

# *Existence and Crisis: Approaches from African Phenomenology\**

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*Global awareness of diverse crises demands more discussion about the meaning and future of human existence and its relation to other modes of being. Given the need for such discussion, contributions in this special issue examine various perspectives on the relationship between the concepts of existence and crisis. The focus is on how African phenomenological conceptions frame existence as both shaped by and responsive to crisis. The contributions address various themes concerning the relation between existence and crisis, including issues of methodology, technology, politics, universal human rights, colonial history, and ecology. They reveal how African phenomenology opens new critical and constructive approaches to existential crises across diverse contexts. To contextualize the contributions to this special issue, I introduce the concepts of African phenomenology and existentialism, with specific reference to the concepts of existence and crisis, together with a very brief outline of the contributions to this special issue.*

**Key words:** existence; crisis; African phenomenology; African existential phenomenology

Recent discussions within phenomenology—specifically, within ecophenomenology, relational ontology, and African and Africana Phenomenology—demonstrate a revived engagement with the question of human existence, approached through the prism of diverse crises. These include disasters and diseases caused by climate change, racist, colonial, and sexist predicaments of oppression and violence, war and genocide, economic collapse, famine and health hazards, mass-scale slaughtering of animals and the destruction of the environment by humans, the threats posed

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\* This mini issue goes back to selected papers delivered at the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference of the *Centre for Phenomenology in South Africa*, Chintsa, South Africa, September 4-5, 2024. It has been co-edited by Amara Chimakonam (University of Fort Hare), Justin Sands (University of Bloemfontein) and Abraham Olivier (University of Fort Hare). The focus of this conference was on African phenomenological notions of existence and crisis. Due to its shift of focus from phenomenology in South Africa to the project of African phenomenology, the *Centre of African Phenomenology* (CAP) was launched as a Centre of its own on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November 2024. This mini issue is strictly seen as the first publication of the *Centre for African Phenomenology* (<https://saphenomenology.wordpress.com/>).

by the rapid development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and related technologies, etc. Global awareness of these issues demands more discussion about the meaning and future of human existence and its relation to other modes of being. Given the need for such discussion, contributions in this special issue examine various perspectives on the relationship between the concepts of existence and crisis. The focus is on how African phenomenological conceptions frame existence as both shaped by and responsive to crisis.<sup>1</sup> The contributions address various themes concerning the relation between existence and crisis, including issues of methodology, technology, politics, universal human rights, colonial history, and ecology. They reveal how African phenomenology opens new critical and constructive approaches to existential crises across diverse contexts.

To contextualize the contributions to this special issue, the following two sections introduce the concepts of African phenomenology and existentialism, with specific reference to the concepts of existence and crisis. I close with a very brief outline of the contributions to this special issue.

## **1 African Phenomenology**

The use of the concept of “African phenomenology” is relatively new, and the first book that introduces it systematically is the recent anthology “Phenomenology in an African Context” (Olivier et al 2023).<sup>2</sup> This concept goes back to the phenomenological work of some renowned African philosophers, including Paulin Hountondji, Dismas Masolo, Tsenay Serequeberhan, Mabogo More, and Achille Mbembe. The contributions to this anthology demonstrate in various ways how the African context challenges phenomenology to self-apply its classic method of suspension, i.e., to put itself in brackets and self-reflect radically upon the methodological assumptions its proponents make. To use Paget Henry’s (2006) concept of Africana phenomenology, one can say that the subject that practices phenomenology “de-centers” themselves by subjecting the activities of their consciousness to self-reflection.<sup>3</sup> The idea is that through such bracketing, the constituting activities of consciousness can come to the fore and become available to description. African and Africana phenomenology seem to share this methodological approach of de-centering qua self-bracketing with traditional phenomenology as it has been introduced within the western context.

However, the technique of “de-centering” seems to mark a decisive difference between traditional western phenomenology on the one hand and African and Africana phenomenology on the other. In Edmund Husserl’s classic transcendental approach, the focus is on the reasoning capacities of consciousness that humans are purported to share universally, invariant of their particular contextual conditions, including social, political, and economic factors. In African and Africana phenomenology, it seems rather different in that contextual conditions are considered to be a central part of the constitutive activities of consciousness (Olivier et al. 2023). This difference is

what the de-centering technique of phenomenology seems to bring to the fore. This technique is meant to show the formative effect of environmental conditions on consciousness.

African and Africana phenomenology offer some classic examples of accounts of the formative effect of contextual conditions on subjects' consciousness in terms of the genesis of what Du Bois called the "double-consciousness" of being an American and African (Du Bois 1969: Chapter 1), Fanon termed sociogeny (Fanon 1967: 4), and Biko dubbed "Black consciousness" (Biko 2005: 29).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Mabogo More speaks of the experience of "being-black-in-the world" (More 2023: 141).<sup>5</sup> These examples show how a racialized context and its social, cultural, political, and economic manifestations are considered a formative part of what makes a subject conscious.

To be sure, western phenomenologists typically support the claim of the situatedness of subjectivity in what Husserl classically called the "lifeworld." However, unlike western phenomenologists, African and Africana phenomenologists understand situatedness not as a universal category that concerns all humans equally, but rather they would take it in its particularity, and claim to deal with very different "lifeworlds."<sup>6</sup> So one may say, if classic western phenomenology seeks to identify seminal structures of the constituting activities of consciousness independent of the subject's specific conditions of living, then African and Africana phenomenology take consciousness to be constituted by such conditions in the first place. Thus, the lived conditions of the conscious subject in their particularity are viewed as part of the conditions of the possibility of its consciousness.

African and Africana phenomenologists have in common that they can be broadly characterized by their critical focus on the lived experience of black persons and peoples African and of African descent who were and are subjected to the formative workings of slavery, colonialism, racism, exploitation, and sexism. As Outlaw indicates, however, African phenomenology refers more strictly to the critical analysis of the shaping effect of the lived context on persons and peoples African while Africana phenomenology has its focus on the African diaspora (Outlaw 2017: 14).<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, as Lewis Gordon points out, persons and peoples African and of African descent will have their unique settings and sets of "existential questions" regarding their "lived context of concern" (Gordon 2000: 10).<sup>8</sup>

## 2 African Phenomenology and Existentialism

To get a better grasp on how existential questions arising from crises are framed within an African phenomenological perspective, it is worthwhile saying more about the link between African phenomenology and existentialism.<sup>9</sup> Lewis Gordon, one of the contributors to this special issue, makes some helpful distinctions in this regard, which I would like to explain briefly.

To begin with, Gordon distinguishes between “existentialism” and “existential philosophies,” which he also calls “philosophies of existence” (Gordon 2000: 10). He writes: “I regard existentialism—the popularly named ideological movement—as a fundamentally European historical phenomenon” (Gordon 2000: 10). He considers European existentialism as just “one continent’s response to a set of problems that date from the moment human beings faced problems of anguish and despair” (Gordon 2000: 6). Existential philosophies (philosophies of existence) regard similar “concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation” (Gordon 2000: 6). However, unlike existentialism, which considers one continent’s issues of universal concern, “philosophies of existence are marked by a centering of what is often known as the situation of questioning or inquiry itself” (Gordon 2000: 6). Gordon calls the “situation of questioning” the “lived context of concern” (Gordon 2000: 10). He speaks of existential Africana philosophy to make clear that people in the African diaspora have particular existential questions arising from their specific lived contexts of concern. Thus, he refers to the “existential demand for recognizing the situation or lived context of Africana peoples’ being-in-the-world” and the “question of value raised by the people who live that situation” (Gordon 2000: 10). In this line, one can say that African peoples have particular existential questions arising from the crises of lived contexts of concern with neocolonial, racist and other forms of oppression. Such questions constitute the subject of an African existential philosophy.

Gordon makes further distinctions by pointing out that “Africana existential philosophy is a branch of Africana philosophy and black philosophies of existence” (Gordon 2000: 5). He writes: “In Africana philosophy, there is a focus on the unique features of Africana cultural experience on the one hand, and the reality that Africana people are a black people and hence are impacted by the significance of race and racism on the other” (Gordon 2000: 6). The terrain of black philosophies of existence is broader than Africana—and for that matter African—philosophies of existence as they bear reference to black subjects which do not live only in Africana or African communities. In any case, the point to be stressed is that the significance of blackness and anti-black racism is a main, albeit not only, existential issue within Africana existential philosophies and certainly also in African existential philosophy, for instance, such as Mabogo More’s.

Notably, Gordon further maintains that “although my focus is existential, the way I go about conducting my analysis is phenomenological” (Gordon 2000: 72). He explains more specifically that to analyze the Africana experience in its lived context of existential concerns, he uses the phenomenological method of bracketing (Gordon 2000: 73). It means a critical analysis in the sense of (a) the suspension or critique of the natural attitude that anti-black racist and colonialist/neocolonialist regimes are premised on and (b) an inquiry into the existential concerns with the lived experience and liberation of black people under such regimes. This critical phenomenological analysis is in line with Henry’s approach to Africana phenomenology, and, for instance, More’s use of Husserl’s notion of the suspension of natural attitudes in his approach to African phenomenology in *Sartre on Contingency* (2021).<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, one can also speak of an African existential phenomenology, thus an African existential philosophy with a phenomenological methodology. This methodology is about the critical analysis of anti-black

racism and other forms of oppression of existential concern within the African context, as related to other contexts such as the African diaspora or black communities outside the African diaspora.

“Critical” can thus be taken to mean both theoretical “judgement” and “crises” as Lewis Gordon points out in his contribution to this special issue, as well as in the mentioned anthology (Gordon 2023).<sup>11</sup> This is specifically the critical thinking called for by the crises caused by lived, existential conditions under colonial and neo-colonial racist, sexist, xenophobic, and other forms of oppression in its diversity of manifestations. What ultimately seems to distinguish African phenomenology from other phenomenologies is its focus on the formative effect of the crisis of lived, existential conditions on the conscious mind in but also beyond the African context—if we take seriously Serequeberhan’s notion of the “variegated multiplicity of our shared existence” (Serequeberhan 2015: 48).<sup>12</sup> In Hountondji’s terms, the crisis of lived, existential conditions are themselves considered part of the transcendental condition of the possibility of consciousness, of what enables—or disables—a critical conscious mind.

In conclusion to this section, it seems fair to say that in African phenomenology, existence and crisis are central, related concepts, and that approaches to African phenomenology are intrinsically connected to existential philosophies. They are critical reflections on the constitutive effect of existential crises, as manifest in unjust, disabling lived conditions, on the genesis of consciousness in the African context as related to other contexts. One can speak of African phenomenology as *African existential phenomenology*. For brevity’s sake, I use the term African phenomenology.

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The contributions to this special issue address various ways in which crises shape existence from within the framework of African phenomenology. Each contribution has a specific, albeit not exclusive, thematic focus. Lewis Gordon focuses on issues of methodology and technology, Jane Gordon on politics, Chris Allsobrook on universal human rights, and Dismas Masolo on history and ecology.<sup>13</sup>

With Masolo, the contributions come full circle. He ends where I began in my introduction to African phenomenology and where Gordon in his analysis started: the self-suspension of phenomenology towards arriving at it in the practice of that suspension. Gordon refers to this phenomenological movement as the “movement of critique,” that is, the movement driven by the power of self-questioning the assumptions of consciousness, specifically assumptions that are driving factors of existential conditions of crisis. The contributions to this special issue demonstrate in various ways a “movement of critique” by advocating the attitude of self-questioning the methodological, technological, political, legal, historical, or ecological assumptions on which actors may premise actions that lead to existential crises. As a movement of

critique, African phenomenology seems to serve particularly well as a methodological approach towards existential crises.

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- <sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Justin Sands and Amara Chimakonam for helpful comments on a first draft of this introduction, as well as first drafts of the other contributions.
- <sup>2</sup> My brief discussion of African phenomenology relies on our editorial and my personal introductions to the concept in Olivier (2023). See: Abraham Olivier, “African Phenomenology — What is That?”, in *Phenomenology in an African Context*, ed. Abraham Olivier, M. John Lamola and Justin Sands, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023), 15-36.
- <sup>3</sup> Paget Henry, “Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications,” *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* (2006): 1–22 (URL: [https://globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/sites/globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/v1d3\\_PHenry.pdf](https://globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/sites/globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/v1d3_PHenry.pdf); last accessed on July 16, 2025).
- <sup>4</sup> Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, Cambridge: ProQuest LLC, 2005; W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, The Project Gutenberg eBook, 1996; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks*. London: Pluto Press, 1967.
- <sup>5</sup> Mabogo P. More, *Sartre on Contingency: Antiracist Racism and Embodiment*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2021.
- <sup>6</sup> Note, this does not mean that Husserl advocates an undifferentiated conception of the lifeworld. As, for instance, Anthony Steinbock shows extensively in *Home and Beyond*, Husserl distinguishes between “home-world” and “alien-world” as two different “lifeworlds” (Steinbock 1995). However, this distinction is still assumed to apply universally to all humans, compared to the claim of African phenomenologists who argue against such application. For instance, More would argue that in the racist world to be black means to be “homeless” from the outset and to have no “home-world” (More 2023: 141). See: Anthony Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*, Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1995.
- <sup>7</sup> Lucius T. Outlaw, Jr, “Africana Philosophy,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/africana/>; last accessed on July 16, 2025).
- <sup>8</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought*, New York: Routledge, 2000.

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- <sup>9</sup> My discussion of the link between African phenomenology and existentialism is a reworked version of my discussion of this relation in Olivier, “Phenomenology of Contingency: Reflections on More’s African Phenomenology,” forthcoming, in *South African Journal of Philosophy*, August 2025.
- <sup>10</sup> I discussed More’s view, that is, his African existential phenomenology, in detail in a forthcoming paper, Olivier (2025).
- <sup>11</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, “Some Reflections from Africana Phenomenology on African Phenomenology,” in Oliver et al. (2023: 37-62).
- <sup>12</sup> Tsenay Serequeberhan, *Existence and Heritage*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015.
- <sup>13</sup> D.A. Masolo’s article entitled “When Humans Become their Own Enemy: A Brief Narrative on Today’s Existential Crisis,” is to be found in this issue in the section ‘Intellectual Journeys.’