

## Fanon: Africana Philosopher of Existence<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** The idea of the absence of reason and philosophy among colonized cultures is very prevalent in the Western philosophical canon. The purpose of this study is to make an argument for a reading of Fanon's thought in philosophical terms and thus dispel the myth that Africans do not and cannot philosophise. The study has two main findings, firstly, that the preclusion of Africans from philosophy is based on pejorative biological stereotypes about the absence of reason among Africans. Secondly, that a compelling argument can be made for a reading of Fanon's thought in philosophical terms. The study makes use of a close reading of relevant primary and secondary literature.

### INTRODUCTION

There has been a general tendency not only of regarding Europe as the centre of knowledge and reflective reason but also of confining and collapsing black intellectual production only within the autobiographical frame and to see blacks in general as producers of experience and as without reason in the Western philosophical tradition particularly among the Enlightenment thinkers. This is so notwithstanding the fact that black theorists have been around since the advent of modern theorizing (Gordon 2000: 27). Following Lewis Gordon, Anthony Bogues (2003) has eloquently demonstrated in his book *Black Heretics, Black Prophets* that black theorists, particularly the eighteenth-century slave narratives, have engaged with issues of liberty, slavery and separatism at a theoretical level. This fact notwithstanding, black literary production in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has become synonymous with the autobiographical frame. Gordon conceives of this trend that begins from the late 1970s and which has endured right up to the present period as occasioned by discursive practices by some of the influential thinkers of this period. These thinkers focused their energies, insofar as black writers are concerned, on autobiographical reductionism of

race, gender and class (Gordon 2000: 25). Gordon elaborates, "Less concern focused on what previous black writers were saying and more on which black writers were writing or saying these things" (2000: 27).

The hypocrisy in the Western philosophical canon becomes increasingly problematic particularly when the question of the black writer is examined in relation to his/her European counterparts. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, authored *The Confessions*, which was a fundamentally an autobiographical account of the author's life. Earlier, St. Augustine wrote and published his own autobiographical work with a similar title *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. In his work, Rousseau goes further than anyone who had previously written on issues of truthfulness and honesty, detailing even some of the most embarrassing moments of his formative years. Despite this, however, none would dare confine Rousseau or St. Augustine to the autobiographical moment. In fact, Rousseau, the author of *On the Social Contract* is regarded today as one of the prominent philosophical giants to emerge from the history of Western philosophy.

Thus, in their rejection of the bad faith and hypocrisy immanent in the Western philosophical tradition, More (2008) and Bogues (2003) lament the way in which black literary production has been collapsed and confined into the autobiographical moment. Bogues conceives of this as problematic in three respects. Firstly, it elides seeing blacks as producers of knowledge and as such it works to reinforce the misconcep-

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tion that black people are only producers of experience. The concern for Bogue is that when written productions of black thinkers are studied only within the literary and autobiographical frame, one misses their political ideas and purposes. The second concern relates to the narrowness of the autobiographical frame, which has as its focus the experiences of life. The concern here is that as this happens “the complex relationships between the written testimony of the slave and the political language and context in which the testimony are embedded are elided or reduced to a secondary position” (Bogue 2003: 25). Lastly, the autobiographical frame fails to recognize important theoretical developments and/or strands in slave narratives, particularly in the late eighteenth century. Bogue identifies black abolitionism as an important strand of writing during this period and views it as a significant moment of black radicalism on the world stage (2003: 26). Bogue’s overarching point is that in an environment wherein reason is racialized, black theoretical production functions to demonstrate the membership of black people into the human community—something that might be missed by focusing on the narrow biographical frame.

More in his influential essay “*Biko: Africana Existentialist Philosopher*” (2008) cites the Afro-Caribbean philosopher, Paget Henry as lamenting the “near absence of an explicitly cultivated philosophical tradition” (cited in More 2008: 45) particularly within the contexts of South African and Afro-Caribbean philosophies. This is so despite many internationally known religious, social and political figures. Like Gordon and Bogue, More laments the tendency in some quarters of locking black theorists in the biographical frame and political activism. He ascribes the lack of a philosophical tradition as largely embedded in the problem of inter-textuality. This is particularly true when viewed within the context of Western epistemic hegemony, which Henry associates with the “particularization of reason” according to which “Europe acquire[s] epistemic hegemony that made it co-extensive with the geography of reason” (2006: 2). Within the context of knowledge production, what this means is that for the black writer to be able to make an intellectual contribution, she/he must go via Europe as an intellectual detour if she/he is to be heard at all.

### Rationale

In her reflections on the experiences of Afro-Brazilian artists in France, Lenita Perrier (2017: 41) notes that the black Brazilian identity is deeply entrenched to a stereotyped typology of the “Brazilian black artist”. While Afro-Brazilians are somewhat treated favorably compared to other people of African descent in Paris, Perrier nevertheless notes that in the eyes of white Parisians, a ‘Brazilian artist’ still means the same thing as “black artist” (2017: 41). Thus, it is argued that the perception of black artists in this way is closely connected to historical ideas about Africans as *a priori* and as congenitally inferior in relation to their white counterparts. What this means is that regardless of the quality of work produced by a black artist, it is deemed a foregone conclusion that such work can never measure up to productions by white artists. So, it is suggested that it is within this context that Perrier’s observed typology of the Brazilian black artist can be understood.

Within the broader context of this study, a similarity is drawn between the predicament and life experiences of the Afro-Brazilian artist, as envisaged by Perrier, and Fanon’s black intellectual. This similarity derives from the fact that both the Afro-Brazilian artist and Fanon’s black intellectual have the objectification of their labor in the various products of their creations demoted and downgraded to a lesser social status. This situation is best exemplified by one of Perrier’s interlocutors by the name of ‘Rosi’, a young female of Afro-Brazilian origin living in Paris in her rejection of her blackness altogether asserting, “*I never wanted to belong to this race. I always identified myself as being white*” (2017: 42). The self-disparagement in Rosi is the product of long colonial processes of black human depersonalization leading also to the degradation of black intellectual production. It is in this light, therefore, that the predicament of the black intellectual and the artist can be understood.

More (2017) advances a similar argument as that of Perrier. In the article, “Locating Fanon in Post-apartheid South Africa”, More notes that Fanon’s critique of colonialism was as much a critique of apartheid in South Africa as it was a critique of colonialism. Underlying More’s argument is the recognition that anti-black social systems project and render blacks, in general,

as backward, biologically and mentally inferior to their white counterparts (2017: 130). At the heart of More's reflections is the argument that racial discrimination compartmentalizes human subjects into racial groups. This compartmentalization is based on the distinction between "superior" whites and "inferior" blacks. Like with Perrier, the implication for the black artist and the intellectual is that their artistic works are relegated into the margins of mainstream art.

Furthermore, while many commentaries recognize the political views of thinkers like Fanon and Biko, More also notes that what is often deliberately ignored is the contribution of these thinkers to philosophical discourse. While, for instance, More underscores Biko as a philosopher, he also observes that Biko's philosophical outlook, especially "the existential phenomenological basis of his thought", has its roots in Fanon. Discernible from this is the fact that since Biko's philosophical outlook is influenced by Fanon, the latter is by implication proven to be a philosopher. It is for this reason More remarks that "it [was] through Fanonian philosophy and its emphasis on black identity, agency and liberation that the Black Consciousness philosophy of Biko (and Manganyi) became embedded into the collective consciousness of the black masses that ultimately brought the apartheid regime to its knees" (2017: 37).

### Study Objectives

Against the practice that precludes blacks from the realm of reason and that seeks to confine blacks only within the autobiographical frame, the study sought to achieve two objectives namely:

1. To locate Frantz Fanon within existential philosophy and thus show Fanon to be a philosopher.
2. To dispel the myth and stereotype that views Africans as producers of experience and thus devoid of reason.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method used is the philosophical technique of rigorous argumentation and conceptual analysis. What this means is that the hypothesis is tested by the strength of the arguments for and against it. The method involves, firstly, examining the plausibility of the application of

the qualification or title of 'philosopher' insofar as the intellectual figure of Fanon is concerned, and then contrasting it to other differing views on Fanon. Having done so, the study identifies and clarifies the dispute between the way in which Fanon can be read and what these other views read and intellectually locate Fanon. This requires a close reading of the work of Fanon insofar as it has a bearing on or the extent to which his work contributes to philosophy and the existential tradition in particular. Furthermore, the study relies on relevant published and unpublished material.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Upon review of the relevant literature, the researcher established that the practice of excluding 'non-Europeans', not only from membership to the human community but also from philosophy, is based upon a misconception about the absence of reason among colonized cultures. Onwuanibe views this practice as a product of early European ideas about who or what constitutes a human being. In this regard, he notes that Westerners have historically conceived of a human being as one who fully participates in reason. Since, however, Europe conceives of Africans (and other 'non-Europeans') as without reason and interiority, the study establishes that the latter are thus *a priori* excluded from philosophy. For, the ability to philosophize is here, deemed to be the proclivity of a rational being or, as noted, of a being that fully participates in reason.

The study also finds that despite attempts at excluding 'non-Europeans' from reason and philosophy, the capacity for self-reflection and philosophizing is, in fact, not something that is unique to Europeans but is universal, and that self-reflection is something that each culture is endowed with. This view finds corroboration in the work of Paget Henry who observes that within the context of Africana Philosophy "the occasion for self-reflection [was] the racist negation of the humanity of Africans and the caricature of 'the negro' that it has produced" (2006: 4). Notably, the researcher's finding that as regards the intellectual figure of Fanon, it was the condition of anti-blackness that accorded him the site for critical self-reflection, understanding, reason and philosophy. This view is corroborative evidence of Henry's observation of philosophy as

a universal phenomenon. Thus, contrary to the prevailing scholarship on the locus of Fanon's thought, it is with Fanon, the philosopher, that the discussion is focused on.

The framing of Fanon as a philosopher within the Africana existential tradition requires one to first understand what Africana philosophy entails. According to Gordon (2000), Africana philosophy is a branch of the much broader field of Africana thought. Gordon describes Africana thought as a study that "raises ironic self-reflective and meta-theoretical questions" (Gordon 2000: 3). He further explicates that Africana thought "refers to an area of thought that focuses on theoretical questions raised by struggles over ideas in African cultures and their hybrid and creolized forms in Europe, North America, Central and South America, and the Caribbean" (2008: 1). Having explicated what Africana thought entails, he then situates Africana philosophy within this broad discursive field. Accordingly, Gordon defines Africana philosophy as involving "theoretical questions raised by critical engagements with ideas in African cultures and their hybrid, mixed or creolized forms worldwide" (2008: 1). From this explication, one can discern that the principal concern of Africana philosophy is not empirical reality per se but abstraction from it. Thus, Africana philosophy is concerned with raising "theoretical questions" arising from reflections on ideas emanating from Africana cultures. This does not mean that Africana philosophy is dismissive of objective reality. What this essentially means is that Africana philosophy operates at a meta-philosophical level, producing higher order knowledge emanating from the lived experience itself. Thus, such an engagement shows Africana philosophy as a reflective intellectual activity with its context being the lived experience of the black subject in an anti-black social environment. As Gordon further observes, the context for the emergence of Africana philosophy was the imposition of the identity 'black' upon the inhabitants of the continent of Africa by Western powers and the conflation of "most Africans with the racial term 'black' and [the] many [negative] connotations" (2008: 1) that "blackness" and "African" have assumed since the European conquest of Africa.

According to the Afro-Caribbean scholar Lucius Outlaw (1996), Africana philosophy entails the following:

[A] 'gathering' notion under which to situate the articulations (writings, speeches, etc.) and traditions of the same, of African and peoples of African descent collectively, as well as the sub-discipline—or field forming, tradition-defining, tradition-organizing—reconstructive efforts, which are (to be) regarded as philosophy (Outlaw 1996: 76).

Like Gordon, Outlaw construes Africana philosophy as a discursive term "under which potentially large collections of traditions of practices, agendas and literature of African and African descended peoples" can be gathered (Outlaw 1996: 77). It is noted, however, that in this agenda-setting field, what is important are those practices that fall under the rubric of philosophy. From this perspective, Africana philosophy can be construed as a tradition that recognizes the intellectual productions of Africans on the continent and those of African ancestry in the diaspora. As such, it can be distinguished, for example, from other philosophical productions by black people elsewhere in the world, what Gordon refers to as "black philosophies" (2000: 6). The distinction is important since it highlights the fact that not all black people in the world are of African descent. As Gordon (2000: 6) observes, there are, for example, black people who are indigenous to Australia and whose identity is not African but who have nonetheless lived their reality as 'blacks'. There is thus a cultural as well as a philosophical distinction between Africana and black philosophies in the sense that one philosophizes from the point of view of his/her subjective situatedness in space and time. Having thus defined Africana philosophy, one is now better positioned to explicate what Africana existential philosophy entails.

### **Africana Existential Philosophy**

The term 'existentialism' is generally associated with the human existential condition constitutive of the anguish and anxiety of being situated in space and in time. Thus, existential thinkers concern themselves with reflections on the problems of human existence. Gordon defines 'existentialism' as premised on the thesis that "[t]he lived body is the subject of agency instead of subjects like the abstract Kantian transcendental subject, and that the fundamental problem of value is the problematization of self and other, and that anguish over freedom and



the reality of unfreedom poses problems of liberation” (1995: 45). Since black people, as the result of colonization and conquest, experience their being as subservient or inferior beings to ‘superior’ whites, Africana existential philosophy thus takes as its concern reflections on the reality of unfreedom that colonial and metropolitan racism have brought about, a condition which Noel Manganyi describes as the condition of being-black-in-the-world. It thus operates antithetically from the ravages of race-based oppression occasioned by European colonial projects in the formerly colonized and still colonized world. In other words, Africana existential philosophy becomes, in a sense, a philosophy born of struggle in that the existential conditions of oppression dialectically inform the nature of reflection and action.

More (2008) notes that Africana existential philosophy entails the following:

Because of the historical fact of racial oppression, colonization, and slavery, Africana philosophy raises questions of identity and liberation by focusing on the reality that African people are a black people and hence are affected by the significance of race and racism. The raising and articulation of the existential questions of identity and liberation within the context and framework of the situation of black people, constitutes what has recently come to be known as ‘Africana existential philosophy’ (2008: 47).

It can thus be contended that it is the theoretical reflections and “articulation of the existential questions” by black people themselves on their existential conditions that characterize Africana existential philosophy. Thus, from the perspective of the encounters with race-based oppression and domination, the preoccupation of Africana existential philosophy has to do with coming to terms with such issues as anti-black racism, colonialism and imperialism. Some of the grounding figures in this tradition include thinkers such as Qobna Ottobah Cugoano, Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, Richard Wright, Aime Césaire, Toni Morrison and James Baldwin. To a large degree, Fanon follows in the tradition of and is inspired by the works of these figures. This is demonstrated by his pained intellectual and practical engagement with the existential question of black identity and oppression.

One might perhaps trace the genealogy of this intellectual movement from the eighteenth

century through the political ideas of Qobna Ottobah Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* first published in 1787. Ottobah was a native of Africa and a former slave. *Thoughts and Sentiments* was a slave narrative and an important book for numerous reasons. Of particular importance is the fact that it was the first abolitionist text written by an African in English (Gunn 2011: 629). This is not to say that Cugoano was the first individual to write an abolitionist text as people such as Quaker John Woolman (1754) and Granville Sharp (1769) had already done so. It is also worth noting that the book raised the “most overt and extended challenge to slavery ever made by a person of African descent [...] the first [book by an] English-speaking African historian of slavery and the slave trade and the first to criticize European imperialism in the Americas” (Carrera 1999: xx). The book was also an ethical pastiche, as it sought to challenge the system of slavery both on religious and epistemic grounds.

Epistemologically, Cugoano made use of the natural rights discourse of the Enlightenment thinkers at the time. Accordingly, he considered natural rights as common rights and extended these to include black slaves. From here he was able to argue that since slavery robbed the slave of his or her liberty, slavery was against the doctrine of natural rights. He considered slavery not only as the worst kind of evil but also as contradictory to the key tenets of the Enlightenment (Cugoano 1999: 11).

Religiously, Cugoano challenged slavery on the grounds of the tenets of the doctrine of monogeny (the belief that the origin of the human species is one creation by God) as opposed to polygeny (which sees human origin as plural). Accordingly, he believed that the creation of human beings was one creation by God, notwithstanding external differences such as skin color. Moreover, since humans are created by God in a like manner, that is, in his image, Cugoano argued that human beings should be treated equally. Racial difference should not be taken to mean difference in terms of ability. As such, it should not be used as a pretext for racial domination and oppression. Thus, those that promoted and participated in slavery and slave trade are regarded by Cugoano as against Divine Law.

Another important voice in this tradition is that of Anna Julia Cooper. Cooper was an African-American woman born into slavery in the

1800s and is best known for her work, *A Voice from the South: By a Woman from the South*. In this book, she addresses issues such as gender, racism, education and inequality. Precisely for her emphasis on gender, the book has come to be regarded by some as one of the first articulations of black feminism. Since she writes as both a black person and a woman, race and gender become intertwined even though she is sharply aware of the peculiarity of black women's suffering. For, a black woman has to bear the existential anguish of being categorized first as a black in a white dominated world as well as a woman in a patriarchal society (1988: 134). She further remarks, "The colored woman too often finds herself hampered and shamed by a less liberal sentiment and a more conservative attitude on the part of those for whose opinion she cares most" (1988: 134-135). Thus, one finds in Cooper a sense of the predicament of an alienated black woman in an anti-black social environment and a 'voice' that desires the ear of society.

By making use of the dialogical method, Cooper voices the ideas and experiences of others as well as her own. Furthermore, through her writing, she introduces to the audience the existential category of 'an Other'. However, unlike the negative perceptions of the 'black other' in mainstream American society at the time, Cooper conceives of 'the other' in positive reductions and as an equal. Thus, the other is recognized as an equal interlocutor and an equal contributor in the production of knowledge and ideas. The advantage of her method is that it directly engages the affected individuals or social groups and avoids a situation wherein someone else or a group of others become the spokesperson(s) for another. She thus insists that people, colored or white, ultimately are the same. For those who insist on the inherent differences among races, she writes "My 'people' are just like other people—indeed, too like for their own good. They hate, they love, they attract and repel, they climb or they grovel, struggle or drift, aspire or despair, endure in hope or curse in vexation exactly like all the rest of unregenerate humanity" (Cooper 1988: 112). In this light, Cooper's ideas can be construed as being at odds or going against the grain of prevailing Euro-American scholarship in relation to the humanity of the black person.

One already finds here a broad parallel between Fanon and his predecessors. The themes

of racial inequality, racial domination, freedom and recognition are some of the threads, which connect him to his predecessors. But one of the dominant intellectual figures that successfully penetrated so deeply into the condition or facticity of the black subject was W.E.B. Du Bois particularly in his work *The Soul of Black Folk*. In the opening lines of this work, Du Bois, notes, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, which entails relating the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (1905: 13). Just as Du Bois observed at the dawn of the twentieth century the "color-line" to be the problem of the twentieth century—which Gordon has described as "a line between 'normal' and 'abnormal' identities" (2000: 63)—race has indeed been one, if not, the major factor that divides societies across the globe, in addition to religion and gender.

In this work Du Bois critiques the problem of being a black person in white America. To this end, the concepts of "the veil" and double-consciousness emerge as ways in which the author critiques black identity. By the veil Du Bois means "a particular sensation...of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (1905: 3), whereas "double-consciousness" describes an ontological condition whereby one feels his or her identity not as one but plural and torn into parts. Through these concepts, Du Bois argues that within the context of race relations in America, a context in which blackness has suffered systematic dehumanization, blacks suffer from this double-consciousness. As he puts it, "One ever feels this twoness, an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unrecognized strivings" (1905: 3). Its character is that blacks suffer a double identity of being black and/or African on the one hand, and American, meaning white, on the other, the latter also being the society that rejects them. Furthermore, negative perceptions occasioned by the phenomenon of the veil and this double-consciousness lead blacks to question not only their identity and humanity but also leads to problems of black self-disparagement. The problem of 'double-consciousness' would find keen interest and attention in the work of Fanon, particularly in his work *Black Skin White Masks*. As is evident below, instead of a "double-consciousness", Fanon proposed, instead, a triple or "third-person consciousness" (1967a: 110). For, as he saw

it, the Negro<sup>1</sup> had in the trains and other public spaces, developed a triple awareness of his body and himself. Accordingly, there was an awareness of self as occupying space, an awareness of self as seen through the gaze of the other, the white man, and the sense of nausea associated with the fact of having to be made 'invisible' (Fanon 1967a: 112).

By rejecting the tendency of being confined only into the autobiographical frame, the emergence of Africana existential philosophy as demonstrated in the works of the above thinkers and also such figures as Aimé Césaire, Fanon, Lewis Gordon and Paget Henry, in the twentieth century, shows that black people are not only producers of theory but are also endowed with self-reflective reason. Thus, contrary to the myth that sees blacks as unreflective a people, this tradition disproves this myth. Although existentialism with the capital 'E' originated and thus arguably resonates with post-war European *angst* and the body literature produced by that continent, concerns over existential issues, such as freedom and dread are universal phenomena. This is the reason why Gordon in his book *Existentialia Africana* makes a distinction between existentialism and philosophies of existence with the former being a "fundamentally European historical phenomenon" (2000: 10), while the latter being concerned with "philosophical questions, questions premised upon concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation" (2000: 10) and "by a centering of what is often known as the *situation* of questioning or inquiry itself" (2000: 10).

### Fanon's Existentialism

Earlier, it was noted that Africana existential philosophy is animated by black peoples' concerns in relation to the condition of being-black-in-an-anti-black world. These concerns relate to the anguish and anxiety by blacks over freedom against oppression, liberty and racism. It is these same concerns, the reflections on issues of black identity, culture, recognition, liberty and racism that characterize Fanon's philosophical endeavors. What situates Fanon's thought within existential philosophy is his insistence on understanding the black condition as a situationally lived experience. By situating and contextualizing experience he, *ipso facto*, goes beyond the limiting ontological realm and in so doing his-

toricizes his analysis. Moreover, through transcendence, which is essentially a momentary suspension of the realm of necessity, or finitude, to use Kierkegaard's terminology, he is able to view and reflect on the black existential condition abstractly at a meta-philosophical level. This means that the lived experience itself becomes the context upon which philosophical reflection (and action) becomes possible. In fact, in consequence of his philosophical and/or ontological reflection on the being of the black subject in anti-black social environments, Fanon is led to question the human status of the black subject within the context of Western or white hegemony. He thus asks the question, "What does the black man want?" The researcher suggests that the question arises since in a white dominated world the black subject does not hold any ontological resistance. In other words, it is not as a Man or an 'Other' that the white man sees the black, but as an inferior form of being. The implication thereof is that the Other becomes an inferior version of himself, and as such, is certainly not equal to a white self-consciousness.

The reality is that through the ideology of racism, blacks begin to internalize these pejorative ideas and stereotypes about their inherent inferiority and the superiority of whites. Thus, in a white supremacist world, the black does not register in the white self-consciousness as a fully-fledged human being. So, what one sees here is that Fanon, like his predecessors, is deeply concerned with the question of Being from a conceptual or philosophical point of view, that is, the meaning and/or significance of Being. As Gordon (2000) remarks of Du Bois, the latter did not simply "write of *being*" (2000: 63) but focused more on "its meaning" (2000: 63). Similarly, Fanon is not concerned with simply examining Being merely from an ontological point of view but more so in terms of its meaning, its teleology and/or purpose. He thus has to navigate the complex terrain of metaphysically ascertaining the status or *meaning* of being black in a white dominated or anti-black world.

But, there is another reason why Fanon's ideas are philosophical and this relates to the method of enquiry that he employs in relation to understanding human reality. Gordon (1995: 45), for instance, observes that Fanon's method of inquiry is existential phenomenology. This, he ascribes to the juxtaposition of phenomenolog-

ical and existential concepts in Fanon, the problematization of (the black) self in relation to the (white) other, “anguish over freedom” in the context of unfreedom and the raising of concern over the “*situationally* lived” existence by people of flesh and blood (Gordon 1995: 45). Indeed, because of his appeal and commitment to these values, this “situates Fanon’s thought in existential philosophy and in terms of method in existential phenomenology” (Gordon 1995: 45). The classic occasion by which Fanon employs phenomenology to existential situations is in the book *A Dying Colonialism*. In this text, Fanon chronicles the suffering of the Algerian people under French colonialism during the Algerian War of Independence. According to Gordon, through the focus on the object of consciousness, the phenomenon, a philosophical or “phenomenological moment” occurs through the “suspension of certain kinds of interests” (Gordon 1995: 45) for that which is the specific object of consciousness. This kind of disciplinary commitment, it is argued, situates Fanon’s thought broadly within philosophy and through his commitment to the situationally lived experience of black people, in Africana existential philosophy.

It is also for this reason that the Caribbean scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2008: 93) remarks, “Indeed, Fanon’s extraordinary effort to describe and examine the lived experience of the black and the condemned gain him a title of a philosopher of existence.” More (2008) regards Fanon as one of the “dominant existentialist figure” (2008: 48) who has had a profound influence on Steve Biko. Although Fanon does not frequently state in his oeuvre that he is influenced by an existential phenomenological outlook, there are, however, moments where this becomes explicit. In *Black Skin White Masks*, for example, he states, “My life is caught in the lasso of existence. My freedom turns me back to myself. No, I do not have the right to be a Negro. I do not have the right to be this or that” (Fanon 1967a: 178).

Reminiscent of Sartrean existential philosophy, Fanon states, “I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek therefore for the meaning of my destiny” (1967a: 179). In his lectures on existentialism, later published as *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre had stated that one does not come into the world imbued with predetermined essences. On the contrary, essences

emerge later spawned by the processes of becoming. So, from this one can discern that Sartre conceives of the process of individual development ethically as coming into being through human agency and individual responsibility. Similarly, Fanon states, “I should constantly remind myself that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. I am part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it” (1967a: 179). This makes explicit the fact that Fanon is not merely concerned with diagnosing the black existential condition (or experience as it were) and the anguish that it imposes, but more critically, he is concerned with the question of transcendence, or as he puts it, “bringing invention to existence”. Fanon’s reflections on his situation and on the racial problem that black people in general face lead him to begin raising questions of identity such as “who or what are we?” and “what shall we do?” (More 2008: 7). While these questions relate to ontological concerns, they also relate, at the same time, to teleological ones. For, as Gordon observes, once ontological questions of identity have been resolved, the next logical thing to ask is, what shall be done? In the case of black people, this question translates to, what shall be done about the problem of black oppression? By situating and reflecting on the black situation on the premise of particularly lived experiences, in the researchers’ view, situates Fanon’s thought within the tradition of Africana existential philosophy.

It is notable, however, that Fanon does not fit the typical description of an academic philosopher. As both intellectual and activist, he must constantly oscillate between the two realms, which are dialectical. Thus, unlike the academic philosopher who merely contemplates the world, as a critical race theorist, Fanon is a philosopher who lives and puts into practice his ideas. In other words, he is one who lives his ideas. This double-fold character of being both an intellectual and an activist resembles what one finds in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where Marx suggests that what matters is not merely to know the world but to change it. Similarly, Fanon is of the view that if the decolonial project is to succeed, then it is not enough to reflect and merely contemplate about it, like Marx, Fanon is of the view that what matters is to change the world. For, as he puts it, “Men change



at the same time that they change the world” (Fanon 1965: 30).

Moreover, since historically white-self consciousness had rejected the humanity of the black-self, it was up to the latter to make his/her humanity known and recognized. Fanon avers, “Since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution...to assert myself as a Black Man...to make myself known” (1967a: 115). Thus, one here recognizes a certain kind of consciousness emerging, an awareness of self-ness or more precisely, black consciousness within the context of anti-black sentiment, what Steven Biko would later aptly refer to as Black Consciousness Philosophy. One remembers here Biko’s lament, “*Black man, you are on your own*” (1987: 91) emphasizing the point which Fanon had made earlier that freedom will not be given but should be demanded and fought for.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon notes that for freedom to be meaningful, the “people must know where they are going, and why” (1967b: 156). It is this kind of consciousness that Fanon wanted to instill within the anti-colonial movement, a philosophy of black consciousness. It is also in this context that the Nigerian poet and social critic Dr. Chinweizu understands black consciousness when he writes, “A decolonized and re-educated African ought always demand that matters be explained from an Afrocentric viewpoint” (1987: XIX).

What one discerns from the preceding discussion is that besides being an abstract thinker who made ready use of philosophical and existential concepts, Fanon was also a philosopher of praxis. As the researcher has observed, he oscillated between both the intellectual and the material realms in such a way that one informed the other in a dialectical and symbiotic fashion. Precisely because of the practicality of Fanon’s thought, his philosophy of black consciousness quickly appealed to liberation movements such as the Black Panther Movement in the United States and the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa led by Steve Biko. According to Thomas K Ranuga, “The radical ideas of Fanon became available at the most critical juncture in the liberation struggle of Azania [South Africa]” (1986: 186), and this was the time when South Africa’s liberation movements such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) had been banned by the apartheid government. According to More, “Both Fanon’s classics texts *Black*

*Skin White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, became the grounding texts of the Black Consciousness philosophy in South Africa” (2008: 48). These accounts testify to the influence of Fanon’s thought, and for the current purpose they show Fanon as an Africana philosopher of existence. Despite this, however, there are those scholars such as David Caute and, to some degree Jock McCulloch, who are of the view that Fanon was not a philosopher.

Although acknowledging the influence of Sartre and, to a lesser degree Marx, on Fanon, Caute does not conceive of Fanon as ‘a philosopher’ or, at the very least, not as a philosopher in the ‘proper’ sense of the word. He makes a distinction between a philosopher proper and a social philosopher. The former approaches philosophy as a purely abstract intellectual activity, and not necessarily context-based and is guided by a philosophical method, whereas the latter is not. After making such a distinction, Caute then moves to state that the application of a philosophical method is not readily discernible in Fanon. That is to say it is implicit rather than explicit. On this basis, he concludes that since Fanon does not rigorously apply a philosophical method, he (Fanon) “was not a philosopher” (Caute 1970: 33).

The researcher’s reading of Caute’s position on Fanon (and the researcher can extrapolate this to include other black intellectuals and/or thinkers) is that he unwittingly makes the cardinal mistake, as has been noted above, so characteristic of the Western philosophical canon of collapsing philosophy and reason with whiteness and experience with blackness. But this cannot be farther from the truth. For, if as a criterion, the researcher takes analytical philosophy that Caute tends to prioritize as the criterion of what constitute ‘philosophy’ or ‘philosophizing’, then other ‘philosophical’ traditions would not count as philosophy. According to this criterion, which is now widespread particularly in the academy, Continental, Indian, Chinese and African philosophies would not qualify as ‘philosophy’. Generally, an ethnocentric (in this case, a Eurocentric) view can be quite dangerous as it evaluates other cultures according to its own standards and expectations.

Furthermore, Caute points to another reason why Fanon is not a philosopher. This reason stems from the first, that is, between those thinkers that rigorously employ a philosophical method like Sartre or Hegel and those that do not. The researcher takes Fanon and Sartre to be both

existentialist thinkers and the preceding discussion on Fanon's existentialism shows why this is so. It is worth noting, though, that despite these two thinkers being existentialists, Caute takes the position that Fanon can be explained in terms of Sartre. In other words, Fanon's thought, according to Caute, is a derivative of Sartre. As he puts it, "[t]he testimony of Fanon provides inseparable evidence for the wider and more complexly articulated system of Sartre" (Caute 1970: 33). Unlike Sartre or a white person, "the Negro", as he further explains, "is thrown into the world in a total sense that escapes the white man" (Caute 1970: 33). Having stated this, he does not go on to explain what he means by the Negro being "thrown into the world".

To Caute's charge that Fanon's thought is derivative of Sartre, the researcher shall have two responses, first, that existentialism and philosophy in general, are universal. As is observed earlier, the ability to philosophize is not something unique to Europeans and this is the reason why there are Indian, African and Chinese philosophies. Moreover, relating particularly to the existential philosophical tradition, Gordon (1995) observes that since existentialism concerns dealing with issues of dread, anguish over the reality that unfreedom poses in relation to liberation, he notes, "One need only find black philosophers who hold these theses and one will encounter, regardless of their self-ascription, existential philosophers" (1995: 45). Although Gordon stretches matters here a little by including "everyone", the researcher wants to suggest that having committed himself, in terms of thought and action, and by virtue of having shown fidelity to such existentialist tenets as described by Gordon, Fanon qualifies as a philosopher of existence.

Gordon further observes that some of the most recognizable figures in Western existentialism such as Kierkegaard, Buber and Heidegger did not exactly regard themselves as existentialist thinkers. The fact, however, that they use "its line of critique...they can easily be found in discussions of a small set of thinkers who include Sartre and de Beauvoir" (Gordon 1995: 45). In the case of Fanon, although the thinker does not often ascribe to himself the title of being an existentialist thinker, there are moments when this becomes explicit. Moreover, the fact of his immersion and preoccupation with existential concerns and by making use of its line of critique, qualifies him as a philosopher of existence.

Secondly, by maintaining that Fanon can be explained in terms of a Sartre, Caute fails to discern Fanon's originality within the existentialist tradition. It is true that Fanon owes intellectual debt to Sartre. This is unquestionable as such Fanon scholars as Macey, Genzier and Geismar have also observed. However, appropriating a thinker for one's own intellectual objectives is not a uniquely Fanonian thing. Marx did the same with Hegel's idealistic philosophy by materializing it and thus bringing it down to earth. However, nobody would question Marx's intellectual and philosophical stature. Similarly, Fanon uses Sartre to understand the alienation of the black subject. Unlike Sartre whose philosophy, particularly in *Being and Nothingness*, rests on ontological assumptions, Fanon prioritizes race as being central to understanding the situation of being-black-in-an-anti-black-world. Therefore, from this perspective, one can see that Caute's observation that Fanon is or was not a philosopher does not hold up to scrutiny.

Pursuant to understanding the black condition, Fanon recognizes that racial prejudice has eroded the humanity of the black subject. That is to say, while whiteness *is* blackness *is not*. For this reason, blackness still needs to re-establish itself first as both self and other. This means that within the context of race relations in general, it is only then that black people can be recognized at the human level.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study set out to frame Fanon as a philosopher within the Africana existential tradition. To this end, it was noted that while in the Western world blacks are generally precluded from participation in reason, philosophy and critical self-reflection, the ability to philosophize is, in fact, a universal phenomenon. Furthermore, although some commentaries like that of Caute do not regard or conceive of Fanon's method as philosophical, it was shown that by virtue of his employment of philosophical concepts in particular, existential phenomenology, makes Fanon a philosopher and places his thought in the Africana existential tradition. Furthermore, Fanon's existential outlook, particularly his awareness of the category of 'an Other', shows affinity with the Sartrean existential conception of an Other.

Moreover, it was noted that the Western philosophical canon tends to reduce black intellectual production to the autobiographical frame.

The danger, as was noted, is that when this happens black political and philosophical ideas are lost or elided. The location of Fanon within existential philosophy in this study shows, contrary to common beliefs, that philosophy is not a Greek phenomenon but a universal phenomenon, and that Fanon's philosophical line of enquiry proves and qualifies him as a philosopher of existence.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings of this study, the researcher recommends the following to be done. Research be conducted into the way or extent to which literary productions by black authors, particularly philosophical ideas by black thinkers are treated in post-colonial societies. A disproportionate part of literature in the Westernized university tends to be biased in favor of intellectual productions from Western countries, mainly white males of these countries. This is to the detriment and exclusion of intellectual ideas emanating from black thinkers in non-Western countries. So research investigating the extent to which black philosophies are incorporated into the mainstream academy in the 'post-colonial' era is necessary, as it would assist in identifying gaps where improvements can be made.

Ethically, the study recommends that race (and other biological reasons or arguments) not be used as a measure of intellectual ability. For nothing is more traumatizing than to be discriminated on the basis of something that one has no control of nor change. This is particularly so when such discrimination has the implication of excluding other members of society not only from participation in reason but also from humanity itself. Furthermore, such discrimination is seen, within the context of this study, as bad faith on the part of the oppressor.

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### NOTE

<sup>i</sup> The word Negro was a politically correct term during Fanon's days. Over the decades, however, the term has acquired negative connotations.

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