

PHILOSOPHY AND AUTHENTICITY

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The study of African philosophy shares some imperatives with the study of Caribbean philosophy. Let us work our way to some of these from the African angle.

For the past three decades or so African philosophy has been much occupied with a concern for authenticity. We are talking here of authenticity in a commonsensical rather than a technical philosophical sense. The reference is to the idea of being true to oneself in a given sphere of activity. The underlying question has been "When is a philosophy authentically African?" Even though this question has been a real motivating force, it has often been only implicit. Worse, it has sometimes been confused with the question whether there is such a thing as African philosophy in African traditional culture. The affirmative answer to this later question is so obvious as to put the wisdom of any African who poses it into question. The same is not true, however, of the question whether a piece of work by a contemporary African philosopher qualifies as an instance of African philosophy.

Let us tarry awhile on why the answer to this last question is not so very obvious. Suppose an individual born and bred an African is trained institutionally only in Western philosophy, and of that only in one brand, let us say, the analytic. He becomes a first class practitioner of that tradition and does influential work in it. There is not one word in his writings about anything African. Nor is there any trace of a reverberation of his work among Africans. He is an African and a philosopher, but is he an African philosopher? Does his work in the present circumstances constitute an African philosophy? I, for one, would answer in the negative, though I would countenance some semantical debate regarding the first question.

But now, retaining the same hypothetical individual with identical furnishings of mind, let us make the following change. His work gains almost universal credence in Africa, and in a few generations becomes an orthodoxy among Africans and remains so for tens of centuries. Imagine also that all the philosophies by which Africans live have come to have an analogous history and a similar content. Transport yourself forward to a time fifty centuries from now and ask whether this reigning orthodoxy is a piece of African philosophy. The question itself would be otiose. What else could it be? Yet, it would be clearly possible that these philosophies are unsuitable for Africa. They may, for example, lead to the perpetuation of an intellectual dependency among the generality of Africans and, indeed, to the interminable subordination of Africa to the West. I infer from this that a philosophy may be both truly African and injurious to Africa. Could such a philosophy be authentically African?

If authenticity were a purely descriptive concept, this would be possible; that is, it would be possible for a philosophy to be authentically African and at the same time harmful to Africa. But this is not the case, because the concept of authenticity is also normative. For a philosophy to be authentically African, it is not sufficient for it to be truly African; it must also be unprejudicial to Africa. Calling a piece of philosophical work authentically African thus implies a certain degree of approbation.¹ In this respect, authenticity is a somewhat subtle concept. If a philosophical belief were truly African but prejudicial to Africa, one would not, indeed, call it authentically African. However, neither would one call it inauthentic. One would simply abstain from invoking that particular 'either . . . or.'

¹This point is even clearer in the case of an individual introspecting about her own authenticity as a person. It is obvious, in that case, that the question driving her meditation is not whether the individual is identical with herself, but rather whether she *is* herself under some conception of what she ought to be. For further details, see my "Problems of Africa's Self-Definition in the Contemporary World," especially pp. 59-60.

Thus consider a contemporary African philosopher who is an orthodox Christian. According to Christian teaching, there is no such thing as the African world of the ancestors. That is supposed to be a world continuous with this world and interactive with it. Christian eschatology, on the other hand, speaks of a non-temporal afterworld, which is, metaphysically, an *other* world. In any case, the African attitude of reverence to the ancestors amounts, by one of the Ten Commandments, to sacrilegious worship. Accordingly, from a Christian standpoint, the doctrine of the ancestors is to be condemned not only as false, but also as sinful. Our African Christian, if he is even mildly knowledgeable of African culture, is bound to recognize the doctrine of the ancestors as a truly African conception.² But he is unlikely to feel called upon to describe it as an item of authentic African philosophy, except perhaps in some diluted, figurative, sense. It is, for example, only in some such sense that one who is not attracted to, say, Kantian philosophy might describe some given theory as authentically Kantian.

Let us note also that the very concern with authenticity in African philosophy presupposes a background of crisis. A contemporary British philosopher does not engage in earnest discussions as to what it is for a philosophy to be authentically British. The reason is that he is most likely untroubled by any challenges of cultural identity. In our case, however, that is, as Africans and peoples of African descent, we have suffered severe historical reverses, by way of colonization and slavery, that have unsettled our sense of our own identity. Colonialism and, even more grievously, slavery downgraded our cultures and interrupted their natural flow in such areas as education, religion, law and politics. At the time of independence in Africa our leaders were faced with the necessity not just for social and political reconstruction but also for cultural regeneration. The challenge was a philosophical one, and they perceived it as such.

The point is that, unless they were prepared just to imitate Western political and social models, they needed to do fresh thinking from first principles of an African provenance. The African rider was of the last consequence. For the good of the African psyche, if for nothing else, it needed to be shown that contemporary Africa could rebuild on the basis of a philosophy of society deriving from her own indigenous traditions. In other words, it needed to be shown that Africa could be *herself* again and thrive in the modern world on that basis. Theirs, then, was a search for an authentic African social and political philosophy.

In a comparatively short time these leaders, that is, our first group of post-independence leaders, busy men of action all of them, produced an impressive corpus of philosophical literature. I think we all can learn at least two things from the work of our post-independence philosopher-kings. The first is that availing ourselves of insights from foreign traditions, even if it means the traditions of our erstwhile colonizers, need not compromise the African authenticity of our intellectual productions. And the second is that there is a lot that we can get from our own traditions without substantial borrowings from other traditions. In spite of appearances, the two lessons are not incompatible. There are areas of knowledge and reflection in which we have no option but to try to domesticate disciplines developed in the Western world, and there are others where such adaptations are optional.

But, first, let us let us see how the two lessons emerge from the work of the African leaders alluded to. To take the first lesson first. It is, I think, best exemplified in the work of

² Not infrequently an African Christian will gloss over the incompatibility between various elements of an African cosmology and its Christian counterpart, proclaiming at one and the same time pride in the African 'heritage' and faith in the conflicting Christian tidings. This inconsistency is, of course, a considerable, though not insuperable, complication for our argument.

Kwame Nkrumah, first President of Ghana. He was a fierce advocate of African nationalism, who sought to liberate and unite Africa. He also sought to establish an independent standing for Africa in international affairs, projecting what he called the 'African Personality.' It will be recalled that this term originates with the Caribbean thinker Edward Blyden. And, while on this, we might note that Nkrumah was also influenced by another Caribbean figure in the person of Marcus Garvey. More broadly, it is important to note the influence of thinkers in the black diaspora on African political thought in the shape, particularly, of Pan-Africanism. Obvious names in this connection are Césaire, Du Bois and Alain Locke. Fanon's intellectual influence also demands mention, but it is a later phenomenon and is actually gathering momentum now among African intellectuals. I think that it is one of the strong points of Masolo's history of contemporary African philosophy – I am referring to his African Philosophy in Search of Identity – that he devotes considerable space to this historic flow of influence (See Ch. 1).

To return to Nkrumah, despite his insistence on African authenticity, he was, as he himself put it, a Marxist socialist and a non-denominational Christian. Leaving Christianity out of account as contextually inessential for our present purposes, it does not escape notice that Marxism is a doctrine emanating from foreign sources, specifically, from the culture that put us under bondage. Even so, Marxism may still be the best philosophy and ideology for decolonization and reconstruction. Beyond this, Nkrumah maintained that Marxism agreed with indigenous African conceptions. The traditional African mode of social formation was, for him, itself a kind of anticipatory socialism. The transition to scientific socialism, on this showing, was merely the updating of indigenous socialism. It could therefore, be quite peaceful, as the first edition of Nkrumah's Consciencism suggested, unless, as the second edition of that book asserted, the imperialist conspiracy with 'reactionary' forces in Africa hardened into military confrontations with nationalist forces.

Personally, I do not think that Nkrumah's socialism brought any blessings to Ghana. Neither do I think that traditional African society was any kind of socialism. Not that it might not have been good if traditional African society had been socialist in form; but it simply was not. Here we encounter a confirmed habit on the part not only of Nkrumah, but also of all our philosopher-kings to confuse African communalism or communitarianism with socialism. The former was a *cultural* dispensation in which the principal means of production (which, in traditional Africa, was land) were held by individuals *in virtue of their lineage membership*. The latter, that is, socialism, by contrast, is a political system in which the principal means of production are owned or, at the minimum, controlled *by the state*. The difference is fundamental.³ Nevertheless, as far as authenticity is concerned, this is not crucial. So long as Nkrumah believed sincerely, as a result of reflective inquiry, that Marxist socialism was ideal for the empowerment of Africa and that it agreed essentially with the African traditional outlook, he was right to have a sense of African authenticity in trying, as he thought, to pursue a Marxist blueprint of reconstruction in Africa.⁴ Indeed, the first hypothesis alone, namely, that Marxism is the best system for Africa, is sufficient justification for that self-perception. A sense of African authenticity on the part of a modern African is, thus, not

³ For a detailed criticism of the assimilation of African communalism with socialism by the first post-independence political leaders, see chapter 5 "The Socialist Interlude" in Kwame Gyekye's Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience.

⁴ On the importance of *due reflection* in the matter of the integrity of identity, see further chapter 10 "The Need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy" of my Cultural Universals and Particulars: an African Perspective.

incompatible with an openness to the multifarious intellectual resources of the modern world. That is obviously true also for Africans in the diaspora.

But even more axiomatically, openness to the philosophical intimations of our own traditional cultures is imperative upon us. One reason for this is that, owing to the colonial intervention, the philosophical potential of our traditions was totally ignored or only insufficiently tapped. How useful it can be to be especially attentive to our traditions is illustrated by the intellectual work of Julius Nyerere, the first President of Tanzania. Nyerere, I believe, best exemplifies the second lesson mentioned above. He showed that one could elaborate a whole philosophy and ideology of socialism without importing any models from the West or, for that matter, the East. He did this by propounding the philosophy of Ujamaa socialism. This socialism was based on a careful analysis of traditional communalism and the needs of modern Africa. In particular, he avoided trafficking in foreign philosophies, such as Marxism or even liberalism.

In the matter of exploiting traditions, Africans of the diaspora have even more variegated opportunities than their African brethren of today, for they have their own transmuted African traditions in addition to the original traditions in Africa to draw upon. To all this is to be added the particular Western traditions with which they have become associated by the force of history. Nor should one omit to mention the local East Indian, and other, traditions with which they have historically co-existed. In relation to Africa, this reflection supports a strong educational policy of studies in African languages in the Caribbean.

I will comment below on the philosophical advantages of the availability of such diversity. But, apparently, the adage that there are no roses without thorns applies to the enterprise of tapping traditions that have once been tampered with by a racialistic imperialism. One result of this tampering is that the literature on indigenous thought has been written in the languages and in the conceptual frameworks of the colonizing people. The assumption underlying this intellectual practice is that those conceptual frameworks are ineluctable for the human mind. In fact, they are not. Any African who tries to think through them in his or her own language is likely to find quite a large chunk of those frameworks incoherent. That would be just a preliminary, for, of course, the incoherence may be due an expressive inadequacy of the indigenous rather than the metropolitan language. Whether this is so or not can only be established by a comparative evaluation of the conceptual constructs in question. Thus, philosophy in any post-colonial, post-racist, situation has necessarily to be comparative. But this is easily lost sight of; because, if you are instructed in philosophy in a given foreign language, that language tends to become not only your medium of expression, but also your medium of thought. Consequently, the categories of thought embedded in that language are apt to seem to you natural and inescapable. In the upshot, one begins unwittingly to superimpose the categories of thought in that language on the thought structures of one's own native culture. I should think that if one lives in an environment characterized by the confluence of radically different languages and cultures, as in the Caribbean, it should be relatively easy to avoid this kind of self-abnegating parochialism.

In Africa, we are barely at the threshold of the needed conceptual self-exorcism. I have called it conceptual decolonization.⁵ Accounts of African traditional philosophy are heavily laden with foreign categories of thought, which remain unexamined. This has come about at all because in many parts of Africa the first influential accounts of African thought were written by foreign travelers, missionaries and anthropologists. Not unnaturally, these were written in the conceptual schemes of the metropolitan languages. We hear therein of stories of the ubiquity of religion in African culture, of the dominant role of spiritual entities in

⁵ See chapter 10 of my Cultural Universals and Particulars.

African explanations and of the constitutive status of supernatural sanctions in African ethics, and so on.

Already, in these few conceptual allusions we meet with three familiar categories of thought, originally familiar to many of us through English language discourse. They are embodied in the distinctions between the religious and the secular, the spiritual and the physical, and the natural and the supernatural. (There are a lot more, but these will do for illustration.) A category of thought is a concept (simple or complex) in terms of which large aspects of human experience or of external phenomena are characterized. Following the foreign models of exposition in which these categories of thought were freely used in characterizing African thought, we now frequently find African scholars themselves proclaiming with great pride how thoroughly religious we Africans are and also how spiritually and supernaturally oriented we are. They may be right.

But since these categories of thought came to us from foreign sources, it ought to occur to us to examine by close attention to our languages whether they are really applicable to our indigenous thought structures. As far as the Caribbean is concerned, this brings us again to the desirability of the serious study of African languages. If we undertake this task of critical inquiry into the colonial conceptualizations of indigenous thought, we might find – I certainly think I have found – that their applicability is subject to significant qualifications, in regard to some of them, such as the concept of religion, or to even more severe skepticism in other cases, such as those of the spiritual and the supernatural. I might mention that in this last case, that is, in the matter of the ontological dualism of the natural and the supernatural, my finding is that it does not have a place in the African system of thought that I know best, namely, the Akan. In this system of thought reality is not bifurcated into two spheres, with one called natural and the other supernatural. If it is correct that we could legitimately dispense with this dualism in our accounts of African thought, that would be good riddance indeed; for that dualism is known to lead to various extremely recalcitrant metaphysical conundrums in Western philosophy. I have dealt with some of these and related concepts elsewhere with a similarly liberatory result.⁶

To give these comments just a little more concreteness, let us take a relatively trivial example of how a difference in linguistic framework can affect the propriety of a universalistic philosophical claim in a given language. In a previous discussion (Cultural Universals and Particulars 102-3), I have discussed the claim made by the British philosopher David Mitchell to the effect that the equivalence between the active and passive voices reflects a necessary truth that is inescapable to the human mind. His words are:

The *necessary* truth that if A acts on B, B is acted on by A, seems to reflect a categorial distinction between active and passive and not a merely linguistic convention; that is to say, it seems that it is linguistically permissible to substitute 'B is acted on by A' for 'A acts on B' only because we cannot but think that if A acts on B, B is *necessarily* acted on by A. (146)

This claim is compromised by the fact that in the Akan language (spoken in parts of Ghana and the Ivory Coast) there is no such grammatical duality as the active and the passive, and yet the language is not one whit the poorer in expressive capabilities. The upshot is that Mr. Mitchell's *necessary* truth is, in fact, relative to a special convention of English and cognate languages. This result shows, of course, that the alleged universal principle is not mandatory in all human discourse.

Actually, in these matters the result is not as important as the resolve itself to enter upon the critical conceptual examination of the colonial characterizations of our traditional

⁶ See, for instance, chapter 7 of my Cultural Universals and Particulars.

thought. If we do not do this, it would mean that, in the matter of the exposition of our own thought, we are just aping the West. We would then certainly not be *being* ourselves, intellectually. Accordingly, all claims to authenticity will have to be suspended until the effort is made. That effort, is, of course, a philosophical one. It emerges, therefore, that in our post-colonial situation, philosophy is, in part, at least, a search for authenticity. I believe that this is as true of the Caribbean as it is of Africa.

This imperative of critical conceptual investigation, by the way, cuts right across the Analytic/Continental divide of contemporary Western philosophy. By the force of colonial circumstances, many of us were trained in analytic philosophy or in continental philosophy. (For our purposes, let us forget the strangeness of this dichotomy, with one component identified in terms of method, and the other in terms of location.) What needs particularly to be noted is that the concepts suspected of intercultural incommensurability are as basic to the one brand of philosophy as the other. This realization may perhaps serve to discourage the post-colonial philosophers of Africa and the Caribbean from philosophical partisanship based on the methodological polarizations of Western philosophy.

In our last few remarks we have been dealing with issues arising from the study of traditional thought. That study is, of course, extremely important, and we are going to have to take to heart in all our philosophizing the need for the special kind of conceptual alertness to which I have called attention. Of course, the study of our traditional philosophy is not exhausted by such conceptual concerns. At least two levels of philosophical thought are discernible in African traditional thought. There is the level of communal thought, which is represented by such things as proverbs, maxims, popular doctrines and various figurative narratives. Even more interestingly, there is also the level of more or less technical thinking represented in the thought of such individual thinkers as those studied by Henry Odera Oruka in Kenya.⁷ It is evident that such thought often transcends communal orthodoxy. In Ghana, for example, there are 'drum texts' that go well beyond popular theological cosmology.⁸ A contemporary philosopher may well find that such material will repay careful study. I think also that the ideas underlying various traditional cultural and political institutions may sometimes be found helpful to us in our attempts at post-colonial social and political reconstruction, though not necessarily in the directions that were suggested by our first crop of post-independence rulers.⁹

In addition, however, to the need to be cognizant of the philosophical resources of our traditional heritage, we need to know that we live in a modern world, and we need to understand it in order to be in a position to do something about its discontents. This means, apart from anything else, that we must try to come to grips with the role of science and technology in modern existence.

The philosophical concern with science is perhaps more urgent in areas like Africa and the Caribbean than in the West. If, for example, a Western irrationalist, exulting in 'intuition,' should declare science and technology to be negative forces in the world, he might perhaps have the excuse that there is a surfeit of these in his society. Certainly the exploitation of science and technology and, we better add, industrialization, can lead to egregiously

⁷ See Oruka's Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy.

⁸ See chapter 9, section 3 of my Cultural Universals and Particulars.

⁹ See chapter 14 "Democracy and Consensus: a Plea for a Non-Party Polity" of my Cultural Universals and Particulars. See also chapters 12 and 13.

inhumane conditions in society. It can lead, for example, to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few.

But one thing is obvious. Science and technology do not themselves do mischief. It is the manner of their use that does. If that use is informed by humane values, and restrained by due circumspection, consequences should be less demoralizing. But such values do not fall like manna from the heavens. They can only come, if they are ever going to come, through careful reflection on the ends of human action. Behold, we are back to philosophy, to the philosophy of morals and politics in themselves and in special relation to science, technology and industrialization. We are back too to the need for the broad understanding of science that may be cultivated in the philosophy of science.

Meanwhile, an African intellectual, who tries to imitate a Western irrationalist, as some are known to do, in trifling with science, does not even have the former's excuse, such as it is. In most parts of Africa we do not have enough science and technology. We are assailed on all sides with poverty and disease. Often we do have the physical resources, but not the technical ability to appropriate them. Thus, for example, in order to extract our 'God-given' gold or other such valuables from the bowels of the earth we have to go and get foreign experts to come and do it for us at a tremendous fee, reckoned not only in monetary terms but also in political and cultural consequences. For sure, we will never overcome such dependency until we master the relevant knowledge and acquire the requisite skills. Of course, other factors than cognitive ones are involved, but cognitive factors are necessary and fundamental.

However, suppose those cognitive gains are made; even so, we would be unlikely to put them to humane uses unless the philosophies underlying our efforts are conversant with the concomitant ethical issues and committed to humane values. Otherwise, our efforts will bring only paltry results or worse, and the prospect might still be of more and more dependency and the escalating of the erosions of our sense of authenticity.

Notice that this call for science and technology and their philosophical understanding is motivated by practical considerations. This is, in fact, true of all philosophy. The discipline is the theory of practice. There are two levels of meaning to this remark. More to the surface, it means that philosophy is concerned with the fundamental principles of our interactions with our own species and with the non-human environment. This is uncontroversial. But I intend also a somewhat controversial meaning, which, I think, goes deeper. It is that those principles themselves are shaped by the existential imperatives of practice.

In the cultural and intellectual flux of post-colonial existence it should be easy to perceive at least an intimate connection between philosophy and practical life. However, understanding this is only half the battle won. For, if philosophy is practical, it is also theoretical; and it is theoretical before it is practical. Any fundamental, coherent and illuminating theory of any aspect of practice is apt, before too long, to become abstract, complex and technical. Division of labor, thus, is a matter of common sense and prudence. Accordingly, the theory of practice is resolved into a variety of projects of inquiry. Thus we have logical, ethical, epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, political and aesthetic divisions of philosophy, which themselves have further subdivisions. Let it be admitted at once that the inevitable elaborateness can breed obliviousness to practical utility on the part of some industrious philosophical researchers. From a broad standpoint, however, this does not matter too much so long as there are others upon whom practical considerations are not lost. Indeed, given a significant number of thinkers not forgetful of eventual utility, the labor of those in the technical tower could turn out to be a valuable resource. In any case, insistence on too

immediate a harvest of practical blessings from philosophical endeavors, as from any theoretical inquiries, is apt to impoverish them severely.

Consider the discipline of logic. This is the branch of philosophy that studies systematically the principles of correct reasoning. The practical importance of such a study hardly needs a comment. It turns out, however, that the only way one can accomplish such a task is to construct *systems* of such principles much in the way of, say, geometry.¹⁰ It turns out, furthermore, that constructing such systems in a purely 'abstract' manner enables us to obtain structures that have all kinds of interesting formal and mathematical properties.

Not unexpectedly, there are specialists who do logic from a purely mathematical motivation, and indeed, sometimes from a motivation that is more formal than those commonly operative in mathematics itself. Furthermore, even those who retain their sense of the practical mission of logic, cannot make much progress in modern logic without getting quite abstract and technical. (A rule of thumb, albeit a crude one, for telling apart the two types of workers in logic is that those not altogether untouched by eventual practical considerations will speak of *symbolic logic*, while the more formally austere will proffer *mathematical logic*.)

The problem now is that, seeing how technical even the practically oriented pursuit of symbolic logic can become, there are people who think that, at any rate, in places like Africa, there is, or, more strictly, there should be, no room for such studies, for they have no practical bearing. It will be easily seen *at this stage* that this point of view rests on the fallacy that, if something is not of immediate practical use, then it is of no practical use at all. Such a view, if consistently pressed, must make short work of entire branches of advanced learning. As far as concerns a discipline like logic, anyone who knows that it is born out of the quest for correct and rigorous thinking will see that, if such mental habits are virtues anywhere, they are virtues in Africa and the Caribbean also. Such a person will therefore understand that the pursuit of such a discipline carries no necessary risk to authenticity. All this, again, is on the proviso that in our post-colonial situations we are always to be alert to the possibility that *some* conceptual constructs in a discipline that has been long cultivated by other peoples might reflect nothing more enduring than the peculiarities of a foreign language. Recall, in this connection, the example of the active and passive voices discussed above.

We note, furthermore, that there are people who look askance at philosophers in Africa and other such parts of the world who pursue studies such as symbolic logic, on the grounds that such disciplines only contain the achievements of other peoples. Well, if we go by their disinclinations, that situation will remain forever!

Any exercise in self-(re)thinking, whether the self in question is an individual or a culture, is a step in the quest for authenticity. In any post-colonial situation, such a quest is an urgent necessity. This discussion suggests that in that enterprise one thing that we should bear in mind is that authenticity was made for man or woman, not man or woman for authenticity!

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¹⁰ Even Aristotelian logic offers a system in this sense, for it establishes an economical set of rules for evaluating an infinity of arguments.

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