

Discourse and Object:¹
Appraising the Comparative Approach in Philosophy

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Introduction: everything in flux

It is pretty safe, and commonsensical, to proclaim that we have always been hybridic!. Any consideration of our history suggests that this is not by any means a recent phenomenon. Through our migrations we all have acquired from places and peoples we have transited through as much as we also have lent out to them. Our contemporary kin have only extended and given this hybridity new perspectives. Her portrait is incessantly and far more widely diversified. She is global and, like her ancestors, defies any attempts to essentialize her. In today's grammar, she is helplessly post-postmodern. Old approaches to comparative thought were built on the assumption that thought systems, like many other things we designate as "cultural", the kind of things once thought to deeply characterize and define us, belong to systems or traditions that bear or are characterized by strong homogeneity, and that every individual was born into one by virtue of her dominant and metaphysical strings of descent. This view of cultures as "hard" or "natural" systems was rooted in modern European thought, and was imposed upon our perception of society through colonial inducement. Contemporary social theory aims partly to correct the anthropological view of tribes or ethnicities as closed cultural communities by requiring that we adjust not only how we view the constitution of the social circumstances of thought production but also what constitutes comparative thinking and how it is propagated in the socialization of the person as both actor and cognitive agent. In this new picture of things, every moment in the life of the Self is transitory, and therefore contingent.

¹This is a modified version of the paper read at the 2006 Cave Hill Philosophy Symposium on the idea of "Comparative Philosophy: Western and Non-Western". The Symposium was held March 2nd. and 3rd, 2006.

The pitfalls of modern European thought — that which ushered in the objective view of the world — needs to be reconsidered in the light of Heraclitus’ view of world as constantly in flux. Specifically, he would have wondered how, after him, and where, in the path of history, modern Europeans erred into the traps of the objectivist idea of reality which we all inherited from the modern mind, namely that everywhere there are hard realities to be known in their lasting natures, and that for those realities that change, such as societies or communities, there is a natural order, and one ideal end that accomplished human life ought historically to attain. Yet before science there was Christianity’s view that there was only one way, one light, and one truth. It is in Christianity that the belief originated to the effect that there can be only one good and true thing, and also one correct way of arriving at it. In its general significance and impact, this view foregrounded science, and later stood at the center of the confluence of science, religion, and anthropology. For a long time it formed the basis of the ideologies of historical differences between peoples determined by the relative proximity to the ideal end. In the specific African case, Placide Tempels used it (1959: 17) to distinguish those who were adapting, the *Évolués*, from those, the primitive, who were stricken with damnation and left in darkness the absolute “pagans” like me. This attitude was meant to teach us that because the purpose of human life was or could be only in one sense. In other words, there also must be only some specific social and political arrangements that render the attainment of that purpose possible. In the minimum, they must be in the right direction those arrangements that aim but have yet to attain that political and moral perfection that alone is commensurate with the objectified human ideal. This was Hegel’s idea of history that saw the underlying unity of all institutionalized human endeavors to be the historical incarnation of the Absolute (seen through the prism of dialectical human reason). Like him, Heidegger thought that there was something essentially European about the relationship between the Absolute and ideal human — meaning rational or philosophical — endeavor.² Those cultures and systems whose ways are distant from, and out of sync with this progressive European path ought to be aided in all available and possible ways to discover it, which, in Nineteenth-Century European thought, justified the global projections of

²See Heidegger, Martin, *What is Philosophy?* (trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde), London, Vision Press Ltd., 1958, p. 31.

European colonial, missionary, and anthropological enterprises. Hegel thought that European incursions into Africa had historicized portions of it while the spread of Islam had transformed other parts.

In his now classic opus, *The Invention of Africa* (1988), V. Y. Mudimbe amasses minute important details of how, over a period spanning many centuries, this complex discourse became the driving force of the missionary and anthropological programs in their service to colonization. Not only did the grounding ideology in Hegel's and Heidegger's philosophies invent the ideas of being German or European as unifying forms of identity, but over time, usurped into a social and Christian view of "Europeanism" in contrast to Others, this ideology became the basis for the image of Africa as a dark continent from which, says Mudimbe, "no respectable consciousness could arise and function outside of a cadre that has conjugated, in a totalizing manner, Greek rationality, Judeo-Christian ethics, and scientific procedures and practices" (1997: 147-8). Many of us, then and now, are products of this programmatic triangle that links Christianity and colonialism, anthropology and Christianity, and colonialism and anthropology. The question, then, is how a dominated culture, a dominated consciousness, emerges from this negation to reclaim itself, even to the point that earns the respect of a comparative study. There are three possible ways, one more than Césaire told Maurice Thoréz many years ago. In a letter to Thoréz in 1956, the great Martinican poet and philosopher said there were two ways of losing oneself: either by rejecting oneself totally to become the Other, or by shutting oneself within the isolating walls of difference.³ But there is a third way of reacting to conquest, by taking charge and giving a new beginning to a historical synthesis. According to Mudimbe, this synthesis situates the self in the *espace métissé*, by taming and acculturating the Other to the fundamentals of the self, thus creating a new order that integrates appropriation with difference, submission with creative defiance. Several African philosophers (for example Mudimbe 1988 and 1997; Appiah 1992, 2005,

³. This statement probably expresses Césaire's own admission of, and disappointment with lessons of postcolonial politics learned from some controversial decisions, which he considered practically viable, while balancing them with an ideology of equal difference for his *pays natal* and for all black people. The alternatives, while articulating his disappointment with the polarized politics of the time, have been the cause of much political controversy either by interpretation or by application.

and 2006; Wiredu 1980 and 1996; Hountondji 1983 and 2002; Gyekye 1997) address this fundamental historicity of human life with different styles of approval. The lives of historical humans take place in these *espace métissé*; they are lived in spaces in-between, somewhere mid-way between Césaire's two poles. No condition is permanent. Even Hegel's own invention of Germanism and Europeanism takes account of the rise of the spirit from the ashes of history. The temporal vicinity of our colonial history makes the in-between spaces of our lives relatively more visible, and more debated or contested due in part, as Chinua Achebe tells us in *Things Fall Apart*, to the suddenness and depth of the initial variation. One of the many lessons of Achebe's classic novel is that if there are or have been any social orders, then these can be understood only in terms of the *discourses* by which they are constantly constituted, because there are no social orders as permanent and lasting arrangements. Okonkwo's tragedy arises from his own lack of cognizance of this historicity; precisely from his encounter with the sudden falling apart of what he erroneously had thought to be his permanent and indelible station in society and the virtues that defined it. But alas, as the colonial and Christian authorities extended their reign, Okonkwo is rudely awakened to the realization that if there had been earlier times when a clear understanding of his social position allowed him to make inferences about what to do, those times were sadly gone.

Africa's postcoloniality has been marked by disagreements about how to reconstitute either our epistemological or our socio-political systems in the aftermath of the colonial episode. The colonial invention of Africa as a place where individual consciousness had no place has been at the center of these disagreements. Originated in the British social anthropologist Evans-Pritchard's study of the Azande (Evans-Pritchard, 1937), the idea became the beacon of Tempels' idea of African philosophy as collective thought, and Senghor's idea of African mind as participative. In response, Hountondji's rationalist critique of ethnophilosophy aims at presenting the universal phenomenological characteristics of consciousness by challenging the assumption, underlying Senghor's racialized psychology, that modes of "intending" the world are racially distributed. In developing his counter-position, Hountondji universalizes both Husserl and Senghor. In other words, he appeals to, or draws from a mix of

methodological influences from Gaston Bachelard and Edmund Husserl and ideas of science from Husserl, Bachelard, and George Canguilhem as descriptions of mind in general, all minds, any mind. By the same stroke, he elevates what Senghor postulates a racially distinct African mind to the universal but passive feature of mind in general, of all minds, of any mind.

Husserl teaches of two levels of intending or consciousness, one natural and, for that reason, passive. In today's psychological parlance, many would concede that it is almost physical by virtue of being acted upon by external reality and by its own autosensitivity. Husserl calls it "natural intending". The other one is active or critical, and is the seat of deliberate reflection. Husserl contrasts these two domains as "life-world" and "objective-scientific world" and says that "The knowledge of the objective-scientific world is 'grounded' in the self-evidence of the life-world" but they must not be conflated. Utilizing this distinction, Hountondji argued that ethnophilosophers, following both Tempels and Senghor, were privileging "natural intending" as a peculiarity of Africans, thus implying that Africans did not need critical and deliberate intending which is the seat of theory in general, and of science (and philosophy) more specifically (Hountondji, 2002, pp. 26ff). Theoretical practice requires this shift from the natural intending as a passive state of mind to a conscious and deliberate intending, one in which the subject posits the object of his/her intention — what Husserl calls "the life-world" — as outside itself.

When two cultures interact, the points of their adjustments and accommodations will be most visible where these are brought into sharpest resolutions, magnifying the points of separations and differences. The debate on ethnophilosophy identifies the collective-individual opposition as one of those areas about which African thinkers are not unanimous there was opposition between African and Western cultures. But assuming there was such opposition, it does not help merely to state and celebrate the difference. The problem, to paraphrase the old adage, is to show how the collective fares in the system of acquiring new forms of knowledge. Critics of the old (Tempelsian) ethnophilosophy argue that what is imperative is to reckon what kind of knowledge benefits society today, and how this knowledge is acquired or is stipulated through the use of the resources available to persons pursuing it.

Whether and how much organized knowledge benefits society is a question that probably has obvious answers. But two matters may not be as obvious: one, is where, in the stream of consciousness, this kind of knowledge falls, and two, is whether, based on how the first matter is resolved, we can indeed keep the collective-individual separations irreconcilably apart. In attempts to resolve these issues, African philosophers have, at least in part, made recourse to some existing traditions of thought. For example, Hountondji has tried to resolve the issue of the location in the stream of consciousness of organized knowledge by appealing to the phenomenological analyses of Husserl. Also, he has tried to justify his call for the appreciation and embrace of science by appealing to Gaston Bachelard's philosophy of science, and to Louis Althusser for its application to the dialectical understanding of historical change. Viewed against the backdrop of Léopold S. Senghor's psychology, Hountondji's views (of consciousness, of science, and of historical change) make a claim to a universalism that he thought was stifled by Senghor's racialized view of mind. Another African philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, takes a slightly different path: philosophical anthropology. In his project too, the drive is to describe the universal bio-social processes through which the functional human capacity is enabled and enhanced by the economy of exchange and mutual dependency and regulation between the collective and the individual.

It emerges from these projects that the individual is never a finished product, nor is he/she a mental replica of any one group or community whose resources and values come to permanently shape his/her thinking. Furnished only with a structured consciousness that gets to organizational work to make sense of his/her world, there is nothing permanent about his/her identity. So there is little that is unconsciously shared with others in the form of organized knowledge which goes on to make part of a collective pool of finished propositions about reality. Shared beliefs are, to borrow from Wiredu, coincidental concurrences of opinion only. Although not directly historical, Wiredu's philosophical anthropology situates the realization of functional human capacity in a historically open-ended context.

From a cultural viewpoint, nothing is fixed about what the individual is or can become. There

are no permanent social stations from which we can make enduring claims. Even those social identities that we claim as individuals and as members of larger groups are no longer fixed and obvious. So how does such an individual navigate through his/her everyday choices and experiences? And what, about his/her life, if any, would still constitute a ground for comparison with the experiences and thoughts of other people? Sometimes I muse, but also seriously realize, and with some sadness, that, for example, as I sit in my office in a mid-Southern city of the United States, I wonder which world, or which culture, I can claim to “truly belong to”, since the idea of belonging shifts, without ceasing, between different value systems and my behavioral responses to them as I shift my mental focus and, because of this, as I do different things in sequence, or as I initiate different activities to run concurrently. For example, while I am busy typing a paper on my computer for an up-coming conference or lecture, I am also listening to a musical CD, playing on the same computer, by a Kenyan artist singing a sweet piece in my native language in praise of a former student of mine. This scene brings to life several elements of identity, none of which is primary to or more basic than another. Anything that I consider myself to be is based entirely on my acceptance to apply the prescriptive ideas associated with it to the guidance of my conduct. My being Luo, Kenyan, philosopher, lover of a certain musical genre, a friend, teacher, colleague, employee, parent, spouse, and so on — and the list can go on and on, including other roles that I have not mentioned, but also real, like being a parent — are not descriptions so obvious or objective that anyone can see or identify them in me from a far. Rather, they are behavioral vestitures that I appropriate and responsively become part of by choice (at least once we are capable of doing so). And when I choose to join the “game” of being, say, Luo, it is assumed of me to recognize, accept, and practice certain values which spell or define my “belonging” or commitment to the membership of that particular aspect of my life. But it is not the only membership that I carry with me at any given time, nor is it in competition with the others that I also concurrently commit to. All of them are social identities, meaning that they are acquired and maintained by choosing to practice (not just imitate) those behaviors that prescribe my membership in each.⁴ The matter can get complex because of at different

⁴There is need for caution here because very often this kind of identity invests its sustenance in the emotions of its members, and thereby thrives almost as if it was an entity by virtue of a member’s

levels. For example, when our neighbor died several years ago, his wife had him cremated the next day, even before all their children had arrived, leave alone the fact that neighbors, at least we in my family next door, came to know of the death nearly one week later. My shock with the handling of the matter was not only because I am African, or Kenyan, but basically because I am Alego Luo. My shock was based on my appreciation and preference for the manner people there handle matters of death, especially among kin and neighbors. They will come to say “pole”, meaning to express their sympathies and condolences. Relatives will stay a long time ranging from several days to weeks, and the bereaved family may continue to receive mourners for many months.

The difference between the ways of my American neighbors and those of the Alego Luo is that to the latter, death, like many other aspects of a person’s life, is a public event that affects many more people than merely the spouse and one or two children of the dead. Hence in death, as it was in life, everyone gets the chance to demonstrate expectations of the specific social relationship they had with the dead and, by extension, with everyone in the multi-faceted web of relations as defined by the dead person’s social life. Humans always stand in different relations to different people.

To be sure, just because we live in a deeply de facto pluralist world, we are also constantly facing conflicts in our relations just because, as people move to live and work in places far from home, or in places that are fast becoming new homes, they bring with them conflicting commitments and conflicting courses of action in virtue of their embrace of the values that regulate those commitments and

defense of its reality. When one merges his or her social awareness with the assumed reality of such identity, they are often likely to invent a value hierarchy by which they justify their discrimination of the Other. The victimizing hate of Others, something we have seen so much expression of in recent years, starts when our erroneous thinking of identities as hard realities is either accorded political protection or made the basis of political claims (explained by reference to some historical event) in exclusion of those Others consequently viewed as undeserving of the goods over which we claim rights by virtue of the political value of our identity. Across the globe, episodes of mass genocides, ethnic termination or cleansing, have their origins in or can be traced to such false views and politicization of identity.

courses of action. So when, upon my return from a long Summer vacation with my Alego Luo people, heard that our neighbor across the street from us had died while we were away, we thought it was the most basic human act to go express sympathy to the spouse of the departed good neighbor although we had known him only very briefly before his passing. To our dismay, our surviving neighbor told us she was surprised we had gone to her house at all, let alone to bring up an issue that was private and long gone. With only her head peeping through a slightly cracked door, she tolerated us just long enough to let us know we were intruding. Like in the first case I mentioned earlier, in this one too death was considered a private affair, and no-one participates in the events surrounding it without a clear invitation.

It is the case that pluralism has exposed the incompatibility of systems of value in ways previously known predominantly to scholars and travelers, folks who represented a small and privileged section of their societies. To them the reality of the diversity of others painted an exotic picture they could talk about with some distance that hid disdain behind scholarly analyses. The circumstances of recent mass migrations and increased media coverages of foreign events has brought pluralism closer to home and to a vast number of everyday folks. It is these everyday folks, the likes of my neighbors, who are showing signs of disenchantment with pluralism at their doorsteps. Dealing with a heavily accented manager at the neighborhood grocery store, knowing that her child is being taught by a new grade school teacher who arrived from some country whose name she cannot pronounce, or having to deal with the new foreign nurse at her doctor's office, have all swept from under her arm the familiarity and confidence of home. Elsewhere, religious fundamentalism has erupted as a way of keeping out or putting under check the infiltration of new or foreign beliefs and courses of action.

What, then, is the value of comparative thinking in our contemporary world that is so heavily punctuated by pluralism and disenchantment? The driving force of pluralism for the contemporary individual is not the attainment of her freedom, for the meaning of this value, however important it may be for directing moral discourse, is never clearly provided. Disenchantment with others, as well,

perhaps, as their embrace, are driven by assumptions of social stations from which we make our judgements about others' ways. At the same time, like Isaiah Berlin says, "[t]he central assumption of common thought and speech seems to ...be that freedom is the principal characteristic that distinguishes man from all that is non-human; that there are degrees of freedom, degrees constituted by the absence of obstacles to the exercise of choice; the choice of being regarded as not itself determined by antecedent conditions, at least not as being wholly so determined" (Berlin, 1998, p. 109). The contemporary individual's major problem is therefore one of committing, and knowing how, to negotiate between different perspectives, and knowing how to utilize these negotiated circumstances to enhance the possibilities of freedom for himself and for others. To be free is to be able to make an unforced choice, based in turn on one's ability to understand and compare, between competing possibilities. From a moral standpoint, this individual lives perennially in comparative circumstances, as he/she is always located in "sympathetic impartiality" (Wiredu),⁵ also called "practical morality based on mutuality" (Beidelman)⁶ in relation to others.

Contrary to the belief, widespread but questionable, that we belong to some unchangeable collectives — like Ganda, Yoruba, Zulu, or Zande — according to whose more or less "official" principles we conduct our moral lives, it is clearer now than ever before, from our "stationless" view of the individual, that these collectives are complex groups held together by constant negotiations rather than homogeneous groups defined by adherence to "official" routines. A closer look at cultural practice suggests that cultural ways are not normative charters for social action. Rather, as Jackson notes, "[t]hey are explorations into the problems of right conduct."⁷ No one truly wishes that all people lived in

⁵Wiredu, Kwasi, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 29-31.

⁶Beidelman, Tom O., *Moral Imagination in Kaguru Modes of Thought*, Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993, p. 164.

⁷Jackson, Michael, *Allegories of the Wilderness*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 31.

exactly the same way. That kind of life would, among other things, be boring, uncreative and, worst of all, unfree. Instead, they are likely to say that the problem is not to create a one-size fit-all world — such as was once identified with the idea of a Communist universe — but one in which reason reigns supreme, a world in which we should be left to our best rational choices. In addition, it is likely to be suggested, such a world should have little or no interference in anyone's choices by anyone, or by any institution, other than to protect citizens from such interference, and to reduce or eliminate suffering.

This line of reasoning speaks almost directly to at least one line of the liberal worldview to which it seems that we must construct our own individual values. But liberalism is not blind to the human attachment to cultural roots, however transitory they may be. Our ability to think of different sources of values is enabled in part by the fact that we observe that such variations dot the world we live in and drive us toward critical discernment and choices between them without exhausting our individual freedoms. This old problem, namely of reconciling individual and collective values, individual and objective experiences, confronts some people with a greater sense of urgency than it does for others. There is not a place more radically confronted by this contrast than contemporary Africa where the resistance of our old cultures is routinely challenged by the needs of today's liberally-oriented individuals as the demand for those rights and freedoms — of choice in self-definition and self-direction — deemed to be crucial for effective and individually fulfilling participation in the world's contemporary contexts increases.

Despite its variety, conservatism feeds off the fear of pluralism and difference, and fends off freedom by closing doors to possibilities and change. In our *de facto* plural contemporary world, those metaphors depict a social reality as close to home as mine and my neighbors described above. But let us not be mistaken; as Africans, and I believe this would apply well and equally to many other people, we have been wrong about this just like European thinkers and ordinary folks have been. The difference for us is that although we have brought pluralism to the doorsteps of the West, both literally and figuratively, thus reversing the direction of cultural importation, sometimes it is still evident that our

awareness of involvement in this globally-transforming episode continues to be encumbered by the weight of the colonial burden. Frightened by the prospects of rejection, whether real or imagined on the strength of the memory of the past, sections of African migrants in Western institutions and societies generally continue to predicate their acceptance there on self-negation, an effort to sever their African roots as a way of demonstrating their adaptability and immersion. In some serious cases, “Africa-centeredness” has been attacked as a burden on account of what is claimed to be Africa’s moral deprivation.⁸ Admittedly, “Africa-centeredness” is often a complex concept that, depending on who one reads, occasionally mixes overflated and mythical views of Africa for a variety of reasons. A more serious view of Africa-centeredness, the variety evoked by, say, Kwasi Wiredu, or Valentin Mudimbe, Anthony Appiah, Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, and Paulin Hountondji, neither carries nor even remotely implies a romanticized idea of Africa as a place populated only by kings and queens with no commoners as subjects. The real Africans, those whose thoughts and beliefs, and their practical cultures and traditions are studied by the mentioned philosophers — and certainly not exclusively by them — are people with burdens as well as celebrations. They are the real people once imagined by Langston Hughes in his 1926 New Negro “Manifesto” of racial pride. This idea of Africans, like it was for Hughes and his comrades in laying down the tenets of the “realness” of the new Negro, demythologizes Africans and re-presents them as real people who have both burdens and positive achievements.

The view of a “real” Africa attempts to break away from two models of misrepresentation, both of which are driven by a colonial hangover. The first one paints Africa as a damned place that is caught up in steep and insurmountable contrast with Europe. The second model, driven by the desire to counter the Eurocentric discourse of hegemonic arrogance, romanticizes Africa into a place of fairytales, almost a primordial locus where only the good prevails because it descends effortlessly from a superhuman reservoir of ideal values. In opposition to both of these misrepresentations, critical African philosophers, like Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, evoke the idea of Africans as people

⁸See, for example, Kwesi Otabil’s *The Agonistic Imperative: The Rational Burden of Africa-Centeredness* (Bristol, IN, Wyndham Hall Press), 1994.

who are aware of the high and low points within their own cultural systems. They determine the goals of their best efforts, and, through reflection on experience, realize that such goals remain unattainable without the appropriate discipline of mind and sustained labor. By moral imaginations derived partly from present and memory of past experiences of practical reason, they become aware of the circumstances of an improved moral regime and a state of better social circumstances of well-being that may result from adherence to a life directed principles of virtue. But they are also constantly reminded of how hard it is to be and to do good with the consistency and moderation that ground a virtuous character, for they are constantly hounded by both real (as known in the present or from memory) and possible failures of people in their midst; and they are also reminded, by such social knowledge, that virtue is the result of self-discipline and constant personal moral probity.

By focusing on the idea of culture as the result of responsible (critically measured) thinking and conduct, expressible generally as including participation in the identification of rationally and socially approvable goals and the means for attaining them, critical African philosophers challenge African societies at large to determine and pick up their own burdens rather than be human mules and surrogates who only carry the burdens of other people. The idea is that there is neither a humanly significant gain nor fun in leaving one's own burden unattended and picking up the baggage of another person. Hence the attempts — by African philosophers — to expose the ontological character of inherited philosophy as a disguise of its Westernism have not been merely fanciful exercises. Rather, such exposé restores to philosophy what Habermas refers to as “the connection of its knowledge with the human interest in autonomy and responsibility...”⁹ If we recall the historical episode from which we have long been yearning for freedom, we will see not only the promise but also the therapeutic power of the proclamation that the efforts expended toward the attainment of this freedom — by which I mean the freedom of which Ngũgi wa Thiong’o, Valentin Mudimbe, or Kwasi Wiredu speak — cannot be in vain. As evoked by them, like many others do, the return to indigenous epistemic orders de-ontologizes

⁹Habermas, Jürgen, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Eng. transl. Jeremy J. Shapiro), Boston, Beacon Press, 1971, pp. 310-11.

thought generally, and philosophy particularly, by redirecting it to the sources in which thinking is grounded, namely to self-reflection. But the freedom of which they speak must be the freedom that allows a critical engagement of the Other while remaining autonomous by reserving the discretion to engage. It is, also, the kind of freedom of which Gayatri Spivak speaks¹⁰ — when writes about the historico-cultural subversive reversal that reinstates the “native informant” in her role of sovereign and PI over the creation of knowledge about herself. In this reversal, all knowledge becomes perspectival, or, to borrow the epistemological expression from Wiredu, all from their respective points of view, subject only to the scrutiny of the moral responsibility and methodological rigors by which they are produced.

The now-classic saying by Wittgenstein that “*the world is all that is the case*”¹¹ speaks to the pluralist view of experience, which, by virtue of its subject-based diversity, cannot be the same for everyone, much less for every culture. Captured in the primitive formal structure of consciousness and the rudimentary language — Wittgenstein’s facts — that accompanies it at the beginnings, this world remains undeveloped on the margins of thought. Only with time, as our own reason becomes critical and takes stands vis-a-vis the proposed stands of others does it become part of a rationalized or cultural world. In other words, the latter is born out of the unity and sustenance of the comparative dialogues which develop between these perspectives on both narrow and far broader historical scales. For example, my discussion of the meaning of *juok* connects me narrowly to other speakers of the language to which the concept of *juok* is linguistically located while, at the same time, it resonates with, and brings into dialogue a broader global community of people who share in the abstract language of

¹⁰Spivak, Gayatri C., *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 1ff.

¹¹Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness) Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1961, p. 5. My emphasis. At the time, Wittgenstein thought, mistakenly, that the order of reality imposed its character on our thought and language, the structures of reality, on the one hand, and of consciousness and language, on the other, were picture-reflection of each other. His world, like that of Hegel to Marx’s eyes, stood upside-down.

metaphysics, well beyond the original linguistic locus of the term.

The discourses we share with others in the process of rationalizing or making sense of “the world” are both local and global, and this dual character of discourse signals the elevation of meanings above the restrictions of their circumstantial origins and embodied experiences to which they are simultaneously and inextricably connected. We may not always be aware of this global conceptual ramification of the conceptual terms we encounter daily in our attempts first to understand, and then to apply and comply with both informative and regulatory ideas and concepts of everyday order — whether these are moral, scientific, religious, or political. Let us call the universal character of reason its form, and the specific contents it works with its matter. If this is so, then what changes between traditions is not their form but the matter — the historical and circumstantial specifics that are *formally* translated into discourse.

In the human condition, the matter of traditions is not a body of untamed behavior. As we encounter it at the very initial stage of our inculturation, we receive it as a body or system of rationalized or preferred circumstances, presented, when the right time comes, for our *con-forming* choices. Sometimes we succeed and at others we fail to find a satisfactory merging of our formal reason with the matter of traditions we inherit at home or encounter in distant places. This is how and why cultures change, namely that as individuals we are not fenced in by any culture or condition. In other words, we have many roots, and we carry them with us through time and space for as long as they continue to find accommodation within our formal translations.

How does all this relate to the question of comparative philosophizing? I am aware that it may be an unachievable task trying to define what exactly what is a philosophical questioning in distinction from, say a very intelligent and insistent demand for a justification by someone who has been implored by his or her pastor at a Sunday service to be good to their neighbor. But I am also aware that philosophical questioning is not removed from our everyday concerns to the kind of distance we often

assume it is. Let us pretend that our hypothetical parishioner insists in asking her pastor to explain exactly what doing a good consists of, and which acts would fit such a definition, and why only they, and not others, should be performed in the first place. Very good and intelligent questions indeed. But this person's insistence is driven by the need to be clear about the practical consequences of the pastor's teaching. She wants to practice what has been preached but clearly wants unambiguous directions. Now, we encounter not exactly this sequence of questions as asked by our imaginary concerned Church-goer, but certainly similar or comparable ones when we demand justification for many teachings and "ways" of doing things in the societies we live in. Philosophy emerges when we demand to see whether, and how, the rational form and matter of everyday experience hold together. But this hypothetical case also shows that philosophical questioning can and usually is practiced anywhere, and almost everywhere people raise issues and demand proper explanations and justifications of various claims and principles upon which the guidance of their everyday lives is built. Our hypothetical parishioner's insistence on getting only satisfactory answers from her pastor could easily transform into a philosophical quest if she sustained such a demand by at least partly pointing out, clearly for purposes of paving the way toward an answer, why some of the pastor's answers and explanations would be good and others not. By doing this, the novelty she brings to the discourse would be the *formalization* of the discourse, and if she did it well she could as well push some of us out of our positions in the Academy. Furnished with the power of insistent questioning, the matter of philosophical thought resides right inside our everyday languages, inside the assumptions of the public policies of our governments, and in the assumed righteousness of our private moral paths and goals wherever and whenever we encounter them. Hence, if the idea that experience is all transient at both individual and collective levels is to be cathartic to all those who have been diverted away from themselves by false theories of belonging to groups in a nature-like manner, then it should culminate in putting back the idea of performance — defining one's claim of belonging to any specific group by practicing what the group considers crucial to its membership — as the only basis of what counts as real. And because there is neither a natural (human-independent) world from which to infer meanings and purposes other than those defined by humans across the globe, nor conclusions about values based

on stations in any permanent social order, our thoughts are always comparative, and can be sustained only by a constant critical comparison with those of everyone else.

Comparative thinking is the spine of a liberal world that is both anti-foundationalist and anti-essentialist. It thrives in examining, contrasting, and understanding, not rejecting *a priori*, any competing knowledge claims. It arises precisely out of the realization that the “objectness” of the world is a non-rationalized stance of nature that appears to us only as a logical possibility, one that stands outside — as temporally prior to — human discourse. It is mute. Rooted in the critique of the aforementioned presuppositions of modernity, comparative thinking embraces the historic, ethnocentric, and gendered modifications of knowledge, and insists that knowledge cannot be accounted for without periodization and the plural diversity of the contents of consciousness, a view that Wittgenstein clearly hinted at when he said in the *Tractatus* that “The world is all that is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things” (1, 1.1). Although he used it to develop a false view of language-world relationship, it was obvious that this world as a totality of facts was open to propositional pluralism.

Perhaps we should remind ourselves that although opposition to the presuppositions of the project of modernity continues to be strong across the disciplines, the confluence of the maturity of the project of modernity with the upsurge of the colonial project makes opposition to it more visible in the disciplinary trajectories that address those presuppositions from the socio-political angle, such as in postcolonial literature and social theory more broadly understood. In other words, contemporary comparative thinking insists on an understanding of modernity as an encapsulation of “the cultural logic of a period of history”, and not as a transcendental event whose contents defy historical and other kinds of social contextualization. Because the said social conditions or factors of knowledge production and acquisition do not occur homogeneously anywhere across the globe, the perceptions they engender cannot be assumed to be either similar across regions, or to be constant over time. Yet, in emphasizing the impact of writing in sustaining the historical nature of philosophical dialogue, some philosophers have privileged one tradition of philosophical discourse over others, even to the extent of exposing a

narcissistic attitude elevated to the frightening level of racial exclusivity. It is this racist undertone that allows Heidegger to declare unflinchingly, as I mentioned earlier, that philosophy is so much European that the phrase “‘Western-European philosophy’ is, in truth, a tautology” (*What is Philosophy?*, p.31).

The idea of comparing modes of thought strips the Hegelian and Heideggerian ideas of history of their absolutist pretensions, and restores subjectivity to all humans by claiming that it is their aspirations and motives that form the basis of change. It thus recognizes that there are varieties of historical expressions, all stemming from the different expressions of this subjectivity. In this sense, comparative philosophy aims, at least in part, at interrogating the equation of thought as such with particular histories, and thus aims at examining the tripartite relation between thinking, history, and culture. Everywhere, philosophy asserts itself firmly as cultural inquiry, an idea that expresses what has always been, yet never put so more clearly or evoked so more strongly than in the practice of postcolonial critique. In very broad terms, this critique allows the re-emergence of indigenous systems wherever they may be as autonomous of the frameworks that provided the categories through which they were once recorded and described.

Among the themes of this turnabout is the critique, for example, of such ideas as, in relation to the metaphysics of persons, of transcendental subjectivity, of the nature of consciousness and orders of knowledge, and in relation to the nature and quality of claims, of the picture of knowledge as accurate mental representation, of truth as correspondence of that representation to reality and, in relation to the nature of public conduct, of the different freedoms and rights of the individual, and whether these are hampered or enhanced by our various customary or political beliefs and practices. In their pursuits, as well as in their articulations, some endeavors in these areas of inquiry have made the important point that there is no such thing as a neutral and sovereign reason that is divorced from how real people experience life in real and historically determinate conditions where they produce and acquire knowledge.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor once said that the politics of multiculturalism was, at least in part, the politics of recognition.¹² But even more importantly, multiculturalism is a quest, or a demand, more precisely, for inclusion into the multi-faceted or pluralistic discourse, or plural narratives in the schemes and motivations of different people — because it seeks to subvert the passivity and denigrating dismissal that once came with colonial recognition of non-Western systems. Thus to call “multiculturalism” the “politics of recognition” is not to designate it as a neologism, as a new time-word, one that younger generations of students (who are so historically removed from the conditions that this (postcolonial) demand for recognition addresses) might fail to appreciate and therefore wish to dismiss as only a sort of unnecessary whining.¹³ From a closer look, however, a response to Hegel’s view of the Absolute incarnated in the historical Caucasian flesh and mind is not quite what one would want to call whining. Rather, it is a critical suggestion that either there are plural Absolutes or there is none at all other than the many expressions of the inexorable human experience. Hence the dismissal of multiculturalism as a sort of whining lacks precisely the appreciation of the significance of the idea as a stage in the evolution of historical consciousness made possible by the drama of domination.

Let us give the young students some credit, because historically significant terms hardly ever mean the same thing or bear same historical weight for everyone. Hence, while multiculturalism might mean to some people a sort of whining by a section of the global society, it might well mean a reclamation of cultural autonomy by someone who has been robbed of her own as a victim of cultural imperialism. As educators, the accusation of “whining” calls for a rearrangement or re-strategizing in the

¹²Taylor, Charles, “The Politics of Recognition”, in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann, NJ, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 25-73.

¹³Those of us who teach courses that incorporate introduction to postcolonial theory frequently encounter this resistance by young, unsophisticated and historically naïve Euro-American students, and sometimes graduate students are not exempted. To be sure, thinking of postcolonial discourse as whining is occasioned by complex senses of distance or removal from the historical moment that births it. To a Caucasian mind it could be the result of both socio-political privilege and temporal blur, while to a descendant of the once-dominated cultures it could be a no less abstract idea by virtue of temporal distancing that camouflages the imbalance of international cultural, economic, and political relations.

teaching of our multiculturally intensive courses. One, and because we are teaching classroom audiences that are increasingly culturally diverse, it begs us to design courses that present such subjects like epistemology, or metaphysics, or ethics, or medically significant ideas of mind and mental health — and who knows what does not fit this list — by putting side-by-side the different-culturally-informed theoretical articulations on these issues as a matter of course rather than running separate courses as tokens of political correctness. The idea here is that multicultural teaching and learning is not just a matter of mere recognition — which can take place without active engagement with what is different, thus leaving in place the hierarchical order that it is meant to dismantle — but a judicious, responsible, and full-blown practice of critical comparison of any number of views seen to differ in their claims about same, similar, or relevantly related issues. It is this sense of multiculturalism that should transform into an ethical stand for a more just world, for a world of fair cultural systems, for a world of greater political democracy, of equality, and of respect and protection for human rights across the globe within and amongst nations.

Like “identity”, multiculturalism is one of the pivotal ideas and quests, both intellectual and political in the broader sense of the term, that have been aligned to the surge and increase in quest for liberal ethics in its individual and collective implications. With these connections, multiculturalism too postures as a moral demand for distributive parity as well and for respect and tolerance for other people’s reasonable beliefs and practices, not just a call for passive recognition. Indeed, these relational values — distributive parity, respect, and tolerance — would not have much significance unless they are applied, and are seen to be applied, in the management of the affairs of human relations. Contemporary focus on liberties, and on various kinds and aspects of democratic principles, local and global, are prompted by a feeling of urgency in the restitution of different kinds of rights to those to whom they have been systematically denied. In some cases, regaining and winning these rights has required some struggle, on occasion even violent struggle. Colonialism generally, and its worst face in the form of the now- defunct apartheid system in South Africa, probably would still be around in some form or other if it were not for that kind of struggle. This is what made Fanon’s work and thought so much more

relevant and catalyst to contemporary postcolonial and other reclamations of freedom. To be sure, the demand for recognition, autonomy, and equal participation in the making of a liveable world does not always come without its own problems or dangers. Among these, false assumptions about collective identities and their concomitant conservative and exclusionary embrace of the associated cultures clearly stand out in our recent memories. Together, when exercised without restraint, they tend to perpetuate the very non-dialogical conflicts that the idea of multiculturalism aims at eliminating.

The submission that unrestrained multiculturalism bears contradictions and dangers has been usurped by sections of the globalist theory to fortress their argument that if cultural politics of modernity caused the fragmented and conflicted world that no longer serves our liberal interests, then the real solution lies in eliminating conclave of cultural identities altogether from how we think of common human values, especially human rights. Both these stands are flawed, precisely because they fail to see the fundamental claim in the critique of power, namely that, as human beings, we are defined in our practical behavior partly by our various cultures, and that what is crucial is to recognize the practice of these in the most rational and caring manner possible that enables a non-hierarchical dialogue across the various boundaries that our choices and practices draw while disclaiming any form of essentialism for them. Pluralism, then, comes with its own moral obligation: responsible appreciation of, and respect for other people's ways and views as the only avenue to productive dialogue and comprehensive investigation and growth of knowledge.

Communitarianism as basis for Comparative thought and values : Lessons from African philosophy

Such strategies signal the search for a different world order, one that is, or can be, backed by the claim – itself certainly open to debate – that neither the formal object of knowledge, nor its expressions are objective in the old correspondence sense. In other words, and again as once viewed by Wittgenstein too, there probably always will be multiple expressions of the world around us. Like

my own savvy and sharply analytic father would say, everyone both sees and does not see, at the same time – which makes me think of my father as our village version of Wittgenstein – the world is all that there is – a sterile, passive, and meaningless occurrence waiting to be “known”,¹⁴ or interpreted, as we narrate our encounters with it. But while this realization, itself an interpretation (of what it means to be in an encounter with the world), does not deter us from being curious about, and seeking to “know” what lies behind our experiences, the content, or object of such a search can only be a matter of comparative discourse among different Subjects, a dialogue between diverse narratives. Readers of African philosophy are probably suspicious already, and possibly even totally confused, about where my alliances lie, for this happens also to be similar to the radical idea suggested by our eminent Ghanaian colleague Kwasi Wiredu — that all knowledge is, and can be, only from a point of view. Although this is not the occasion for a full-fledged discussion of Wiredu’s epistemological position, pointing out how his theory of truth is an *a fortiori* argument for comparative dialogue in the enterprise of knowledge production as an experience and as an understanding (theory) may be useful. To do this, a return to, integration of “the usable past”, to use Bogumil Jewsiewicki’s expression,¹⁵ — meaning the excavation and application of the historically significant out of the indigenous archives — will be inevitable. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1999) already told us why this is the path to the post-postcolonial stage. In the latter, the focus in intellectual practice shifts from substantive universalism to the idea of human Subjectivity as constituted by the relationally conditioned practice of meaning-making. This shift accepts only a minimum metaphysical view of personhood, namely a specifically universal physical constitution and a non-substantive idea of mind that acquires its actual characteristics only through the act of producing meaning as an entailment of the specifically human physical constitution. Endowed in this manner, the individual is equipped to traverse any and all cultures, as she/he is capable of *understanding* across cultures either directly or through the aid of translation.

¹⁴The quotation marks on the word “know” is deliberately placed to highlight the problematicity of the assumptions that accompany it in the history of epistemology, especially when “knowing” is defined as correspondence of reason to its object, and so is sharply contrasted with “believing”.

¹⁵See Jewsiewicki, Bogumil, “African Historical Studies: Academic Knowledge as ‘Usable Past’ and Radical Scholarship,” in *The African Studies Review*, Vol.32, No.3, 1989, 1-76.

Wiredu's idea of comparative thinking is built on the view that while knowledge is universal, differences in assumptions about (the autonomy or inter-dependence of) individuals can lead to problematic conclusions about what is possible in and the nature of our knowledge of the world. If we all adopted the inter-dependence view of the individual, maybe comparative thinking would be urging only at the inter-personal level. But we don't, hence the need to practice comparative thinking also from the point of view of the broader and social-organizational values that inform how we develop theories (of personhood and of knowledge) from the assumptions that those social organizations feed us on. In this scheme he theorizes and defends the relational metaphysics of selfhood against the transcendental idea of the person.

I find his saying, namely that

No human society or community is possible without communication, for a community is not just an aggregation of individuals existing as windowless monads but of individuals as interacting persons without communication there is not even a human person¹⁶

not only to have close affinity with a saying in my own mother-tongue, popularized by the public artist (performer) and social commentator Gabriel Omolo, that *Jadak kende en ng'a m'oyuma miwuoro* (the isolated or socially disconnected individual does not develop reason; she/he is like a proverb, for she/he develops no sense of either values or standards - nudity has no moral consequences for him/her) but also, and perhaps more importantly, to be an indication of the unrestricted human capacity and ability to engage with meanings across cultures. The unrestricted mind reaches out to other minds in search of shared grounds of understanding — that is, justifications for differences and similarities of opinions — and for practice without converting such shared opinions into realities that are independent of how they are known. Rather, in Wiredu's view, they are only concomitants of points of view. Communicative interaction with others in our different roles, both primarily and on the grounds of our points of view, makes us into human persons and drives inquiry.

¹⁶*Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 13.

The communitarian theory of personhood is significant because it underscores the fundamental mutuality — which can also be referred to as active and respectful engagement or interaction — between and among humans. It demands an egalitarian recognition of the basic human and civil rights of all, thus stripping privilege from any one or particular position and making comparative thinking the only ground upon which cognitive and moral values are to be founded, a position so radically different from the one envisioned in Kant's anthropology. What can we infer from it?

By underscoring participative collaboration among all humans as the path to the sustenance of human civilization and advancement, communitarianism, understood in the sense above, demonstrates the pivotal and indelible status of individuality in both metaphysical and epistemological terms while also revealing its limitations. In this important sense, the individual is the product, as much as he/she is also the agent who is constantly modifying the very social contexts from which his/her consciousnesses or mind arises and takes shape. By the power of our imaginations under this scheme, we suggest believing in the view that while our individuality is undeniably crucial, our humanity is greater; and while the different cultural systems that regulate human activity are unavoidable, the inter-cultural respect, recognition, appreciation, and embrace, are far much more beneficial to human survival and improvement or progress.

Because philosophers work with and from imaginations of logically possible and plausible best worlds, let us frame our concluding question thus: what would be better or worse about our world if, in our pursuit of understanding and establishing a world that is tolerable to most, we started, not from the position that we are all rational individual agents each of whom works on his or her own — *ognuno per se stesso* — but that we are a community of rational *persons* whose strengths lie in the recognition of both our fallibility as individual agents, and in collaborating and dialoguing with each other across cultures, across nations, and inter-personally? Ironically, even Placide Tempels, the paradoxical figure at the apocalyptic point in the history of contemporary African philosophy, had a significant hint at what a pluralistic world should hang on. In Tempels' own words, for example,

Behaviour can be neither universal nor permanent unless it is based upon a concatenation of ideas, a logical system of thought, a complete positive philosophy of the universe, of man, and of the things which surround him, of existence, life, death and of the life beyond (*Bantu Philosophy*, p. 19)

Unfortunately, however, this statement was not backed up with an appropriate and honestly pluralist interpretation of Bantu philosophy. But it warranted even his harshest known adversary, Paulin Hountondji, to say many years later that (he wished Tempels had realized the weight of his own statement to indicate that) all philosophies are, in their matter (that is schemes and orientations), ethnophilosophies. As proposed by others,¹⁷ we transition discursively between them only by means of careful translation.

¹⁷On the possibility and problems of translation across cultures, see Hallen, Barry and J. O. Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (2nd edition), Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, and Wiredu, Kwasi, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*. The history of the problem of translation, however, goes back to such discussions as Quine's theory of indeterminacy of translation and the idea of commensurability between paradigms in the general theory and history of scientific knowledge. The latter was popularized by Thomas Kuhn in the early 1960s.

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