions. To illustrate this, the ideas of Plato and Aristotle are fundamentally so different that even in modern Western thought, it is often said one is either an Aristotelian or a Platonist, and by extension, an empiricist or a rationalist (Tarnas,1991:11).

Additionally, both Platonic and Aristotelean systems include elements of Eastern and North African mysticism (Tarnas, 1991:13). However, regardless of such dichotomies, both these thinkers and their works have been primarily claimed as 'Western' in their origin, or at least as pillars of what is now referred to as Western philosophy. On the African continent, however, the imposition of foreign rule along with colonial institutions has unfortunately meant that what contemporary Africans learned in school were not primarily African texts – either because they did not exist or because they were considered inferior to the Western tradition. The advantage thus enjoyed by European scholars by consuming Western texts has as such eliminated the need to deeply consider questions such as “what, in terms of ideas, defines a Western person?” (Janz, 2007:689). While Africa has undoubtedly a wealth of historical evidence with regards to its thought systems, the oratory nature of such ideas has additionally hampered the development of the tradition as a rigorous, systematic historical paradigm.

Through what is commonly referred to as oral literature, sub-Saharan African thought has historically been maintained and passed down through the spoken word. Unlike writing, which in its clearest form tends to be explicit, the spoken word lends itself to what scholar Pauline Hountondji calls “an implicit, silent and a latent form of knowledge.” (Hountondji, 1983:ix) Accordingly, “oral traditions have the habit of transmitting only consensus; a broad and generalized agreement of whatever issue at hand.” (Hountondji, 1983:ix) Consequently, the oratory approach to philosophy rarely ever lends itself to any

systematic critique of its assertions. In accordance with the continuity thesis,¹⁸ its notions remain unchallenged and unchanged (Hountondji, 1983:ix). In his 2013 book, *The Ink of the Scholars: Reflections on Philosophy in Africa*, Senegalese scholar Souleymane Diagne discussed the limitations of the oratory approach to philosophy:

One cannot speak of philosophy in the absence of a written tradition; that in a culture of orality the need to memorize and to conserve is so pressing that it leaves no place for the critical examination of the content transmitted; and that, in the final analysis, to posit the equivalence of philosophy and of a worldview expressed in orality would be to accept and even praise the value of unanimity, which would go against the most basic sense of philosophical questioning. (Diagne, 2013:53)

The above is not only an issue for philosophical speculation prior to the rise of the African academic scholarship and written texts; it is also the cause of the false notion that philosophical speculation unique to Africa during the pre-colonial era is non-existent or rather too primitive to be considered philosophical in nature. As such, post-colonial scholars are not endeavouring to answer the question¹⁹: does Africa have a philosophical system? Instead, they seek to address the question: what subject matter should animate African philosophy in the wake of colonialism?

As a comparative example, pre-modern Europe clawed itself from the Dark Ages through the rediscovery of ancient Greek texts, particularly those of Aristotle (Tarnas, 1991:17). This enabled European scholars at the time to lay the foundations for the Renaissance Era, a period which many historians identify as the epitome of Western progress (Tarnas, 1991:21). Thus, if the Dark Ages of Europe could be compared to the Imperial Age of Africa, post-colonial scholars who are aware of the effects of colonialism similarly pose questions of what subject matter should comparatively animate the tradition of African Philosophy.

¹⁸ This is based on the thesis that ideas develop over time because of revisions, critiques and further discoveries of a topic.

¹⁹ See Eze 1997.

At first, it seems only practical to construct a system of philosophy from the everyday lives of African peoples. For Hountondji, however, this approach to philosophising further impedes the development of African thought. Hountondji argues instead that the discipline of philosophy should engage itself with the rigorous analysis of concepts and, more importantly, attempt to establish itself as a “second order of science in its empirical practice.” (Hountondji, 1982:vii) However, this approach to African Philosophy is challenged in this regard by what one could describe, according to Hountondji, as a *fetishism of ethnicity*, collectively referred to as *ethnophilosophy* (Hountondji, 1982:vii). As a philosophical trend, ethnophilosophy encompasses the erroneous view that African people as whole share a homogenous view of the world and, as such, its purpose is to form a systematic world view from these views. What makes Hountondji particularly critical of ethnophilosophy is that in its ultimate achievement, it is a “collection of varying cultural idiosyncrasies which, while a good place to start engaging with philosophical thought, should not be considered a philosophy in themselves.” (Hountondji, 1982:xxiii) What further aggravates the issue for Hountondji is that African scholars are often themselves uncritical of this trend; instead they accept what is handed down to them as part of the Western collective of ethnography – which is a systematic study of people and cultures (Hountondji, 1982:xxiii). Judged under the guise of ethnography, African discourse is a collection of mythical stories and imaginative legends of the world. Examples include such topics as the

... Rwanda philosophy of *being*, the Luba notion of *being*, the dialectics of the Burundi, the idea of old age among the Fulbe, the sense of honor among the Wolof, the conception of life among the Yoruba, the African concept of time and so on. (Hountondji, 1982:xxiii)²⁰

Thus, the fetishism of ethnicity inherent in this type of approach continues a trend established by anthropologies of former times, which were characterised by a tendency

²⁰ These examples provided by Hountondji all form part of the field of metaphysics, as will be discussed in later chapters. As such, it could be inferred that this aspect of Hountondji's critique is also a critique of traditional conceptions of metaphysics – furthering the argument (from the perspective of this particular thesis at any rate) that for a truly unique African metaphysics to be considered in contemporary times, there is a need to turn to what Hountondji dismisses as ethnophilosophy.

to animate the African person and his culture along stereotypical lines. This, according to Hountondji, consequently establishes a “new standard, one which is bound to hinder the African philosopher or, for that matter, the so-called primitive or semi-primitive philosopher from tackling issues of a universal meaning and significance.” (Hountondji, 1982:33) One could imagine an image of a hypothetical African philosopher, who, if preoccupied primarily by the concerns of ethnophilosophy, and viewed externally, could come to be judged as whimsical, nostalgic, and rather naïve.

The 1945 publication *Bantu Philosophy* by Belgian missionary Father Placide Tempels is an example of such an ethnophilosophical publication. While the book is regarded as the earliest written attempt at defining the subject matter of contemporary African philosophy, scholars such as Hountondji have expressed reservations regarding its prominence. This text provides an investigation into the ontological nature of the Bantu peoples of sub-Saharan Africa and subsequent defence of the existence of a philosophical rationality found within the Bantu people. It emphasises the “irreducibly communal nature of the individual African existence.” (Janz, 2007:694) Often defined as *the Bantu way*, this ontological approach to philosophy came to define “African peoples as primarily focused on emotional expressiveness rather than abstract reasoning.” (Janz, 2007:694) Although the book inspired much intellectual engagement in Southern Africa across multiple disciplines, its critics were concerned with the negative influence it had on the political sphere, in particular how it simplified the rationality of the Bantu people (Janz, 2007:695). Hountondji further points out how the book “addresses not the people talked about”; rather, it is intended for a scientific community interested in the mystical African person (Hountondji, 1982:34), reminiscent of what has become known as the interrelated phenomenon of *orientalism*.

In his 1978 book, *Orientalism*, Palestinian-born scholar Edward Said addressed similar issues as pointed out above with regard to ethnophilosophy, but within the various geographic areas known collectively as the ‘East’ or the ‘Orient’. According to James Brown (2010), in *A Stereotype, Wrapped in a Cliché, inside a Caricature: Russian Foreign Policy and Orientalism*:

In the course of empire, after the physical-and-political conquest, there followed the intellectual conquest of a people, whereby Western scholars appropriated for themselves (as European intellectual property) the interpretation and translation of Oriental languages, and the critical study of the cultures and histories of the Oriental world. In that way, by using Orientalism as the intellectual norm for cultural judgement, Europeans wrote the history of Asia, and invented the "exotic East" and the "inscrutable Orient", which are cultural representations of peoples and things considered inferior to the peoples and things of the West. (Brown, 2010:n.p.)

The continent of Africa, like the Orient or the East, is culturally, historically, linguistically, religiously, and politically diverse, and as a result likely not to have such uniformity in its thought systems. As such, Henry Odera Oruka's 1990 publication *Trends in Contemporary African Philosophy* intentionally adopted a broad approach in defining the subject matter of African philosophy. According to Oruka, African thought systems comprise various trends found throughout the continent. The first is *Ethnophilosophy*, which is defined as "the collective traditional wisdom or the generally held ontological assumptions and worldview of African ethnic groups or tribes as having the status of philosophy." (Coetzee and Roux, 1998:117) *Sage Philosophy* is the second trend, relating to "the 'philosophical sages' within a culture, those who are more than repositories of cultural wisdom, and bring a critical edge to that wisdom." (Coetzee and Roux, 1998:119) *Nationalistic / Ideological Philosophy* comprises the third trend of African philosophy, which identifies "political figures such as Senghor, Nkrumah, Nyerere, and others [who have] dealt with philosophical issues even as they engaged in emancipatory projects and nation-building." (Coetzee and Roux, 1998:120) *Professional Philosophy* is the last trend demarcated by Oruka, which refers to "the identity of a group of philosophers, rather than a specific style of philosophy, most explicitly working on European traditions – occasionally with little attention to the particularity of Africa itself." (Coetzee and Roux, 1998:121)²¹

²¹ Oruka later added the *literary-artistic* trend (novelists, poets and other literary figures such as Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe engage with philosophical issues in their novels, poems and essays) and the *hermeneutic* trend where African languages are analysed in order to interpret philosophical content found therein (Kwame Gyekye, Barry Hallen and J. O. Sodipo are major figures within this trend) (see Janz, 2007:693).

The geographical layout of the continent has further contributed to the difficulties in defining the identity of Africa. The German philosopher, Hegel, seems to have been guilty of this confusion when he “called North Africa, European Africa due to cultural similarities.” (Janz, 2004:107) In an attempt to resolve this confusion, Janz posed the novel question of whether African philosophy is a *spatial* or a *platial* activity. As a spatial endeavour, African philosophy “thinks of itself as analogous to a country on a map and sets out to reclaim intellectual territory that was appropriated by European thinkers.” (Janz, 2007:693) On the other hand, “African philosophy is ‘platial’ when it focuses on phenomenological analysis, that is, when it explicates the meaning of an African life-world for Africans.” (Janz, 2007:693) In other words, a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach (platial) is contrasted to one that is defined by clear borders that seek to limit the interpretative capacities of questions related to the place that is Africa (spatial). It is important to note for this dissertation, the platial characterisation to African philosophy is mostly adopted.

The issue of race and African personhood has equally been prominent among scholars in defining African philosophy. As Janz queried: “Is being African in some way unique, qualitatively different from other ways of being human; or is one human first and African second?” (Janz, 2007:693) For Janz then, this unanswered question shows how “African as a category stands in tension, as a particularized identity category, but one which as yet is relatively unwilling to take other possible particularizations seriously.” (Janz, 2007:694) As such, Janz states, the following questions remain contested within the tradition, although of course they also enable a dialogue to further the tradition itself:

1. To what extent must African philosophy engage traditional thought and culture to be truly African?
2. How can and does Africa relate to the West, to other philosophical, cultural, scientific and religious traditions, to colonising countries, to its diaspora?
3. What is fundamental reality, in an African context?
4. How can (and how should) political, social and ethical life be imagined in Africa?
5. What is the relationship between thought and practice in Africa? Can and should African philosophy be practical?

These questions explicitly contextualise the challenges to constructing an identity for doing African Philosophy. More so, these questions exemplify why the tradition should deal with questions which are platial (phenomenological) rather than spatial (historically/politically delineated).

While the above discussions are concerned with offering an identity for contemporary African philosophy, Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko's ideas could also be considered as an attempt to offer an identity for the contemporary African person. If one were to apply Oruka's classifications, both these scholars would generally fall under Oruka's *Nationalistic / Ideological* philosophical trend. In further applying Janz's platial thesis, both these scholars moreover would form part of the school thought known as *post-colonial theory* – engaging in questions specific to contemporary African peoples. Arguably, for Jonathan Hart and Terrie Goldie, this has been the most prominent political, metaphysical and existential philosophical trend within contemporary African philosophy:

Postcolonial literature often addresses the problems and consequences of decolonizing a country, especially questions relating to the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated people, and themes such as racialism and colonialism. Critical or theoretical approaches vary within the field, for example the difference between Frantz Fanon and Edward Said is not only as a result of a philosophical outlook but one of time, space and ethnicity. Collectively nonetheless, post-colonial theorists are responsible for opening the social discourse between the colonizer and the colonized, a dialogue that has enabled a critical study of the colonized-decolonized person. (Hart and Goldie, 2003:3)

As pivotal contemporary African scholars however, Fanon and Biko's contribution to what one could describe as a *philosophy of being* or *consciousness* exemplifies these two as being somewhat unique. Briefly, it is their insistence on *consciousness* that needs to be emphasised here. The definition of 'consciousness' in this context, as a critical or theoretical approach, encompasses both its clinical (psychological) and philosophical (existential-phenomenological) aspect. The former²² refers more specifically to Fanon,

²² This includes the works of Sigmund Freud and the many like Carl Jung who followed Freud in the psychoanalytic tradition.

while Biko primarily embodies the latter²³. Also, the choice to select *consciousness* as a norm to be interrogated within African philosophical thought is a result of a conscious attempt to rebel against the positivist notion which regards knowledge as ‘factual’ information of the external world. As with the existentialists, the attempt here is to illustrate the pivotal role of the subject who after all does formulate knowledge of the world through consciousness of *being, dwelling* (and its converse of being ‘*un-homed*’) and *thrownness* (see Heidegger, 1971).

In a similar vein to Fanon, Biko too was concerned with the spiritual regression of subjugated peoples. Biko’s work however addressed a colonial situation of a different era: apartheid South Africa was his scope. Like Fanon, Biko also interrogated the systematic assault on the minds and culture of marginalised South Africans. Widely regarded as the pioneer of the Black Consciousness Movement (1978), Biko’s forward looking philosophy was an attempt to emancipate the subjugated from the oppressive societal structures imposed upon their very consciousnesses.²⁴ In other words, the work of both Fanon and Biko dealt not merely with political or economic emancipation from colonial structures, but psychological, mental and spiritual conceptions of *being* in a world in which black peoples were alienated from their very selves, of being unhomed from not only their land but also their language, traditions, and culture, and how an emphasis on the emancipation of consciousness provided a potential ontological path of freedom which needed to be considered alongside their political battles.

As a final normative word relating to this initial foundational chapter, *the influence colonialism has had on the development of a contemporary philosophy unique to Africa can be summed up as being primarily negative*²⁵. It is largely the cause of the identity crisis contemporary African philosophical speculation is faced with. While some attempts have been made to offer an identity for the tradition going forward, there still exists the lingering urge to anchor the tradition onto a unifying normative foundation. This is why,

²³ This includes those of the philosophical tradition like Hegel and Jean-Paul Sartre.

²⁴ While there is a continual mention of consciousness throughout this dissertation, Fanon and Biko’s ideas will only be briefly mentioned. A detailed discussion of their interrogation of consciousness as related to metaphysics is beyond the scope of this dissertation and will thus be considered in further research.

²⁵ See Wiredu 1998

for Janz, “African philosophy stands as both an important critical and reflective moment in world philosophy, and a contribution to the world of philosophy by working out its ‘debts and duties’.” (Janz, 2007:700)

The remainder of this study, on the one hand, follows a somewhat different approach to this often taken-for-granted norm. First, it does not agree with the notion that African philosophical speculation begins with Placide Tempels’ *Bantu Philosophy*. Instead, it takes the view that Tempels’ book begins a post-colonial era for the movement. Secondly, this dissertation argues against Hountondji’s critique of ethnophilosophy, which views philosophy as the hand maiden of the physical sciences. Rather, it argues that such a critique continues a trend characteristic of the West, and particularly the need to impose its standards onto the world. It should be further noted that this dissertation asserts the notion that the West itself is in crisis²⁶. Thirdly, the notion that a philosophical tradition needs a unifying normative foundation is rejected on the basis that very few other traditions have ever truly accomplished this. As mentioned earlier on, Western philosophy itself has not been uniform in its own assertions, despite its confidence in its own identity. Finally, this dissertation is built on the premise that philosophical assertions and socio-historical conditions equally affect each other. It is by no accident that colonialism is the first topic that needed to be discussed.

This trend further follows into Chapter Two, which is a fairly detailed analysis of the historical developments of the West and the social phenomena which caused them and came to shape modernity. While Chapter One discussed what it means for Africa to be colonised, Chapter Two will illustrate one of the central ideas of this writing: that, before Europe colonised the world, it colonised itself. Thus, the disenchantment which would come to define modernity²⁷, was born out of a fundamentally disenchanted European outlook.

The topic of disenchantment (of spirit, consciousness, nature, etc.) is the very reason this dissertation focuses mainly on metaphysical speculation in contrast to, for example,

²⁶ Discussed in the introduction and further elaborated throughout the dissertation.

²⁷ See Max Weber (1918) in which the thinker is considered to have popularized the term in a lecture. “Weber used the German word *Entzauberung*, translated into English as disenchantment, which literally means de-magic-ation.”

political philosophy, ethics, aesthetics or epistemology, all of which are branches of philosophical inquiry and could also be reanimated in the contemporary African context. This is because this work builds on the hypothesis that if the defining characteristic of the modern world is empirical/positivistic in nature, in accordance then with the Hegelian dialectic, that which is non-empirical, or that which is metaphysical, is a potential anti-thesis to modernity. Furthermore, pre-colonial African thought systems are very much characterised by such a character, and thus offer an interesting alternative to the emphasis on Western scientific thought. Chapter Three will then discuss this in finer detail, while in Chapter Two, the rise and gradual decline of Western metaphysical speculation will be discussed.

CHAPTER TWO: THE MODERN PROBLEM

While the previous chapter briefly laid out the situation of philosophy in the modern African context, it needs to be followed by a discussion on the very concepts of 'modern' and 'modernity' themselves. As a field of study in the history of ideas, scholars rarely agree as to what exactly modernity is.²⁸ For example, philosopher Stephen Hicks, an advocate for emphasising the positive aspects of the Enlightenment, and by extension modernity, defined scholars belonging to the modern period as follows:

Bacon, Descartes, and Locke are modern because of their philosophical naturalism, their profound confidence in reason, and, especially in the case of Locke, their individualism. Modern thinkers start from nature, instead of starting with some form of the supernatural, which had been the characteristic starting point of pre-modern, Medieval philosophy. Modern thinkers stress that perception and reason are the human means of knowing nature, in contrast to the pre-modern reliance upon tradition, faith, and mysticism. (Hicks, 2004:7)

As such, Hick's definition of modernity focuses on the central role of naturalism (i.e. empiricism and positivism) in philosophy and the subsequent rise of the scientific method and, by extension, the various scientific disciplines. However, scholars such as Leonard

²⁸ Such scholars include theologians, philosophers, historians and scientists.

Peikoff, also a proponent of the Enlightenment but a critic of modernity, push against Hick's take on modernity, instead arguing that such definitions are not encompassing what is characteristic of the modern period, namely an insistence on emphasis on the subject²⁹ over objective or scientifically explained reality (Peikoff, 1982). For Peikoff, the naturalism which is often attributed to modernity can already be found in the writings of Aristotle. According to Peikoff, modernity

... is anti-realist, holding that it is impossible to speak meaningfully about an independently existing reality. Modernism substitutes instead a social-linguistic, constructionist account of reality. Epistemologically, having rejected the notion of an independently existing reality, postmodernism denies that reason or any other method is a means of acquiring objective knowledge of that reality. Postmodern accounts of human nature are consistently collectivist, holding that individuals' identities are constructed largely by the social-linguistic groups that they are a part of, those groups varying radically across the dimensions of sex, race, ethnicity, and wealth. (Peikoff in Hicks 2004:6)

For Peikoff then, philosophers such as Immanuel Kant,³⁰ Hegel,³¹ Martin Heidegger³² and Karl Marx are modern precisely because they held the primacy of consciousness over existence. Scholars such as Michael Allen Gillespie³³ and Robert Pippin³⁴, however, offer a definition of modernity which reflects the term's use in everyday language: namely, modernity as the new and forward looking. Accordingly,

[t]he modern project unlike any before it aspired to distinguish itself primarily as new and autonomous to what had existed before. Modernity needs to demonstrate not merely its originality but also its superiority to its predecessors. (Gillespie 2008:23)

²⁹ The subject here specifically denotes the notion of human consciousness, or awareness of the self and the world by the self - as emphasised by thinkers such as Kant and Hegel.

³⁰ Kantian noumena and the phenomenal categories are to thinkers such as Peikoff causes for the modern divide between mind and matter.

³¹ See *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).

³² See *Being and Time* (1927).

³³ See *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (2008)

³⁴ See *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem* (1991)

It is the case that there are numerous other definitions of modernity;³⁵ in this dissertation, however, modernity is defined as a series of (empirically-based/positivistic) ideas which insist upon the primacy of objective existence and the immanent over the primacy of consciousness and the transcendent. While it is true, as Peikoff has pointed out, that naturalism is also characteristic of Ancient Greece, particularly as found in Aristotle, modernity differs from the ancients by its atheism, its rejection of faith in favour of the empirical – the readily observable. As biologist Richard Dawkins, a staunch defender of the natural sciences, stated, “I am against religion because it teaches us to be satisfied with not understanding the world.” (Dawkins, 2006:126)

Furthermore, as a period in history, modernity is demarcated to have begun from the 1500s with the onset of the Renaissance, and to have found its highest expression in the age of Enlightenment during the 1700s. Below is a tabulation of the pre-modern and modern conceptions as proposed by Hicks in the 2004 book, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*:

	Pre-modern	Modern
Metaphysics	Supernaturalism	Naturalism
Epistemology	Mysticism and/or faith	Experience and reason
Human Nature	Subject to God’s will	<i>Tabula rasa</i> ³⁶

Both Hick’s definition of modernity and the above tabulation will be used throughout this thesis.

Having thus established a working definition of modernity, Chapter Two continues with a discussion of the socio-historical events which collectively gave rise to the “modern

³⁵ These other conceptions of modernity fall beyond the scope of this study; however, it is important to note that there are these different conceptions of this notion.

³⁶ This is the idea that people are born deprived of built-in mental content, or as blank slates, and thus all information comes from experience or perception.

problem” as the title suggests – while recognising, again, arguments vary as to what exactly the modern problem is, because of the definition one chooses to delineate to modernity. In this writing, modernity denotes the crippling effect upon the field of metaphysics, to which the rise of naturalism has had in the history of ideas. To lay this problem out, the following chapter is divided into three sections. The first is a brief overview of the history of Western metaphysics. The second section discusses the rise of modernity, and Section Three considers the effects of modernity upon the modern world. In the context of the entire dissertation, Chapter Two discusses two central ideas, namely the destruction of Western metaphysics, and the West’s long history of extending beyond its own regions and influencing the rest of the world.³⁷ As such, the modern problem is today a problem of the entire world.

2.1. The development of Western Metaphysics

2.1.1. The Pre-Socratics

In discussing the effect of Western colonialism upon the modern field of metaphysics, we must inevitably first begin with the place of metaphysics in the ancient world³⁸. What is considered Western metaphysical speculation can be traced back to the pre-Socratic thinkers during the fourth and fifth centuries BC³⁹ (Bonadeo, 2014:15). Ancient Greek philosopher Parmenides of Elea (475 BC) is arguably the pioneer of Western metaphysical speculation (Bonadeo, 2014:15). In an untitled poem which is commonly referred to as *On Nature*, Parmenides proposed a view of reality as to how the universe might be structured. For the ancient scholar, “[a]ll reality is one, change is impossible, and existence is timeless, uniform, and necessary.” (Parmenides in Bonadeo, 2014:17) While Parmenides’s ideas are now considered far from academic,⁴⁰ he did lay the foundation for questions of ontology and change (time) to be considered. In response to Parmenides of Elea, Heraclitus of Ephesus, by contrast, argued that “[a]ll is *Flux*, there is nothing but change and one cannot step in the same river twice.” (Bonadeo, 2014:17)

³⁷ This is also considered an impulse towards colonialism.

³⁸ it is not within the scope of this dissertation to do a deep reconstruction of Western metaphysics. Instead, this dissertation will only be providing a brief overview of the narrative of the development of metaphysics in the history of Western Philosophy. More thorough reconstructions have been provided in other texts.

³⁹ BC (before Christ) and BCE (before the common era) are used interchangeably here.

⁴⁰ Academic here refers to the systematic and scholarly in the modern sense.

Without having realised it at the time, these two scholars along with their followers laid the foundations for the split in Western thought relating to what would hundreds of years later be called the body-mind dichotomy.⁴¹

At the time, these pre-Socratic scholars, and those who adopted and expanded their corresponding ideas, contributed to metaphysical speculation by challenging the notion that all that is, is by the will of some deity, and human existence is but a consequence (Bonadeo, 2014:18). Implicitly stated in their ideas, was the notion that human beings have a nature or *being*, and a world exists externally with which human existence interacts (the Heideggerian *Dasein*) (Bonadeo, 2014:23). Before the pre-Socratics, it was widely believed that human beings were but extensions of the gods; the idea of humans as free and independent entities was unconsidered (Bonadeo, 2014:20). However, ideas by pre-Socratic scholars and thinkers tended to be very abstract and thus tended to use metaphors to explain phenomena; it is because of this that their ideas are considered mostly speculative. An example of this is given by Bonadeo: “Anaximenes argued that the primal element from which all is made is *Air*; while Heraclitus chose *Fire*, because unlike Thales’s *Water* and Anaximenes’ *Air* (and of course *Earth*), *Fire* is always rapidly changing.” (Bonadeo, 2014:23) Arguably, it is from here that the idea of a primal element to explain all of reality can be found. Moreover, like their ancient counterparts, contemporary scholars themselves have yet to offer a concise, irrefutable argument for a primal element to all of existence.

Subsequently, for Pythagoras of Samos, Plato’s teacher, “mathematics could supply the most fundamental explanations of reality, namely the *Forms*, the organization and arrangement of things in the universe.” (Conee and Sider, 2005:11) However, while most pre-Socratic thinkers were *naturalists* (i.e. material reality explains phenomena), Plato and Pythagoras were, in modern terms, rationalists (i.e. abstract ideas by themselves explain phenomena). In contrast to a naturalist metaphysics, Plato asserted that “[f]orms or ideas are more real than material objects since they are more permanent.” (Conee and Sider, 2005:11) Plato’s definition of permanence thus followed that of the pre-Socratics,

⁴¹ The mind-body dichotomy refers to the idea that the mind, or consciousness, and the physical body are abstract, distinct and separable.

in the sense that nature comprised of ever-changing elements (namely, water, fire, earth, air). Forms, on the other hand, comprised ideas / ideals such as Virtue, Justice and Beauty, all of which, according to Plato, were eternal and unchanging.⁴² In a very general sense then, Pythagoras, and by extension Plato and Socrates, all asserted that abstract conceptions, whether mathematical (Pythagoras) or ideals (Plato and Socrates) were by themselves enough to explain phenomena (Conee and Sider, 2005:14). Socrates, after all, died in defence of “wisdom and ethics”; in short, he gave up his physical existence for his ideals.

Aristotle, the famous student of Plato, began his metaphysics by questioning the origins of *Forms* and their universal application (Conee and Sider, 2005:21).⁴³ Aristotle wrote several works which were aimed at answering the questions Plato had posed. After his death, the “head of Aristotle's Peripatetic school, Andronicus of Rhodes, edited and arranged Aristotle's works, giving the name *Metaphysics* (*τα μετα τα φυσικα βιβλια*), literally the books beyond the *Physics*, a separate series of writings by Aristotle.” (Furley, 1999:9) It was from Andronicus that the term ‘metaphysics’ was formally inscribed and used. Now referred to as *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, the collection of works by the ancient scholar was concerned with “studying the principles and causes to Plato's *Forms*.” (Furley, 1999:9) However, Aristotle's thinking was deeply naturalistic and moreover influenced by his earlier work, *Physics*, in which he proposed a materialistic logic to all things, even to *being* itself (Furley, 1999:11). Furthermore, Aristotle systemised metaphysics and separated what was to be studied in a logical manner. It should be noted that, unlike his teacher Plato, Aristotle ascribed to a materialistic outlook; he believed that all could be understood by examining the physical (Bonadeo, 2014:18). Below is a basic structure of his metaphysics, which for most part was influenced by his method of analysis from *Physics*.

1. The Categories

- Things that are (*ta onta*)—beings
- Substance, quality, quantity, and relation

⁴² Plato's idea of forms is further described in his c. 375 BC book, *The Republic*.

⁴³ Found in *Metaphysics*, a treatise on the subject by Aristotle, published after his death.

- Non-substantial Particulars
 - The Role of Substance in the Study of Being *Qua* Being
- 2. The Fundamental Principles: Axioms**
- Systematic Logic
- 3. Theology**
- The first cause to all causes

Despite Aristotle's logical metaphysical system, he, like Plato, did not provide a solution to the question of the cause for the first cause (Furley, 1999:17). And, like for Plato and pre-Socratic scholars of Heraclitus's kind, for Aristotle the first cause to all of existence was a deity or deities of some kind (Furley, 1999:22). However, where Plato had asserted that *Forms* are real and existent in the objective world, Aristotle's *Categories*, *Logic* and *Physics* introduced the notion that *Forms* are not real physical entities but rather abstractions by the mind in contact with physical objects (Furley, 1999:22). For example, where Plato would have argued that courage or virtue are real entities (real not in the sense of physical, but observable), Aristotle would have argued that these are but abstractions of the human mind and differ from place to place (Conee and Sider, 2005:37).

2.1.2. The Hellenistic Period

While it is customary to denote the above intellectual developments as Western, they were geographically speaking from Ancient Greece, and only centuries later were seen in hindsight as forming part of the what became the Western philosophical tradition. Alexander the Great (336–323 BC), the most famous student of Aristotle, through his military conquests and cultural expansion, managed to export Greek metaphysical speculation from Greece to whatever area he conquered. While on one hand, Alexander's great expansion meant the growth and further development of philosophical speculation across regions from which philosophers and their respective schools of thought could go beyond Athens, on the other hand, it is evidence of some of the earliest impulses by an empire to forcibly impose their culture onto the colonised (Conee and Sider, 2005:104).

In Alexander's defence however, there is proof that while he wanted to conquer the entire world, he also aspired for "cultural diffusion and syncretism; the combining of different beliefs, while blending practices of various schools of thought." (Conee and Sider, 2005:104) Moreover, Alexander's ideals (the teachings of the Classical scholars, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) were carried through during the Hellenistic period⁴⁴.

As a result of the relatively cosmopolitan nature of Alexander's empire, multiple schools of metaphysical speculation were found throughout the Hellenistic period. Among the most important were, in the first place, those who taught the teachings of Plato – known as students of the Academy, or Platonists. Secondly, there were those "who maintained and developed the philosophy of Aristotle" – the Peripatetic school (Conee and Sider, 2005:111) Further schools of metaphysical speculation, such as Epicureanism, Cyrenaicism, Cynicism and Stoicism were, all in some way, considered as being variations on the first two schools. Despite the various schools and their respective ideas, metaphysical speculation was primarily directed to the study of ontology.⁴⁵ This was a divergence from the Classical period (of the pre-Socratics, Plato & Aristotle) during which metaphysical speculation was directed towards cosmology,⁴⁶ specifically in discovering the elusive first cause. This seems to have been a result of the multi-cultural nature of the Hellenistic period. As such, the question troubling scholars at the time was how to integrate the growing civilisation Alexander had envisioned, where questions on the nature of ontology were mainly discussed.

For those influenced by Aristotle, "the goal of life was the *eudaimonia* which originated from *virtuous actions*, which consisted in keeping the mean between the two extremes of the too much and the too little." (Adamson, 2015:46) Epicurus (341 – 270 BC), the founder of Epicureanism and follower of Aristotelianism, further proposed a primarily ontological basis to all of existence (Adamson, 2015:47). Accordingly, human beings were social creatures who should be concerned primarily with "attaining a happy, tranquil life characterized by *ataraxia* (peace and freedom from fear) and *aponia* (the absence of pain)." (Adamson, 2015:47) For Epicurean metaphysicians then, the nature and purpose

⁴⁴ 323 BC – 33 BC

⁴⁵ Ontological speculation will be discussed in finer detail in Chapter Three.

⁴⁶ Cosmological speculation will be discussed in finer detail in Chapter Three.

of ontology was self-evident. Due to their naturalistic-Aristotelian basis and thus empirical outlook, Epicureans proposed an entirely temporal notion to ontological understanding. Since cosmological knowledge was outside the realm of the senses, gods and souls were of no concern to human beings. For Epicurus and his followers, “[d]eath is the end of both the body and the soul, people should behave ethically not because the gods punish or reward people for their actions, but because amoral behaviour will burden them with guilt and prevent them from attaining *ataraxia*.” (Adamson, 2015:52)

In short, Epicureanism celebrated a sensual form of human existence and placed humankind at the centre of all metaphysical speculation. This was reflected in art, religion, science and literature of the time. Art, for example, “saw a turn from the idealistic, perfected, calm and composed figures of classical Greek art to a style dominated by realism and the depiction of *pathos* (emotion) and *ethos* (character).” (Adamson, 2015:52) In literature, “comedy of manners were more domestic and formulaic, stereotypical low born characters such as slaves became more important, the language was colloquial and major motifs included escapism, marriage, romance and luck.” (Adamson, 2015:52) Religion perhaps took the most interesting form, namely with Epicurus’s view that “disinterested gods living far away from the human realm in *metakosmia* resulted in religious freedom.” (Adamson, 2015:52) Due to its cultural diffusion, Hellenistic religion comprised of multiple practising religions, some even a morphosis of Greek, Egyptian, Pagan and Roman deities (Adamson, 2015:52). Peter Adamson further argues that the cult of *Tyche* (luck, fortune) led to the development of a “complex system of astrology, which sought to determine a person’s character and future in the movements of the sun, moon, and planets.” (Adamson 2015:52) Unfortunately, the Epicurean outlook was often criticised for being too hedonistic, and as such, it was popular among those who wished to escape ethical living and punishment by the gods. As Adamson summarises, “Epicurus was inaccurately remembered as a patron of drunkards, whoremongers, and gluttons.” (Adamson, 2015:55)

The decline of both the Peripatetic and Epicurean schools happened in conjunction with the rise of the Roman Empire and by extension, Christianity. While the rise of the Roman State was inevitable following the death of Alexander and the dissipation of his empire,

the effective decline of the influence of Aristotle and Epicurus was not as obvious. While it is the case that the Hellenistic period was not entirely dominated by the Aristotelian – and by extension Epicurean – thinking, those who followed the traditions of Socrates and Plato found very little influence in a Hellenistic culture dominated by temporal existence (Kenny, 2005:227). For example, the Cynics (followers of Socrates), whose ontological outlook was that of “ascetism, living with bare necessities and in accordance with nature” ultimately did not gather much of a following (Kenny, 2005:230). While Stoicism could arguably be considered the mature form of ontological speculation of both the Aristotelean and Epicurean schools, its ethical outlook was almost entirely Cynical and as a result also never gained the same cultural influence (Kenny, 2005:227).

As for followers of Plato, different heads of the Academy often resulted in different metaphysical outlooks with some basic underlying Platonic aspects. It was not until the emergence of Plotinus (c. 204–270 AD) that the teachings of Plato would re-emerge (Kenny, 2005:229). Plotinus, the founder of what would later be deemed Neoplatonism, rejected the notion that ontological speculation could be divorced from cosmological questions (Kenny, 2005:233). According to him, the separation of *being* from a *higher being* led to a gradual loss of morality, as humankind strayed away from its creator (Kenny, 2005:233). The schematic below best summarises Neoplatonism (see Kenny, 2005):⁴⁷

i. The One

- “A supreme, totally transcendent *One*, containing no division, multiplicity, or distinction; beyond all categories of being and non-being.” (Kenny 2010:56)

ii. Emanation by the One

- “The absolute transcendence of the *One* or of the Divine, as the source of the *Being* of all things that yet remains transcendent of them in its own nature; the *One* is in no way affected or diminished by these emanations.” (Kenny 2010:56)

- **The first emanation (*Demiurge* or *Nous*)**

⁴⁷ Anthony Kenny, 2010, *A New History of Western Philosophy*.

- “A perfect image of the *One* and the archetype of all existing things. It is simultaneously both being and thought, idea and ideal world.” (Kenny 2010:57)
- **The second emanation (World Soul)**
 - Immaterial human consciousness
- **The third emanation**
 - Matter and substance

While Plotinus’s thinking was very eclectic, invoking elements of Egyptian mysticism, Astrology and Judaism, he drew from Plato the notion of knowledge prior to existence and *Forms* as existing things and not abstractions (Kenny, 2005:235). Along with other Neoplatonists such as Lamblichus and Proclus, “Plotinus gave a further religious and even occult and superstitious emphasis to metaphysics.” (Furley, 1999:33) Moreover, the growth of the Christian Church further meant that metaphysics started to become almost entirely theological in nature. According to historian David Furley, “Neoplatonism was in essence a Theological system associated with a religious way of life complementing Christianity.” (Furley, 1999:33)

While metaphysical speculation during the Classical and Hellenistic periods was dominated by ontological questions, one can plausibly argue that it was cosmological concerns that characterised the Medieval Era of the Neoplatonists. In a similar approach to Alexander, the Roman Republic too aspired to be an empire and thus embarked on military conquests and cultural expansion (Kenny, 2005:265). However, the multicultural ideals of Alexander, and by extension the Hellenistic period, were not equally embraced by a Roman Republic adamant on building an empire characterised by monothelitism⁴⁸. It is because of this very reason that the one God of the Neoplatonists would come to dominate the Medieval era. As for followers of Aristotle and Epicurus, their influence “died out in late antiquity, subject to hostility from early Christianity.” (Kenny, 2005:272)

⁴⁸ A doctrine with a belief that there is one deity.

2.1.3. Beginning of the rejection of Western metaphysics

The rise and the eventual dominance of the Christian Church characterised the Medieval era. Hostile to any metaphysical speculation which might undermine its stronghold over society, Christian cosmological thought primarily dominated this period. Even though the era spans over 15 centuries, some of the most important figures in the development of metaphysical speculation of this era are regarded as being Saint Augustine (354 – 430 AD) and Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274 AD) (Kilma and Hall, 2011:5). In the early period of the era, scholars of metaphysics were occupied with the task of combining the various thought systems into a single coherent structure. While the cosmopolitanism of the Hellenistic era meant diverse cosmological opinions from religions as diverse as Paganism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism could freely coexist, the Roman Republic wished to consolidate all these into a singular system (Kilma and Hall, 2011:5).

Building on the ideas of Plotinus, early Christian metaphysicians consolidated his cosmological system into the Trinitarian Doctrine⁴⁹ (Kilma and Hall, 2011:7). While it was far from a perfect system, over the centuries the Christian trinity became a combination of Aristotelian *Logic*, Platonic *Forms*, elements of Paganism and Eastern and African mysticism (Kilma and Hall, 2011:8). For metaphysical speculation, *the Trinity* was offered as a solution to the gap between the physical and the immaterial or transcendent. Like the system conceived by Plotinus, God was at the top, souls in the middle and material entities at the bottom. From this, Saint Augustine's writings became greatly influential. While his work expanded numerous volumes, he was concerned primarily with

... the transcendence and immateriality of God, the superiority of the unchangeable over the changeable, the ontological hierarchy of God, the incorporeality and immortality of the soul, the dichotomy of the intelligible and the sensible realms and the causal presence of God in his creation. (Kilma and Hall, 2011:12)

⁴⁹ The Christian doctrine that God exists as three persons, the Son, the Father and the Holy Spirit which are not separate beings but one.

Regarding the metaphysical categories, the Medieval period provided some of the greatest contributions to the notions of 'time' and 'cosmology' of what became the 'Western tradition' as such. While each was inseparable from Christian thought, they nonetheless influenced how society was organised and informed. Because the era was so extensive, it is commonly divided into three periods: the Early Middle-Ages, the High Middle-Ages and Late Middle-Ages (Kilma and Hall, 2011:12). Despite this, certain common themes in society were prominently present throughout. That is, informed by the Christian cosmological view, people lived their lives directed by the Christian concepts of heaven and practised faith (Kilma and Hall, 2011:16). Virtue and humility were preached by the Church, while priests, monks and other "men of God" were embodiments of these ideals (Kilma and Hall, 2011:20).

As with the Classical and Hellenistic periods, the decline in Medieval metaphysical speculation was the result of a combination of factors and not just intellectual disagreements. To name a few, first, the Roman Empire had grown too big and could no longer sustain itself. Secondly, "disputes within the leadership of the Church led to the Avignon Papacy of 1309–76 and then to the Great Schism, lasting from 1378 to 1418, when there were two and later three rival popes." (Kilma and Hall, 2011:32) Moreover, the effects of wars, famines, and plagues would result in the questioning of the cosmological outlook which characterised the era. Among medieval scholars, the causes and effects contributing to the decline and eventual fall of the metaphysical outlook which dominated the Medieval Era remain a topic of debate. Despite this, however, the most common narrative is that the scepticism which surrounded the authority of the Church and the mysticism of the time necessitated the rise of a new era: first the Renaissance, followed by the Enlightenment, and what is now known as Modernity as a whole. When denoting the period which gave birth to the Enlightenment and the rest of Modernity, Gillespie refers to it as "the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns." (Gillespie, 2008:5)

By the dawn of the late Middle Ages, the inheritance of the culture and precedence of the Classical and Hellenistic periods were nothing but a distant memory in Western Europe (Tarnas, 1991:171). The former wars with the Barbarians had destroyed the existence of a wider social life held together by higher ideals. Moreover, the Islamic expansion isolated

Western Europe from the knowledge of the Greeks (Tarnas, 1991:176). Thus, Tarnas argues, “cultural progress for the Medieval mind above all signified, and required, the recovery of the ancient texts and their meaning.” (Tarnas, 1991:178) The Scholastic movement is perhaps the most noteworthy attempt to achieve this. Hugh of Saint-Victor (1096 –1141 AD), the writer of the first *Summae Encyclopaedia*⁵⁰ which aimed at comprehending the whole of reality, emphatically proclaimed that “the purpose of the seven liberal arts – the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy) was to restore God’s image in us.” (Tarnas, 1991:179) Furthermore, the Church-funded project of restoring ancient wisdom rapidly grew throughout Europe and was the basis for the development of universities at the time (Tarnas, 1991:184).

The rediscovery of Aristotle’s writing which had been preserved by the Muslims and Byzantines also shifted metaphysical speculation away from the “Christian philosophy forged by Saint Augustine and based on Plato.” (Tarnas, 1991:189). This shift in metaphysical grounding now included Aristotelian notions where “reason now signified not only logic but also empirical observation and experiment; cognition of the natural world.” (Tarnas, 1991:192) The attempted relationship between reason and faith gave rise to a tension Albertus Magnus (1200 – 1280) and his pupil, Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274), attempted to resolve. However, it was from their speculations that the late Medieval universities would eventually favour the arguments presented by the forerunners of the scientific revolutions. (Tarnas, 1991:192) One might argue that from the antithesis of Aquinas and Magnus to the Medieval church arose the early modern thinkers. It was Magnus himself who “asserted the independent value of secular learning and the need for sense perceptions and empirical observation on which to ground one’s knowledge of the natural world.” (Tarnas, 1991:177)

Although Thomas Aquinas had sought to resolve the tension between faith and reason, Arabic philosophers such as Averroes (or Ibn Rushd) (1126 – 1198) taught Aristotelean philosophy without inferring to natural theology. Known as “secularist philosophers”, men

⁵⁰ Also referred to as the *first summa* of theology in the Parisian schools, by the then little-known Biblical interpreter and theologian, Hugh of St. Victor.

such as Averroes began pointing out discrepancies between Aristotelian reasoning and the Christian Revelation. Consequently, the Church prohibited communication between scientific thinkers and thinkers of the faith. (Tarnas, 1991:179) By now, however, scientific reasoning had become a force on its own. Along with the rediscovery of Aristotle, the works of Ptolemy on the subject of Astronomy further challenged the classical views of the Christian faith. William of Ockham (1287 – 1347) planted even deeper the seeds which would later give rise to modern thinking. (Tarnas, 1991:179)

Moreover, the infusion of apostolic faith inspired a discourse between the secular world and Christian Revelation while at the same time re-establishing the relation between nature and grace (Tarnas, 1991:179). Accordingly, the evangelists asserted that “the Word of God was not a remote truth to be cloistered far from humanity’s daily life, but was directly relevant to the immediate particularities of human experience – by its very nature, the gospel required entrance into the world.” (Tarnas, 1991:179) In their highest attainment, Magnus and his pupil, Aquinas, developed a Christian theology which affirmed the Creator’s intelligence within the created world. Epistemologically, “[t]he more the world was explored and understood, the greater knowledge of and reverence for God would result.” (Burt, 2003:86)

The achievements of Aquinas and his mentor Magnus, however, were the foundations for which counter argumentation could arise. In her book, *The Death of Nature* (1980), historian Carolyn Merchant illustrates how in antiquity, “As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it.” (Merchant 1980:3) Although interpretations on the nature of nature often differed, what was unanimously agreed upon was that nature was alive. This notion was nonetheless deeply affected in the twelfth century by the idea of contingency. Through God’s hands, the whole of nature was maintained. It was, however, this valorization of nature which created the conditions by which nature was also taken out of the hands of God. Consequently, this meant that nature would lose its most essential quality: its aliveness. The sun, for example, which the ancients attached to the emergence of God, was to be seen mechanically through

some scientific schema as a result of cosmological causes which could be systematically understood. (Merchant, 1980:7)

The relentless divide between faith and reason slowly further escalated during the onset of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution and finally the Philosophical Revolution, which were pioneered not by theologians but by mathematicians and scientists. While men such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and René Descartes (1596-1650) were believers in the *faith*, they were not primarily concerned with merging faith and reason. Instead, each seemed to assert an equal and distinct place for science and faith. Bacon, for example, believed that a new empirical method of understanding was required after the discoveries of the New World (i.e. new continents outside Europe) (Tarnas, 1991:198). As for Descartes, Burt shows that

... his metaphysics and epistemology was similar to Galileo; the world was to be understood through those objective qualities that can be perceived clearly and distinctly and analysed in quantitative terms, such as; shapes, numbers, durations, specific gravity and positions. (Burt, 2003:68)

This Nominalist Revolution⁵¹ thus led to a growing scepticism towards the dominance of religion in guiding and defining human will, action and knowledge. While the era itself was still predominantly religious, it began to take on a different flavour. A growing sense of humanism during that time soon meant that human beings took centre stage in the order of things, while in the previous eras and among many older civilisations, a deity (or deities) and nature were regarded as central.

⁵¹ Denoting the rise of Nominalism during the Late Middle-Ages, which was a school of thought which asserts that physical particular things exist prior any abstraction being laden upon it.

2.2. Modern Skepticism and the rejection of Western Metaphysics

2.2.1. The return of Naturalism and the dawn of the Scientific Era

14th century Italy further inspired what would later become known as the Renaissance man, or a Renaissance person. Within a single era, movements from various social platforms began cementing what became the modern world view. Copernicus (1473-1543), for example, pioneered a heliocentric universe⁵²; Martin Luther (1483-1546), in a different context, rebelled against the Catholic Church and established the Reformation (Tarnas, 1991:225). At the same time, in the art world, the great Michelangelo (1475-1564), Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Raphael (1483-1520) all produced works unprecedented in style, focus and emphasis. These Renaissance persons shared one thing in common: they were all rebelling against the status quo, the established ways of their Medieval predecessors (Tarnas, 1991:225).

The Renaissance man was now capable of penetrating and reflecting nature's secrets, in art as well as science, with unparalleled mathematical sophistication, empirical precision, and numinous aesthetic power. He had immensely expanded the known world, discovered new continents, and rounded the globe. Polyphonic music, tragedy, and comedy, poetry, painting, architecture, and sculpture all achieved new levels of complexity and beauty. Individual genius and independence were widely in evidence. No domain of knowledge, creativity, or exploration seemed beyond man's reach. (Tarnas, 1991:225)

With the humanist emphasis of the Renaissance, human life was seen as sacred, while the aspiration towards a heavenly afterlife of the former medieval era and before was replaced by the potential of a heaven on Earth. In this regard, the Renaissance can be considered as encompassing the resurgence of a humane European spirit after the murky mysticism and carnage of the Dark Ages. With the likes of William Shakespeare, Galileo, Machiavelli, Bruni and Bacon to follow, "the Renaissance did not cease in producing new

⁵² The accepted astronomical model of the sun being the centre of the solar system and not the Earth as it was thought in prior, particularly Christian models.

paragons of human achievement.” (Tarnas, 1991:225) Art works, architecture and science were all characterised by an insistence on human values and beauty. The German astronomer and mathematician Michael Maestlin (1550-1631) went as far as to invent the Golden ratio, a mathematical principle which is known to measure beauty (Tarnas, 1991:225).

Together with these metaphysical transformations, the Renaissance further brought with it the modern conception of the State. The weakening Roman Catholic Empire in Italy created an opportunity for Florence, Milan, Venice and others to develop city states that were independent of the Church (Tarnas, 1991:227). It is from these conditions that the Italian diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) produced his masterpiece, *The Prince* (1532). Accordingly,

[w]hereas in earlier times, the life of the state was defined by inherited structures of power and law, now, individual ability and deliberate political action and thought carried the most weight; the state itself was seen as something to be comprehended and manipulated by human will and intelligence. (Tarnas, 1991:227)

The creative element of the human spirit could not be denied; it permeated throughout all spheres of society. However, for all its achievements, the Renaissance failed to provide an epistemology that would replace its former counterpart. As mentioned above, Renaissance society was after all religious, and consequently God was still hierarchically dominant. Although the Renaissance was human centric, in its transcendent aspect, God remained superior to man and this had certain effects on society as a whole. In philosophical life, one was compelled by the dictates of the time to posit any thesis on a theological basis, for even the discoveries by Nicolaus Copernicus were soon forced to correlate with the scripture. In art works also, the religious undertones were present: *The Creation of Adam* by Renaissance man Michelangelo is perhaps one of the most recognisable paintings to have ever been created. The developing emphasis on the human subject further led to a brimming belief in the power of the human mind to create

his environment as he or she pleased; what René Descartes would years later call the *cogito*⁵³ was nothing but an intellectual schema of the creative spirit of the human subject.

Furthermore, the Renaissance laid the platform which allowed for serious and rigorous intellectual attention to be paid to the human subject and all its potential. The two revolutions in philosophy and science⁵⁴ were a continuation of the Renaissance era with less emphasis on religious motives which often characterised the offerings of the time. Among historians and intellectuals from various fields, the exact dates of these revolutions are debated.

While the major difference between the Renaissance and the two revolutions lay in the method by which rationality was applied, the humanism of the Renaissance resulted in an emphasis on beauty, art and other pleasant human creations. These ideals of course were reactions to a necessary renewal of the European human spirit after the “demographic, cultural and economic deterioration” of the Dark Ages (Scruton, 1981:168). As a result, the Renaissance was successful first in elevating the European human person.

However, the emergence of secularism, which arose from the increased scepticism following the Nominalist Revolution, resulted in philosophers pondering the limitations of the teleological understanding of the world. Moreover, the appraisal of human intelligence and its capacity to create its own world further led to questions about its understanding and comprehensibility of the external world. Whereas in former times the external world was explained in synonymous intellectual schemas with a deity, a need for measurable techniques soon became apparent.

The mathematician, Copernicus, was the most prominent among the pioneers of the Modern Age. Prior to his discoveries however, Copernicus was not only looking for theories which would see him dubbed the “father of Science”; he was instead hoping to expand on his knowledge of ancient Greece (Scruton, 1981:310). Ironically, the discoveries made by Copernicus were commissioned by the Church who had hoped to

⁵³ Denoting the conscious aspect of humankind.

⁵⁴ The Nominalist Revolution in philosophy and the Scientific Revolution in the sciences.

further strengthen its hold over liturgical matters (Scruton, 1981:168). As a result, Copernicus was allowed unlimited access to Ancient Greek manuscripts where he discovered the works of Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle (Tarnas, 1991:248). Armed with Aristotle's geocentric conception, Neoplatonist conceptions of the sun and Pythagorean theorems, "Copernicus hypothesized a Sun centered universe with a planetary Earth and mathematically worked out the implications." (Tarnas, 1991:248) Naturally, these discoveries completely called into question the authority of the Church as it related to scientific matters. Although people did not abandon religion, a divide inevitably resulted due to the usefulness in practical matters science often offered. From this perspective, science was a useful tool to navigate one's environment, while religion addressed matters of the spirit. However, the tension between faith and science became more and more apparent. Those who dared followed Copernicus's discoveries were banished by the Inquisition, and as for his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*), it was placed on the index of forbidden books.

According to Iain McGilchrist, the divide between faith and science during the 16th century gave modernity its rebellious character towards authority and anything which came before it (2009:26). Furthermore, according to McGilchrist, it divided the "Head from the Heart" (2009:26). As more "Men of Science" became prominent, the need to rebel against the dictates of the Church became apparent. As a result, it was with time prudent to separate science (rationality, the head) from faith (spirituality, emotion, the heart). The consequence of this decision would later haunt humanity, not only with the horrors of the twentieth century, including brutal colonial projects, World War I and II, and the industrial nature of Stalinism in the USSR, but in the heartless manner technological innovations would be later used.⁵⁵

However, the German mathematician Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) was somewhat successful in expanding Copernicus's notions by making them compatible with faith.

⁵⁵ For a deeper discussion on the dialectical nature of this separation between "head and heart", and particularly as it related to supposedly "progressive" technological innovations (McGilchrist, 2009:26), see Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's thesis on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. An analysis of this topic falls beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Accordingly, the sun was for Kepler the central image of God, and mathematical schemas were mere tools in understanding the “celestial harmony of the spheres” through which a divinity expressed itself (McGilchrist, 2009:125). According to McGilchrist, Kepler’s insights saved the Scientific Revolution, for “without the aesthetic and harmonic superiority of Kepler’s system, the Revolution might have not endured.” (McGilchrist, 2009:125)

Moreover, the tension between science and faith was not always present among German philosophers⁵⁶. Being idealists first, it seemed for them that scientific discoveries were only tools in understanding the divine – or at least as far as men could comprehend. For the Italians, conversely, theory or ideas were second to the physical world. An idea was superior only if it could be observed or, even better, created into existence. The leading figure of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci, articulated, designed and engineered machines of all kinds, including war-machines, a robotic knight, scuba diving gear, artificial dams and the infamous “flying machine” (Scruton, 1981:168). The mechanistic philosophy, which asserts that existence is one big machine composed of independent parts without any relationship to each other, can thus be traced back to 15th century Italy. Interestingly, mechanistic philosophy is also the basis for modern science, its highest expression found among the empiricists. However, before the rise of empiricism, the insistence on reason which had been established by the Renaissance saw the growth of the rationalist school of thought.

Spearheaded by French philosopher, René Descartes (1596-1650), the rationalist school of thought hoped to escape the epistemological confines of the mind by constructing knowledge of the external world and the self out of the simplest, indubitable ideas possessed innately by the mind. For rationalists, the world was knowable *a priori*⁵⁷, through an analysis of ideas and derivations done through logical analysis. For example, using reason, one can understand a phenomena through an analysis of the insinuations regarding it. In application, the use of reason serves as a heuristic technique (i.e.

⁵⁶ Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling & Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel among others.

⁵⁷Defined by the Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy (2020) as, “A priori justification is a type of epistemic justification that is, in some sense, independent of experience”.

discovery tool) to guide theorists in the development of theoretical models (Scruton, 1981:168).

Descartes, unlike the Italians, did not systematically question the authority of the Church in scientific matters. As a result, his work was allowed to endure. At a later point in his life, he even tried to prove the existence of God in a rational manner, although his assertions have been criticised for being circular and contradictory (Scruton, 1994:168). Among its many achievements, the rationalist school of thought is considered the most successful in reviving the role of 'hypothesis' in science. Although Descartes himself followed mechanistic philosophy, he did not, however, praise its role as first in the order of things. For him, it seemed machines were nothing but clever inventions, and the world was only mechanical because that is how we know how to perceive and conceive of it. As a result, Descartes insisted on the primacy of the *cogito* (i.e. thought) aspect of human nature. Decades later, Immanuel Kant would establish the rational school methodology with the famous *a priori* (transcendental) categories of the mind (Scruton, 1994:168).

From the Cartesian premise then, rationalism would become the primary scientific / mathematical / philosophical schema during the late Renaissance phase. However, rationalism had its own pitfalls. The mathematician Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), for example, had already expressed his dissatisfaction regarding the inability to observe the consequences of mathematical hypotheses. Consequently, Galileo, from the work of Leonardo da Vinci, sought to invent mechanical tools to accurately measure physical phenomena. The telescope was among these innovations; with it, Galileo was able to both prove and further expand Kepler's discoveries (Scruton, 1994:168). The need to observe phenomena became more and more apparent, especially in Italy where mechanistic philosophy had dominated for years. Throughout Europe however, the rationalists of the Renaissance Era were still enjoying primacy of philosophical reverence.

The end of science being answered by a rational / hypothetical schema came after its perceived failure in answering definitively the question of 'motion'. Works by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) were widely accepted but they were too mathematical, not practical enough. The young British genius Isaac Newton (1643-1727) is further said to have expressed dissatisfaction with Cartesian methodology, and had attempted to solve

the problem of motion (Tarnas, 1991:267). He did, however, combine works by Copernicus, Kepler and Descartes to arrive at his “Three Laws of Motion” and, consequently, “the Scientific Revolution, the birth of the Modern Era was now complete.” (Tarnas, 1991:271)

Man’s role in the universe could be best judged on the evidence that, by virtue of his own intelligence, he had penetrated the universe’s essential order and could now use that knowledge for his own benefit and empowerment. One could scarcely doubt that man was the crown of creation. (Tarnas, 1991:271)

As it related to philosophical matters, prior to Newton’s discoveries, scepticism towards the limitations of rationality was expressed by those who questioned its assertions of a mind independent of experience. Italian polymath Paolo Sarpi (1552-1623) was the most noteworthy thinker to point out this perceived flaw in rationalist philosophy. In his 1609 book, *Arte di Ben Pensare (Art of Thinking Well)*, “Sarpi expressed what he deemed a list of wrong ideas, all which hindered good thinking.” (Tarpley, 1993:110) Among these was the idea of the soul. According to Sarpi, “there is no thought which is not mixed with sense impressions, no part of our mental life is free of matter and as of consequence the soul does not exist, since it has no immaterial substance.” (Tarpley, 1981:110) For Sarpi then, the existence of a soul could be entertained by rationalists since it implied prior experience, and for him such an assertion proved the impracticality of the school of thought. Furthermore, figures such as Galileo, who himself was inspired by the writings of Sarpi, called for a revolution in methodology. Rationalism was but hypothesis – a new practical schema was necessary.

Although no definitive method existed to combat the rationalist school, the philosophical writings of Sarpi had laid the foundation for what would be later referred to as empiricism. According to Edward Tarpley, “Sarpi is the basis of everything written by Sir Francis Bacon.” (Tarpley, 1981:72). Bacon (1561-1626), of course, is the most prominent figure in establishing the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment. Adam Smith, David Hume, John Locke, Francis Hutcheson and many others were all empiricists; they believed in solving matters first by looking at them from a practical and realistic methodology. Empiricists thus were characterised by their insistence on practical solutions, inventions of tools to measure

cause and effect, and their departure from the aesthetically conscious and hypothetical / *a priori* rationality of the Renaissance. Instead, emphasis was placed on the possibilities of human intelligence, his or her freedom, and his ability to create tools to navigate the world s/he now possessed without the need of a deity to look over him or her. From this, rationality became an instrument humanity could use against nature and delusions of a God.

The Enlightenment era which was characterised by the empirical sciences, human freedom, and its capacity to create, proceeded shortly after this Scientific Revolution.

2.2.2. The Enlightenment

The discoveries of the Scientific Revolution, in particular those of Newton, had further increased similar aspirations within the philosophical community. The Natural Sciences had attained such a level of accuracy and measurability that they soon became the premium standard in academia. The mechanistic philosophy established in earlier times was similarly enjoying its prime with the emergence of the initial Industrial Revolution (Scruton, 1994:168). In an instant, machines revolutionised the way work was done. Industrial economies, particularly that of Britain at the time, were faced with a new social order centred around production and commerce. For Francis Bacon,

[t]he discovery of the New World by the Global explorers demanded a corresponding new mental world in which old patterns of thinking, traditional prejudices, subjective distortions, verbal confusions, and general intellectual blindness would be overcome by a new method of acquiring knowledge. This method was to be fundamentally empirical; through the careful observation of nature and the skilful devising of many and varied experiments in the context of organized research, the human mind could gradually elicit those laws and generalizations that would give man the understanding of nature necessary for its control. (Tarnas, 1991:272)

For Socrates, Aristotle, Plato and other key figures, knowledge was often equated with virtue; Bacon, on the other hand, equated knowledge with domination and power (Tarnas, 1991:272). Like Niccolò Machiavelli, Bacon took a view of society which was utilitarian.

For him, the rationalism of former philosophers lacked objective validity and as such was often in danger of “spinning out of itself into an endless web of abstractions.” (Tarnas, 1991:273)

Moreover, the new empirical method was similarly opposed to natural theology. For Bacon, matters of faith could be understood with scripture but matters of nature needed careful observation and experimentation. Interestingly, Bacon was also a man of faith and as far as he saw it, the separation was necessary in so far as it was practical. Accordingly, the human senses would guide the new process of discovery. For Bacon, the philosopher’s task was to discover observable phenomena in the natural world; what Immanuel Kant would later popularise as *a posteriori*⁵⁸ knowledge was an articulation of the empirical method. Unlike Kant however, Bacon wanted to completely remove mathematics from the process of discovery. Since it was theoretical first, Bacon saw mathematics as likely to be liable to the same pitfalls of rationalism and natural theory. Although Bacon’s vision was not completely achieved in his lifetime, he was successful in proposing a scientific schema based on an empirical foundation, a domination of nature, and the separation of science and religion. Francis Hutcheson, another major philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment, adopted Bacon’s method, while David Hume “helped outline the parameters of philosophical Empiricism.” (Scruton, 1994: 352)

Broadly speaking then, the empirical method of Bacon along with the discoveries of Newton greatly characterised the process of discovery during the Enlightenment. Under the title of Natural Philosophy, studies of nature were separated into “physics and a conglomerate grouping of chemistry and natural history, which included anatomy, biology, geology, mineralogy and zoology.” (Kuhn, 1962:36)

The Empirical method mentioned above inspired within philosophy questions of how the human *cogito* comprehended the world and thus constructed knowledge from sense impressions. According to Tarnas, “[i]t was above all John Locke, Newton’s contemporary and Bacon’s heir, who set the tone for the Enlightenment by affirming the foundational

⁵⁸ Defined by the Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy (2020), “a posteriori justification requires more than merely understanding a proposition. Observations based on our senses, or introspection about our current mental state, are needed for us to be empirically, or a posteriori, justified in believing that some proposition is true.”

principle of empiricism: there is nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses.” (Tarnas, 1991:333) Whereas Bacon was successful in establishing the empirical method as primary in studying the external world, he did not with the same thoroughness as Descartes extend his method in understanding the human mind and its relationship with the world. Influenced thus by Newton, Bacon and the other Royal Society scholars, Locke constructed the empirically oriented idea of the mind first in opposition to the Cartesian assertion of innate ideas, and secondly, in establishing the empirically oriented Self as the epistemological framework of the human mind.

For Locke, sensory experience was the basis by which we come to know the world. Accordingly, simple sensory impressions combine within the mind to form more complex concepts such as our experience of beauty, taste and smells. Furthermore, “[s]ense impressions and inner reflections are two foundations of knowledge from whence all the ideas we have or can naturally have do spring.” (Tarnas, 1991:333) From the above assertion, Locke further suggested that prior to experience, the human was a “blank slate” (*tabula rasa*) upon which sensory experiences are drawn (Tarnas 1991:333). From the blank slate, which is filled by sense impressions, the human mind builds complex explanations “... by means of its own introspective and compounding operations.” (Tarnas, 1991:333) In the final analysis of the Lockean methodology, “cognition begins with sensation”; the mind does have innate powers of assessment, but it does not possess innate ideas as suggested by the rationalists, especially Descartes (Tarnas, 1991:333).

Despite these clear-cut assertions, and despite the success empiricism was enjoying among natural philosophers and machinists, Locke’s ideas of the mind were not without opposition. Finished in 1704, but only published 30 years after Locke’s death, out of admiring respect, *New Essays on Human Understanding* by Gottfried Leibniz put into question the schema of the empirically oriented mind. For Leibniz, a primarily empirically orientated self could not exist as new epistemology since it fails to address the Cartesian dualist problem of mind and matter (Scruton, 1994:345). Consequently, for Leibniz, Locke’s empirical epistemology of the mind was an extension of the rationalist schema with an emphasis not on the mind’s processes but on how it receives the information it processes. Accordingly, “[a]ll mental representation of supposed material substances are

finally ideas to the mind and therefore the existence of a material world external to the mind is an unwarranted assumption.” (Scruton, 1994:345) Moreover, for Leibniz, “[a]ll that can be known with certainty to exist is the mind and its ideas, including those that seem to represent a material world.” (Scruton, 1994:345)

Leibniz’s counter argument against Locke put the rationalists’ and empiricists’ battle at a deadlock for almost three decades. While in the so-called ‘hard sciences’, physics was without opposition enjoying dominance over mathematics, in philosophy it was not so. The empirical schema of the human mind simply could not offer a metaphysical narrative of its existence. It was not until 1740, with the publication of David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, that a definitive metaphysical defence of empiricism would come into existence. For Hume, there was a necessary distinction between sensory impressions and ideas. What rationalists called ‘innate ideas’ were for Hume abstract interpretations of an unknowable mind. What could be understood instead was the cause of these sensory impressions on the mind to generate ideas. Hume’s famous notion of *causality* was thus derived from this question. Accordingly, “[t]he mind may perceive that one event, A, is repeatedly followed by another event, B, and on that basis the mind may project that A causes B but in actuality these are only associations by the mind onto reality.” (Scruton, 1994:337)

What perhaps made Hume’s writings so profound were his conclusions. Unlike those before him, namely Locke, Descartes, Leibniz and Kepler, Hume’s metaphysical system in fact threatened the whole of Western metaphysics. What this means is that for Hume, metaphysics epitomised the pitfalls of the rationalist system; although he did not refute all of rationalism, he did reject what he referred to as *pure reason*, that is, “logical conclusions of pre-determined conclusions.” (Scruton, 1994:337) From this background, Hume essentially rejected all of metaphysics – except his own, which was predicated on irrefutable sensory data.

Although Hume’s complicated system of metaphysics had not quite ruined the rationalist school, it would soon force it to abandon its close ties to metaphysical narratives. In fact, Leibniz, and later Immanuel Kant, exist as the last rationalists to have written in length on questions of metaphysics. The Age of Enlightenment had attained its goal: the empirical

model to understanding things became with time and with each passing generation the main model of comprehending the world.

While it is far from a holistic picture to suggest that post Enlightenment all visages of metaphysical speculation were discarded, what the Enlightenment truly achieved was a model of interpreting reality which was not only consistent with its assertions but appeared to be independent of the human mind and its perceived errors. This model is referred to as the 'scientific method'. To fast forward to the present day, the statement that something is not scientific is synonymous with the assertion that it is not true; it is not consistent with the model of reality prized by the Enlightenment. While this thesis is far from presenting an indictment of the scientific method, it does take issue with the fact that it came to encompass all of humankind's endeavours and was further exported as such. In particular, the modern tendency to focus on the parts and not the whole, which for mathematics, for example, is an acceptable approach, is almost unimaginable when applied to intimate relations among people. Thus, the tendency towards scientific pedantism in all aspects of human existence is argued here as being a symptom of the modern age.

While a counter-Enlightenment (encompassing reservations towards empiricism) sentiment within the West can be traced back to as early as the 17th century with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and throughout the modern age itself, for example, in certain aspects of Baruch Spinoza's metaphysics⁵⁹ and Romanticism⁶⁰ there were counter-Enlightenment expressions, the rise of the British Empire would come to eclipse world views that were not naturalistic / empirical. In similar fashion to Alexander and his cosmopolitan outlook, or the Roman Empire with its Christian Theology, the British Empire would eventually modernise the world. In attempting to locate the sources of the Enlightenment, Hicks notes:

⁵⁹ Briefly, Baruch Spinoza was also a rationalist following Descartes but at the same time challenging Descartes. His pantheism is especially important – namely, the unity of spirit and nature. He didn't believe in the Christian God, but rather a kind of creator or intellect.

⁶⁰ "The Romantic era was an intellectual movement that originated in Europe towards the end of the 18th century. It was partly a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, the aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment, and the scientific rationalisation of nature—all components of modernity." (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

.....all of them English, most often identified as being most influential in making the Enlightenment possible are: Francis Bacon, for his work on empiricism and scientific method; Isaac Newton, for his work on physics; and John Locke, for his work on reason, empiricism, and liberal politics. (Hicks, 2004:25)

Furthermore, the growth of trade, coupled by Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), particularly the idea of *cheap labour costs and factors of production*⁶¹, soon meant that the more developed nations, Britain at first, then France, Netherlands and later Portugal, were also the most affluent of nations. From here, the earliest roots of modern imperialism were planted, as discussed in Chapter One;⁶² profit was one of the central drives in developing colonies across the Southern Hemisphere. Despite this, however, certain German thinkers continued their assault on the Enlightenment:

Enlightenment reason, the critics charged, undermined traditional religion. The leading Enlightenment thinkers were deists, having abandoned the traditional theistic conception of God. God was no longer a personal, caring creator—he was now the supreme mathematician who had aeons ago designed the universe in terms of the beautiful equations that Johannes Kepler and Newton had discovered (Hicks 2004:25)

Writing in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche grieved that “[t]hey are no philosophical race, these Englishmen: Bacon signifies an attack on the philosophical spirit; Hobbes, Hume, and Locke a debasement and lowering of the value of the concept of philosophy for more than a century.” (Nietzsche in Hicks 2004:252) Famously awaking philosophy from its dogmatic slumber,⁶³ Kant's work⁶⁴ arose in response to Hume. Other German and later French thinkers included:

... Schelling who said of Locke, *je méprise Locke* (I despise Locke); in their fight against the English-mechanistic dollification of the world, Hegel and

⁶¹ See *Wealth of Nations* (1776)

⁶² European colonialism spread out to the continent of Africa, where African philosophies began to grapple with the loss of their traditional metaphysics, and in the post-colonial context with the revival and redefinition of it (it being a distinctly African metaphysical system/set of beliefs?).

⁶³ See *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783).

⁶⁴ Specifically relating to Kant's “Copernican revolution” in philosophy.

Schopenhauer were of one mind (with Goethe)—these two hostile brother geniuses in philosophy who strove apart toward opposite poles of the German spirit and in the process wronged each other as only brothers wrong each other. (Hicks, 2004:56)

While the counter-Enlightenment spirit has remained strong in philosophy, from Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx to Heidegger, the rise of the United States of America, the brainchild of John Locke, and the shining symbol of capitalism, would politically inspire a spirit of the Enlightenment throughout Europe. Whenever attempts were made to push back against this, the results were disastrous. To mention just a few, Rousseau inspired the deadly French Revolution; the event of the wide prosecutions and witch hunts of the *Young Hegelians*; the horrors of various interpretations of Karl Marx's communist ideals; and the misinterpretation of Nietzsche inspiring aspects of the Nazi regime. While conclusions vary as to what exactly the *crisis of the West* is and entails, this dissertation asserts it is the modern West's inability to find its spirit, its metaphysics in the wake of modernity⁶⁵ (as has been briefly delineated within this chapter).

The following chapter aims to look at how African metaphysical systems have been victim of the West's desire to multiply itself, particularly its naturalistic outlook, and to what effect. As such, in a positive manner then, Chapter Three attempts to provide a reconstruction and defence of alternatives to the dominant historical Western systems as laid out over the course of this chapter.

Furthermore, it will also be elucidated how several aspects of what is found in post-Enlightenment Western metaphysics (particularly in Spinoza's pantheism, Romanticism's emphasis on the power of nature, tradition, culture, etc., and Heidegger (his notion of *Dasein* in particular) are very much already present in many pre-colonial systems of African metaphysics. It is thus to these African metaphysical systems that this dissertation will now turn.

⁶⁵ It is unfortunately not within the scope of this dissertation to discuss counter-Enlightenment assertions within Europe. The focus of this dissertation is rather to consider alternatives to the naturalism of the Enlightenment outside of Europe.

CHAPTER THREE: PRE-COLONIAL AFRICAN METAPHYSICS

3.1. In defence of ethnophilosophy

Without pretence, it must be stated that Chapter Three is largely an ethnophilosophical⁶⁶ study itself, despite the concerns relating to ethnophilosophy raised in the first chapter. As such, it is prudent to further discuss the potential/heuristic merits of this controversial trend before going forward. As stated in the conclusion to Chapter One, this dissertation rejects a number of the critiques against ethnophilosophy. Instead, this study builds on the premise that critics of ethnophilosophy unreasonably require that the trend of doing Africa adhere to external standards of philosophical speculation, the standards of which, through academic understanding as a result of socio-historical progressions (namely, colonialism and later imperialism), are Western and for those who ignore the colonial history of the world. The common argument by many European scholars is that since Western systems of thought have been in gradual development for millennia, all avenues for human philosophical speculation have thus been explored (Scruton, 1994:2).

In defence of this particular paternalistic argument, Roger Scruton argued that each age in the development of Western philosophy proved by means of its shortcomings the limitations of that school of thought and the necessity for the evolution of another (Scruton, 1994:2). For instance, the pre-Socratics who defined the world by means of metaphors were succeeded by Aristotle, who invented logic and, by consequence, systematic thinking (Scruton, 1994:3). From this example and many more in his book, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy, from Descartes to Wittgenstein*, Scruton concludes: "Western philosophy ought to be regarded as all of human philosophy since it has explored all avenues for speculation." (Scruton, 1994:5) Moreover, according to this argument, those

⁶⁶ In addition to the works cited in this section, more recent works in defence of ethnophilosophy further include Barry Hellen's (2010) *Ethnophilosophy Redefined?*, Katrin Flikschuh (2017) *Conciencism: Nkrumah's Philosophy in Action: Between Ideology and Ethnophilosophy* and DA Masolo (1998) *Ethnophilosophy, African*.

who argue for a separation of Western standards from other philosophical systems do so not for the development of ideas but for historical-political reasons.

In this dissertation, however, the above described notion is rejected on the ground that it contrasts two different instances, namely “a discursive, analytical philosophy in contrast to a descriptive anthropology.” (Imbo, 1998:55) The former refers to processes (scientific) by which philosophical assertions should be guided, while in the latter case, a philosophy is judged by how it guides a people. As such, ethnophilosophical assertions are less concerned with being scientifically rational. Additionally, critics of ethnophilosophy, particularly those who like Hountondji argue that African philosophy should emulate scientific rationalism, do not in terms of the history of ideas acknowledge that the growth of naturalism within the West arguably also led to the decline in philosophical assertions deemed non-empirical. As mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation is built upon the premise that the “crisis of the West” resulted from its lost metaphysical speculations. This was discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter and will be returned to in Chapter Four.

Hountondji, the most prominent critic of ethnophilosophy, is likewise somewhat reserved regarding the general make-up of this trend. Accordingly, one must understand the collective proclamations to which ethnophilosophy is largely characterised but not regarded as philosophy. In the book, *An Introduction to African Philosophy*, Samuel Oluoch Imbo (1998) summarises Hountondji’s position as follows, and then turns on it:

Philosophy should reflect the expression of personal interpretations rather than the collective thought of “Africans” or “Bantu” in general. The disciples of Tempels and the negritude poets begin by describing the collective values of a people. Then, without warning, they switch to a defense and reclamation of these values. This is not, however, how conventional philosophy should proceed. Philosophy should first attempt to justify the values to be reclaimed. (Imbo, 1998:55)

While indeed ethnophilosophical proclamations tend to reflect collective beliefs, they are not thought of by the collective since there is no such thing as a collective brain. Instead, they are passed down into the collective by, for example, a tribe's sage or an individual elder. The lack of a traceable reference to the original source due to the oratory nature within the tradition is the result of this misconception. For example, if Hountondji's beliefs were held as a universal practice, similarly Aristotle's ethics of moderation would be rejected if they were a Greek cultural practice with no reference to the scholar himself. A better example is perhaps that of Socrates, the famous ancient Greek scholar without any written text to his name. It is from this realisation that ethnophilosophical scholars such as Placide Tempels, Alexis Kagame, and John Mbiti, together with Cheik Anta Diop, Leopold Senghor, and Ogotemmeli build their work (Imbo, 1998:55). In defence of ethnophilosophy, Imbo further notes:

The unwritten and un-systematized indigenous cosmologies which are believed to be interwoven into the complex ritual practices are for ethnophilosophers, manifestation of philosophy. Such cosmological outlooks form an intricate web that guides the people in making sense of their lives. Through a description of the rituals and beliefs, the cosmology and religious worldview of the people can be reconstructed. (Imbo, 1998:56)

This chapter then, provides a reconstruction of some of the most prominent ethnophilosophical claims and beliefs throughout Africa. Since the focus of this study is on metaphysics, such proclamations will fall under the metaphysical categories of ontology, cosmology and time. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first is a description of the method of metaphysics used throughout this dissertation. The second section is a reconstruction of pre-colonial metaphysical speculation. Section Three then discusses the decline of African metaphysics with illustrative examples.

3.2. The general field of Metaphysics

Realising that there are disagreements within academia about the meaning of and what constitutes metaphysics, it is necessary to establish a conceptual understanding of

metaphysics within the context of this particular dissertation. Adopting the definition by example method, metaphysics is a study into “the nature of existence.” (Bahm, 1974:6) Since the concept of existence is quite broad, *categories* of study are branches from the trunk of metaphysics. Thus, narrowly defined, metaphysics becomes a discipline of study “which enquires into the universal nature of existence and its categories.” (Bahm, 1974:7) *Space, time, purpose* and *relation* are some of the most commonly used categories within metaphysics (Bahm, 1974: 10). They each represent a key characteristic feature of existence and are by their very nature mostly universal to the human experience.

The choice to use *universal categories* in defining metaphysics is a result of the comparative nature of this dissertation. For example, in discussing the category of *time* within African metaphysics, the primary interest is not to investigate if this is recognised in one culture or not. Rather, *the concern is how it is recognised and what impact it might have in their respective thought systems*. As such, these categories are universal, while how they manifest is specific (by ‘manifest’, it is meant how they are understood within a thought system). This then follows the *platial* approach put forward by Janz in his phenomenological approach to African Philosophy, as discussed in Chapter One.

There are generally two methods of metaphysical inquiry: the first presupposes human consciousness as primary, while the second method regards external reality as primary. With regard to the first method:

Metaphysics takes its point of departure from the nature of human experience as *a whole*. Its methods are the *analysis of* experience in its totality in order to determine its main features and their interconnections; and the *synthesis* of the results of analysis into a consistent and comprehensive conception of the meanings and implications of experience. (Leighton, 1992:6; author’s emphasis)

This dissertation draws from this particular approach to metaphysics, as it regards as needing serious consideration the human experience of actual events and their implications, *which systematically are called philosophies*. Drawing from the work on metaphysics by Joseph Leighton, this study further builds on the notion that human experience is always in flux, moving from reality to itself and back again (Leighton, 1992:6). The task of such analysis is then to deduce and systematically interpret the

philosophies of this process. In some instances, the task is even more daunting, in that the metaphysician often works *with no philosophical framework at all*. For example, Tempels was giving neither a critique nor summary of the Bantu people's philosophy in his region; rather, he had to construct an entire anthropological and metaphysical outlook based on his interaction with the Bantu. This method of metaphysics is not independent of reality but "draws from actual experience and finds in actual experience the justification for its constructive work." (Leighton, 1992:6). As such, the metaphysician of this kind is faced with the problem as to how far, and in what directions the inquiry should be drawn. Accordingly, the metaphysician who "is warranted in transcending the actual has to keep in mind the impermanence of experience and the immense difficulties which confront the attempt to make consistent, the implications deduced." (Leighton, 1992:6)

The technique by which this method of metaphysics is conducted does often vary; in some instances, it is completely new, unique to the author. Cheikh Anta Diop for example, whose historical constructions can be deemed as *an Afrocentric historiography*, "assumes a high level of unity between the different traditional African cosmologies." (Imbo, 1998:57) According to Diop's cosmological system, "African civilizations are made within a metaphysical and epistemological framework that presumes an essential unity among the different African cultures." (Imbo, 1998:59). Like Diop, John Mbiti's *religious ethnography* builds on the idea of a unity among African cosmologies, while attempting to offer an essentially Africanised version of Christianity (Imbo, 1998:59). Mbiti's system moreover proposes an inseparability between the ontological and the cosmological among African cultures (Imbo, 1998:59). Accordingly:

Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the field where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop. Africans therefore utilize a different ontology from that of Europeans. It is an ontology according to which the African is in deep and intimate worship in his or her every action. Thus, the tree is revered not as a specialized edifice for worship but because of its symbolic strength, longevity, and stability. (Imbo, 1998:59)⁶⁷

⁶⁷ This description of the essentially religious nature of the African person can also be found in orthodox traditional peoples around the world, particularly those who have "lagged behind" or resisted the modern trend of the

Regardless of the approach to which metaphysical speculations of the first kind are constructed, they collectively partake in the premise that experience is the basis of all metaphysical inquiry. This approach places the subject or experient at centre; thus, all metaphysical notions are a systematic interpretation of the experience which gives the human subject meaning. As summarised by Leighton, “[t]he main aim of metaphysics is the attainment of a synthetic or synoptic interpretation of the meaning of experience in its wholeness.” (Leighton, 1992:10)

The second method to metaphysical inquiry, as mentioned above, is characteristic to the West and has since the 17th century dictated modern systems of thought.⁶⁸ This method is built on the primacy of existence, on placing objective reality over consciousness or experience (Kuhn, 1962:104). Accordingly, consciousness is seen as a *perceiving* and not a *creating* entity (Murdoch, 1992:147). Functionally then, the primary task of consciousness in this schema is to understand objective reality in accordance with the scientific method (Murdoch, 1992:147). Taken to its logical extreme, the second method of metaphysical inquiry goes as far as to envision a universe without the consciousness of human beings; it prides itself as knowledge which is “independent of human consciousness.” (Murdoch, 1992:148) This was discussed in great detail in Chapter Two.

Since metaphysics as a concept is such a broad term and essentially covers all there is to study about existence, it is necessary, as mentioned earlier, to divide the field into categories. Categories are guided by the questions a metaphysician intends to speculate upon. For example, those who ponder on the nature of “being, becoming, existence or reality” are dealing with *ontology* (Carroll and Markosian, 2010:11). Other common categories include “causation, freedom and determinism, laws of nature, time, material

secularised individual. Liturgical participation still dictates the rhythms of these peoples (provide a reference here). However, the aim in this thesis is not to provide a comparative study of traditional peoples; it is to look specifically at the nature of pre-colonial African people as it has been recorded and passed down.

⁶⁸ Post-Enlightenment Western metaphysics has begun to lean more towards the former (experiential approach) than the latter (as can be found in Heidegger’s existential phenomenology). This again indicates that following the disenchantment of Western metaphysics after the Middle Ages, attempts to re-enchant Western society (via thinkers/schools of thought such as?) seem to show a remarkable similarity to pre-colonial African metaphysical systems and beliefs - can you provide some additional clarity and elaboration on this point and the ‘remarkable similarity’ mentioned as it appears to be crucial in relation to your entire project.

objects and their properties.” (Carroll and Markosian 2010:7). In line with the focus of this study, three of the numerous metaphysical categories will be discussed, namely: *ontology*, *cosmology*, and *time*. It should be remembered that the intention of this study is to evaluate which aspects of African metaphysics could contribute to the contemporary discussion on the possibility of an alternative modernity. Taking into consideration anti-colonial and post-colonial African philosophy, this research intends to make an African-based contribution to the contemporary debate on how one could conceive of an alternative modernity. This study thus aims at offering a social antidote (critique), in that it is not an intellectual assessment aspiring either to invalidate or develop concepts. As such, the categories chosen best serve this purpose, and in accordance with the primacy of consciousness, the metaphysical method described above, the three categories are discussed with relation to the human experience.

3.3. Pre-colonial Metaphysics: a reconstruction

As the title suggests, pre-colonial metaphysics encompasses the various thought systems practised across what became known as Africa, before the intrusion of the West during the period of European colonialism and the resulting cultural imperialism. This does not necessarily suggest that there was a unified African knowledge system before colonialism; rather, the reference is to the pre-colonial era before European countries began enforcing their cultural standards onto the entire African continent through religious, economic, political, and cultural conquest. As such, pre-colonial African metaphysics includes philosophies “as they were understood in traditional African societies which may be distinguished from modern attempts to try to understand and adapt these understandings for contemporary relevance.” (Ukpokolo, 2017:27)⁶⁹

⁶⁹ This discussion does not include the various influences of Islam that became deeply established in especially northern and western (and later East) Africa. However, it would be remiss to not mention them, and the importance of taking the interpretations of Islam into consideration especially when discussing pre-colonial Africa – which refers specifically to the advent of European colonialism. See for example *The Palgrave Handbook of Islam in Africa* (eds. Ngom, Kurfi and Falola, 2020). What this dissertation refers to, perhaps more specifically, is what would now be dubbed the ‘traditional’ or ‘Pagan’ traditions of the vast array of people across the continent of Africa.

As a study into the nature of things, African metaphysics encompasses a variety of ideas practised throughout the continent. It is an outlook which tries to reach “a more comprehensive, all embracing, totalistic view of reality without neglecting the unique place of individual things in the holism of reality.” (Ozumba, 2004:19) For Wilfred Lajul, African metaphysics investigates “the essence, properties and laws of existence.” (Lajul, 2014:140). Offering a specifically localised approach, Nigerian scholar Okechukwu Ozumba further defines a metaphysics in Africa “as the African way of perceiving, interpreting and making meaning out of interactions, among beings, and reality in general.” (Ozumba, 2004:12)

Moreover, pre-colonial African metaphysics is largely free from the plight brought about by the logical positivists⁷⁰, who themselves grew out the empiricist movement of the European Enlightenment movement. One can go as far as to suggest that pre-colonial metaphysics in Africa is one of freedom of thought and intuition – when compared to contemporary Western metaphysics. This does not mean, however, that such thinking is non-real and boundless; rather, it is innocent of modernity’s insistence on the empirically recognisable. The quotation below by Ozumba eloquently sums up a metaphysics in Africa:

African metaphysics is, then, the engagement with reality, the identification of empirically grounded and deeply seated rational explanations of existence; it is an attempt to explain the relationship between what humans experience in their interactions with the visible and the invisible world around them. (Ozumba, 2004:23)

In the following section then, we will consider the notion of ontology in pre-colonial Africa, as one of the categories of metaphysics to be discussed in this study.

⁷⁰ A philosophical movement of the 1900s which asserted that all knowledge is empirical and anything else should be rejected.

3.3.1. Ontological speculation in pre-colonial Africa

Ontology, by definition, is the study of “*being, beingness*; the state or fact of existing.” (Carroll and Markosian, 2010:11) Ontologists ponder less on the specifics of phenomena but rather deal with the broad, abstract fundamentals. Such questions may include “what is *being*?” or “why is there *being* at all?” (Carroll and Markosian, 2010:12)

Broadly speaking, there are three camps of thought that are dominant within African ontology. The first separates (hu)man’s *being* from any divinity. The second camp understands man’s *being* as connected to a divine phenomenon, while the third is a synthesis of the two. For example, Madubu Dukor, who belongs to the first camp, argues that “African ontology is anthropocentric or man-centred, in a sense that everything is seen in terms of its relation to man.” (Dukor, 1989:369) For Kwame Gyekye, who belongs to the second camp, “[t]he African doctrine of universal causation speaks of a metaphysical kind of causality which binds the creator to the creature.” (Gyekye, 1987:27) For philosopher K.C. Anyanwu, who belongs to the third camp,

[f]orces are interrelated in African metaphysics: from the beginning of the world, it is assumed, there has existed a life force, created by one God which is always active, spread throughout the universe, dispensed to all animate-life forces, man, animals and the plants, sometimes communicated to things which we consider inanimate. (Anyanwu, 1983:60)

Regardless of which camp they operate from, all these scholars agree that African ontology, particularly in its pre-modern phase, is active, dynamic, and energetic, containing what Tempels refers to as “life force; the vital force of the Bantu.”⁷¹ (Tempels, 1998:82) As a result of this active and energetic state, African ontology encompasses “beliefs in and practices associated with the hidden, intuitive, mysterious, supersensible and potent forces.” (Gyekye, 1987:35). According to Geoffrey Parrinder, “[i]n some parts of West Africa, these terms have been translated as *Nyama*, the impersonal, unconscious

⁷¹ This kind of an ontology is also present in Romanticism, itself a dialectical reaction to the Enlightenment rationalism of Kant. The movement stressed the importance of nature, emotion and intuition as opposed to the naturalists insistence on reason and objectivism.

energy found in man, animals, gods, nature and things.” (Parrinder, 1974:22). In summary, one could argue that from the perspectives of these scholars,

[t]raditional African ontology is a concept of being as a life-giving force, related to and influencing other *beings*; this totality of beings is in harmonious, complementary relationship with each other for the benefit of the human being as a central agent in that harmony. (Akpan and Etta, 2013:48)

Despite Tempels’ book’s controversies (discussed in Chapter One), his work does offer important insights into African ontology and *being*. According to Tempels, “force is being, being is force.” (Tempels, 1959:51) From this, a pre-colonial African ontological outlook “recognizes that all beings are made of forces, that the life force of the creator is present in all creatures and in all things⁷².” (Lajul, 2014:28) Moreover, “*force* in African thought is a necessary element in being, it is inseparable from the definition of being; without the element force, being cannot be conceived.” (Lajul, 2014:28)

Furthermore, for the Luba people, or Baluba, upon whom most of Tempels’ work was based, “beings are differentiated by their essence, behind every human being there is a vital power or soul; it is why Africans personify nature because they believe that there is a spiritual force residing in every object of nature.” (Lajul, 2014:28). For this reason, Nigerian philosopher Isaac Ukpokolo argues against the notion of a so-called “primitive Africa”, since the traditional approach to *being* in African culture is demonstrated in “how African religious practices, feasts and ceremonies *cannot* in any way be equated to magical and idolatrous practices or fetishism” (Ukpokolo, 2017:9; own emphasis). Ukpokolo further adds:

In African metaphysics, *being* is activity and becoming is a process that goes on all the time, so long as such a person is in existence; while becoming a person is

⁷² There are clearly elements of similarity to Spinoza’s metaphysical notion of pantheism, but this outlook discussed here was obviously developed in pre-colonial Africa within its own context, and without need of the systematic metaphysical history of the West. See Scruton (1981)

a process that starts probably at conception and continues till death, or even after death according to some African cultures. (Ukpokolo, 2017:28)⁷³

Additionally, one could also consider Ancient Egyptian civilisations which included various cultures along the “Nile Valley, Kemet and in Kush, also known as Nubia or Ethiopia.” (Obenga, 2004:32) Prior to colonisation by the Romans and later the British, Ancient Egyptian metaphysical speculation “flourished in Egypt from about 3400 BC to 343 BC and Kush from about 1000 BC to 625 BC.” (Obenga, 2004:32). Unique to Ancient Egypt was its long contact with the Western world while retaining self-determination. In fact, scholars from both Ancient Egypt and Greece would sometimes draw inspiration from each other (Adamson, 2015:9). As a result of this, both Ancient and contemporary Egypt are unfortunately mislabelled as Western or European, and consequently as not belonging to the so called “dark continent”. This is a mischaracterisation that again even Hegel was guilty of: “Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit. . . . Egypt . . . does not belong to the African Spirit.” (Hegel, 1886 [1956]:99)

It is not within the scope of this work to unpack in depth the ontological system of this ancient civilisation. The argument of this section instead attempts to give further credence to the view by Theophile Obenga, who, in responding to Hegel, wrote:

The Egyptian civilization of the Pharaonic period (3400–343 BC) was *intrinsically, that is, in its essential nature, an African civilization*, on account of its spirit, character, behaviour, culture, thought, and deep feeling. (Obenga, 2004:32; emphasis added)

Metaphysical speculation in the ancient times of Pharaonic Egypt comprised of “the wise teachings (*sebayit*) of the old sages, who were scholars, priests, and officials or statesmen at the same time.” (Obenga, 2004:32). Furthermore, while the Egyptian writings in the form of hieroglyphics are complex, the concept *rekhet* is generally

⁷³ This view is still present in Ramose’s notion of Ubuntu as ‘be-ing-becoming’ as opposed to merely ‘being’. See Ramose, 2002. It also shares similarities to the metaphysics of *being* put forward by Martin Heidegger (provide the reader some references to literature that they can explore to examine this comparison in greater detail).

translated to denote philosophy; *rekh or sai* refers to a wise person and by extension a philosopher (Obenga, 2004:32).

The ontological outlook of the ancient Egyptians was one thus also characterised by dynamism and its relation to time. For this great civilisation, existence was not static but dynamic; *being* was that which had motion, whether in the form of actual life or a memory (Obenga, 2004:32). Accordingly, “the main goal of *ankh* (human life) was to come to exist as *nefer* (a good divine being) in order to become Osiris, that is, immortal and eternal.” (Obenga, 2004:32)⁷⁴ Even though the ancient Egyptians recognised time in three dimensions (past, present and future), a *being* who after death has achieved the form of *Osiris* could be reincarnated and thus exist in the past as a memory, in the present as life and in the future by virtue of being alive (Obenga, 2004:34). For this civilisation, “the distinction between *being* and *non-being* was only a semantical distinction which had no ontological significance.” (Obenga, 2004:32)

For the ancient Egyptians, *being* was hierarchically structured, with eternity being the end goal. The concept of eternity meant continual existence on Earth after one was reincarnated. Human life thus was an aspiration towards the attainment of *Ra*, the highest *being* which was thought to be “imperishable and possessing full reality, that is, power, beauty, truth, perfection, and goodness.” (Obenga, 2004:36). Since the ancient Egyptians did not believe that death equates *non-being*, ethically then human beings could not escape the consequences of their actions. Once existing, *being* existed perpetually in one form or another.

In contrast to Western Enlightenment metaphysics, ancient Egyptians did not have a framework which separated spirit and matter. Mind and body were the same entity; it is for this reason that some Egyptian aristocrats often fancied themselves gods. On a human level (relating to consciousness), the gradual process of attaining *Ra* meant a state of *being* in which one possessed a self-directing will, what according to Obenga would have amounted to a sense of “becoming and effecting.” (Obenga, 2004:36) While the ancient Egyptians did recognise the concept of creator gods *Atum, Ra and Ptah*, they

⁷⁴ This ontological notion of *being-becoming* is also found at the heart of Ramose’s (2002) interpretation of the sub-Saharan concept of *Ubuntu*, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

did not direct the affairs of humans but rather bestowed onto existence qualities which were thought of as godly (Obenga, 2004:37). Examples include “*bau* (might), *hedjut* (radiance), *udjau* (prosperity), *useru* (wealth), *ib* (intelligence) and *djedet* (stability).” (Obenga, 2004:36) As such, humans either attained these qualities or not.

Despite their many deities, ancient Egyptians also appear to have been very grounded within the context of real material existence. While it would be far from accurate to call them empiricists, they nonetheless held an ontological framework which appreciated physical reality. Anthropomorphised as the goddess Maat, a keystone of Egyptian ontology held that

Maa basically means “the real,” “reality,” that is, that which is genuine and authentic as opposed to artificial or spurious. Maat is reality as a whole, that is, the totality of all things possessing actuality, existence, or essence. Maat is that which exists objectively. (Obenga 2004:47)

This, of course, is in stark contrast to the oft-held view that African cultures tend to hold a singularly unrealistic ontological framework. According to this patronising view, African people, primitive or not, tend to lack an outlook of life based in the actual. Those who hold this belief contrast the tendency to anthropomorphise a metaphysical framework with the process to which this is achieved. For example, for Imbo, “libation and animal sacrifice are not only evidence of ancestor worship, but symbolic reaffirmation of a particular metaphysics.” (Imbo, 1998:59) Moreover, the deterministic view which characterises modernity was unknown to the Ancients, whose ontological outlook celebrated freedom and will. Interestingly, it is in their account of evil that this becomes even clearer:

Human beings [of Ancient Egypt] can distinguish between what is right and wrong, thanks to their consciousness. They are capable of having commiseration, forgiveness, and also of being ashamed of wrongdoing. Evil is not a divine principle in the world. The origin of evil is to be found within the nature of human beings themselves. *Ka* (human nature) is good, but the first thing in life is *ib* (consciousness). *ib* (consciousness) can have various activities, such as thinking and feeling, but to think and feel well depends on consciousness. In human beings

the principle of humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom belongs to consciousness. (Obenga, 2004:46)

Furthermore, unlike any other system of thought in Africa, the Egyptian model remained free of external cohesion (colonialism) for almost 35 centuries (Obenga, 2004:46). According to Obenga's probably somewhat romanticised investigation into Ancient Egyptian metaphysics, "[d]uring this long span of time, there was no social discrimination between men and women, no human servitude or slavery; all of which were possible because of Maat, the keystone of the Egyptian metaphysics." (Obenga, 2004:46). In fact, *Maat* as metaphysical outlook is found in multiple cultures across Africa. While studying the etymology of words, linguistic scholars such as Obenga found that various cultures throughout Africa practised a very similar ontology:

Ancient Egyptian: *maat*, "truth"; *maa*, "true"

Kongo (Congo) : moyo, "life," "soul," "mind"

Mpongwe (Gabon) : *mya*, "to know" the truth (*mya re isome*, the "selfknowledge,"

Yoruba (Nigeria) : *mo*, "to know" the truth (knowledge)

As with *Maat* in ancient Egyptian culture, the notion of 'personhood' must also be similarly investigated in sub-Saharan cultures. As an expression of personhood, "group solidarity is most often cited as a key, perhaps the defining, feature of African ontological systems." (Menkiti, 2004:324) Formulations of this practice vary, and according to John Mbiti, "an individual's relation to the group is best described as one of 'I am because we are'." (Mbiti, 1970:141) Multiple interpretations of this ontological outlook exist, sometimes as misinterpretations which are deliberately appropriated for political motives or simply misunderstood by the wider audience due to the oratory nature of the tradition. Ifeanyi Menkiti clarifies this problem as follows:

"I am because we are" is not such as to directly translate into another set of related statements, for example, "He is because we are" or "You are because we are." Its sense is not that of a person speaking on behalf of, or in reference to, another, but

rather of an individual who recognizes the sources of his or her own humanity, and so realizes, with internal assurance, that in the absence of others, no grounds exist for a claim regarding the individual's own standing as a person. (Menkiti, 2004:124)

This further contradicts the widely held notion that the idea of individualism is alien to traditional Africa. The formulation instead is different, neither affirming the modern Western ideal of individualism nor challenging it. Rather, the African conceptualisation of *being* is one of positively recognising your fellow as a sibling of the same species. There is also substantial evidence which suggests that the Westerners who travelled to African regions for exploration or settlement were not in fact met with widespread violence (Peires, 1976:126). South African historian, Jeffrey Peires, notes how before the arrival of the imperial British invaders, there was cultural intermingling in South Africa among the Xhosa tribe, the Khoisan and the Boers of Dutch descendancy (Peires, 1976:131).

Thus, seen as a continuous process which is "laden with the possibility of triumph, but also of failure", the traditional African ideal of *being* is also a moral code (Menkiti, 2004:124). While by virtue of their humanity, all members of a society are *beings*, the process of what Menkiti refers as *ontological progression* – the attainment of full personhood – is only possible when one is fully incorporated into the community (Menkiti, 2004:124). For example, rituals such as *isiko lomoluko* (male circumcision) among the Xhosa people signified a boy's acceptance into the community as a man (Peires, 1976:60). In the Xhosa language, as moral condemnation, it is often remarked *awunaBuntu*, which translates roughly to one who is immoral due to their failure of recognising the *being* (*uBuntu*) in themselves and others (Peires, 1976:131). Aside from its moral basis, the phrase is also an ontological classification. In this language, *umntu* translates to an actual person; *ubuntu* is therefore in one respect a moral expression of *being*, the metaphysical manifestation of a superior consciousness. Intrinsically then, the lack of such a state consciousness denotes those who were often called evil. From Menkiti's conception of personhood, such people are anti-communal (what in the West may also be referred to as anti-social, but with an ontological basis as opposed to merely a moral one).

South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose similarly offers a take on the philosophy of *Ubuntu*⁷⁵ as a communal guideline. Ramosa argues that "the be-ing of an African in the universe is inseparably anchored upon *Ubuntu*." (Ramose, 2002:230) Regardless of the variations by which this ideal is practised, Ramose emphasises that African ontological speculation is marked by some insistence on *Ubuntu*. In terms of geographic demarcation, the Ubuntu ontological outlook "goes from the Nubian desert to the Cape of Good Hope and from Senegal to Zanzibar." (Ramose, 2002:230)

Linguistically, *Ubuntu* is made up of the prefix *ubu-* and the stem *-ntu* (Ramose, 2002:230). The prefix according to Ramose "evokes the idea of be-ing in general; it is enfolded be-ing before it manifests itself in the concrete form or mode of existence of a particular entity." (Ramose, 2002:230) As an ontological ideal then, "*ubu-* is always orientated towards *-ntu*; thus, there is no strict and literal separation between *ubu-* and *-ntu*." As such, Ramose points out the character of African thought as moving towards a metaphysics of wholeness and community, which he insists is characteristic of the African tradition.

In summary then, in these – admittedly – limited examples there is among pre-colonial African ontological conceptions a universal insistence on *being* as an expression of a *supreme being*, on the *dynamism* and *force* of *being*, on *communal existence*, and on *society as wholistic entity* which encompasses everything from animal, plant and inanimate matter. Other examples of such ontologies include:

- ❖ Akan and Yoruba ontology: *being*, *okra* is the essence of a person, the expression of the *supreme being*, *Onyame* in human form; and
- ❖ Luba ontology: *being*, as a dynamism, *kufwa* and *kufwididila* in Luba, which denotes one power or *force* to existence.

We will now move the discussion from the communal nature of African ontology to an investigation of cosmology in pre-colonial African culture.

⁷⁵ According to Ramose, *Ubuntu* is an "An enfolded being → unenfoldment → concrete manifestation in different forms / modes of being (ontological)." (Ramose, 2002:230)

3.3.2. Cosmological speculation in pre-colonial Africa

Cosmology is a branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of the universe; it is a theory or doctrine describing the natural order in accordance with a specific culture (Cahn, 2012:40). While contemporary cosmological speculation is scientific, usually falling under the natural science field of Astronomy, the type of cosmology referred to in this section denotes the systems of thought which African people use to comprehend the universe. According to Madubu Dukor, “cosmology is a theory or a myth of the origin of the universe, it is part of a peoples’ world view.” (Dukor, 1989:1) As such, it is to be regarded as the view of the universe a people hold, which similarly and in turn influences their arts, ethics and social organisations.

Drawing again from the ancient Egyptian model, which without any doubt was deeply religious in its cosmological outlook, in order to make sense out of their lives and give meaning to their existence, the Ancient Egyptians envisioned themselves as beings brought into existence by the sun god *Ra* (Obenga, 2004:39). According to the creation myth, “[i]n the beginning, the sun-god as *Atum* or *Ra-Atum* had appeared from primeval waters known as *Nun* by his own power of self-development.” (Obenga, 2004:39) The Nile river was very important to the ancient Egyptians, hence the primacy of the primeval waters referred to above. *Ra*’s so-called power of self-development similarity characterised the ontological outlook of this ancient civilisation. From *Ra*, most, if not all, the deities of Ancient Egypt followed, the most famous of which include *Osiris*, *Seth* and *Horus* (Obenga, 2004:40). Like most cultures across the world, the ancient Egyptians tended to associate a deity with some cosmological function:

- ❖ *Nun* represents existence itself
- ❖ *Ra* is self-determination, purpose and the rationality to existence
- ❖ *Geb* is the earth-god of fertility and the growth of plants
- ❖ *Nut* is the goddess of the sky and fortunes in one’s future

The hierarchical order consisted of the following three main pillars:

1. *Nun* = primordial space and time, the first principle to existence.
2. *Ra* = emerged by his own energy to start the physical existence of all beings.

3. *Kheper* = not a god but life and force even in inanimate things.

While it is now common practice to characterise such civilisations as primitive and unscientific, the ancient Egyptians seem to be the exception. Their ontological outlook of force and rationality resulted in a society of initiative and purpose, in accordance with their god *Ra*. The civilisation possessed abstract thought, mathematics, technological advancements and a metaphysical system which influenced not only other African cultures, but what became Europe as well (Obenga, 2004:44). In Ancient Greece, “Thales (624–546 BC), the founder of philosophy, geometry, and astronomy in the Greek world, was educated in Egypt under the priests.” (Obenga, 2004:49). During the Hellenistic period, Plotinus (AD 204–270), the father of Neoplatonism, the dominant philosophy during the Middle Ages of Europe, was born in and educated in Egypt before traveling abroad and becoming a Roman citizen (Kenny, 2005:230). In Western metaphysical speculation, Plotinus introduced the Egyptian cosmological model, which later inspired the Christian rationale (Kenny, 2005:230).

As mentioned above, this Egyptian model of metaphysics is also prevalent in pre-colonial cultures across the African continent. For example, the Igbo people of Nigeria conceive of “existence as consisting of two basic notions; the unity of all things and the ordered relationship among all beings in the universe.” (Dukor, 1989:374) Furthermore, the Igbo believe in a reciprocal relationship between divinities and men, where the “gods provide health, fertility of the soil and reproduction while men through ceremonies, appease the gods.” (Dukor, 1989:374). The rationale for the process of creation is equally like that of the Ancient Egyptians. Like the Ancient Egyptians, the Igbo myth of existence begins with a form of immanence from a deity. Accordingly, the supreme *being Chukwu* (equivalent to *Nun*) is the entity from which all of life emanates (Chinweuba, 2018:11). *Chineke* (equivalent to *Ra*) is both the physical and spiritual manifestation of the supreme *being Chukwu* (Chinweuba, 2020:11). *Chineke* is the energy which animates physical reality:

Each individual is created with a spirit, a genius, or a spirit-double; his *Chi* which is resident in the spirit world before the Supreme Being *Chineke* soliciting good things for the individual. (Chinweuba, 2020:11)

The cosmological outlook held by the Igbo similarly affects their social life. The Igbos are essentially a religious people: “The supreme *being* has a moderating effect on the overall conduct of the people, they eat religiously, bathe religiously, dress religiously and sin religiously.” (Chinweuba, 2018:11) Of importance to note is that the Igbo do not separate the cosmological from the ontological – it is all one and the same. This contrasts with the Ancient Egyptians; whose practice of self-determination translates more closely to the modern idea of free-will. For the Igbo then, human action is not only an expression of the supreme *being* but a direct consequence:

Igbos universally believe that nothing just happens, for every occurrence depends on causality sorely controlled by the Supreme *being*. This means that even their existence and the origin of things are rooted in their belief in a Supreme cause who prevails on earth despite the activities of other Deities. (Chinweuba, 2020:35)

The AmaXhosa people of South Africa likewise possessed (and in some measure still do) a cosmological outlook which was inseparable from the causes of everyday life. For example, the annual animal sacrifice “along the Ngxingxolo river was an attempt at appeasing *Gcaleka*, a deity associated with fertility.” (Peires, 1976:123). From this ritual, Xhosa people hoped for a successful harvest and the bringing of the rains (Peires, 1976:123).

Some African cosmological models therefore encompass various views which are a framework in which the world is understood. Value systems are subsequently constructed in relation to these frameworks, and the meaning of life is subsequently built upon it. Accordingly, African cosmology is “the underlining thought link that holds together the African value system, philosophy of life, social conduct, morality, folklores, myths, rites, rituals, norms, rules, ideas, cognitive mappings and theologies.” (Kanu, 2013:533). Moreover, the common trend within African cosmology is to divide the universe into two separate but interrelated dominions, namely the physical and the spiritual (Kanu, 2013:534). The former “is dominated by man, who occupies the central position in the scheme of the created world; while the latter consists of spiritual beings and ancestors.” (Kanu, 2013:534)

Of further interest is the role which humankind plays within African cosmology; Nigerian scholars Kanu and Onunwa both emphasise “the primacy of the human being in the African universe, which is triangular, with God at the apex, the ancestors at the base and man at the centre.” (Kanu, 2013:534) For these two thinkers, the African person is viewed as taking a central place within the universe and is thus, more importantly, endowed with the freedom to determine his or her destiny. For Kanu, African cosmology predates the Western Enlightenment notion of humankind as being a creature endowed with a free will – the distinguishing factor seems to be what humankind is tied to, the social contract or the divinities (Lajul, 2014:30).

Collectively, there is thus among African cosmological conceptions a universal insistence on the unity of all things and a cosmic order to existence, with a life-giving deity at the top. This unity is then also closely linked to the conception of time, which will be discussed in the following section.

3.3.3. Conceptions of Time in pre-colonial Africa

In relation to the previously discussed metaphysical categories, the category of time is the most complicated to discern. Whereas both ontological and cosmological arguments arise out of the seemingly universal need to make meaning of existence, the conception of time is a specialised one since in one culture it can be prevalent, while in another it is virtually unconsidered in conscious awareness. (Palmer, 2011:n.p.) What makes the matter even more complicated is the fact that the two prevalent conceptions of time completely oppose each other⁷⁶. The ‘*A Theory*’ of time defines the concept as “the successive progression of different properties.” (Carroll and Markosian, 2010:163) As an example, the successive progression between reading the previous sentence and this one amounts to time; as such, duration, according to the *A Theory* of time, is the defining factor. The ‘*B Theory*’ of time does not view duration as constituting time, but rather the recognition of one moment from another. Consequently, there is no such thing as *time* as

⁷⁶ See McTaggart’s distinction between *A series* and *B series*, the modern originator of the two conceptions of time who “reached back to the ancient Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Parmenides. Parmenides thought that reality is timeless and unchanging. Heraclitus, in contrast, believed that the world is a process of ceaseless change, flux and decay. Reality for Heraclitus is dynamic and ephemeral. Indeed, the world is so fleeting, according to Heraclitus, that it is impossible to step twice into the same river.”

an external physical entity; it is only human perception which recognises one property from another (Carroll and Markosian, 2010:163). Moreover, the problem of time can further be categorised from three different manifestations of it:

1. From the perspective of consciousness, the interplay of *being* within the cosmology of things;
2. Conceptual and mathematical time;
3. Physical experience of time.

Regardless of the theory held or how time may be practised, it is nevertheless to be understood as a metaphysical category which is both present and important throughout many African thought systems.

As a model of mathematics and symbolism, the Ancient Egyptians remain the only pre-colonial African culture to have kept the duration of time to such an elaborate extent (Kuhn, 1962:98) The absence of such a system from other cultures seems to be the result of the prominence of the oratory tradition, which by virtue of its nature would not have allowed for gradual recordings of duration. As such, with the lack of mathematical symbols, numbers generally also meant that the precession of events was recorded by observing change, such as in the form of seasons (Kuhn, 1962:98). An example of this would be “the Xhosa traditional calendar, which began in June with *isiLimela* and ended in May with *uCanzibe* when a large star visible in the Southern Hemisphere signaled the time for harvesting.” (Peires, 1976:123) In its original form, the Xhosa calendar was observed as follows:⁷⁷

June – <i>IsiLimela</i> (month of the Pleiades)	July – <i>EyeKhala/EyeNtlaba</i> (month of the aloes)	August – <i>EyeThupha</i> (month of the buds)
September – <i>EyoMsintsi</i> (month of the coast coral tree)	October – <i>EyeDwarha</i> (month of the lilypad)	November – <i>EyeNkanga</i> (month of the small yellow daisies)

⁷⁷ South African Broadcasting Corporation, 2013.

December – <i>EyoMnga</i> (month of the mimosa thorn tree and simba)	January – <i>EyoMqungu</i> (month of the Tambuki Grass)	February – <i>EyoMdumba</i> (month of the swelling grain)
March – <i>EyoKwindla</i> (month of the first fruits)	April – <i>UTshazimpuzi</i> (month of the withering pumpkins)	May – <i>UCanzibe</i> (month of Canopus)

Despite the multiple variations in the understanding of time across African traditions, universally the concept among African cultures is inseparable from both the ontological and cosmological framework held. For example, “Xhosa men used to count their years of manhood from the time in June when the *isiLimela* first became visible in the sky.” (Peires, 1976:123) Since this correlated with the agricultural cycle, years passed were remembered in accordance with the success or failure of a harvest. The most blessed years were those which yielded the most harvest. Consequently, families often competed to see who could produce the most harvest (Peires, 1976:125). It should be noted that while Xhosa people lived in communal societies, land and cattle were held privately by the corresponding family (Peires, 1976:125).

Regardless of the various associations with the passage of time, two trends are prominent among these African traditions: time as *signifying an event* and time as *cyclical*. Accordingly, “[t]ime for African people is meaningful at the point of the event and not at the mathematical moment.” (Martin, 2008:214) Furthermore:

Among the people of Mali, time has an ecological, ritual, and genealogical context [(Koné 1994)]. The ecological context is based on a conceptual cycle of events that constitute the passage of seasons. These events are composed of pragmatic choices that are performed based on when they will be successful, not necessarily a specific mathematical time. (Martin, 2008:214)

For the philosopher John Mbiti, African cultures lay more emphasis on the phenomenology of temporal experience in relation to time. For example, the centre of gravity for human thought and activity is in the now present moment, what in Swahili is

called *Zamani* (Mbiti, 1990:17). According to Mbiti, within traditional (pre-modern / pre-colonial) life, time is simply a conformation of events which have occurred; there is very little insistence on that which *might* occur (Mbiti, 1990:17). Accordingly, the concept of time has two dimensions, namely the *immediate present* and the *remembered past* (Mbiti, 1990:17). Furthermore, Mbiti notes that the East-African tribes, namely the Kikamba and the Gikuyu, have in their languages virtually no verb tenses for the future (Mbiti, 1990:17).

Moreover:

The linear concept of time in Western thought, with an indefinite past, present and infinite future is practically foreign to African thinking; the future is virtually absent because events which lie within it have not taken place, they have not been realized and therefore do not constitute time. (Mbiti, 1990:17)

As such, what constitutes *actual time* is that which is present or has already occurred; time moves backward rather than forward and thus people focus on what *has been* and *is now* rather than what *might be*. Menkiti elaborates on the consequences of such a world view:

Time's movement was generally from the present to the past, so that the more of a past one has, the more standing as a person one also has. In this regard, a remark to the effect "I am looking forward to my own past" would be a remark well placed within the thought system. (Menkiti, 2004:324)

More so, it is important to note that "[a] person experiences time partly in his own individual life, and partly through the society which goes back many generations before their own birth; only in the rhythm of natural phenomena is the future considered." (Mbiti, 1990:17) Interestingly, this view of time which insists on past experience gives the elders a special space in the social order. And even more crucial to consider is the social regard implied in this order, where "[m]orality and the maturation of the human person are so intimately bound up with years lived, that older people are deemed to possess a higher level of *being* by virtue of experience." (Menkiti, 2004:325) This is summarised by Zimbabwean scholar Dennis Masaka as follows:

Full personhood is not perceived as simply given at the very beginning of one's life but is attained after one is well along in society, this indicates straight away that the older an individual gets, the more of a person he becomes. Conceived as such, full personhood is an outcome of fundamental transformation of a person in respect to his or her character. The idea of full personhood thus, is the idea that moral maturity increases with one's biological age. (Masaka, 2018:4)

Collectively then, it can be argued by drawing from the above-mentioned theorists that there is among African conceptions of time a universal insistence on time being observed in relation to a collective event (such as changes in seasons). Time passed is also viewed positively, from the perspective of *being* which is acquired with life experience; hence, the favourable view of the elderly as being both wise and as having earned respect within the community. While some scholars such as Mbiti also propose the notion that time in traditional thought is cyclical, this is not as prominent as the other two instances but is generally accepted as a defining attribute (Masolo, 1994).

Considering the three metaphysical categories explored above as being inherent in pre-colonial or pre-modern traditional cultures across the African continent, we must now consider what occurred at the moment of colonial invasion of the continent, the advent of cultural genocide that took place over a few centuries, and its lingering effects upon contemporary African conceptions of themselves and their *being-in-the-world*.

3.4. The decline of a metaphysics unique to Africa

The decline of a metaphysics unique to Africa⁷⁸ is directly linked to the spread of Christianity (and Islam), European colonialism, and the rise of naturalism during the

⁷⁸ While aspects of this metaphysical system may be prevalent in many other so-called 'traditional' communities, such as in Europe before the advent of modernity, before the Reformation and Enlightenment periods, the way it was practised on the African continent – amongst the people on the continent with their particular histories, natural environments which shaped their worlds, developments as cultures, and so on – provides it with a unique platial (phenomenological) nature which would have differed from the context of traditional Western communities or those in perhaps India, Japan, or South America, by the very fact that the peoples of the African continent gave rise to their own questions and engagements with the world that would have differed from anywhere else and any other time. It is this approach that gives African metaphysics its unique status, while in terms of universals it may not be 'unique' as such.

modern age. Since all three of these have been discussed both in Chapters One and Two, this section instead offers two illustrative examples, which although they occurred centuries apart, both show victims of the imperial impulse to expand and intrude. The Ancient Egyptians of North Africa and the Xhosa people of Southern Africa are the examples that will be referred to.

In Ancient Egypt, Roman conquest with “its strict monotheistic nature, did not allow the syncretism seen in periods before.” (Conee and Sider, 2005:65) Even though Ancient Egypt had experienced multiple invasions during its long history and managed to retain its cultures, the monocultural nature of the growing Roman Empire did not allow conquered nations any religious freedoms. The process was not immediate, however; it was gradually achieved with the building of churches, the conversion of Egyptian priests, and stigmatising native practices as being ‘Pagan’ (Conee and Sider, 2005:67). In less than a century after the “Edict of Milan legalised Christianity in the Roman Empire, Graffito of *Esmet-Akhom*, the last known inscription in hieroglyphics was written at the temple of Isis on the island of Philae, the final remaining places of worship of native Egyptian cosmology.” (Conee and Sider, 2005:71)

Eager to protect their social standing, Egyptian elites (mostly statesmen and possibly women) were among the first to convert to the Christian religion. As for private citizens who may have wished to continue the practice of their native customs, hostility from “priests, bishops, and monks who rampaged through the countryside, intent on eradicating demons” further weakened the prevalence of a uniquely Egyptian metaphysics (Conee and Sider, 2005:71). While previous conquerors such as Augustus would often maintain and even build temples honouring Egyptian beliefs, Christianised Rome watched it fall apart. For the people to whom such temples were symbols of their metaphysical notions, the state of progressive ruin, the falling into disrepair of these sacred shrines also meant the destruction of their ontological *being*. Accordingly:

The end of any vital existence for most village temples stripped away the literate and respected leadership class the priesthood had long provided and no doubt

eliminated to a large degree the ritual occasions that lent the village a sense of itself as a community. (Bagnall, 1998:28)

This destruction of the orientation of a person to their world is also elaborated upon by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, in his book *Decolonising the Mind* (1986). In this text, he specifically describes how the colonial English education system enforced in Kenya ripped the Kikuyu people from their language. He further shows how language itself is an ontological marker for a culture, in that it denotes the development of history, tradition, and the earliest examples of how a child is able to orientate themselves as *being-in-the-world* through describing themselves and themselves in relation to the world.

In a related example, the Xhosa people, a Nguni clan of Southern Africa, are an example of the process of modern colonisation which systematically managed to bring about the ruin of a people's metaphysical outlook. Common to traditional pre-colonial Bantu culture in Africa, the Xhosa held a metaphysical outlook in which "the unseen world was active in this world and was an important causative influence." (Peires, 1976:123) Accordingly, "failure or misfortune proceeded from a specific spiritual cause, which could be diagnosed and remedied by a qualified person, the village healer." (Peires, 1976:123) This mystical world view did not however limit the use of experimentation and hypothesis – the Xhosa people regularly borrowed farming practices from the Khoisan and Boers whenever satisfactory results were not achieved (Peires, 1976:124).

As did the Ancient Egyptians, the Xhosa also had contact with European people, namely the Boers of Dutch descent (Peires, 1976:123). While there was conflict between the Boers and the Xhosas, it was often in the form of squabbles for the equal share of farmlands. The British, however, were quite different; they possessed immense technical and material resources solely for the purposes of colonisation. From the 1770s up to the 1890s, successive military defeats during the Xhosa Wars resulted in Xhosa natives doubting their own world view. As Peires explains:

Obviously, traditional religion could neither explain nor control this alarming new phenomenon, which was inexplicable and uncontrollable within the limits of traditional theories about the way the world worked. If an explanation was to be obtained, it was surely to be found in the new stock of concepts introduced by the Europeans. (Peires, 1976:133)

The concept of God, and consequently those of good and evil, were the first to be absorbed into Xhosa cosmology. Since the God of the Christians resided in the sky, so he / she would not interfere with Xhosa divinities which were thought to reside deep underground (Peires, 1976:133). The Christian concept of death was also adopted. Ontologically, the Xhosas did not account for sudden death; although *being* was not thought as immortal, it was also expected that one chose to die out of voluntary participation (Peires, 1976:134). By the end of the 1800s, Xhosa people were converting to Christianity *en masse*. Despite this, however, the Christian religion did not altogether erase the traditional world view of these people. Instead, a Xhosa-Christian synthesis occurred. Moreover, the Bible's Old Testament, with its influence of ancient Hebrew beliefs (the idea of ritual purification to end impurity and of sacrifice to please the ancestors) allowed for this to happen more smoothly (Peires, 1976:136). Thus, while Christianity certainly did not eliminate the uniquely Xhosa metaphysics completely, the British method of colonial rule certainly came close, or at least managed to eradicate traditional Xhosa structures which were closely linked to *being-in-the-world*.

Upon realising the potential of the Industrial Revolution, the push to transform colonies into viable economies of their own became an imperative for European powers. Europe as a whole was thus imported into Africa. The schools ensured that all uniquely African metaphysical categories became Western.⁷⁹ As for those who kept to their traditions, stigma from the educated class, who were economically superior, ensured that very few would follow their traditional ways. By the end of formal colonial rule, during the 1900s, uniquely African thought systems existed merely on the fringes – some as ideas of times

⁷⁹ See the previously mentioned text by Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Decolonising the Mind*, to understand the influence of the colonial schooling system on the native children's sense of *being-in-the-world*.

gone by, and some as meaningless practices for those whose place in the Western cosmos was not so fortunate.

It is from this realisation that works such as this one are built on. As mentioned in the previous chapter, European colonialism did not just colonise almost the entire world with its metaphysical outlook, it also colonised itself – which culminated into the so-called “crisis of the West”, which by implication, is a crisis of the entire globe.

What does this mean for the contemporary African person struggling to counter a failing modernity without having to draw directly on solutions from the West, which would result in the further colonisation of the mind? Could some of the pre-colonial metaphysical grounding concepts, as described in this chapter, possibly be reanimated in a modern context in order to help imagine a possible future grounded in African history but dealing specifically with issues facing contemporary African people?

Having offered a reconstruction of a couple of uniquely African metaphysical theories in this chapter, the following chapter will illustrate how these ideas could potentially be included in the conversation of an alternative modern outlook. It must be noted that what has been engaged with here is certainly nowhere near a comprehensive reconstruction of all pre-colonial African metaphysical systems, as that would be beyond the scope of a Master’s dissertation. Rather, a few examples have been given of the type of thinking found at the heart of these metaphysical systems, that with much more engagement and consideration could potentially offer counter-narratives to modernity that draw upon experiences, histories, cultures, and languages other than those coming out of Europe or America, ones that are firmly grounded within the people of the African continent itself.

Add footnote: why Africa as a whole? Acknowledge that there is an established view that the Magreb and Egypt engages in a new and different metaphysical world from the rest – mention that even West Africa has Islam and Christian influences, but certain parts of traditional African metaphysics remains from the migration process of Bantu from North and West down to sub-Saharan Africa.

Comment 3: “Finally, I think it is important to clarify that there are already multiple modernities in Africa.”

Recommendation: Add this to your introduction and again in a footnote in your final chapter. Draw from the collection of essays on ‘Multiple Modernities’ you already refer to / draw from to show how this has been argued by other theorists working on modernity (modernities) in Africa.

CHAPTER FOUR: AN ALTERNATIVE, AFRICANISED MODERN WORLD VIEW?

At this point in this dissertation, it is prudent to make clear some key points, especially since this is the most prescriptive of the Chapters. The first point of clarification relates to the kind of African spirit embodied by this dissertation. It is a spirit which often characterises sub-Saharan Africa tribes and not Northern or Western Muslim Africa. The focus thus far and so forth has been on cultural practices and not religion or more precisely, a theology. The second point of clarification relates to the question of “does one size fit all”? Why should the prescriptive theory to be argued below apply to diverse cultures? Here, the reader has to be reminded that, the contemporary conversation of alternative modernities is an ongoing search for other normative foundations in light of the crisis of Western modernity. This dissertation as such, is in response to this and an attempt to offer as one of many alternatives, a uniquely African theory. It is not anywhere in this dissertation suggested that the ideas offered here are universal and all encompassing. The ideas prescribed below, apply to those who in-common shared the process of colonialism, first by Christianity and later Western European countries. A process which gave rise to pan-Africanism and search for similarities in the contemporary space.

With the above in mind, Chapter Four, the final chapter, provides a discussion on the possibility of an alternative modern world view from a distinctly African perspective. The idea of an alternative modernity is derived from the 2001 book, *Alternative Modernities*, which is a collection of essays on the premise that modernity is no longer a phenomenon

specific to the West. Instead, the concept and reality of modernity should be understood as it manifests within cultures across the world. As such, attempting to solve the problem(s) of modernity needs to encompass how cultures other than the West are dealing with modernity. The following refers to some of the appraisals of the book

The idea of alternative modernities holds that modernity always unfolds within specific cultures or civilizations and that different starting points of the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes. Without abandoning the Western discourse on the subject, the contributors to this volume write from the standpoint that *modernity is in truth a richly multiplicitous concept*. (Forges, 2007:48, emphasis added)

Creative and vitally important. The authors don't just note that modernity is more than a single, homogenous thing, they *explore the fissures and fault lines and assess the implications for both scholarly understanding and public discourse*. In doing so, they offer a *hopeful and intellectually supple alternative to the often-repackaged notion of a 'clash of civilizations*. (Calhoun, 2010:604, emphasis added)

Furthermore, the idea of alternative modernities as such fits in well within the scope of this dissertation, which has, up until this point, delineated how the West for millennia has come to reach beyond itself, and the implication this has had upon metaphysical engagement within both the West and its colonies. This factor is similarly found in a 2001 essay⁸⁰ by Michael Hanchard, Professor of Africana Studies at Penn Art. Titled, "How and in what ways have African-descended peoples been modern subjects?", Hanchard illustrates how "ideas about human rights, black nationalism, and race have invariably reacted against or innovated on discourses of modernity." (Hanchard, 2000: 272) Building on the ideas of British historian, Paul Gilroy⁸¹, Hanchard argues for alternatives for Western modernity, which are uniquely African in origin. Accordingly:-

⁸⁰ The essay is within the book *Alternative Modernities*.

⁸¹ See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*.

“The world historical processes of modernism and modernization “have nourished an amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization, to give them the power to change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it their own. Dialectically, Afro-Modernity can be seen as the negation of the idea of African and African-derived peoples as the antithesis of modernity. Gilroy has suggested that “the cultures of diaspora blacks can be profitably interpreted as expressions of and commentaries upon ambivalences generated by modernity and their locations in it.

As a self-conscious political and cultural project, Afro-Modernity is evidenced in the normative convergence of two or more African and African-descended peoples and social movements in response to perceived commonalities of oppression. Afro-Modern politics are characterized by (a) a supranational formulation of people of African descent as an “imagined community” that is not territorially demarcated but based on the shared belief in the commonalities of Western oppression experienced by African and African-derived peoples; (b) the development of alternative political and cultural networks across national-state boundaries; and (c) an explicit critique of the uneven application of the discourses of the Enlightenment and processes of modernization by the West, along with those discourses’ attendant notions of sovereignty and citizenship. (Hanchard, 2001:282)

Building on the assessment above and drawing from the reconstructions in Chapter Three, Chapter Four proposes what an alternative modernity might look like within contemporary Africa. Of importance to note, is that this chapter is a response to the thesis: “If Western modernity has led to the disenchantment of the world, what does a *re-enchantment* unique to Africa look like?” As a proposed response to this question, this chapter is divided into two sections, the first being a summary of the current state of the world in the wake of naturalism. The second looks at how specific ideas of metaphysics from African history might illuminate an alternative pathway forward for the peoples of Africa in particular.

4.1. The Distorted Metaphysics of the Modern Person: An International

Assessment

Once again, we must begin by turning to the ancients. Aristotle, arguably the father of metaphysics,⁸² prescribed that metaphysical speculation was to be done *after* the study of *physics*.⁸³ For various reasons leading up to the modernisation of the world, the intellectual history of the West necessitated a clear separation of the objective (world?) from the subjective (experience of the world?). However, over the course of history, scholars have been arguing among each other as to which holds supremacy over the other. As such, the common saying in philosophy that one is either an Aristotelean or a Platonist has remained consistent (Furley, 1999:10).⁸⁴ For Aristotle however, this dichotomy is not necessary since knowledge of the external world (*physics*) and the principles of first causes (*metaphysics*) are compatible. Scholars of the Middle Ages thus made what could be considered a grave error by repressing the scientific discoveries of early modern thinkers, while modern thinkers made the same error in rejecting almost all that is subjective in humankind.⁸⁵ As has been argued through the course of this dissertation, it was from this particular impulse that the so-called civilising mission, one aspect of the rationale behind colonialism, embarked across the world to purge the “ignorant” of their “backward ways” and spread the word of science. Writing in 1947, in the wake of the horrors of World War II, critical scholars Max Horkheimer and Theodor

⁸² “The word metaphysics derives from the Greek *meta ta physika*, literally, after the things of nature.” (*Metaphysics, History of* - in Encyclopaedia of Philosophy)

⁸³ In the entry on *Metaphysics, History of*, in the Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, “the phrase *ta meta ta physika biblia* (the books after the books on nature) is not used by Aristotle himself, but Medieval philosophers took this title to mean that the subjects discussed in the *Metaphysics* came ‘after the things of nature’ because they were further removed from the sense perception and, therefore, more difficult to understand; they used Aristotle’s frequent contrast of things ‘prior and better known to us’ with things ‘prior and better known in themselves’ to explain why the treatises on first philosophy should come ‘after the books on physics.’”

⁸⁴ For a clearer distinction and discussion on this, see Chapter Two in the *History of Western Metaphysics*, by Furley (1999).

⁸⁵ Of course, it is important to make it clear that this statement does not imply that contemporary Western thought is devoid of thinkers interested in matters beyond positivism. Examples include, but are not limited to, existentialism, phenomenology and hermeneutics, which all emphasise the subjective. These schools, however, were largely critiques and not appraisals of the Modern Age. As such, subjectivity is not written out of Western philosophy; however, this study is an addition to ideas by, for example, Kierkegaard, who during the 1800s wrote exactly on the subjectivity of the individual. The same could be said regarding Hegel (phenomenology), Freud and Jung (psychoanalysis) and Schleiermacher (hermeneutics).

Adorno provided a damning critique of the Enlightenment – and by extension modernity – when they argue that:

Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. ... In the authority of universal concepts, the Enlightenment detected a fear of the demons through whose effigies human beings had tried to influence nature in magic rituals. *From now on, matter was finally to be controlled without the illusion of immanent powers or hidden properties.* (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947:3, emphasis added)

While the complete character of modernity is still evolving, its defining feature “is the departure from the supernatural, the gradual alienation of humanity from nature, and the production of a bureaucratic and technological life world stripped of mystery and wonder.” (Storm, 2017:4) It is for this very reason that the Prussian sociologist Max Weber defined modernisation as *die Entzauberung der Welt* – the disenchantment⁸⁶, or literally, de-magic-ing of the world (Storm, 2017:4). Critical theorists, in agreement with Weber, have fleshed this idea out:

Reason has become completely harnessed to the social process. Its operational value, its role in the domination of men and nature, has been made the sole criterion. . . . As the end result of the process, we have . . . an empty nature degraded to mere material, mere stuff to be dominated, without any other purpose than that of this very domination. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947:21)

To the extent that nature is made accessible to objectivating observation and causal explanation, it is depersonalized. Nature as an object of science is no longer part of the social frame of reference. (Habermas, 2001:106)

The purpose of this first section is to briefly discuss the current state of the Western world, whose metaphysical outlook has been distorted by the specifically Western, positivistic frame of reference. Since Western metaphysics was largely theological (due to the historical forces discussed in Chapter Two), the following critiques are derived from philosophers who are also theologically inclined. They include Michael Allen Gillespie,

⁸⁶ It was the Romantic, Friedrich Schiller, who first coined the phrase “disenchantment” of nature, which resonated very strongly with Weber’s critical outlook.

Danie Goosen and Ivan Illich, for whom modernity often fails to mention its effect of having removed humanity from its place in nature. According to these scholars, the distortion and later denial of metaphysical categories (ontology, cosmology, and time) is the cause of this.

4.1.1. A Distorted Ontological Outlook

According to the aforementioned theorists, it is important to first consider how ontology, or an ontological outlook, has been distorted within a modern, Western philosophical world view. *Radical Immanence: An Anomaly in the History of Ideas* (2012), is an exposition by South African philosopher, Danie Goosen, in which he attempts to illustrate the dynamic of immanence⁸⁷ as it manifests between tradition and modernity. For Goosen (2012), "traditional ontology⁸⁸ can be described as an ecstatic⁸⁹ ontology, and is based on the idea that immanent *being*⁹⁰ has a natural desire (*desiderium naturale*) to participate in transcendent *being*." (Goosen 2012:23)⁹¹

For pre-modern metaphysical speculation then, "*being* is mimetically⁹² mediated by its participation in an external other." (Goosen 2012:24)⁹³ For the moderns however, *being* represents a "historical shift from external to internal mediation; such internal mediators, referred to as internal multiplicities, include but are not limited to the political, social and psychological proximity of the desiring self." (Goosen 2012:24) Consequently, the immanent being is isolated to and within itself, eliminating the conditions for transcendence in any meaningful way. As Goosen points out, internal mediation under the modern condition is intensified "because any possible form of external mediation" is quickly discarded. (2012:25) As a point of clarity, Goosen does admit to feelings of nostalgia towards tradition – although not necessarily calling for a return of the old ways. What he seems to illustrate, instead, is what might be called an epistemic exposition of

⁸⁷ Immanence refers to the manifestation of a divine entity onto the physical plane. This does not necessarily mean the divine makes themselves physically present; it is rather understood to imply the manifestation of something greater than usual, an energy, spirit or force.

⁸⁸ This refers to ontological speculation before the modern period.

⁸⁹ I.e. joyful, elated, euphoric, delirious, joyous, blissful.

⁹⁰ Immanent being refers to the temporal existence of *being* within humankind.

⁹¹ Transcendent *being* refers to that which is existent beyond the physical boundaries of the material world.

⁹² I.e. Receptive.

⁹³ The external other refers to a higher power, a creator, or a divinity.

the faults of modernity, especially since this era tends to claim a position of superiority and progress over what is considered as tradition.

Traditional ontology is thus, for Goosen, an ecstatic ontology; it is based on the notion that immanent *being* naturally desires to participate in transcendent *being*. Traditional ontology thus asserts a relationship between the immanent and the transcendent, between beings and *being*, the parts and the whole.

What then happened to the modern vicissitudes of immanent and transcendent being after they had been isolated from their ecstatic coherence? Under its modern guise, immanent *being* is not characterised by a desire to participate in transcendent *being*. It is on the contrary, argues Goosen, "experienced as pure nature; fully enclosed within itself, autonomous with regard to the whole." (Goosen 2012:42) Consequently, immanent *being* experienced as pure nature is objectified by the modern subject and cut off from a holistic engagement with all the possibilities of life.

Traditionally, preference has been given to transcendent *being* over immanent *being*. The ancients argued that the former was a precondition for the latter to exist in any meaningful way. Modernity, in contrast, views transcendent *being* as a projection of the immanent, a conception supported by a long line of thinkers such as Hobbes, Kant and Heidegger (as well as Marx and Freud). According to these thinkers, immanent *being* is better off not reaching out to transcendent *being* as it increases the risk of falling into a form of distorted consciousness (sometimes referred to as false consciousness, the veil of ignorance, or the subconscious). Broadly speaking then, transcendent *being* is then viewed as a figment of the imaginative subject from the perspective of the modernists. Also, under the guise of freedom, modernism adopts a radical reduction of the whole; the "parts" which traditionally made up the "whole" are abstracted and considered as whole in themselves. According to Goosen, the above dynamic is responsible for what he deems the "ontological freefall" occurring throughout the modern period. (Goosen 2012:54)

Accordingly, in relation to the outcomes of this particular thesis, two relevant aspects of the so-called modern ontological freefall stand out. First is the invention of a traditional structure which asserts that things should be reduced to their origins. Secondly, within the modern era, the conception of freedom is largely understood from a socio-historical

perspective. For modernists, *being* is historically conditioned and at any present moment it can *be* what it desires for itself. Postmodernity takes this one step further, preferring the potential over the actual, the unrealised future over the past and present. At first glance, there often is the conception that these notions arose from the suppressive force of tradition. However, Goosen points out that "owing to its limitation by the actual, tradition prevented the possible from imploding on itself." (Goosen 2012:55)

The technological progress of modernity and its many lauded potentials further exalt this trend. It could be argued that many may not and do not realise the disastrous effects on the human spirit that the break from transcendent *being* has caused. It seems that most adherents of modernity, including the author of this dissertation, blindly associate technological progress – which is future oriented – with a parallel improvement of the human spirit, and from what has been delineated above, this may not be the case at all. In a similar vein, we will now consider how our (i.e. adherents and participants in modern society) cosmological outlook has also been distorted and undermined, albeit in a different manner.

4.1.2. A Distorted Cosmological Outlook

In a similar vein to Goosen's thesis that modern being exists in the immanent and not the transcendent, Ivan Illich, in a 2005 book, *The Rivers North of the Future*,⁹⁴ describes how such an outlook is equally negative for the metaphysics of cosmology. For Illich, the modern person who is trapped in the temporal⁹⁵ is unable to conceive of existence beyond what they can perceive (Cayley 2005:49). For example, modernists can barely accept, if at all, the biblical virgin birth: according to Illich, "[w]e have lost the sense that there exists between extremes a realm of gratuity, or gift that comes into being in response to a call, rather than a determined cause." (Illich in Cayley 2005:49)

According to the German philosopher and historian, Hans Blumenberg, "contingency expresses the state of being of a world which has been created from nothing, is destined to disappear and is upheld in its existence by one thing, and one thing only: divine will."

⁹⁴ The full title of the book is *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*.

⁹⁵ I.e. immediate existence / awareness of the empirical.

(Blumenberg, 1983:14) Furthermore, contingency, writes Blumenberg, "is one of the few concepts that are of especially Christian origin, even though the word itself is derived from a latinization of a concept in Aristotelian logic." The idea of contingency expanded during the Middle-Ages, as for Christians of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, "God himself is dragged into the realm of *contingency*." The beginning of modernity thus coincides with an attempt to break out of a world view defined by contingency. (Blumenberg, 1983:23)

Moreover, this is reflected in the thinking of Descartes, who, in contrast to William of Ockham, asserted "[e]ach being finds its own nature, what it is in itself, a reason and a claim, not only to existence, but to being what it is." (Blumenberg, 1983:28) Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many of those inspired by Descartes remained Christians who accepted the affirmation that "God made the world as it is by placing the seed of nature into each being." (Blumenberg 1983:28) In this sense, contingency under the modern guise consequently means that each being contains, as it were, reason of their own to act as they may choose. Similarly, in modernity, one can view this as an understanding of a 'new gospel'. As Merchant notes (as mentioned in an earlier chapter):

Through God's hands, the whole of nature was maintained. Ironically, it was this valorisation of nature which created the conditions by which nature was taken out of the hands of God. Consequently, this meant that nature would lose its most essential quality, its aliveness. The Sun thus which the ancients attached with emergence of God is seen mechanically through some scientific schema because of cosmological causes which can be systematically understood. (Merchant, 1817:167)

This then further relates to the distortion of the metaphysical relation to time, as will be discussed below.

4.1.3. A Distorted Understanding of Time

Among the fathers of the Modern Age, Descartes was the first to challenge the classical view of time. The Cartesian idea of *cogito* began first with concerns over the justification of “mathematical truths to the study of natural phenomena.” (Sherover, 1975:96) A mechanistic understanding of the world of nature was developed by Descartes in conjunction with mathematical principles which could be considered valid if they adhered to spatial or geometric possibilities (Sherover, 1975:94). To better understand the effects of the Cartesian method on the modern perception/experience of time, it is useful to first consider the notion of substance. For Cartesians, the world consisted of physical substances which occupied space. Time was thus a process or experiential existence between substances. It was perhaps John Locke who further illustrated Descartes ideas. Armed with the Cartesian notion of substances and Newton’s ideas on space and time, Locke asserted that the sense of time passing is the result of a “succession of ideas in consciousness” which gives the feeling of continuity (Sherover, 1975:103). Although Leibniz’s critique of Locke placed some of the notions in question, it was Leibniz’s ideas upon which Immanuel Kant later developed his own ideas of time (Sherover, 1975:96). For Kant, time was not just a sense of experiential succession of ideas; it was along with the comprehension by consciousness proof of the synthetic existence of time as experienced by the human mind. Thus, by this account, St. Augustine’s notion of time beyond nature as illusory was shattered. Beyond metaphysical debates, it is the experience of time between the two ages that is also worth mentioning.

The concept of time developed by the Ancients, and further maintained by medieval thinkers, *was cyclical in relation to the origins of the cosmos* (Gillespie, 2008:3). For medieval Christianity, "the world had a specific beginning, course of development, and end that was prefigured and revealed allegorically in Scripture." (Gillespie, 2008:3) Accordingly, time for Christian thinkers was not unending; it began "with a lost paradise and will end with paradise regained." (Gillespie, 2008:3) In contrast to modern ideals,

from such a position then, time was *not* viewed/experienced as a fleeting opportunity to gain power or fame, but instead *offered one the opportunity for pious living through a promise of a better afterlife*.

How then do modern persons define themselves or rather their sense of *being* when viewed from a temporal perspective? Commonly understood, one is viewed as modern when one is current (or up to date) with what is fashionable (Gillespie, 2008:2). It thus refers to a perception or a mode of behaviour associated with *viewing time in linear terms*, the future of course being most favourable.

This modern attitude is indubitably to be regarded as being new, in contrast to previous times, when “people defined themselves in terms of their land or place, their race or ethnic group, their traditions or their gods.” (Gillespie, 2008:4) It is certain some people did define themselves in terms of an event in time; for example, with an event in the past. However, locating oneself temporally in any of these ways is different from defining oneself in terms of time. Thus, one discovers as a symptom of modernity the *explicit need to be new, to be unlike anything before, not even bounded by salient tradition* (Gillespie, 2008:2). From this perspective, the modern person is not only existent in history, but also *makes history* (Gillespie 2008:3).

According to Gillespie, “[t]he term ‘modern’ and its derivatives come from the Latin *modus* which means ‘measure,’ and, as a measure of time, ‘just now’ with the late Latin derivative *modernus*, from which all later forms derive.” (Gillespie, 2008:4) However, it was not until the 16th century that the term was employed to demarcate a particular historical period (Gillespie, 2008:5). Despite the fact that the distinction of old and new was already present in antiquity, it was never used in its modern sense. The cyclical view of time during antiquity often meant that “new was equated with degeneration and decline.” (Gillespie, 2008:4)

The origins of the modern age seem at first to be a break from the superstitious world into a new world based on reason (Gillespie, 2008:6). Karl Löwith further “argued in *Meaning in History* (1949) that modernity was the result of the secularization of Christian ideals and that it was thus not ultimately distinct from the Middle Ages.” (Löwith in Gillespie,

2008:6) Other thinkers point to modernity as arising out of the debates within theology, namely the nominalist revolution against scholasticism.

Moreover, these debates opened the floor for metaphysical questions which gave rise to modernity. As Gillespie notes, “[t]hese attempts were neither arbitrary nor accidental but reflected the philosophical choices from among the available metaphysical possibilities.” (Gillespie, 2008:7) Put simply, one court argued for the primacy of men, while the other was in favour of a divine entity. Modernity, conversely, favoured science over both. This was the beginning of the naturalistic revolution; hence today, the dominance of the natural sciences over most other conceptions of the world is a reality. Thus, we find with Descartes “[m]an is in part a natural being, but he is also in part divine and is thus distinguished from nature.” (Gillespie, 2008:8) As for Hobbes “[ma]n is thoroughly natural and thus free only in a sense compatible with universal natural causality.” (Gillespie, 2008:8) The modern project, which could be argued as maturing from the Enlightenment, grew out of the above tension.

But what alternatives could be offered to this that are not merely naïve or nostalgic in nature, but comprehend the modern moment together with its very real problems?

4.2. Africa as an Alternative?

Returning yet again to the idea of *alternative modernities* and in particular its central theme of looking to other cultures for a possible way forward to the problem of disenchantment, if African thought (as proposed by this writing) is to offer a solution, it must address the following metaphysical issues, as posed by the critiques of the modern age:

1. An alternative to the modern notion that immanent *being* and transcendent *being* do not need to have an oppositional relation to one another, especially the notion that immanent *being* can exist independently of the transcendent. We must critically re-evaluate the modern overemphasis on artificial structures (technological progress, media, scientific education, and entertainment) which

contemporary rationalism argues to be the foreground to which *being* finds meaning in its existence.

2. African thought systems must offer a cosmological outlook which does not separate the parts (the *immanent* and *transcendent*) from the whole. Having offered an alternative to the modern fallacy of limiting existence to an *immanent* existence of being, re-enchanting the world becomes a possibility since *being* is again connecting to something greater than itself. Moreover, this might return the mystery of the cosmos to humankind; to echo Charles Taylor, “[e]veryone can agree that one of the big differences between us and our ancestors of 500 years ago is that they lived in an ‘enchanted’ world and we do not.” (Taylor, 2011: 407).
3. African metaphysics must address the modern tendency to attach time to a menial, temporal existence of being. The mechanistic, often linear view of time held by moderns must be revised.

With regard to the first point above, pre-colonial African metaphysics does not sever the connection between immanent *being* and transcendent *being*.⁹⁶ According to the Ancient Egyptians⁹⁷ for example, “the main goal of *ankh* (human life) was to come to exist as *nefer* (a good divine being) in order to become *Osiris*, that is, immortal and eternal.” (Obenga, 2004:32) For the Ancient Egyptians then, *being* was hierarchically structured, with eternity being the end goal. The concept of eternity meant continual existence on Earth after one was reincarnated. Human life thus was an aspiration towards the attainment of *Ra*, the highest *being* which was thought to be “imperishable and possessing full reality, that is, power, beauty, truth, perfection, and goodness.” (Obenga, 2004:36). On a human level (for consciousness), the gradual process of attaining *Ra* meant a state of *being* to which one possessed a self-directing will, what according to Obenga would have amounted to a sense of “becoming and effecting” (Obenga, 2004:36). More examples of such ontologies include the Akan and Yoruba ontology:

⁹⁶ As summarised in Chapter Three: there is among African ontological conceptions a universal insistence on *being* as an expression of a *Supreme being*, on the dynamism and *force of being*, on communal existence, and on society as wholistic entity which encompasses everything from animal, plant and inanimate matter.

⁹⁷ I.e. the Egyptian civilisation of the Pharaonic period (3400–343 BC).

being, *okra* is the essence of a person, the expression of the *supreme being*, *Onyame* in human form⁹⁸.

As such, even in cultures where there is less emphasis on transcendent *being*, the ontological outlook is far less cynical in contrast to modernity.

4.3. Contemporary Examples

Since it is often useful to provide examples when proposing how a theory might function, below is a very brief discussion of examples of such contemporary attempts of applying pre-colonial African metaphysics to a modern problem.⁹⁹ Admittedly, the second example is not uniquely African; however the author, (Iain McGilchrist), similarly, is optimistic in finding a solution to the modern crisis by drawing from other cultures than the West, by using contemporary neuropsychology to imagine an alternative way of conceiving of *being-in-the-world*.

4.3.1. A Southern African contribution

A scepticism of the unknown, that which the senses cannot perceive, is so characteristic of modernity that any thought system wanting to critique the period must start from this realisation, which for Magobe Ramose, seems to the case. Writing on the metaphysical implications of a southern African triadic idea of *being*, namely *Ubuntu*,¹⁰⁰ a concept which he asserts to be the root of African philosophy, Ramose (2002) in *The Philosophy of Ubuntu and Ubuntu as a Philosophy* illustrates how the concept is onto-triadic, or having three dimensions of relatedness,¹⁰¹ and provides a conception of the cosmos which transcends the empirical grounding of the modern age. Accordingly:

The ontology of invisible beings is the discourse about the unknown from the standpoint of the living. The unknown remains unknowable on the side of the living. Yet, it is believable and because of this belief it has a direct influence on the life of the living. In this sense, the belief in the unknown unknowable is metaphysics. It is

⁹⁸ Note that these arguments are discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter.

⁹⁹ Contemporary in the sense that refers to the modern age as experienced today.

¹⁰⁰ Discussed also in Chapter Three.

¹⁰¹ Namely, the living, the dead and the yet to be born.

a claim, based upon belief, to knowledge about beings outside the domain of the world of the living. The ontology of invisible beings is thus the basis of ubuntu metaphysics. (Ramose 2002: 236)

Writing on the fragmented relationship between *being* and nature as a result of the “the reductionist, fragmentative and empiricist rationality” of the modern age, Ramose draws from the ontological outlook of the Sotho people in Southern Africa. (Ramose 2015:75) In a similar spirit to other African metaphysical assertions, this southern tribe¹⁰² adheres to a practice of *Motho ke motho ka batho*, a proverb which translates as follows:

To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them. It is *botho* understood as being human (humanness/humanity) and a humane (respectful and polite) attitude towards other human beings which constitute the core or central meaning of the aphorism; *motho ke motho ka batho*. (Ramose, 2015:75)

As a philosophy of wholeness, the Sotho ontological outlook translates to a unified "relation between human beings and physical or objective nature" (Ramose 2015:75). According to Ramose, "to care for one another, therefore, implies caring for physical nature as well, as such; without such care, the interdependence between human beings and physical nature would be undermined." (Ramose, 2015:75) As in other conceptions of African metaphysics, here again the emphasis on wholeness, harmony and balance is seen. It is why with this background, Ramose proposes this as an alternative guiding concept to the ecological problems modern humanity now faces – as opposed to drawing on the usual scientific narratives and theories. A short list of such issues with regards to modern ecological matters includes the threat of nuclear war and the pressing issue of climate change.

For Ramose, “the threat” the planet now faces can be attributed to a loss of *batho* (establishing humane relations with others) which should be interpreted as

¹⁰² As a result of the modernisation of Southern Africa, this does not apply to all Sotho people. Rather, this is traditional belief found within the metaphysics of the traditional tribe.

humanness,¹⁰³ or "a condition of being and the state of becoming, of openness to ceaseless unfolding." (Ramose, 2015:74) Moreover, *batho* instils human dignity since it reinforces a well-founded relation with others and by extension, with the entire cosmology. Expressed by the Sotho phrase *feta kgomo o tshware motho* is the belief that one would rather choose their fellow *being* over worldly possessions (Ramose 2015:74). This by extension includes the ceaseless seeking towards profit making mostly associated with the modern capitalist system and its destructive consequences on the environment. Ramose concludes his assertion as follows:

In these circumstances, the indigenous African people's philosophical aphorisms of *motho ke motho ka batho* and *feta kgomo o tshware motho* can make a significant contribution to world peace by leading the way to the restoration of *botho*; the first essential step to peace with oneself as well as world communal peace. (Ramose, 2015:74)

This is then to be viewed as a example of how it may indeed be possible to draw from a traditional African metaphysics towards the world – namely, that of Ubuntu – and reinvigorating and reconceptualising it in order to deal with a particular modern problem – that of climate change and environmental destruction (as well as attempting to offer a viable way of addressing or dealing with social/political antagonisms). This provides a familiar narrative to Southern African people who can relate to the traditional aspect of it as well as the ontological positioning of the subject in relation to the world, and thus encourage them to consider a modern problem without having to resort to Western scientific discourse to bring about a true sense of change. This is then clearly an example of an alternative modernity which draws from a distinctly traditional African paradigm that could be reimagined within and amongst Southern African people.

4.3.2. The Divided Brain: A physiological view

¹⁰³ This is the author's emphasis, choosing to use *humanness* as opposed to human-ism, which according to the author, "suggests a condition of finality, a closedness, or a kind of absolute either incapable of or resistant to any further change arising from the principle of motion." (Ramose, 2015:74)

As mentioned above, the following example does not relate directly to African philosophy; however, as a matter of *platial*¹⁰⁴ concern, the following can arguably be viewed as being African in spirit, if interpreted as such. Writing in his 2010 book, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, and further in a lecture given at the Rivest, Shamir, and Adleman conference (RSA), British physician and philosopher Iain McGilchrist proposes the thesis that Western philosophy has become too reliant on its analytic principles, at the expense of the intuitive¹⁰⁵. More importantly, McGilchrist asserts the notion that Western modernity might find a solution to its problems *from the more intuitive cultures it once discarded*. Providing both empirical proof (through medical research) and philosophical arguments (drawn from the intellectual history of the West as well as from the example of traditional Japanese culture), he argues for equal importance of both the logical and the intuitive, the physical and the metaphysical aspects of human existence. According to McGilchrist, analytic knowledge should be separated from speculative inquiry while still making up a part of the whole of *being-in-the-world* (McGilchrist, 2010:n.p.). Like Aristotle, McGilchrist argues that the speculative is as relevant as the factual. Using his data of neuroscience and the anatomy of the brain (the two hemispheres and the role of the *corpus callosum*),¹⁰⁶ McGilchrist illustrates how human existence is a product of both hemispheres. For example, it is commonly believed that logic, reason and science reside on the left hemisphere, while, art, imagination and romance are products of the right hemisphere (McGilchrist, 2010:n.p.). This, for McGilchrist, is to be regarded as being incorrect due to the fact that according to his research, all the above functions are products of *both the two hemispheres*.

How each hemisphere functions without the aid of the other reveals its nature, its apprehension of the world and its limitations. The right hemisphere gives sustained, broad, open, vigilant alertness, whereas the left hemisphere gives narrow, sharply focused attention to detail (McGilchrist, 2010:n.p.). In patients where the right hemisphere

¹⁰⁴ This refers to Bruce Janz's platial thesis as discussed in Chapter One.

¹⁰⁵ A wide term denoting the side of human cognition which favors the implicitly recognizable over the explicit. It is a term related to the arts and imagination.

¹⁰⁶ For McGilchrist, "the whole point of the *corpus callosum* is to allow one hemisphere to inhibit the other" (McGilchrist 2010:37)

of the brain was neurologically turned off, their view of the world was narrowed, focusing on specific parts of reality while ignoring others (McGilchrist, 2010). In patients where the left hemisphere of the brain was neurologically turned off, their view of the world was broad, however without knowledge of the specific parts (McGilchrist, 2010:n.p.). For McGilchrist then, the modern world is dominated by the left hemisphere, as such:

There is a loss of the broader picture, and a substitution of a more narrowly focussed, restricted, but detailed, view of the world. The ever more narrowly focussed attention has led to an increasing specialisation and technicalising of knowledge. This in turn has promoted the substitution of information, and information gathering, for knowledge, which comes through experience. There has been an increase in both abstraction and reification, whereby the human body itself and we ourselves, as well as the material world, and the works of art we made to understand it, have become simultaneously more conceptual and seen as mere things. (McGilchrist, 2010:591)

McGilchrist suggests that for the world to escape the grasp of the left hemisphere's view, right hemisphere-orientated cultures (which indubitably includes the various African cultures that have been discussed within this dissertation) must be integrated into the modern world view. More interestingly perhaps is the fact that the *corpus callosum*, the organ separating the two hemispheres, has reduced in ratio over the evolution of humankind. Since the function of the *corpus callosum* is to inhibit and mediate the functions of the two hemispheres, McGilchrist suggests that unity of the two hemispheres is eventually inevitable (McGilchrist, 2010:n.p.).

4.3.2.1. Lessons from right-brained cultures

In the conclusion of his book, McGilchrist considers why his ideas are more likely to be accepted and understood within Oriental¹⁰⁷ regions, or “cultures of the world that have not yet been completely submerged by the West”. (McGilchrist 2010:623) The issue with the West, McGilchrist writes, is the following:

The sharp dichotomy in our culture between the ways of *being* of the two hemispheres, which began in Ancient Greece, does not appear to exist, or, at any rate, to exist in the same way, in Oriental culture: their experience of the world is still effectively grounded in that of the right hemisphere. (McGilchrist, 2010:623)

The Japanese language, for example, “does not have an established method for composing abstract nouns, and has no definite or indefinite articles, considered to be a crucial step in the emergence of abstract nouns in Greek.” (McGilchrist, 2010:624) Moreover, this culture does not seem to have developed abstractions of the world, such as the Platonic *forms*.¹⁰⁸ Thus, there exists no “dichotomy between the phenomenological world and the world of ideas.” (McGilchrist 2010:624) Their ontological outlook is one of unity and wholeness, where things are understood completely without the need for devising complex linguistic tools. This however does not mean to suggest that Japanese metaphysics possesses ultimate knowledge. The completeness comes from an intuitive leap of faith in things. There is an appreciation of the unknown, the implicit (metaphysical). As McGilchrist writes:

This attitude would have been immediately comprehensible in the Renaissance in the West, but was lost as the systematising and specialisation of knowledge, through which observation of nature becomes more markedly subjugated to theory-building, [which then] became increasingly important with the Enlightenment (McGilchrist, 2010:625)

The intuitive, right-brained attitude of the Japanese translates into a cosmology which sees nature not only as an organic entity, but as alive and living. This is, as the reader

¹⁰⁷ The term here is used to denote cultures referred to as the “East” of Continental Europe. While this term has come to be controversial, as discussed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), it is used here merely as a collective term, and both this writing and McGilchrist acknowledge its historical controversy.

¹⁰⁸ Refer to Chapter Two for a detailed description of the Platonic forms.

may note, very similar to the African conceptions of ontology, as nature and *being* is alive, dynamic, and energetic (see Chapter Three). Accordingly, it is important to note the term *shizen*, the Japanese word for nature, whose derivation means of itself, spontaneously (it is in fact an adverb, not a noun), as opposed to whatever is brought about through calculation or by will.” (McGilchrist 2010:625) Once again, this is reminiscent of the discussion on Ancient Egyptian metaphysics.

Moreover, McGilchrist points out how the Japanese, in contrast to the West, and like pre-colonial African cultures, have an outlook of time which appreciates the past. As opposed to the modern obsession with the new, traditional Japanese views of time “appreciates what is fleeting, the impermanence of nature (*shizen*) is seen as the Buddhahood,¹⁰⁹ or essence of the divine.....like Heraclitus’s river, always changing, but always itself.” (McGilchrist 2010:625) This then also echoes remnants of Ramose’s interpretation of *Ubuntu* as not merely an ontology of *being*, but rather *be-ing-becoming*, implying the concept of motion (Ramose, 2002:231).

In reiterating the idea of *alternative modernities*, particularly the suggestion that modernity ought to be critically discussed as it now manifests within different cultures, both the African and the Japanese examples above serve as *possible* alternatives to the modern problem of a disenchanted ontology, cosmology and understanding of time – which may then have an influence/impact on how modern problems are understood and addressed. Contemporary scholarship, including such writing as this, has the task of formalising such systems in order to make them available to mass consciousness, while simultaneously being aware that the consciousness of such an existential problem does not necessarily exist with the current state of existence, where many – if not most – are not aware of the potentialities existent in traditional systems.

Furthermore, there also exists a rich history of alternatives within the West to the modern outlook. European scholars (through the *platia* thesis) can thus draw from, for example, the ancient Greeks, the Hellenistic period (both discussed in Chapter Two), the

¹⁰⁹ This is in reference to the Ancient practice of Buddhism, an Eastern mystical belief system.

Renaissance, and the Romantic era. Some post-Enlightenment thinkers, such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, also offer particular anti-naturalistic metaphysical systems which have not been discussed in this dissertation, in order to provide a voice to the more marginalised and less advocated African pre-colonial thought systems, particularly in the context of post-colonial Africa.

The kind of approach Ramose further advocates contains many of the same essences found in Western post-Enlightenment metaphysics, although perhaps not as restricted and formalised to Western history. This is of great importance when proposing an approach to conceiving of an alternative modernity in the context of sub-Saharan Africa – that the language and *being* speaks to the context as opposed to drawing once again from European alternatives. Ideally, both would be considered. However, primacy should first be given to recognising that such alternatives are already present in the history of thought on the African continent and within the African peoples themselves.

CONCLUSION

The overarching intention of this study has been to investigate which aspects of traditional African metaphysics could contribute to the idea of alternative modernities in the wake of colonialism. This work has revealed that there are several aspects of traditional African metaphysics which could potentially provide the ‘alternative’ to the notion of alternative modernities.

However, it is important to emphasise a number of significant points for the reader to be made aware of regarding the conclusions of the study. In the first instance, this is an ethnophilosophical study, particularly Chapter Three and Four. As such, the reader must be aware of the potential challenges to and critiques of this type of approach, which have been discussed in Chapter One and Three. Secondly, this study relies on historical reconstructions to build up to some of its conclusions. As such, the reader must be cognisant of the fact that historical events deemed important (by the author and the research that has been undertaken) have been selected; as such, not every aspect and event of the history of Western philosophy has been addressed. Thirdly, as much as this

is a comparative study, its conclusions are not meant to suggest in any way that African philosophy is superior to Western thought. Rather, it is supporting the notion that alternative modernities similarly means multiple modernities; and more importantly, challenging the hegemony brought about by the single narrative of historical progress and development as often found in Western thought. Finally, and of crucial importance, is that the reader should keep in mind the fact that this dissertation could not possibly address all the arguments for or against the notion of African Philosophy, or how to do African Philosophy. Neither could it reconstruct all the different pre-colonial metaphysical systems found in the continent of Africa. As such, the author had to choose a few so as to illustrate the objective at hand, which was to argue for the possibility of an alternative modernity to be found within traditional African thought systems and African peoples themselves, as opposed to looking elsewhere. As such, there could be numerous examples of traditional African thought systems that do not collaborate the stance taken within this study. However, that does not necessarily negate the objective of this dissertation.

In briefly glancing through the objectives of each chapter, Chapter One aimed to provide a discussion of both Africa and its philosophies, and where it finds itself now, especially in the wake of colonialism. More importantly, Chapter One provided an acknowledgement of the challenges faced by the field of African Philosophy, and how these are kept in mind throughout the dissertation. Chapter Two then considered the intellectual development of Western metaphysics from the Ancients to the moderns, its growth, disenchantment, and decline, and how this culminated in the crisis of the West, which by virtue of colonialism is a crisis of the world. Chapter Three in turn provided a reconstruction of some traditional pre-colonial African metaphysical categories which might possibly address the crisis referred to above, drawing from largely ethnophilosophical writings. The fourth, and final chapter provided a discussion of how the three categories of metaphysics chosen for this dissertation, namely ontology, cosmology, and time, have been distorted in modernity, and then considered how such reconstructions of pre-colonial African traditional thought in particular could potentially contribute to the debate of alternative modernities. The objective was thus to (briefly) engage with contemporary issues from a platian, or phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective, discussing actual issues experienced by

African people as opposed to getting bogged down in debates about the delineation of terminology and definitions of who African people or what African problems are.

The hypothesis of this thesis was that Western modernity as we know it is in crisis; this has shown almost beyond doubt to be the case, especially as it has manifested in the former colonies – as discussed both in Chapter Two and Three. However, it should be noted that Western modernity is not a static concept; it is also constantly developing, both in the West and outside itself, and thus its nature can also be expected to change, and new unforeseen consequences arise, whether positive, negative, or both.

A further project then, which could develop from this thesis, would be to study more comprehensively other metaphysical categories as discussed in this dissertation, and to consider how to develop and reanimate them in order to deal with the modern issues faced by African peoples in the post-colonial context. A more comprehensive analysis could also be done of the Western contemporary metaphysical systems and those of pre-colonial African cultures, as there seem to be numerous similarities but also interesting points of divergence. Where those similarities arise from and why they diverge would provide for a study on what was lost in the modern project, and what the loss meant for the different cultures of former colonisers and colonised. Of perhaps more practical relevance, a deeper discussion should be undertaken as to how the notion of reanimating Ubuntu, in its various manifestations, could provide an alternative approach to many of the pressing issues facing the African continent at present, including not only environmental destruction and climate change, but also endemic corruption, violence, and fascism. This, however, would have to be approached from a very grounded perspective without space for sentimentality and nostalgia, in order to really be able to bring about tangible change.

In light of the above then, it is the contention of this study that modernity, as it manifests outside the West, should be discussed and defined under the particular culture it encompasses. While the process of modernity which initially developed in the West insisted on a single, empirical outlook, modernity as a present continuous phenomenon must encompass and appreciate a multiplicity of views. And it is the intention of this dissertation to show that with deeper research and practical application, there are

concepts found within certain traditional metaphysical systems that could provide/contribute towards at least one of those alternative views.

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