

An open-ended conversation

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In 1911, Italian Catholic priests put before a group of Acholi elders the question “Who created you?”; and because the Luo language does not have an independent concept of create or creation, the question was rendered to mean “Who moulded you?” But this was still meaningless, because human beings are born of their mothers. The elders told the visitors they did not know. But we are told that this reply was unsatisfactory, and the missionaries insisted that a satisfactory answer must be given. One of the elders remembered that, although a person may be born normally, when he is afflicted with tuberculosis of the spine, then he loses his normal figure, he gets “moulded.” So he said, “*Rubanga* is the one who moulds people.” This is the name of the hostile spirit which Acholi believe causes the hunch or hump on the back. And instead of exorcising these hostile spirits and sending them among pigs, the representatives of Jesus Christ began to preach that *Rubanga* was the Holy Father who created the Acholi.¹

This charming, anthropological anecdote given us from the annals Christian missionary work in Africa, while amusing, solicits serious questions concerning the possibility of translatability and applicability of concepts between cultures. Certainly, Italian priests, or any Christian missionaries for that matter, would not wish to equate their concept of a divine creator with the hostile spirit responsible for the onset of spinal tuberculosis. Throughout much of the comparative literature between European and African² modes of thinking such discrepancies are found. It appears that variances in culture have shaped significant differences in the way Europeans and Africans view the world. Furthermore, in the discipline of philosophy itself, understood as *philosophia perennis*, discrepancies between the West, Europe, and Africa are found. Because the answers to these perennial questions, even the questions themselves at times, seem to be continents apart, I am led to question whether the name philosophy is applicable to both enterprises. Not only am I left to ponder the commensurability between the concepts found in these different schemata, but I am left to question the activity in which both Westerner and African are

¹ p’Bitek, Okot. *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1970) p. 62.

² For the exigency of this paper, I shall treat African philosophy as a whole. This is not to deny or ignore the variability among different traditions in Africa, but is only meant to serve as a vehicle for possible comparison between Europe and Africa. Furthermore, I do not wish, with this division, to impart finality to the divisions of philosophy, for Eastern philosophy is as much a part of this debate as the other two. But within the confines of this paper I shall limit the disjunct to just the two.

engaged- perhaps the moniker philosophy belongs to only one or the other. In this essay, I propose to trace briefly the development of philosophy in Africa. By doing so, I hope to pursue a cosmopolitan definition of the activity of philosophy- one through which we may be able to better understand the relationship of African and European thinking. After which, I shall then turn to the question of the commensurability of concepts between these two traditions.

I

Much divisiveness regarding the nature of philosophy is to be found within the philosophical community, both Western and African. From whence does philosophy spring?; What is its purpose?; What is its scope?; What is entailed in the activity of philosophizing?: these are the essential questions with which the discipline is constantly engaging itself. Because of its relative youth as a discipline, the African philosophical climate is one that seems especially suited to begin addressing such questions. This adolescent struggle for identity has developed into two distinctive African philosophical trends- what I shall call, following Kwame Gyekye's distinctions, the universalist/ant-revivalist/modernist position and the particularist/revivalist/traditionalist position.

The particularist broadly defines philosophy as something that "is experienced but not thought and that its practitioners are, at best, only dimly conscious of it."³ This Weltanschauung definition of philosophy is the consequent of early anthropological studies on African cultures. Beginning with the ethnocentrism of Lévy-Bruhl and his concept of "primitive mentality," continuing through the missionary work of Tempels and ongoing through the work of ethnophilosophers e.g. Kagamé and Senghor, a radical division is drawn between Europeans and Africans.

According to Lévy-Bruhl, "at their highest level the mental functions of the individuals within [African] societies are regulated by the mythical archetypes... in which concepts have no place."⁴ Rationality and an explicit, abstract conceptual framework, on the other hand, "was the prerogative of Western civilization" and defined the "quality of the white man which set him above the rest of humanity."⁵ By Lévy-Bruhl's understanding, there are "two mentalities which are face to face (sic) so foreign to each other, so divergent in their habits, so different in their means of expression!"⁶

Placide Tempels continues the division between the European and the African in his work *Bantu Philosophy*. Unlike Lévy-Bruhl, Tempels acknowledges a philosophic framework in African thinking. Tempels proclaims that:

³ Hountondji, Paulin. *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indianapolis University Press, 1976) p. 56.

⁴ Ibid. 12.

⁵ Ibid. 13.

⁶ Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien. *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Paris, 1910).

To declare on a priori grounds that primitive people have no ideas on the nature of beings, that they have no ontology and that they are completely lacking in logic, is simply to turn one's back on reality.⁷

In his missionary dealings, Tempels had occasion to experience and question Bantu culture and beliefs. Among the Bantu, Tempels comes to recognize “an elevated system of thought which, though particular to them, with its own ‘local colour’... deserved to be honoured as by the term philosophy.”⁸ While Tempels is willing to recognize an ontology that underwrites all Bantu life and activity, this ontology “can be thought of and made explicit only because of the conceptual frame of Western philosophy.”⁹ According to Tempels; “It is our [Westerners] job to proceed to such a systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is.”¹⁰ Along the historical path of progress, philosophy begins here to broaden- Africans now are seen as having a distinct form of thinking, a philosophy even, yet it is still only through “advanced” Western systems that it can be made intelligible.

The ethnophilosophers co-opt the distinction between African and Western philosophy, made by both Lévy-Bruhl and Tempels, and divert it into a nationalistic enterprise- a revival of the ‘traditional’ ways of thinking. Léopold Sédar Senghor, in his work on ‘negritude,’ and Alexis Kagamé, emending Tempels ontology through his linguistic analysis of the Rwandan language, affirm an African difference and suggest an “original formative environment” unique to the African mode of thinking. In short Senghor suggests “Emotion is African, as Reason is Hellenic”¹¹ and Kagamé asserts that it is only by means of the unique structure of the Rwandan language that a distinctive Bantu ontology is possible. In so doing, ethnophilosophers affirm the “dichotomy between the nature of the mind of the European and the African made explicit by Lévy-Bruhl and, paradoxically, press (sic) into [their service] the notion of ‘primitive mentality’, which formerly carried a pejorative connotation, in order to give it a new and positive meaning.”¹²

Through the course of its historical unfolding in Africa, the idea of philosophy has become broadened. The activity of philosophy has widened from a critical and systematic examination of ideas underlying human experience to the mere possession of beliefs that are enacted in everyday life. The scope of philosophy is no longer the explicit articulation of the concepts that shape our world. It has, rather, been transformed

⁷ Tempels, Placide. *Bantu Philosophy* English trans. (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959) p. 16.

⁸ Hountondji, 16.

⁹ Mudimbe, V.Y. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) p. 139.

¹⁰ Tempels 67-68.

¹¹ Senghor, Léopold Sédar. *Liberté I* (Paris: Seuil) 1964.

¹² Hountondji, 18-19.

into a way of seeing the world. According to the particularists, philosophy is a “kind of wisdom, individual or collective, any set of principles presenting some degree of coherence and intended to govern the daily practice of a man or a people.”¹³ By this definition, anyone is a philosopher. By experiencing the world, interacting with and in it, we ‘have a philosophy’. Thus anyone with a set of beliefs is a philosopher and has a philosophy. As there are various opinions and beliefs about the world, it follows that there are numerous, varied philosophies, minimally between European and African philosophies- more exaggeratedly between anyone that does not align themselves identically with others’ beliefs.

This ideological understanding of the word philosophy is a pivotal point of contention between particularists and universalists. Particularists maintain this broad definition, which applies to everyone at all times, whereas, the universalists narrow the definition to a discipline, which constantly regards itself by means of self-reflexive critique. Because it is attempting to make explicit its own role and purpose, universalists maintain philosophy “can be regarded as the most self-conscious of disciplines.”¹⁴

Despite their disagreement over the scope of philosophy, one thing remains common between the universalist and particularist - the origin of philosophy. The origins of philosophy draw from the same inspiration - by living in, thinking about and seeing the world. The difference, however, is that the particularist will suggest experiencing the world is sufficient in order to have a philosophy, whereas the universalist suggests this is merely a beginning.

Biological functions and empirical experience lie at the heart of the universalist claim regarding a unified discipline of philosophy. Kwasi Wiredu suggests:

The human constitution of flesh and bones, quickened by the electrical charges and wrapped up in variously pigmented integument, is the same everywhere; while there is only one world in which we all live, move, and have our struggles, notwithstanding the vagaries of climate.¹⁵

At the biological level, all humans are the same - we are animated, self-enclosed, acting beings that experience our environment. As human organisms, we all share the same capacity to experience our world. This claim does not deny the variety of ways by which we experience the world. Those afflicted with color-blindness do not experience red and green the same as someone who is not color-blind- the wavelength receptivity on the cones in the eye does not register identically between the two cases, this much is clear. But this is a difference of degree, not of kind. The universalists’ claim is that, despite

¹³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴ Hountondji, 7.

¹⁵ Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) p. 23.

textual differences, the act of experiencing the world is analogous throughout the human species- we experience the world as humans.

Furthermore, there are basic experiences that all humans share in common. In our more basic modes of life all humans respond to the environment by “drives for equilibrium and self-preservation.”¹⁶ These instinctual drives, so the universalists claim, will ensure “uniformity of reaction within a species.” The suggestion here is that while cultural differences may prompt divergent courses of action, the action will be uniform to the event e.g. whether fighting or fleeing, the action is in response to the instinct of self-preservation. The point here is not that we all preserve-ourselves, although this is important, what is key to the universalist position is that we all recognize the experience and conceptualize what is appropriate to the situation i.e. self-preservation. At a base level, through our interaction with the world we conceptualize, whether explicitly or implicitly, our relationship to the world.

In the process of conceptualizing the world, all humans do so according to certain principles- those of non-contradiction, induction (understood here as learning from our environment), and sympathetic impartiality.¹⁷ In brief, the principle of non-contradiction can be asserted merely on the grounds of identification.¹⁸ If one is to flee in the face of a threat, one must identify the phenomenon as a threat and not as a non-threat. Simply put, in order to preserve ourselves, we must be able to *consistently* recognize what threatens us, else we shall not be preserved for long. Induction follows a similarly simple explanation; either we learn what threatens us or we shall not be for long (that is, unless owing to an improbable series of fortuitous circumstances). The argument for sympathetic impartiality is considerably more complicated. Briefly, social interaction involves, minimally, giving ‘due concern’ to those with whom you interact. The full ramifications of this due concern is left open to argumentation (minimally- the negative duties to others found in egotism; maximally- in the positive duties to others found in the Kantian categorical imperative). What is of decisive importance here is that ‘due concern’ is “essential to the harmonization of human interests in society.”¹⁹

Integral to the universalist account of a “common human identity” is the capacity to communicate. “Without the ability to communicate there can be no human

¹⁶ Wiredu, 22.

¹⁷ Ibid., 27, 29.

¹⁸ The debate concerning the principle of non-contradiction and excluded middle is still an ongoing debate. For a fuller examination whether alternative logics exists, more specifically in the African culture, cf. E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, 1937; D. Bloor’s *Knowledge and Social Imagery*, 1976; T. Triplett’s ‘Relativism and the Sociology of Mathematics: Remarks on Bloor’, 1986; Triplett’s ‘Azande Logic Versus Western Logic?’, 1988; R.C. Jennings’ ‘Zande Logic and Western Logic’, 1989; L. Keita’s ‘Jennings and Zande Logic: A Note’, 1993; and Triplett’s ‘Is There Anthropological Evidence that Logic is Culturally Relative?: Remarks on Bloor, Jennings, and Evans-Pritchard’, 1994.

¹⁹ For a full exposition of the possible scope of due concern cf. Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 29.

community.”²⁰ In order to have a *sensus communis* there must be an ability to share perspectives, opinions, values and beliefs. Without a common medium through which humans communicate there can be no community. Since communication does occur, human beings must share something in common- this commonality is precisely the ability to conceptualize the world we experience and to articulate that experience.²¹

With a universal, human ability to conceptualize and the capacity to articulate that conceptualization, the notion of two divergent, incommensurable philosophies, a Western philosophy, based upon abstract and theoretical interests, and an African philosophy, based upon a tacit worldview, is unnecessary. Philosophy can thus be reunited under a common aegis, that of experiencing and communicating about the world. Yet, unlike the *Weltanschauung* understanding of philosophy, integral to the articulation of our experience is making explicit our conceptualization of the world- both to ourselves and to others. Reflection upon what constitutes our thinking is essential to fully articulating how and why we see the world. Should anyone wish to conduct themselves in the world, by all means it is their prerogative, and should they want to communicate their experience, by all means, but let us not call this philosophy. However, if one should want to articulate their experience and do so in a way that provides critical reasons for what and how they experience the world, should they want to justify their experience, let them enter into the realm of precise, systematic critical inquiry, let them enter into philosophy. As Kwame Gyekye suggests:

Even though philosophers, whether from the same culture or from different cultures, are not in complete agreement on the definition and methods of their discipline, a close examination of the nature and purpose of the intellectual activities of thinkers from various cultures and societies of the world reveals nevertheless that philosophy is essentially a critical and systematic inquiry into the fundamental ideas or principles underlying human thought, conduct, and experience.²²

Philosophy cannot, then, be merely the ideological position of having a set of beliefs. Philosophy by this stricter definition is “a specific theoretical discipline with its own exigencies and methodological rules.”²³ Contrary to the particularist definition of philosophy, one can no more easily spontaneously become a philosopher by experiencing the world than one can spontaneously become chemist or mathematician.²⁴ Like any other discipline philosophy has a specific methodology proper to its exercise. In order to engage in philosophy as a discipline, a discipline that examines the presuppositions and

²⁰ Wiredu, 21.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

²² Gyekye, Kwame. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p 5.

²³ Hountondji, 47.

²⁴ Hountondji, 47.

conceptualizations of thinking for the articulation of our experience in the world, one must engage in another mode, a critical mode, of understanding human experience in the world.

Although the examination of conceptualization has been brought under a unified discipline, universalists will not deny particular cultures have specific interests to which they focus their attention. It would be obtuse to think the particular tradition in which one is acculturated does not create a backdrop against which one conceptualizes the world. The universalist claim is not that there is only a specific set of questions that arise because of instinctual unanimity. Human experience is governed by instinct, but it, too, is informed by culture. Minimally, cultures' histories promote certain settings within which humans attempt to determine meaning. Specific questions are answered according to the framework within which they are posed. Obviously questions such as "What is justice?" or "What is being?" will have pertinent contextual considerations that lead to the specific inquiry. Hence there will be a certain range of possible answers, limited to the particular milieu, that the investigators will find sufficient. The overriding concern of the universalist is to create an arena in which different cultural traditions can begin to correspond with one another, to create the grounds upon which a communicative exchange is possible.

Without the common medium of human identity, homo sapiens, we would be left with cultural solipsism. And this is the position that the universalists set out to refute. Based upon biological operations and the conceptualization necessary to encounter the world, universalists claim that humans have enough in common to begin meaningful, albeit often confused and frustrating, discourse. Although particularities will arise, they are not absolutely disparate. Based upon mere biology, species wide biological identification, humans have an experiential ground from which they can begin discourse.

II

Because of the activity of intercultural discourse i.e. the work of Tempels and Kagamé, and the assumption that such discourse is meaningful I propose to turn now to concrete examples of such an interchange. Should the reader be generous and grant that there are universal, constitutive human experiences and thus fundamental conceptualizations of these experiences, a question still remains; can we communicate radically different conceptualizations of primordial experiences? The universalist position seems to presume that we can on a priori grounds. Yet, if the work of Tempels shows us anything, in empirical exercise the chasm between cultures appears nearly insurmountable.

In his work *Bantu Philosophy*, Tempels relates:

We [Europeans] can conceive the transcendental notion of "being" by separating it from its attribute, "force", but the Bantu cannot. "Force" in his thought is a necessary element in "being", and the concept "force" is

inseparable from the definition of “being.” There is no idea among Bantu of “being” divorced from the idea of “force.”²⁵

and,

For the Bantu power is not an accident: it is more even than a necessary accident; it is the very essence of being... Being is power, power is being. Our notion of being is ‘that which is’, theirs is ‘the power that is’. Where we think the concept ‘to be’, they make use (sic) of the concept ‘power’. Where we see concrete beings, they see concrete forces. Where we would say that beings are distinguished by their essence or nature, Bantus would say that forces differ by their essence or nature.²⁶

Clearly, there is a discrepancy between the two conceptualizations of being. The disagreement here is not merely verbal. According to Bantu ontology, one can increase the power one possesses, thus have more force, and hence “be” in a different way—essentially one can become more human. In the Western conception, one is either human or not, but one cannot become more or less so. Certainly, the conflict here is between a static-substance ontology and a dynamic-event ontology. What is critical inquiry to make of such seemingly irreconcilable differences?

Under the universalist assumption, one can go back to the empirical example to determine whether both groups are describing the same experience. And this suggestion works well with concrete, ostensible examples i.e. those found in the natural sciences.²⁷ But how shall we go back to the primordial experience of being? How can that be demonstrated?

One suggestion for a possible resolution to the conflict in Tempels is to be found in Tshiamalenga’s interpretation of Tempels’ project. Tshiamalenga argues that the irreconcilability between Western “being” and Bantu “being” is one created by Tempels himself. He concludes that Tempels “constructed a philosophy but did not reconstruct Bantu philosophy.”²⁸ The accusation is that a “superficial comparison and premature generalization”²⁹ led to the Tempels assessment of irreconcilability. Owing to this author’s ignorance of Bantu world-views and African philosophy in general, I am in no position to assess the veracity of this accusation. Nevertheless, Tshiamalenga’s argument only delays the problem of irreconcilability, it does not resolve it simpliciter. Suggesting that the initiator of the conflict was himself mistaken does not resolve the real issue at

²⁵ Tempels, 50-51.

²⁶ Ibid., 35-36.

²⁷ Even demonstrable cases prove difficult e.g. How can one “be certain that a series of noises means ‘Look at the cattle!, rather than ‘Look at the undetached cow heads!’?” Hallen, Barry and J.O. Sodipo. *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (London: Ethnographica, Ltd., 1986) p. 25.

²⁸ Mudimbe, 140.

²⁹ Tshiamalenga, N. “La Philosophie dans la situation actuelle de l’Afrique.” *Combats pour un Christianisme africain* (Kinshasa: Faculté de Théologie Catholique, 1981) p. 179.

hand, that of “radical translation: translation from a remote language on behavioral evidence, unaided by prior dictionaries.”³⁰

One plausible suggestion to combat the difficulty of translation is to depend upon bilingual experts in the field of philosophy. In Quine’s words, the appropriate intermediary between two seemingly irreconcilable conceptualizations is the one who “steeps (sic) himself in the language, disdainful of English parallels, to the point of speaking it like a native.”³¹ Bilinguals, it is offered, might broker between the two languages to effect meaningful translations between languages and cultures.

And yet, the “deceptively exceptional case of the bilingual” is still not entirely sufficient. As Hallen and Sodipo point out; “Learning fluency in two languages is one thing, translating between them is another.”³² What Sodipo and Hallen suggest here is that even though the translator is fluent in both languages and understands the concepts in each respective language; she may nevertheless be merely transliterating the word into the new language without any conceptual content. What is transliterated in fact may be incoherent in the conceptual schema of the new language. With this difficulty it would seem that we are at a loss to defend the commensurability between conceptual schemas and languages. Perhaps Tempels’ articulated a fundamental irreconcilability between world-views, perhaps incommensurable philosophies do exist- perhaps the particularists were correct and there are inherent discrepancies that preclude a universal philosophy.

There is one resolution to the aporia of translatability. It is not, however, a linguistic methodology nor a reliance upon trustworthy translations. The resolution to the conflict of incommensurability depends upon the notion of philosophy as suggested by the universalists. It hinges upon the notion that philosophy is “an activity, a pursuit”, that is

the activity of rational examination and analysis of human thought and action with a view clearly to understanding them or coming to have self-knowledge of them; it is an activity of search and of raising questions, challenging assumptions and beliefs that have hereto been taken for granted.³³

If philosophy is an open discussion, the issue of incommensurability is usurped by the ongoing discourse to define what it is that is seemingly irreconcilable. In the case of Tempels and Bantu ontology what might be suggested is a meta-ontology, under which we can subsume the two conceptualizations offered. A synthesis might be offered

³⁰ Hallen and Sodipo, 20. For a thorough analysis of Quine and his application to African philosophy cf. Barry Hallen and J.O. Sodipo’s *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy*, 1986.

³¹ Quine, W.V.O. 'Meaning and Translation', in J.A. Fodor and J.J. Katz (eds.), *The Structure of Language*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959) pp. 474-475.

³² Hallen and Sodipo, 25.

³³ Gyekye, 13.

wherein both accounts makes sense. This is not without precedence; already within metaphysics there are certain structures within which opposing conceptualizations are meaningfully debated e.g. free-will and determinism, substance dualism, and especially the substance versus event ontology debate. The very fact that the discussion of irreconcilability can occur at all suggests a commonality from which we can begin to address the question. In the case of translation what is required is diligent work and exacting description, not merely an attempt at word-to-word correspondence for concepts. Perhaps, with enough time and scholarship, neologisms and a specialized, technical language can be formed to breach the gap between languages. In order to pursue this activity, however, we cannot merely dismiss different world-views as irreducibly other. It requires a critical examination of both positions and methodologies in an attempt at communication. After all, untranslatability can be a problem “but it does not necessarily argue unintelligibility.”³⁴

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³⁴ Wiredu, 25.