Sage Philosophy, Rationality and Science:
The Case of Ethiopia

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Abstract

This essay uses examines contemporary Ethiopian philosophy to determine the practicality of sage philosophy and its connections to rationality and science. The early Messay Kebede, former chair of the University of Addis Ababa philosophy department, views philosophy as an aid to science—any other use of philosophy is myth. The later Messay valorizes myth as a force serving rationality. After criticizing Messay's separation of myth and rationality, the essay considers his proposals for philosophy in Africa. Claude Sumner's (another former Addis Ababa philosophy chair) research on oral Ethiopian traditions offers an alternative to Messay, but Sumner's method can be augmented by Odera Oruka's. After considering Ethiopian anthropologist Gemetchu Megerssa's research on Oromo worldviews, the conclusion proposes a research program using the combined methods of anthropologists and philosophers to develop a philosophical "galvanizing myth" emerging from African history to stand against globalization.

Introduction

> "...all of Africa and its numerous inhabitants, as remarkable in character as they are in color, still remain to be studied; the whole earth is covered with Nations of which we know only the names, and yet we pretend to judge mankind!" Rousseau, *First Discourse*

> "Don't Think. Look." Wittgenstein, Blue Book

This essay uses contemporary philosophy in Ethiopia as a case study to examine the practical status of sage philosophy and its connections to rationality and science. Centering on the rich history of research produced in Addis Ababa University's philosophy department, the essay commences with Messay Kebede's views on these issues. A former chair of the department, he now serves on the philosophy faculty at the University of Dayton in Ohio. Messay's position has changed markedly over time. (The essay follows the Ethiopian custom of referring to a person by given name rather than patronymic.) A survey of his research illustrates a remarkable correlation between philosophy and culture. His early research views philosophy as an aid only to science – any other use of philosophy is myth. His later research valorizes myth as a galvanizing force in the service of rationality.

The essay's second section criticizes Messay's radical separation of myth and rationality. If rationality is the process of setting and achieving goals through reason, feeling and

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imagination, then philosophy's task within rationality is to furnish the foundational goals that direct our lives and to revise those goals when necessary. Philosophy and science are both integral parts of rationality's whole. They are separable only by their degrees of generalization. At its cutting edge, science is philosophy. But philosophy aims at such heights of generalization that its directives are not subject to verification. Hence philosophical guidelines have the character of myth, in the original Greek sense of *muthos,* a likely or plausible story. This section's conclusion considers whether myths can be separated from one another by their degree of plausibility.

The essay's third section considers Messay's proposals for the conduct of philosophy in Africa. Rejecting the methods of African philosophers such as Hountondji, Mudimbe, Appiah, and Wiredu, Messay turns to Henri Bergson, the subject of his Ph.D. dissertation at Grenoble, for inspiration. With Bergson, Messay claims that "galvanizing" myths must drive rationality in appropriate directions. One role of such myths is to ensure that rationality is not given undue emphasis. Messay turns to a "deracialized" Negritude and Afrocentrism (from Leopold Senghor and Cheikh Anta Diop) for a syncretic galvanizing myth appropriate to Africa's current circumstances.

After criticizing Messay's methods for generating viable myths for Africa, the essay's fourth section turns to Claude Sumner's research on literate and oral philosophical traditions in Ethiopia. Sumner's methodology moves from external influences on Ethiopian written philosophy (Indian, Persian, Arabian, Greek, for example) to the worldviews of the indigenous Oromo cultures in Southern, Eastern, and Western Ethiopia.

Sumner characterizes his research as "sapiential literature" (Sumner 1995:23) rather than sage philosophy in the sense of Odera Oruka (1997), whose method relies on dialogical interviews. Sumner's virtue is to employ the services of anthropologists and linguists in producing his wisdom literature. The conclusion of this section proposes a conflation of Sumner and Oruka's methods that requires collaboration between anthropologists and philosophers.

The essay's conclusion proposes a research program that synthesizes the work of Addis Ababa University anthropologist Gemetchu Megerssa and Sumner. Gemetchu argues that Oromo culture derives from an earlier Cushitic culture that stretched from Africa to India three thousand years ago, with connections to Ancient Egyptian culture (Gemetchu 1995: 11-12; Kassam 1995: 10). His hypothesis suggests possible links between Oromo and ancient Egyptian philosophy. Sumner's research can be used to compare the 17th century Ethiopian philosopher Zar'a Ya'qob to Northern African philosophers like the Egyptian Valentinus. Valentinus' gnosticism borrows heavily from ancient Egyptian cosmology. Oromo worldviews as presented by Gemetchu are holistic, as is the cosmology of ancient Egypt.

Coupling sage philosophy in numerous African cultures to literate philosophy in Ethiopia (Sumner's translations), Mali (the Timbuktu texts), and other African countries would be an arduous research program. But such a program might be the best chance for developing a holistic "galvanizing myth" that emerges from African history to stand against globalization.

Messay on Philosophy and Science, Myth and Rationality

The most widely known modern Ethiopian philosopher is Zar'a Ya'qob. His short *Hatata* (translated as 'inquiry' or 'treatise,' but derived from a Ge'ez expression meaning to rub or grind into small pieces) is widely circulated in introductory philosophy anthologies. He is roughly contemporaneous with Descartes, and their methods are strikingly similar. Both break down their topics into small parts and both rely on the light of reason to guide their investigations. Both use réason to establish the existence of God. Zar'a Ya'qob goes so far as to claim that reason alone can give us access to God—scriptures including the Bible and Koran contain much that is false in the light of reason. What is natural is what God prescribes—eating, procreation, monogamy, freedom, love. What is unnatural is prescribed by man and propagated through scripture—fasting, abstention from sex, polygamy, slavery, hatred. All men, says Zar'a Ya'qob, are liars, and men write scriptures (Zar'a Ya'qob in Sumner, 1976:13).

According to Claude Sumner, the discoverer of the *Hatata,* Zar'a Ya'qob goes so far as to excise key elements of Christian scripture through his *hatata*—the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, Incarnation, Redemption or Resurrection, the Mother of Christ, the Church, liturgy or sacraments (Sumner quoted in Messay, 1988:120). Zar'a Ya'qob exemplifies a philosophy of religion so corrosive that it matches 19th century European and American deism like that of Thomas Jefferson.

Astoundingly, Messay claims that Zar'a Ya'qob is *not* a philosopher. With Sumner, Messay admires Zar'a Ya'qob as an "architect of unity" (Sumner quoted in Messay, *ibid.*:78). He viewed all religions as worshipping the same God. Like Descartes, he employs a method of doubt that is resolved only through the light of reason. But unlike Descartes, Zar'a Ya'qob doubts in order to establish "the authentic religion" that brings "peace and love among men" (Messay, 1988:84).

Messay's dogmatism on his rejection of Zar'a Ya'qob as a philosopher is curious. Zar'a Ya'qob's philosophy of religion is unique in the Ethiopia of his time, to say nothing of the wider world. His originality has precipitated Italian claims that the *Hatata* must have been written by an Italian missionary because it is so uncharacteristic of conventional Ethiopian thought of the 17th century (Sumner 1976:61-275).

Messay's claim follows from his definition of philosophy. The whole point of Western philosophy, and "most probably the essence of philosophy in general" is to "explain and establish the possibility of scientific knowledge" (Messay, 1988:85). Messay does not single out Zar'a Ya'qob for exclusion. Banished from philosophy with him are Pascal and Kierkegaard "who refused to confront faith with science," who insisted that religious belief is outside the purview of science (*ibid.*:86). Unlike these philosophers, however, Zar'a Ya'qob was "not even aware of the existence of a scientific knowledge" (*ibid.*). Writing in 1988, Messay does not address the claims of Paul Feyerabend (1975) and Thomas Kuhn (1970) that science itself is grounded in faith—the faith, for example, that science is worth pursuing, that technology associated with science will not destroy life on earth, and that one research program is more worth pursuing than another.

The key to Messay's rejection of Zar'a Ya'qob as a philosopher lies in his explanation as to why Zar'a Ya'qob could not have developed a philosophy. While Zar'a Ya'qob

"contained all the seeds of philosophical thinking," these could not sprout "because of the negative pressure of the social forces" (*ibid*.:127). Only Marxism can "plant the seed" that will remove the "hampering features of the traditional culture" (*ibid*.:148). Philosophy's proper task is to "reflect on a culture in order to revolutionize it" (*ibid*.:144). Philosophy accomplishes this task as an adjutant to rationality. Theories are rational to the degree that they are explanatory. But explanations are rational only if their language is scientific: "When the explanatory language takes the form of scientific language and refers to scientific arguments we have properly philosophy." Any explanation that doesn't take its force from "secular references" is "mythology or religion" (*ibid*.: 128). In separating religion and mythology from rationality, Messay reduces philosophy to science. He is in good company, even outside the ambit of Marxism. The American philosopher Willard Quine (1977; see Verharen 1996) views philosophy as simply the most general part of science. The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (2001/1922) sees the philosopher as a warden making sure that philosophers do not attempt to do anything other than science.

Messay's remarks on the relations of philosophy, science and myth are presented in the context of an Ethiopian culture dominated by Marxism. His position changes dramatically after the fall of the Soviet Union. In Ethiopia under the influence of the Derg, philosophy's task is to hasten the revolution. For Messay writing in the United States, philosophy brokers a marriage between myth and rationality to guide Africa on the path to decolonization.

A myth for the "new" Messay is not the product of pure imagination careless of its connections to experience. On the other hand a myth does not convey knowledge in any empirical sense. Messay takes his definition from Henri Bergson. The "myth-making function" of the mind develops concepts "that counterfeit reality as actually perceived, to the point of making us act accordingly" (Bergson quoted in Messay, 2004: 143). The point of a myth is to drive action. Religious myths illustrate Bergson's point. The corrosive power of thought presents us with "the inevitability of death, the appearance of selfishness in a being designed for social life, and the uncertainty of projected actions in a mechanical uncertain world" (*ibid*.:214). Religious myth thwarts those irresistible claims of rationality with the conviction that our real lives start after death where selfishness will be punished and altruism rewarded. Faith in God's love protects us from an unfriendly world. Myth overcomes the dispiriting claims of rationality.

To have the power to direct action in the face of overwhelming odds, a myth is most forcefully presented as evolving from and continuing a venerable historical tradition. Neither flights of pure fancy nor scientific explanations evoke the power of myth. Myths are conveyed as the stories we tell ourselves to motivate us to action. The most powerful myths are those that command the will of whole nations. And a nation's "capacity to tell a story determines the degree to which a nation controls its destiny" (*ibid*.: 146).

Messay's research in his *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* is a search for a grounding myth, an *ur-myth*, that will allow the whole African continent to control its destiny. As we shall see in the essay's third section, Messay paints Leopold Senghor's Negritude and Cheikh Anta Diop's Afrocentrism as myth-making efforts that must fail by reason of their racializing characteristics. The African struggle against the effects of

colonization is difficult, in part because of the European imposition of a "cult of rationality" on Africans. This cult, itself a myth, imposed science as a standard of rationality and thereby robbed Africans of their "power to believe" (*ibid.*:219). Senghor hoped to restore that power by disparaging European rationality. Diop's restoration claimed that black Africa gave birth to European rationality.

Messay opposes myth to rationality. I have not found an explicit definition of rationality in his research, but it is clear that the model of rationality is science as a synthesis of experience and reasoning. Myth and science live together in the modern world but they clash with one another. Messay quotes Bergson: "experience may indeed say 'that is false,' and reasoning [may say] 'that is absurd.' Humanity only clings all the more to that absurdity and that error" (*ibid.*:213). Nevertheless, myth and rationality cannot live without each other. Messay claims that "rationality always teams up with myth" and that "mythical thinking is coextensive with rationality" (*ibid.*:151). Nevertheless the two forces must achieve a delicate balance: "excessive valorization of rationality results in the complete asphyxiation of the power of the mind." The "myth-making function" must retain its autonomy to achieve its "empowering purpose" (*ibid.*: 212). What I question is Messay's separation of myth from rationality. In the next section I propose a holistic definition of rationality that includes both functions.

A Critique of Messay's Separation of Myth and Rationality

Messay's error is to separate myth and rationality. He goes so far as to say that "myth is not knowledge" (*ibid.*:213). He invokes Kwasi Wiredu's support in claiming that "even in the contemporary world, mythical representations resist the impact of rationality" (*ibid.*). Rather than defining *myth* as the product of imagination disconnected from science, I regard it as *muthos,* a "likely story" in the original Greek. We deploy our myths in this sense when we've reached the limits of knowledge, when we're not sure of how to go on with what we're doing, when we must go on regardless and we must seize upon uncertain guidelines for our direction. Myth-making is integral to rationality as its founding and guiding principles.

Under the influence of Bergson, Messay supposes that "myth confers a transcendent meaning on existence with the consequence that rationality is used as a device for going after the promised transcendence" (*ibid.*:xi). To see that myth need not "confer a transcendent meaning on existence," one need only consult Messay's original mentor, Karl Marx, who insisted that his own particular myth of freedom as the engine of human history could in no way be transcendent. Rationality must have a goal and that goal need be no more transcendent than securing air, water, food, or shelter.

Rationality is our genetically endowed capacity to select and carry out our goals. Before rationality became self-conscious or reflexive, goal selection and execution were automated processes. Goals unencumbered by myths for humanity—as for other mammals—were survival and flourishing, set within the limits of the environment. Because our large brains have given us the capacity for massive abstraction and imagination, we can now change the environment to suit our goals in ways that other animals do not. Our rationality now includes not only goal selection but the capacity to

alter "naturally ordained" goals through rationality's reflexive function. Rather than being the instruments of a natural selection oriented toward survival, humans can now chose liberty over life or love over self-interest: in the often-quoted words of Patrick Henry, "Give me liberty or give me death!"

Not only our means for reaching goals but the goals themselves are subjected to rationality's critical gaze. Marx's peculiar myth was to imagine that humans are inexorably driven toward freedom as the highest, most human expression of survival and flourishing. He could not imagine that humans as a species could choose extinction—against nature's own dictates.

Marx's corollary myth, still shared by Messay, was that science is perfectly modeled in its European expressions. Like language (see Chomsky 2000) and morality (see Hauser 2006), rationality is genetically endowed. As every human is capable of speech and moral behavior, so every human being is capable of expressing rationality in the form of science. Here I use *science* in the sense of abstracting from experience to form guiding generalizations. (*Experience* includes mental as well as sensory phenomena—even the most theoretical mathematics is, after all, an experience.) As those generalizations begin to conform more precisely to the constraints of rationality itself, science begins to take on its modern mathematical form.

Rationality's constraints follow from its evolutionary function. The complex brain and its capacity for imagination and abstract thought augment our capacity for survival. A brain that can map selected patterns in its environment and base its behavior on those patterns has a better chance of survival than an organism that reacts "blindly" to its circumstances through chemical signals or purely automated stimulus-response mechanisms. We move from a handful of humans in the "African Eve" era some 200,000 years ago to over six billion strong today.

Humans are gifted with the ability to externalize their mapping functions through the use of symbols. Symbols express their own survival capacities by triggering emotional responses that move us to replicate them—the memetic process. Symbols have emotional as well as semantic and syntactic meaning. We select symbol sets, theories, in part by reason of their capacity accurately to reflect our experience. Symbols capture our "concepts," literally our "grabbings together" of the patterns extracted from the environment through sensory "per-ceptions," literally "grabbings through." The connectedness of symbols to one another and to our experience is a condition for rationality as the complete expression of the human ability to draw connections. The use of symbols to connect abstract concepts with lived experience accurately is another condition for rationality.

Following Kant's example I would like to enumerate a complete set of conditions for rationality (see Messay 2004:146). Kant was on the right track in searching for the conditions of the possibility of "ob-jective" (literally, *thrown toward)* experience in the frameworks of space and time and the categories of causality and the like. Because my reflections are based on evolutionary theory rather than Kantian apodictic certainty, I look for the techniques we use to refine our approaches toward our goals. Rather than setting conditions for rationality, I look for the promptings we use to adjust our ways of achieving *and* revising our goals.

Like Marx and Darwin before him, I assume that evolution bequeathed us "natural" goals of surviving and flourishing. Our contemporary era with its potential for nuclear and environmental catastrophe shows that rationality has the capacity to subvert such goals. Nevertheless the rational methods we use to achieve our goals have so far not been subverted. We are prompted to ensure the emotive, semantic, and syntactic force of the symbols we use to "re-present" experience (the first presentation was through the senses). From Socrates' persistent efforts to clarify the meanings of key abstract terms like *good* and *justice,* to Wittgenstein's insistence that philosophy *is* clarification, specifying the nature and limits of meaning has been philosophy's preoccupation. The reason flows from the very nature of "sym-bols," literally "throwings together." Symbols acquire their meanings through (initial) acts of choice. The nature and limits of choices of symbols must be continually reviewed.

A second prompting flows from the need to re-present experience accurately. This prompting is enshrined in the correspondence theory of truth. Empiricism's importance in the history of philosophy is a reflection of the experiential aspect of rationality.

A third prompting insists that theoretical systems for re-presentation cannot offer "contradictory" (speaking against themselves) representations of experience. The coherence theory of truth has captured this tactic of rationality. Rationalism's role in the history of philosophy expresses the importance of this prompting, especially visible in Leibniz's proposal for a "universal calculus."

A fourth prompting reminds us of the practical function of rationality: we think for a purpose, and theories that cannot accomplish their purposes cause us to rethink them. This prompting is expressed in the pragmatic theory of truth. The pragmatism of American philosophy has cross-cultural roots that extend to philosophy's earliest manifestations in Greek (Stoicism, hedonism), Indian (Buddhism in particular) and Ancient Egyptian philosophy (with its emphasis on *Maat's* regulative role in human conduct).

A fifth prompting suggests that those theories are best that cover the widest range of experience. Aristotle's conviction that the philosopher knows all things is an early manifestation of this aspect of rationality. Hegel's dictum, "the truth is the whole," captures this prompting perfectly. A contemporary expression is the attempt of string theorists in physics to encapsulate the laws for the four known forces into a single super-law. Like Marx, Einstein hoped that scientific generalizations could capture both natural and human phenomena without discrimination.

A sixth prompting is simply a measure of the abstractness of a theory. The fewer symbols required for a theory's representation of experience, the more abstract the theory. Rationality's power lies in its abstractive capacity. Einstein's $E=mc^2$ ranges over the whole universe with its perfect simplicity in both theoretical and practical ways. All mathematically inclined philosophers like Pythagoras, Plato, Leibniz, and Husserl have emphasized this aspect of rationality. Simplicity was the guiding rule of the first philosophy we have access to. The ancient Egyptians reduced all reality to the chaotic primordial water—*Nun.* And contemporary scientists in their capacity as philosophers have followed an analogous model in reducing the complexity of the universe to the simplicity of the hydrogen atom in the Big Bang.

The seventh and final prompting springs from rationality's reflexive capacity. Socrates' insistence that he knew only that he did not know is European philosophy's most famous expression of this aspect of rationality. Theories as systems for re-presenting experience change dramatically because of experience's resistance to theory's constraints ("essentialising" in postmodern jargon) and because of our imagination's inexhaustible nature.

Philosophy is a primary locus of rationality's imaginative powers. Rationality starts with a goal, and philosophy supplies the goals that justify all other goals. Because ultimate goals that justify concatenations of lesser goals cannot themselves be justified, philosophical goals have the character of likely stories or myths. Not knowing the origins of universe or the purpose of life, for example, we can choose to live within the bounds of ignorance. If we restrict ourselves to scientific knowledge, we cannot explain the origins of the hydrogen atoms that made the Big Bang possible. But the acceptance of that ignorance is a choice that competes with other choices—God as an explanation of atoms' origins, for example. The eternal existence of hydrogen atoms (or their equivalent in energy) or the eternal existence of a force beyond our comprehension that generates hydrogen atoms are both likely stories, myths.

Rationality starts with a myth. Philosophy's task is to imagine that myth and to find compelling reasons to pursue the myth. If the myth and its subsets produce compelling results within rationality's constraints, it becomes difficult to modify or dislodge it. The alteration or destruction of a foundational, guiding myth is also philosophy's task. Dislodging myths takes place even within the contexts of well-established scientific theories. Einstein replaces Newton's foundational principles (Euclidian geometry, infinite universe, rectilinear unimpeded motion, gravitational action at a distance) with his own (Riemannian geometry, finite unbounded universe, curvilinear motion and space). Both practice a version of a "scientific method," namely a mathematization of experience. Both accept the likely story that engaging in this activity is a worthy endeavor. But unanimity on this *ur-myth* yields to downstream disagreement.

A greater imaginative gulf separates Newton and Einstein from Aristotle. Consider the distance between Aristotle's ideas that falling objects long for their resting place and that the soul "animates" the living organism and contemporary Newtonian and Einsteinian mechanics and Darwinian-based genetics. Is Aristotle more mythical, more philosophical than contemporary hard-nosed scientists? A myth is just that, a likely story. All likely stories are grounded in the conviction that they point out directions worth pursuing. A story like contemporary science may end with the termination of our capacity to tell stories, should current geo-politics yield a nuclear weapons exchange capable of producing nuclear winter. How likely a story is that!

We can't reject even the most apparently preposterous myths out of hand. Examples abound in the history of science. Newton shocked classical sensibilities with his proposal that the heavenly and the earthly follow the same basic laws. Darwin's likely story about the unified origins of humans and animals still has an almost universal shock capacity. Marx's likely story is that humans must follow the as yet undiscovered natural laws that govern the whole universe. A shocking myth to those whose spiritual sensibilities insist on human freedom from nature's constraints.

Examples are easier to find in the history of philosophy. Witness the pre-Socratic madness, as it must have appeared to Greeks accustomed to supernatural explanations rather than generalized descriptions of natural phenomena. Consider the Christian imperative of universal, unconditional love—an apparent transgression of all our natural instincts for survival and flourishing. Think of how unnatural Hindu and Buddhist meditation must appear to cultures bent on manipulation of the whole earth environment.

If we grant that likely stories are an integral part of a scientific expression of rationality, is there any rigid way to judge a myth's quality of rationality? Let us postulate as an hypothesis (a likely story!) that rationality is a function of connectivity. The rationality of a myth as a likely story can be measured by the numbers and kinds of connections that issue from its guiding principles. Einstein and Copernicus supersede Newton and Ptolemy not because we can be sure that their myths, their radical assumptions that direct their connective efforts, are true in any sense of that term. Relativity and heliocentrism merely satisfy rationality's promptings in greater degree. Both Einstein and Newton allow us to navigate the whole universe with their theories. By this measure, scope, their theories are superior to those of Kepler, Galileo and Ptolemy whose theories restricted us to the local "heavens" or the earth. Nevertheless, Ptolemy's assumptions still serve as a foundation for modern celestial navigation.

Thomas Kuhn's work showed how heliocentrism was more rational than geocentrism (before our ability to detect celestial parallax) because of its simplicity, its use of fewer symbols to cover planetary, lunar, and perceived solar motion. Confronted with a failure to find experimental confirmation of one of his theories, Einstein affirmed his support for his theory because of its simplicity, economy, or "beauty" (subsequent experiments proved him correct). Newtonian mechanics are still accurate for purposes of space ballistics, but Einstein's relativity is more accurate for greater velocities and masses.

Consider the likely story that malaria is caused by "bad air" (the etymology of *mal-aria*). Such a story might be as practical as a theory of bacterial transmission by the anopheles mosquito. Draining a swamp to get rid of the bad air would stop malaria. But the anopheles theory unfolds into a greater range of experience more accurately. The likely story that malaria is caused by "bad air" comes to a full stop rather quickly. Pursuit of the detailed nature of "bad air" would be as fruitless as the quest for the "caloric," the mysterious cause of heat propagation.

Perhaps the most important measure of the rationality of a likely story is whether the story encodes instructions for "knowing how to go on," in Wittgenstein's felicitous phrase. A theory that enfolds itself in other theories, that advances a tradition, that provokes us to call itself into question, is a fruitful or stimulating theory.

Even the measures of rationality can themselves be called into question through metatheoretical investigation. Consistency is one of the bedrock postulates of rationality. "Do I contradict myself? I contain multitudes!" This phrase may be a fine poetic sentiment. But non-contradiction has achieved the status as one of the "laws of thought" for Wiredu (1996), and it is enshrined as a "theory of truth." Nevertheless, quantum mechanics has called forth "quantum logic," a multi-valued logic used to address Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Einstein's destruction of our common sense notions of the fixity of mass, length and time does not compare to quantum mechanic's assault on consistency as a primary root

of rationality. The principle is so intuitively self-evident: To reason is to connect. Let us not imagine that what we have claimed to be connected is in the same sense and at the same time disconnected.

What hope have we, then, of separating rational from irrational myths? "Purely" mythological symbol systems yield low rates of connectivity—even within "highly" rational systems like science. The symbol *gravity,* for example, has taken on quite different "life forms" in the history of modern science. *Gravity* used as an abstract term to refer to the entire field of gravitational phenomena exhibits a high degree of connectivity. *Gravity* used as a term to refer to the mysterious force acting at a distance to *explain* gravitational phenomena has only emotional rather than semantic connectivity. We simply don't know why mass behaves in gravitational ways—though our generalizations for describing these ways are quite useful.

Newton prudently avoided any speculation about this mysterious force acting at a distance across the vacuum of space. In his famous words, *"hypotheses non fingo"*—I don't make up stories. (Of course he made up the story that he should not make up stories—a perfect illustration of the emotive, reflexive and directive force of foundational myths, likely stories.) The bolder Descartes replaced Newton's vacuum of space with a plenum of "etherial" matter, and explained gravitational attraction as the result of vortices in this medium. Einstein like Newton had a horror of action at a distance, but Michelson and Morley could find no evidence of a Cartesian "aether." Consequently, Einstein claimed that the curvature of space in the presence of mass "explains" gravitational phenomena.

Were the likely stories, the *ur-hypotheses* of Newton, Descartes and Einstein *rational?* Their uses of the symbol *gravity* propelled centuries of investigation that has not so far proven fruitful. A recent hypothesis is that gravitational force is carried by "gravitons," waves or particles like photons. To date, no gravity wave detectors have yielded uncontroversial results.

Einstein's efforts to explain gravitational phenomena by warping space are analogous to earlier attempts to explain heating. The mysterious substance, the *caloric,* had little connectivity. This likely story spurred investigation into the nature of the caloric. But the term lost its emotive and semantic force when heat was described as the motion of molecules, "mean kinetic energy." The explanatory force of mysterious substances like heat or gravity vanishes in a sea of generalized descriptions, the massive connectivity of contemporary science.

Ruminations on *gravity* lead to questions about the rationality of *God* as the explanation of all explanations. Are uses of such a term "purely" mythical, as Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* proposes? The term *God* generates powerful emotive connections. There may be a direct correlation between the abstractness of a term and its emotive force. However, the semantic connectivity of *God* has more the character of syntactic connections. The likely stories clustered around *God* derive their force from the biographical details of God, generated by cultures over the ages. To date, the stories do not have semantic force outside of themselves, except for believers who subscribe to "divine interventions" in the form of divine responses to prayers, miracles and the like.

Are likely stories about God rational? Their persistence and power might be explained by our natural conditioning to refuse to accept states of ignorance on important issues and

to refuse to accept the fact of death as a permanent condition: "There are no atheists in the foxholes." We create hope in the hopeless situation with religious connectivity. Richard Dawkins' protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, many of us are reluctant to "abandon all hope."

Given the tortured and brief quality of the history of thought, assessing rationality is a task best undertaken with great diffidence. So many of our cherished likely stories in the past five thousand years ,have been exposed as irrational in some fundamental way that perhaps the best likely story is Socrates': we can only be certain of our uncertainty. Most provocative are the claims of some religious stories to produce extraordinary connectivity. The (in)famous guru of the Beatles, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, promises to make a science out of meditation, to teach his disciples to fly without mechanical means, to bring world peace about through a critical mass of disciples meditating in one geographic location. Preposterous? Irrational? Purely mythical?

Paul Feyerabend's claim in his own (in)famous *Against Method* is that "anything goes." All myths have equal stature in the face of our abyssal ignorance, and science is one myth among many. More seductive than many other myths, contemporary science delivers massive control of the environment. Exercising such control without a full understanding of its consequences requires abundant optimism or massive pessimism: "It will come out all right in the end—Gaia will take care of us even if we mess up," or "It doesn't really matter what we do since we're all going to die anyway—what difference does it make if all of us die all at once? Think of the untold misery those unborn billions will have escaped!" Science guarantees results. How could science be mythical? The myth of science is that science is worth pursuing. Humans wonder, as Aristotle said, as the sparks fly up. Science is irresistible. How could anyone doubt that science is worth pursuing? And given the progress in the history of science, how could anyone question the rationality of our contemporary pursuit of science?

How to pursue science is one question. Whether to pursue science is another. Only philosophy can answer these questions. Philosophy is just that part of rationality that selects the basic assumptions we use to guide our lives. Philosophy's foundations are themselves without foundations. That's why philosophical choices even in the fields of ontology and epistemology always have the character of ethical choices. Can my choice of the defining constraints of rationality themselves be rational? They are like Wiredu's "social ideals." These are the foundational principles of a society. Choices of social ideals are "neither scientific nor unscientific, rational nor irrational" (Wiredu 1997: 143).

As foundational principles, the defining constraints of rationality are postulated as starting principles; we can't assign the same status to them as the deliberations that rest upon them. They're like the definitions and axioms that produce theorems in geometry— simply not susceptible to proof within the system. One cannot prove that Euclid's parallel line postulate—given a point outside a straight line, only one line can be drawn through that point parallel to the straight line—is better than its competitors. Why not assume Lobachevski's infinite number of parallel lines? Or Riemann's null set of parallel lines? One cannot prove that a life with science in its current technological expressions is better than a life without science. If one valued survival over manipulation of the environment, and one could prove that the contemporary expressions of science will terminate life on

earth as we know it, one could prove that a life without science is far better than a life with science.

Do we have a choice in the matter of such foundational myths? Previously, no. Natural selection dictated our choices. After 9/11 we should be clear that a small group can exercise enormous destructive power. In a few years the development of biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction may allow small groups to terminate human life altogether. For the first time in history, humans can now exercise a choice about whether we should "choose to keep on choosing" or to commit speciescide. To that end, we need a full complement of philosophies to stimulate our imaginations about what life is and how we should live it.

Messay's Proposals for Philosophy in Africa Now

Messay's review of Africana philosophy in *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* is comprehensive and incisive. His critique covers a full spectrum, from Marcien Towa's dismissal of attempts to look for that philosophy in Africa herself, to Senghor and Diop's discovery of that philosophy in Africa and Africa alone. He resists Towa's claim that an assuredly pre-existing African philosophy "need not be recovered for the simple reason that it was utterly worthless" (Messay 2004:88). He is sensitive to Mudimbe's contention that scholarship on Africa to date has produced only an "invention" of Africa, one that has mythical rather than rational qualities (*ibid.*:20). Messay recognizes that philosophical research cannot reproduce original African philosophies that might contain the seeds of African renewal. He applauds Hountondji's insistence that an "ethnophilosophy" that serves merely anthropological purposes is useless for the purposes of decolonization (*ibid.*:87). In this vein he finds Nkrumah and Nyerere's discoveries of an original African socialism to be instruments for African political leaders' successful recolonization of Africa—with oligarchy parading as socialism (*ibid.*:162-169).

Messay singles out Oruka's demand for a transition from "ethnophilosophy" to "sage philosophy" as particularly problematic (*ibid.*:91-94). The critical function of the latter attempts to save philosophy from becoming a disguised version of anthropology but in the process accepts the idea that philosophical sages are exceptions to the mythical norm of "primitive" African thought. Sage philosophy cannot generate a myth capable of decolonizing Africa.

Particularly appealing to Messay is Appiah's claim that an authentic African identity can emerge only from a choice (*ibid.*:138-141). Identities claiming their heritage in historical or material determinism can only be false. Appiah singles out Senghor and Diop for particular criticism. Accepting the European characterization of Africans as emotional rather than rational, Senghor celebrates African empathy with nature and emotional artistic expression. Diop finds black Africans to be the architects of the glorious ancient Egyptian culture, and discovers geographical reasons why Africans have virtues like communalism that escape traditional European cultures.

Messay capitalizes on Appiah's emphasis on choice of identity to modify Senghor and Diop's "galvanizing myths." If the African celebration of emotion is the product of choice rather than genetic determinism, then Senghor's negritude may be rehabilitated. However,

Messay rejects Senghor's vision of complementarity between Africa and Europe. In mythical if not mystical language, he accuses negritude of "failing to foster a demiurgical orientation from the bosom of negritude itself" (*ibid.*:219).

The myth appropriate to African decolonization must be rooted in Africa herself, even if European refinements of rationality will be the technical instruments of decolonization. Senghor's acceptance of a "descriptive [scientific] racially determined notion of negritude, instead of a freely created one" vitiated the movement. Because Senghor succumbed to determinism, he could not change the African past into a viable future: "rewriting...the past in light of present ambitions is how an unfolding subject endowed with a sense of mission moves toward a concocted future" (*ibid.*:220). The mission is the myth. And the myth, having only the status of a likely story, must be freely chosen.

For Messay, Diop's myth is no more successful than Senghor's. However, his myth changed "Egyptian pyramids into Negro testimonies." His inspiration, like all Afrocentric theories, demands "something higher than the mere removal of oppression" (*ibid.*:219). Nevertheless, Diop's myth, like Senghor's, is a product of ethnophilosophy. It cannot stand without Messay's revision which is the product of his own highly critical philosophy. Messay's desired myth assumes messianic proportions: "In claiming what the West despises, Africans redefine themselves as negativity, as the antithetical subjectivity intent on recreating humanity by the insertion of values and beliefs extracted from the experience of negativity" (*ibid.*:212). He compares Africans in their quest for a decolonizing myth to Christians who created a new model of what it is to be human by "valorizing the poor and weak" (*ibid.*). The next section will consider whether indigenous African philosophies, critical in their own right, have a better chance of producing a "galvanizing myth" for African decolonization than Messay.

From Ethnophilosophy to Sage Philosophy in Ethiopia

Messay makes an impassioned plea for a "galvanizing" myth that can pull Africa out of its slough of despond. Such a myth, he asserts, should come from a "re-creation" of traditional African grounding myths. This recreation will not resuscitate traditional African ways of life—it simply hasn't the power. His primary candidates for this myth are a "deracialized" Negritude and Afrocentrism. Africans have something unique to offer the world not because of their imagined race but because of their choices.

Messay's own myth about a galvanizing myth is laudable, but his method short-circuits the work that needs to be done to produce this "galvanizing" myth. Negritude and Afrocentrism are as limiting as Nkrumah and Nyerere's traditional African socialism. Are better models possible? A promising solution is to apply Odera Oruka's methodology for sage philosophy to Claude Sumner's research in Oromo philosophy in Ethiopia.

Oruka's method separates ethnophilosophy from sage philosophy. The former reports on worldviews while the latter presents philosophy in action. The test of a sage philosopher is to be found in rationality. Is the philosopher self-consciously critical of customary beliefs? Does the sage philosopher propose modifications or substitutions? Is the philosopher capable of specifying the reasons underlying his or her critique? Oruka's model searches for rational criticism by means of dialogical interviews. Oruka's research

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has established a method for separating anthropological recording of worldviews from critical reflection on and revision of those views (1990, 1991, 1994).

Sumner has produced three volumes of what he calls Oromo "sapiential literature" (Sumner 1995:23). His method relies on anthropological fieldwork that produced written transcriptions of Oromo songs, proverbs, and folktales translated into German, Italian, and English as well as Amharic transcription. With the help of anthropologists and linguists fluent in Oromo dialects, he produced English translations of the material under the title of Oromo "wisdom literature" (Sumner 1995, 1996a, 1996b). In his view, his work is not a mere recording of worldviews, an ethnophilosophy, but an expression of living Oromo wisdom.

Interestingly, Sumner relied heavily in his research on Oromo informants, including Gemetchu Megerssa, who both checked Sumner's translations and translated original transcriptions into English (Sumner 1995:5, 6, 9). Sumner's collaborative research methodology coincides with a paradigm proposed more than half a century ago by African American philosopher Alain Locke. Locke suggested that philosophers cannot do their work without assistance from the social sciences, especially sociology, psychology, and anthropology, particularly in the field of ethics (Locke 1989).

My proposal for the practice of sage philosophy in Ethiopia is to systematically combine the methods of Oruka and Sumner. Their combined virtue is to insist on the separation of ethnophilosophy and sage philosophy. Sumner's particular virtue was to enlist the aid of linguists and anthropologists in presenting the raw material of Oromo philosophy.

Sumner's assistant, Gemetchu Megerssa, was encouraged to pursue Oromo anthroplogy by Lambert Bartels. Bartels was a missionary in Ethiopia who was inspired by his own natural inclination and the Second Vatican Council to apply techniques of "mutual inculturation" to his work with the Oromo in Ethiopia (Tablino 2005:37). His guiding idea was that the Oromo practice of the Catholic faith should be an expression of their own cultural foundations. Gemetchu was the grandson of the last *gada* (generation-graded socio-political structure) leader in the Macca (also spelled "Matcha"), the Westernmost Oromo group in Ethiopia. In addition to assisting Sumner, he subsequently co-authored a paper with Bartels and went on to write his Ph.D. dissertation on the Oromo at the University of London.

With the help of Gemetchu, Bartels developed a profile of Oromo religion to discover "through sincere and patient dialogue...the riches which the generous God has distributed among the nations" (Bartels quoted in Tablino, *ibid.*) Their method included "listening to what the Oromo people themselves have to say" in order to "allow the people to speak for themselves." For example, Bartels refused to characterize the supreme Oromo divinity, *Waaqa,* as omniscient or omnipresent to avoid "hellenizing" the concept (Baxter and Kassan, 2005:5). Ironically, one commentator calls Bartels a "Socrates among the Oromo" who sought as a philosopher "to discover the Oromo vision of the universe, of God, of man, of life, and of things" (Tablino 2005:37).

Bartels' "philosophical" method has several limitations. In the later part of his life he speculated that the "Oromo religious concepts might have a Hindu Indian origin" (Baxter and Kassam, 2005:4). The Oromo cosmology is much closer to that of ancient Egypt than

that of ancient India. Water plays a crucial role in both ancient Egyptian and Oromo cosmologies (Hornung 1990, Megerssa 1983) and no role whatsoever in the Hindu creation myths. Equally plausible speculation could suggest that Oromo beliefs were influenced by Egypt through Red Sea trade routes south to the land of Punt. And nothing prevents further speculation that Oromo or other Cushitic cultures may have had an impact on ancient Egyptian culture.

A second limitation of Bartels' work is that he did not systematize the various aspects of Oromo thought into an organized whole. Gemetchu undertook this task in his Ph.D. dissertation, "Knowledge, Identity and the Colonizing Structure: The Case of the Oromo of East and Northeast Africa" (Baxter and Kassam:5). A third limitation is that Bartels did not look for the model of rationality that produced Oromo philosophy. A perfect example of sage philosophy in action would be to engage the Oromo in a dialogue about the wisdom of modifying Oromo philosophy to conform to Christian doctrine.

The limitations of Bartels' model are easily corrected by including ethnographers pas well as philosophers on sage philosophy research teams. Sumner began to put this model into practice through his collaboration with linguists and anthropologists. However, he did not capitalize on Oruka's insistence that dialogue grounded in rationality be the method of sage philosophical research. From his part, however, Oruka did not rely on the services of professional linguists and anthropologists.

My proposed new model for sage philosophy research teams would bring anthropologists and philosophers together. The methodology of these teams would include two phases that would be interwoven with one another. The first phase is a systematic, in-depth, dialogical (or polylogical—see Gutema 2004) exploration of informants' answers to four basic philosophical questions corresponding to four areas of philosophy—ontology, epistemology, axiology, and praxiology. The four questions include "what exists," "how can that be known," "what is the value of what exists," and "how may the theoretical beliefs comprising the answers to these three questions be put into practice." The dialogue should include the informants, an anthropologist fluent in their language and trained in ethnography, as well as a philosopher. The informants should include not only individuals qualifying as sage philosophers, but other members of the community. This aspect of the fieldwork is important because of the need to distinguish between sage philosophers' views and those of their community members. Oruka points out that philosophical sages "act like a gadfly" for their communities and "sometimes the community rebels against them, and then they become very lonely" (Oruka 1997:253). Or dead—shades of Socrates!

Interpreting the Borana people of the Oromo group, the Ethiopian anthropologist Sahlu Kidane points out that "most" of the questions asked by anthropologists about interpretations of cultural narratives "turn out to be something the people have never thought about before." Even though the people "perform" the narratives, "they do not often make critical examinations [of them]." Often the performers are "unconscious of some of their attitudes and practices" (Kidane 2002:73). The problems confronting sage philosophy teams will be complex.

The second phase of the revised method includes a systematic, in-depth exploration of the informants' pursuit of rationality, with emphasis on the hyper-reflexive function of philosophy. The dialogue should make extensive use of the seven promptings of rationality

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outlined above in section three. The task here is to determine whether the informants are aware of alternatives to their answers to the four basic questions, and to see whether they provide rational reasons for their choices. Including a broad range of community members in the dialogue together with candidates for sage philosophy will help show whether my proposed model of rationality is indeed at work in the community. The model of rationality I sketched in the second section of the essay is tentative at best. The best outcome of sage philosophy research team dialogues would show that alternative models to my proposal of rationality are required. An example of such a model emerging from African culture is the ancient Egyptian postulation of a multi-valued logic, as described by Eric Hornung in his *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (see also Hornung 1982). My brief sketch assumes that the principle of non-contradiction is clear and compelling. Hornung's research suggests that the ancient Egyptian understanding of the principle is at once more complex and more practical than our own.

What is the compelling motive for pursuing sage philosophy in Ethiopia? One reason is to test Diop's hypothesis of cultural transmission from ancient Egypt to other parts of Africa and its converse. A second reason springs from the fact that culture is preserved not only by means of language but also by philosophy. Cultures are being lost at the same rate as languages. Globalization may reduce the world's 6,000 or so languages to 2,000 within fifty years. Wiredu proposes retaining cultures' philosophical cores even while contemporary science and technology transform their accidental features (cited in Messay 2004:116). To discover a culture's deepest foundations through sage philosophy increases the chance of cultural survival.

A third reason for pursuing sage philosophy in Ethiopia lies in the fact that a philosophy is a work of art—in the senses of both practical and fine art. A culture survives in part through the execution of its philosophical guidelines; a culture's philosophy is part of its proven technology for survival. And philosophies, by reason of their high degrees of generalization and expression through minimalist sets of symbols, are beautiful by reason of their economy and simplicity. A fourth reason to keep these philosophical works of art alive is to discover the collective past of humanity, and to stimulate further creativity in the world's collective philosophy. A fifth reason is the longest stretch—to hope to find a galvanizing myth with filiations throughout a large number of African cultures (Verharen 1998). My tentative hypothesis is that ancient Egyptian holism may be widely reflected across Africa.

Where in Africa will Messay's galvanizing myth come from? Messay headed in the right direction by singling out Cheikh Anta Diop for attention. However, by focusing on Diop's claim that black Africans built the pyramids, Messay missed Diop's deeper message for African unification. Diop holds that ancient Egypt is the key to a future African renaissance in the same way that Greece was critical to the European renaissance (Diop 1991; see Verharen 2006, 1997a). Debate continues to rage over Diop's argument that ancient Egyptian philosophy launched Greek philosophy. But Diop's galvanizing myth for African unity "looks back to take the past" in the manner of Ghana's Sankofa bird—the point of looking back is to create the future. Africa's historical impact on Europe through Greece is irrelevant to her constitution of the future. Diop's vision of an African future springs from his conviction that ancient Egypt is a reflection of a much wider African

cultural heritage based on cultural exchange throughout Africa, from northern to southern Africa and back again. Theodore Celenko's (1996) extraordinary *Egypt in Africa* is the most forceful exhibition of ancient Egyptian links to a wider Africa.

A Research Program: Toward a Galvanizing Myth

My proposal is to attempt to unearth filiations among the Oromo peoples, the Cushite empire, gnosticism, and ancient Egypt (Assman 1998, Hornung 2001). My research model is the reverse of Sumner's method. He started with the written exogenous sources of Ethiopian philosophy. He calls his method an "outside-in" method. His research finishes with three volumes on endogenous Ethiopian philosophy. I suggest that we start with Oromo fieldwork done according to a revised Sumner/Oruka methodology, then work outward through written texts and orature to wider Africa. The hope is to find extensive filiations of Ethiopian philosophy with other African philosophies. A fertile ground for research outside Ethiopia would be the extensive texts from the university of Sankore in Timbuktu in Mali. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has spurred efforts toward preserving and disseminating these writings.

One hypothesis is that modern Oromo cultures are an expression of wider Cushitic cultures that extended from Africa to India, with connections to ancient Egypt (Gemetchu 1993). The importance of water in Oromo cultures may be connected to the ancient Egyptian cosmology of the universe in a watery chaotic first principle. Water is the first principle of Egyptian cosmology but the second principle of Oromo cosmology. The Oromo sky God *Waaqa* creates the universe out of a pre-existing water called *Wallaabu* (Megerssa 1993:8). However, *Waaqa* may be the Oromo sky God not in any literal sense but in the sense of a sky that is the beyond of beyond, itself perfectly beyond our comprehension. The ancient Egyptian first principle of *Nun* is analogous to water, revered as the origin of the universe, and incomprehensible as well (Hornung 1990). I am not making any claims about cultural diffusion between ancient Egypt and Oromo cultures, but merely proposing research hypotheses.

To end on a personal note, what is my own galvanizing myth (Verharen 2001, 2002)? I'm searching for better stories to tell ourselves than the European philosophical stories that have yielded potential nuclear and environmental catastrophe. Stories that do not end with billions of humans barely surviving, unable to satisfy their needs on the land, forced to migrate to large cities like Lagos and Mexico City to lead lives of unquiet desperation.

And my desired myth is much more ambitious than Diop's. His *Civilization or Barbarism* sought a galvanizing principle so that African civilization could stand against the European-style barbarism that began with African enslavement and colonization and continues with rampant globalization. My hope is that a research program in African sage philosophy might help yield a network of holistic philosophies that the whole earth could use as a galvanizing myth against its own destruction (Verharen, 2003).

Can a modified sage philosophy help deliver Messay's galvanizing myth? Philosophy may be epiphenomenal, the equivalent of ideology, as Engels suggests: "ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces compelling him remain unknown to him..." (Engels

quoted in Messay 2004:10). For Engels, freedom is going to have its way with the world whether we help it along or not.

Philosophy may have no practical effect on the course of the world. But we do make use of decision trees to guide our lives: "If I want this, then I have to do that." Careful scrutiny of the foundational and guiding principles of these trees may lead to their revision, especially when a crisis threatens and we have a motive to change our behavior such as we have never had before. As I said above, 9/11 reminds us that a small group can cause enormous destruction. We now face a crisis unprecedented in human history. The exponential growth of technology may make it possible in the near future for small groups to destroy all human life. We now have a motive to discover or recover philosophies that encourage us, in the words of Rodney King, to "all get along."

Speaking of "the new world and the dreams to which it may give rise," Hegel hypothesized that freedom would achieve its apotheosis in the Americas, perhaps as a result of a contest between North and South America (Hegel 1956:87, 86; see Verharen 1997b). Cuba spearheads that "contest" now, joined by Venezuela, Bolivia, and other Latin American countries. However, a larger contest between the Global North and South might produce a freedom that Hegel could not imagine. What a delicious irony if a galvanizing myth for such a freedom were to come out of the exercise of sage philosophy in Africa—the continent, according to Hegel, with no history, the continent saturated in savagery and myth.

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