

Avoiding the errors of ontologies, meeting the challenges of reflective existence

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A. Introduction

There is a tendency to make everything controversial in "philosophy". This is even celebrated as an indication of the nature and virtue of the discipline, the philosophical soul and the character of philosophical reflection generally. Philosophers are given to celebrating what divides them more than they are inclined to mention what unites them, but at the end of the day, some of the so-called controversies generated by philosophers regarding the nature of philosophy would be seen as superficial. For example, when the invitation was sent for abstracts for this Symposium, Rorty was quoted, I believe out of context, thus:

The discipline called 'philosophy' encompasses not only different answers to philosophical questions but total disagreement on what questions are philosophical. (Richard Rorty)

If I ask, "How do I get to Sovereign Centre from UWI, Mona Campus, in Kingston?", hardly would any one wonder if I was asking a philosophical question. On the other hand, if I should ask, "What is space?", then it may be concluded that I was not just trying to find my way from my office on Mona Campus to the Main Library on the same Campus but that I am concerned with more important matters; that I was not just interested in the distance between two objects, that I was not aware of the fact that the "stars" are in the "sky" and very far indeed from the earth, or that there is the possibility of Achilles passing the Tortoise in a race just like a bullet from a gun will cover some distance before hitting the target! What questions are philosophical or not depends therefore not on the simple format of the question, but what kinds of answers and explanations are required to meet the need of the questioner!

Many would agree there is no single definition of 'philosophy'. The hallmark of the field is, rather, a diversity of conceptions, traditions and concomitant vocabularies; each assured of its own originary 'rightness' and indignantly distrustful (and, in some cases, dismissive) of other perspectives. The history of philosophy may be seen as a succession of disagreements and *partis pris* due mainly to the incommensurable vocabularies and the often unrequited concealment of the interests of the parties involved.

Even a brief and simplistic survey of the history of philosophy in the Western world might lend credence to such a view. It is supported even more when one takes into consideration traditions in other parts of the world and in those regions touched by European colonialism. Africa, for example, seems to reproduce the supposed European division between Analytic philosophy in its English-speaking countries and "continental" in Francophone and Lusophone territories. Here in the Caribbean, where philosophy as a formal field of study in tertiary institutions is still, relatively-speaking, an emerging one, there is little consensus on what constitutes philosophy per se or, indeed, what might, in the view of the mostly non-Caribbean academics that teach philosophy in the region, make philosophy specifically 'Caribbean' in nature.

Clearly, human beings are wont to creating myths. Where none exist, humans, searching for explanations for which their current technologies and science cannot determine, will create myths to make up the tally of information and "evidence" needed to satisfy the questing mind. The issue of the existence of Caribbean Philosophy is very akin to the vexed issue of whether Africans and its Diaspora peoples are giving to reading. It is often suggested that what makes the difference between Africans and Americans or Europeans when it comes to information use and management is the interest in reading of the Europeans and Americans, while their African and Diaspora counterparts are more interested in visual images.

Just like the myth of the disposition of Africans to athletics and physical matters, following on the heels of the Seghorian "reason is Hellenic, emotion is African" Negritude, so African children are channeled toward sports, rap and hip-hop in English and American educational systems. The bottom line is simply to question the capacity of Africans and peoples of African descent to handle intellectually complex, abstract and abstruse matters. All these are no more than the need to show that there is a genetic, not merely phenotypical difference between Caucasoids and Negroids!

So, we are warned that if you want to mystify matters for the typical black person, put it in black and white! Clearly, he/she would only take a cursory glance, lose interest and agree to whatever is requested without further investigation. This is not strange, the protagonists of this myth would suggest, as it all comes from the innate weakness of the negro mind to handle complex, attention wasting, and time consuming matters! Probably it has to do with the heat of the Sun in her environment, or it may be in the staples (where it is available, that is), or it may be in the unnecessarily sexed-up nature of her libido!

The relevance of the presupposition of the myth to the matter of Caribbean Philosophy is simple. What percentage of Euro-American whites are literate? What percentage of this group is from middle-income families? What percentage of Africans and African Americans in Africa and in the West are literate? What percentage of this is from middle-income families? In terms of the desiderata for reading and writing, what is the need for such effort on the parts of individuals? To what ends are they externally required to engage in such exercise? When we try to answer these questions, and probably others, it may become clear that this is another bogey, another of the many myths that have been fabricated to pander to the racist, racist, and Eurocentric palate of scholars who cannot but be satisfied with simplistic explanations of the failure of socio-economic, political and cultural infrastructures of Africa and its Diaspora societies. Instead of looking beyond the immediately obvious to exogenous factors to explain the problems, simplistic and quick-fix answers are generated. Since the configuration of power relations are so distended, distorted and lopsided, band-wagonist proclivities take over and persons who should know better are easily persuaded to accept meaningless myths as rigorous explanations of serious phenomena.

Given the above, it is argued in this short essay, that there is Caribbean Philosophy, and that this philosophy is strong, influential, variegated and rigorous in the highest standard that anyone may require. We set out to show this as follows.

B The Nature and Methods of Philosophical Reflection

Traditionally, philosophy has been demarcated into four major headings – metaphysics or ontology (from which this essay takes its title), epistemology (or methodology according to many philosophers), logic and axiology. These are general headings under which humans have reflected on the conditions of their existence, relations with each other and with the world, understood realities and non-realities, made sense of before life, life and death and after life, examined the best ways of reasoning and justifying claims and speculated about what constitute philosophy and what not, who were philosophers in history and who are not. This is not to mention the many philosophies of this and that in respect of cross-disciplinary reflections of ideas and epistemes from these many disciplines. Consequently, the nature of philosophy is glaringly different from the nature of most other disciplines, as it constitute the hallmark of reflection. But the basic methods of philosophical reflection remain the human ability to ask questions, peruse issues and propound theories based on the human capacity to reason. We may explore these matters as follows:

1 *Philosophy is critical, analytic, discursive and argumentative.*

Philosophy is a critical reflective activity in which most, if not all humans engage. This may not be self-consciously, as not all humans (it is actually impossible that all humans) be self-consciously engaged in philosophy as it is practiced in Western academic circles – in classrooms insulated from the realities of life. But humans go through life, confronted by all kinds of issues, and pressed to reflect on these matters whether they like it or not, and whether they are able to provide satisfactory solutions or not to the problems that they generate in their minds and in discussions with others.

This has had the effect of making philosophical problems perennial, insoluble and at times frustrating. Which factor led the abrasive group of scientists of the Vienna Circle to issue a condemnation of traditional philosophy as it was practiced by thinkers up to their time in European history. They claimed that philosophical problems have been insoluble because philosophers have been asking pseudo-questions, being unattentive to the language and meanings of the words that they employ in their discourses, and ignoring the principles of verification that would give meaning and content to their theories.

It is probably desirable that philosophers, working within that contrived superficial tradition and for that superficially insular audience in Western academia, meet the unpractical and impracticable requirement of scientism and the verificationism that it generated, it could be, and often has been, a shackle to the understanding of the multiplicity of the fundamental problems of humanity, reducing philosophy in the West, that is, that one narrow tradition of it, to no more than pedantic logic chopping, concerned with irritating hair-splitting and luxuriating in distractive and pointless abstractions. Clearly reflective thinking does not start at the level of formal logic – whether Aristotelian, Boolean or Hegelian – in order to be incisive, rigorous and useful for the understanding of reality and experience. Philosophical thoughts in pre-historic times have been clearly reflective, and reflected the nature of the concerns of humans in these epochs. And Greek philosophy, when it finally started, late in human history, did not start with logic. It was after almost half a millennia that attention was directed at the formal act of argument representation by Aristotle.

This speaks volumes to the nature of philosophy and the position of logic in philosophy!

In this regards, the existence of other philosophical traditions even in Europe (East, Central and West), in Asia and Africa and the Pacific and Oceania, on the one hand, have served to put to rest the negative attitude of this positivist and neo-positivist critiques of philosophy and, especially of African philosophy (and now of African Diaspora or Caribbean philosophy); while on the other hand, the rediscovery of metaphysics, the transcendence of Newtonian-Cartesian mechanistic rationalism, through the relativity engendered by Einstein and the paradigm shift engaged by quantum physics and the holographic space, have all created even more radical circumspection among the creative and honest thinkers in the West, ushering in a new awareness of pluralism and a palpable need to be more tolerant of other and diverse means of attaining knowledge.

Thus, when one hears such blatantly incoherent lamentations like (a) Caribbean people are not disposed to abstract thinking or philosophical reflection, (b) Caribbean philosophy is a late comer, (c) Caribbean people have little room for philosophical reflection, or (d) Caribbean philosophy is yet to be created, one must be very careful that we do not get drawn into a diversionary, retrogressive and overly patronizing ontological debate about what genetically has been part of the very natural inclinations of humans everywhere, and indeed of African peoples of the Caribbean region right from the beginning.

It can be said that the positivists and neo-positivists, in the West and in Africa, have not totally abandoned their goal. The need to be very cautious in what claims we make with regard to regional philosophies is very important. The various coping mechanisms, methodologies, activities and reflections of Africans in the Caribbean, whether through Kumina, Jonkanu, Pan Music, Voodoo, Carnival, Reggae, Dancehall, Jazz, or even the dominance of the West Indies in Cricket for almost four decades to the latter part of the 20th Century is reflective of the reflective capacity and philosophical capability of Africans of the Caribbean region. If we do not look at continental North America and suggest that America has no philosophy, why would we even bother to wonder whether the Caribbean people have developed philosophical ideas.

2. ***Philosophy is an individualistic, written discipline.***

If we take the contention that philosophy is essentially a written (ad)venture, we may respond by saying that:

- a) **That writing is not essential to thinking.** That philosophizing is reflective thinking, while writing is only a medium for the expression of thoughts, ideas, ideals, beliefs, fears, hopes, etc., just as singing, speaking, painting, drumming, dancing, sculpture, etc. are other media. Thus, writing is a useful means of documenting philosophy, but not the only means.
- b) The second response has been to show that **some of the most respected thinkers in all traditional societies, even in the West, have been people who did not write down their ideas.** Socrates and Jesus are examples.

But even if we put these aside, we find that there is a corpus of work produced by peoples of the Caribbean that clearly pass muster as philosophical text which we

may not be teaching, for no fault of the authors but our own, and which we need to be teaching, as they constitute Caribbean contributions to human effort to understand reality and make sense of human existence.

There is an even more important element of this discourse that we need to attend to. This relates to the element of individualistic nature of the critical reflection called philosophy. It is often assumed that philosophers create their ideas in a vacuum, out of earshot and sight of all other humans, and deserve credit for the genius they display when they come up with novel ideas. This is part of what fuels capitalistic individualism in Euro-American tradition, and it is the harbinger of patent rights, copy rights and ownership property rights. This is why one single person in the West can own billions of dollars while billions of human beings may not be able to scratch a meal a day! Thus, the negation of "I am because we are" constitute a signal material for the denial of creativity to the people who refuse to allow individualism to lead to atomism and nihilism for them.

But this is not suggesting that given the trajectory of the history of the Caribbean peoples, there have not been very reflective persons and corpus of text that meet the criterion of philosophical authorship. This issue is addressed in the next section.

3. ***Philosophy as love of wisdom and as the process of asking questions.***

Given this nature of philosophy as the love of wisdom and the process of asking questions to satisfy the inquisitive nature of humans, it is clear that we need to be responsible in our comments on the intellectual contributions of peoples whose languages, ways of life and cultures are different from our own lest we reify our ignorance to the level of certitude. What this means in the simplest terms is that as human preoccupations differ from society to society and from epoch to epoch, it is clear that the philosophical ideas generated by thinkers in different societies will differ. As a consequence, we must not expect all thinkers to be existentialist across the world at one particular time, and phenomenologists at the next. If the concern of our great grandparents were with who made the world, ours could be what consequences would derive from genetic engineering for human nature as we know it if humans can be successfully cloned. We cannot because some persons postulated some spirits as the source of their being, then condemn such people as barbaric for not thinking of DNA or protein.

C *What, then, is Caribbean Philosophy and who are the Caribbean Philosophers?*

I am sure readers will be interested in how these questions are answered, but if I raise the analogous questions "What is American, Western or European philosophy?" "Who are American, Western or European philosophers?" and "Whether all of American, Western or European philosophy was done or written by Americans, Westerners or Europeans?" Is there American, Western or European Logic? they may feel that I have asked very awkward, irreverent and irrelevant questions. Perhaps this is part of the difficulty one faces on being asked these questions about Caribbean philosophy, especially when we bear in mind that we seldom ask these ludicrous questions about other regional philosophies and philosophers. In most cases, when questions are asked about Western philosophy, it is supposed to mean "what is philosophy?" as if all philosophy is Western, or that all philosophers are Euro-American English speaking persons or, for that matter, as if all philosophers are

Western Europeans and there is no philosophy outside of Western European philosophy and, to compound the confusion, as if all philosophical agenda have, historically, been Western and Euro-American.

At the top of this concealment of ironical inquiry there is a sense of patronage, a condescension, which strangely evokes a cynical smile that invites the African thinker to join a nonexistent debate made profound by some irony of historical perversion. In this sense, the thinker is given a withdrawn and negativized ground for discourse, where, if he/she becomes aggressive in projecting a humble submission that philosophical reflection is as natural to rational beings in search of meaning and understanding of self, the universe and beyond as eating or breathing, he/she is labeled a radical and asked to produce evidence that his/her progenitors were rational humans, and if he/she withdraws into logical reflection as to why Europeans only started reasoning at the middle century before the Common Era, there are blank stares from various directions.

In my view, the task of Caribbean philosophers is the critical, speculative, analytical, reflective, introspective, retrospective, conscious and intuitive attempts to find solutions to profound life puzzles by persons of Caribbean origins. Consequently, I name a few Caribbean illustrious thinkers whose thoughts are philosophical, regardless of whether we as academics have found space to teach their ideas in our philosophical curricular or not. These thinkers and world respected philosophers, not in any order of temporal presentation, include:

- a) Marcus Garvey
- b) Stuart Hall
- c) Walter Rodney
- d) Rex Nettleford
- e) Kamau Brathwaite
- f) Lewis Gordon
- g) Ivan Van Sertima
- h) Paget Henry
- i) Rupert Lewis
- j) Charles Mills
- k) C. L. R. James
- l) Aime Cesaire
- m) Frantz Fanon
- n) Edward Blyden

D *The professionalization of philosophy*

At the risk of making my discussion on the relationship between African philosophy and artistic expression in subsequent sections monolithic, I will make another pertinent point. This is to the effect that, beginning with the itinerant Sophists who went around exhorting payment from the highest bidder to teach rhetoric in the name of philosophy, making it possible to confuse smartness with wisdom, that is, an ability to weave arguments to 'turn' black into white (what a contrast!), humanity has witnessed the appropriation of a noble human engagement away from the realm of relevance. Thus, in the West, philosophy has become an activity of semi-sane, mainly male, leisure loving, provincial persons who affect an air of erudition to cover their ignorance, irrelevance and eccentricity. When we look at the names listed in the last section, they were not concerned with abstract, irrelevant and irresponsible

hairsplitting, because the matters confronting them were serious, they had to address these matters with equal seriousness, as the totality of existence of peoples of their kind were seriously affronted and needed the intellectual effort of these thinkers to assuage their suffering (literally). Consequently, the philosophy that such philosophers propound reflects, and is reflected in, the governance, the morality, the culture, the vocations, the ecology, the economic, the international and environmental relations of global existence, the religion, the music, the art, the songs, the plays, the recreation and leisure, the daily life of their people in the society and in world societies at large.

Like Western classroom (formal) education which only trains and produces a partial human being, able to read, write, speak in a tongue (attain some expertise, that is), Western philosophy has succeeded in alienating the populace, breeding all sorts of irrelevant theories which are mostly impractical, impracticable and often anti-social, hence, having little impact on various aspects of life, leading to a situation that meaning has to be siphoned out of these aspects only after they have been created, as art critics and philosophers do, *post eventum*, after the real sages and artists have left the thinking and creative scene. Thus philosophy and, indeed, philosophy of art, has been regarded as a "second order" activity (a name that the founders of that famous African journal of philosophy, *Second Order*, felt themselves compelled to inherit and attach to the journal), insulated from reality and self-insulating in return.

E Conclusion

I clearly understand the numerous factors that have led to the parlous state of the teaching of philosophy in Universities in the Caribbean. Some of these have to do with, first the fact that no one wants the oppressed to think, become critical and reflective, as this will lead to the end of the oppression. Second one of the big elements of slavery and colonialism is the denial of personhood to the enslaved and colonized, and the greatest instrument of such denial is the denial of a mind, thinking capacity, reflection, philosophy, logic, religion, history, literature, education, etc. etc. to such people. Third, through the appropriation of the wealth of the peoples dominated, there is only enough for stark survival and little to encourage high culture, reflection and identity examination. And finally, the self-doubt that is planted in the mind of the oppressed festers into identity crises. These add up to veritable degrees of self-denial, self-sacrifice and self-destruction. What is happening by way of high and low criminality in Jamaica is an example of the manifestations of the combination of matters mentioned above. Inability to have a viable department of philosophy in any of the Universities and Campuses in the region is consequently not an accident, it is only to be expected, because using philosophy to build the society would only undermine the numerous myths by which Western social, economic, religious, political and cultural constructs are defended and maintained.

When you ask me to show you the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus and I take you to the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus – to the various faculties, the various libraries, the lecture halls, the laboratories, the offices, the halls of residence, etc. etc. – and you still ask me to show you the University, then I will be well advised to understand that nothing I provide will answer your need. In this kind of situation, we have a category mistake. It breeds an ontological error which cannot be easily dispelled, unless we shift ground and speak about the same thing when we talk of the University of the West Indies. It is hoped that this kind of

error of ontologies will be dispelled from a short essay of this nature, if there is intellectual honesty, that is.

In conclusion, I salute the efforts of those who have refused to lay down and play dead in the face of all the adversities. These honourable persons have over many years produced thoughts, philosophies that have been most liberating and creative, charting the course of life for the peoples of the world in similar circumstances, leading to the liberation of oppressed peoples in various parts of the world, and constituting examples in intellectual resistance to domination, oppression and genocide. Whether we are to find the resources to teach the ideas of these great minds to our young ones is another matter. This probably should be the theme of this symposium and not the diversionary one of whether or not there is Caribbean philosophy!

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