

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN
PHILOSOPHY:
THE SEARCH FOR A METHOD

I

The purpose of this paper is to present a commentary on the current state of contemporary African philosophy and to offer some criticisms and recommendations. The question concerning African philosophy has been debated for some years now and one has witnessed a number of interesting works on this topic.

I shall begin, however, with the points made and questions raised in H. Odera Oruka's recent article "Sagacity in African Philosophy."¹ In this essay, Oruka first states what he considers the four main trends in contemporary African philosophy: 1. ethno-philosophy; 2. philosophic sagacity; 3. nationalist-ideological philosophy; and 4. professional philosophy. Oruka then takes issue with the claims made by professional philosophers like Bodunrin and Hountondji that (a) literacy ought to be a recommended requirement for philosophical discourse, and that (b) though it is

¹ H. Odera Oruka, "Sagacity in African Philosophy," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Winter 1983, pp. 383-393.

possible for a non-written philosophical system to satisfy the criteria for “S is a philosophical system,” there must be some means of recording this system so that there be evidence of systematic discourse.

In reply to Bodunrin’s statement that

Had others not written down the sayings of Socrates and Buddha, we would today not regard them as philosophers, for their thoughts would have been lost in the Mythological world of proverbs and pithy sayings.²

Oruka argues in reply that

To exist as a philosopher it is not necessary that one’s thoughts must progress or be available to the future generation. Sufficient for the existence of a philosopher is that one’s contemporaries recognize one’s philosophical ability and practice.³

Oruka may be correct here, but in order to satisfy skeptics it must be demonstrated that there was a general recognition that philosophical work was being done when it was, in fact, being done.

Oruka’s aim is to defend the idea of philosophical sagacity, granted the strong criticism leveled against ethnophilosophy. In this connection, one might note the work of Hountondji.⁴ But it appears that one of the problems facing contemporary African thought is the fact that the term “philosophy”, though debated, has not been much examined as a term deriving its meaning from the historical context in which it is used. It is instructive to note that the term “philosophy” itself has witnessed important shifts in meaning throughout its career. Consider the fact that “philosophy” in the sense of Aristotle is not “philosophy” in the sense of Quine. Newton was regarded as a natural philosopher, whereas Einstein was seen as a natural scientist. Yet even if one grants that there is a general agreement among those who embrace the European philosophical tradition on what philosophy is, there is no consen-

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1983.

sus as to what methods of investigation are proper to philosophy and what topics should be of special research interest. For example, philosophical research in the Anglo-American world does not share much in common with the methods of research in continental philosophy. In fact, there is the general feeling in the Anglo-American world that continental philosophy is not genuine philosophy, and those whose main interests are in that area of philosophy hold a similar disregard for Anglo-American analytic philosophy.

The questions concerning the definition of philosophy are even more problematic when the subject of African philosophy is raised. Some contemporary African philosophers argue that it is possible to express philosophical ideas without recourse to writing. But do African physicists, chemists or economists argue that it is possible to do research in their particular disciplines without recourse to writing? If not, should they? The following question is immediately pertinent: What are the peculiar characteristics of philosophy, in this context, that set it off from other disciplines?

However, on the question concerning African philosophical thought, it seems that the structure of this thought has been determined to a great extent by the ideological systems of belief imposed on Africa by European scholarship of the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras. This ideology describes African achievements as minimal, in the sense that the African had not developed any important civilization, African technological achievements were rudimentary, and that African social structures were of questionable durability. These apparent shortcomings were explained in some quarters as due to biological deficiencies in those mental capacities necessary for creating organized and civilized society. The comments of European philosophers like Kant, Hegel and Hume on African culture are, perhaps, well known. It would therefore be instructive to consider, in turn, some of the more important philosophical movements in Africa generated as a result of the historical confrontation of African and European ideologies.

Negritude: Recall the first responses of Negritude (a philosophical theory) which attempted to transform the supposed negative characteristics of African culture into virtues. Senghor, a key theorist of negritude, writes:

What characterizes best the universe of the Negro-African, besides the primacy granted to the subjective experience of the real, is his anthropocentrism and consequently his *humanism*.⁵ (*author's translation*).

Senghor also writes approvingly of the Eurocentric thesis that the European mode of thinking is diametrically opposed to that of the African. Consider the following:

In fact, I have often thought that the Indo-European and Negro-African were situated at the extremes of objectivity and subjectivity, of discursive reason and intuitive reason, of thinking in concepts and thinking in images, of reflective thought and emotional thought.⁶ (*author's translation*).

Senghor even endorses the notion that African thought cannot distinguish between the rational, the irrational or the pre-rational.⁷ What Senghor probably implies here is that in traditional African cosmologies there is a fusion of language which refers to empirical objects and language which refers to metaphysical entities. But this is also the case in modern European thought which makes reservations not only for terms which have empirical reference but for purely metaphysical terms which refer to objects that enjoy a special kind of existence. For to assert that "S exists" in a concrete sense and at the same time to assert that S's existence is nonempirical is to risk, from a modern European conceptual standpoint, a conflation of the rational and the irrational. Reference is made here to terms like "spirit," "soul," "mind," etc. Senghor's error is to assume, like the colonial ethnologist, that the existence of metaphysical concepts in societies less technologically advanced than those of Europe implies that linguistic discourse in these societies does not recognize notions of rationality and irrationality.

But in the same vein, consider, too, the idea expressed by Aimé Césaire, one of the founders of the Negritude movement, that there

⁵ Leopold Senghor, "Preface," in Alassane Ndaw, *La Pensée Africaine*, Dakar, Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1983, p. 27.

⁶ Leopold Senghor, *Liberté 3*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1977, p. 148.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

was virtue in technological innocence, in response to the claims made by many European intellectuals that African technology was most rudimentary and was of little significance in human history. Aimé Césaire writes:

Hooray for those who have never invented anything. For those who have never explored anything. For those who have never tamed anything.⁸

And Frantz Fanon made points about the moral guidance that the oppressed black could offer to a morally sterile Europe.⁹

But the ideology of Negritude has been seriously questioned by theorists like C.A. Diop¹⁰, who sought to respond to the then current European ideology by arguing that 1. civilization began in Africa (Ancient Egypt), and 2. the ancient Egyptians (as opposed to the present hybrid population of African, Arab and others) were of African racial stock. From this point, Diop then went on to argue that the classical foundations of modern African civilization should be located in ancient Egypt, not in Greece, France or Britain. Diop's approach to the theory of African civilization, in this regard, is analogous to the way in which European scholars have structured the career of European civilization: modern European civilization is assumed to have its technical and intellectual roots in ancient Greek civilization; likewise, for Diop, modern African civilization should assume an intellectual and cultural legacy in the civilization of ancient Egypt.

The ideology of Negritude has also been critically examined by Paulin Hountondji who argues that the popular idea of a specific African essence and personality embracing a peculiar epistemology and sensibility is erroneous. Hountondji argues for a dynamic African culture subject to change according to the dictates of changing political and technological realities.¹¹

⁸ Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1956, pp. 71-72.

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, New York, Grove Press Inc., 1963, pp. 311-316.

¹⁰ C.A. Diop, *Nations nègres et cultures*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1954.

¹¹ Hountondji *op. cit.*, pp. 160-164.

Ethnophilosophy: European ideology claimed that African thought and belief systems could not be truly considered as containing anything of genuine intellectual merit. Levy-Bruhl *et al.* argued that rationality and reflective thought are not synonymous with African thought. The terms which were coined to demonstrate the supposed qualitative gap that existed between European and African modes of thought and expression were “primitive” and “civilized”. And it was implicitly understood that the term “civilized” was synonymous with the term “European.” Thus, the dualistic opposition of terms like “European art” and “primitive art,” “European architecture” and “primitive architecture,” in ordinary discourse, succinctly summed up the relationship between Europe and Africa. Furthermore, man’s most impressive intellectual achievements were supposed to have been either initiated in the European world or to have attained their most advanced expression there, even when not of European origin.

Thus European scholars generally believe that Greek philosophy, mathematics and science represent the first intellectual efforts of man as a rational being. According to this thesis, reason took its first step towards maturity in the works of the Greek scholars. But even when it is recognized that the pre-Greek civilizations should not be discounted in terms of their intellectual and technical contributions to world civilization, it is generally argued that these contributions were refined and developed by European scholars. Hence, philosophy, mathematics and empirical science, in their modern expressions, are regarded as the genuine products of the best minds of Europe.

But the ideological response to this thesis on the part of some African philosophers was to claim that traditional African thought should be judged on its own terms. Such a view of African philosophy has also been argued for by some European scholars. One witnesses here a shift from a general mood of condescension to one of empathy. Consider the following:

For, in spite of our progressively close contact with African cultures over the past century, the West has chosen to see sorcery, savagery and obscenity—in short a caricature of man precisely in those moments of life when the African sets in motion his most genuine values. As strange as it may seem, no one in the West is

astonished at the nuances and subtleties of Japanese or Chinese thought; but let an investigator document certain African ideas and he is considered a rash if not completely reckless “interpreter.”

It is almost as if the refinement of the mind were the heritage of one part of mankind and not another, unless one wants to assert by this strange value judgement that thought and reflection are necessarily expressed by a single category of signifiers.¹²

It is in the context of this post-colonial intellectual climate that ethnophilosophy is nurtured. One witnesses, for example, Leo Apostel’s comprehensive defence of the idea of African philosophy founded on principles of African thought as formulated by Tempels and Kagame.¹³ As defined both by African and European scholars, ethnophilosophy serves the function of the subjective valorization of traditional African thought in contradistinction to colonial anthropological thought which engaged in a purportedly objective devalorization of the African’s intellectual efforts. Genuine African philosophy consists, therefore, of descriptive comments on ethnological concepts of time, ethics, personhood and general cosmology. Yet questions persist as to whether the belief systems discussed may be regarded as genuinely philosophical. The contemporary debate on African philosophy is just about this.

To answer this criticism, H. Odera Oruka argues that a genuine African philosophy could be founded on the idea of “philosophical sagacity.” According to Oruka, there is adequate evidence that in traditional African culture there were sages or thinkers who were original in their inquiries on diverse topics. Oruka argues that such thinkers

go beyond mere sagacity and attain a philosophic capacity. As sages they are versed in the beliefs and wisdoms of their people. But as thinkers, they are rationally critical and they opt for or recommend only those aspects of the beliefs and wisdoms which satisfy their rational scrutiny. In this respect they are potentially or contemporarily in clash with the die-hard adherents of the prevailing common beliefs.¹⁴

¹² Dominique Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality and Thought of Traditional Africa*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 3.

¹³ L. Apostel, *African Philosophy, Myth or Reality*, Belgium, Ed. Story-Scientia, 1981.

¹⁴ Oruka, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

In this connection, Oruka makes a distinction between two areas of traditional African thought: 1. culture philosophy, and 2. philosophical sagacity. The former, a synonym for ethnophilosophy, has been criticized on the grounds that it has not satisfied the appropriate criteria for philosophical literature: (I) ethnophilosophy was not traditionally expressed in writing, (II) nor is there any evidence that it contains thoughts of individual thinkers expressed in rational discourse. Oruka attempts to answer these queries by arguing that literate discourse may not be a necessary condition for philosophical discourse, only that critical, evaluative and coherent thought be engaged in by individual thinkers. This intellectual activity Oruka defines as “philosophic sagacity.”

It appears, from an analysis of Oruka’s ideas, that his aim is to salvage the thesis that the foundations of a genuine African philosophy should be grounded in the belief systems of pre-colonial Africa. But it is the personal critical thought of individuals within the context of these belief systems that Oruka perceives as being sufficient for philosophical discourse. To argue, on the other hand, that a necessary condition for philosophical discourse be ideas expressed in writing would, according to Oruka, lead to the unacceptable conclusion that “to be authentically philosophical, Africans must be indifferent to traditional Africa.”¹⁵

Oruka is correct, it seems to me, in arguing that a genuine African philosophy should not be indifferent to the traditional African belief systems and languages.¹⁶ This caveat is directed against the ideas expressed by members of the African professional school of philosophy. Yet there may be some misunderstanding here. For those theorists toward whom Oruka directs his criticisms do argue that African philosophers should neither ignore the traditional belief systems of Africa, nor overlook the possibilities of doing intellectual work in African languages.¹⁷

For example, Bodunrin states the following:

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 392.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ Hountondji, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

The African philosopher cannot *deliberately* ignore the study of the traditional belief systems of his people. Philosophical problems arise out of real life situations.¹⁸

Hountondji also argues that

there exists a considerable body of oral literature, esoteric or exoteric, the importance of which we are only beginning to suspect. We must have the patience to study it, analyse it, investigate its logic, its function and its merits.¹⁹

It also appears that Oruka's claim that philosophic sagacity is the movement in African philosophy best equipped to "give an all-acceptable decisive blow to the position of ethnophilosophy"²⁰ is not fully defensible since it can be shown that philosophic sagacity as defined by Oruka himself would seem to be an attempt at mere revision of the principles of ethnophilosophy.

The thesis put forward by Oruka that philosophic sagacity differs from ethnophilosophy (culture philosophy) on the grounds that philosophic sagacity entails critical and personal thought, while ethnophilosophy does not, again cannot be sustained. Clearly, any belief system must have been first initiated by an individual thinker or a restricted group of thinkers before becoming a generally accepted belief system. And the novelty of such belief systems would certainly derive their characterization from the fact that they must have been founded on critical analyses of existing belief systems.²¹

Again, Oruka's thesis that philosophic sagacity has a stronger claim than professional philosophy or nationalist-ideological philosophy to help in the development of a genuine African philosophy, on the basis that they are "generally suspected of smuggling Western techniques into African philosophy,"²² is surely

¹⁸ P.O. Bodunrin, "The Question of African Philosophy," *Philosophy*, 56, 1981, p. 173.

¹⁹ Hountondji, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

²⁰ Oruka, *op. cit.*, p. 384.

²¹ The belief systems of the majority of pre-colonial African societies were formulated for societies that were predominantly agricultural, i.e. societies that were essentially two steps away from industrial society. Thus their initial formulations must have raised questions about previous belief systems.

²² Oruka, *op. cit.*, p. 384.

open to criticism. In the first place, it is unclear what Oruka implies by “Western techniques.” It could be assumed, though, that these techniques would include the practice of formulating ideas by means of writing, for Oruka argues himself that philosophic sagacity differs from the general Western conception of philosophy only in that philosophic sagacity is not expressed in writing, but still demonstrates critical analyses and personal ideas—two main criteria of Western philosophy. Yet, it is difficult to see how any claim in favor of philosophic sagacity could be generally accepted unless there is proof available that it does exist. And what better methods of proving the case for philosophic sagacity than committing its representative ideas to writing or some form of recording that could be made easily available to the general philosophic community? Recall one of Oruka’s key points:

To exist as a philosopher it is not necessary that one’s thoughts must progress or be available to the future generation... Lack of knowledge of one’s or a people’s philosophy is not proof of the non-existence of such a philosophy.²³

This is true, but lack of knowledge of some phenomenon cannot also be regarded as proof of the existence of that phenomenon. The burden of proof rests with Oruka, for he must present proof of the existence of philosophic sagacity to interested parties. In fact, Oruka attempts to do so but begs the question in so doing when he demonstrates, *in writing*, that his own father was able to recall and transmit information purely by oral methods. There is no doubt that there were critical thinkers in pre-colonial Africa, but if the question of the viability of philosophic sagacity depends on their existence, then proof of their existence would be most readily achieved by employing the most effective modern techniques for so doing, i.e. by writing, and electronic tape recording. The only way in which Oruka could answer this query, it seems, is to invite the skeptic to witness first hand instances of philosophic sagacity, i.e. critical discussions of general philosophical concepts within an ethnic setting. Oruka couldn’t consistently prove his claims by

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

appeal to a modern philosophy journal: such a proof would be automatically a disproof.

I believe that Oruka's point is that a genuine modern African philosophy cannot subscribe to the professional philosophy model and remain "African philosophy." However, because of the inexorable advance of modern technology and the kinds of culture that accompany it, it is difficult to see how the question concerning the definition and direction of African philosophy could be answered without regard to modern ideas not necessarily generated within the context of traditional African society.²⁴ Yet, there are grounds for concern on the part of those who believe that intellectual work in general and philosophy in particular, in an African context, should seek an African orientation.

In order to examine this thesis, it is necessary to evaluate the role of professional philosophy as it is practiced in the African university environment.

Professional Philosophy: Professional philosophy as practiced in African universities is generally based on the Euro-American model. On these grounds it is understandable why some Western-trained African philosophers argue that written discourse and debate should be requirements for dialogue between members of the philosophical community. The point is also made that philosophical discourse within the African context should be carried on by means of discussions in journals, conferences, books, etc. On this basis, it is also argued that African philosophy is of recent origin. The situation is compounded by the fact that the modern universities in Africa are built on the model of the colonizers. Thus, apart from a small number of modifications, the content of university curricula and the methodology of instruction are essentially the same for both ex-metropolis and ex-colony. So, in this context, the discipline of philosophy means European philosophy from Plato

²⁴ The case discussed here is analogous to the progress made in the field of medicine as practiced in contemporary Africa: modern techniques are used, but traditional methods are also examined for their effectiveness or non-effectiveness from the standpoint of modern science.

to Sartre or Wittgenstein. Bodunrin's response to criticisms of this approach is that there are no requirements that African university departments of mathematics, physics, etc. teach African physics, African mathematics. Thus there are no compelling reasons why philosophy in an African context should be specifically African.²⁵

It would be useful, however, to argue that it is possible for the practice of physics in African universities to be carried out with an orientation different from that of, say, physics in English universities. Proof of the tenor of this point of view is had from the fact that the historical orientation of physics in France was somewhat different from that in the Anglo-Saxon world.²⁶ The reasons for this are that each of the above-mentioned societies evolved its own particular program in physics to meet the goals of that society. Thus, the point is not that the laws of physics (or science) are different for different societies, but that the interpretation and application of these laws may be different. For example, a society that is seeking to establish a firm modern technological base may place more emphasis on the practical applications or modifications of well-tried scientific theories than on purely theoretical research. It is in this context that one may justifiably speak of an African mathematics, physics, philosophy or otherwise.

But it would be an error to assume that the official professional philosophy of the African university is without redeeming value. In fact, it is a properly re-directed professional philosophy that affords the best mechanism whereby the future path of African society could be adequately analyzed. Hountondji, for example, recognizes the possible illusions engendered by an excessive orien-

²⁵ Bodunrin, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

²⁶ Maurice Crosland, *The Emergence of Science in Western Europe*, New York, Science History Publications, 1976, p. 9. Consider the following observations: "The concept of a 'French genius' distinct from an 'English genius' was presented by the distinguished French historian of science Pierre Duhem, who argued the case for national styles in physics. Duhem observed British physicists continually having recourse to mechanical models and wondered whether these had been inspired by the mills and factories of Victorian Britain. Duhem writes 'We thought we were entering the tranquil and neatly-ordered abode of reason but we found ourselves in a factory.' If the model was not normally a crude one of cogwheels and pulleys, it might be marbles or billiard balls to represent atoms or pieces of elastic to represent lines of force. However, the French or German physicist (and Duhem put them together) would see a field of force in terms of a mathematical equation. The basic difference of approach was most strikingly illustrated in physics."

tation of African philosophy towards the study of traditional belief systems. The same author makes the point of the stark contrast between the post-colonial political realities of Africa and the emphasis on the “ideological folklore” of ethnophilosophy.²⁷

Perhaps one way of resolving the issue concerning the foundations of contemporary African philosophy would be to locate the historical roots of African thought in the literate ideas of ancient Egyptian thought and medieval Africa²⁸ in conjunction with philosophical analyses of traditional ethnic belief systems. It is somewhat surprising the way in which some African philosophers accept the notion that the recording of ideas by writing is alien to African traditions. Wiredu, for example, states that “the African philosopher writing today has no long-standing tradition of written philosophy in his continent to draw upon.”²⁹ Hountondji also makes the claim that African philosophy is in its developmental stages.³⁰ The reason for this attitude, it seems to me, is that the mental geography of contemporary man in Africa is determined not only by his ethnic ethos but also by the particular accidents and whims of European colonization. Thus while it is difficult for the colonized African intellectual to experience much psychological empathy with the scholarship of medieval Africa or classical Egypt, he is much at ease with Christian theology and Greek philosophy. Consider, too, the case of the contemporary Christianized African (Catholic or Protestant according to the dictates of colonial caprice), who identifies strongly with Hebrew folktales and mythology transcribed over two thousand years ago, but may have little interest in the ethos of a neighboring African ethnic group.

On the matter of literate tradition, one may add that literacy, even in the industrialized societies, is a recent phenomenon. Just a few hundred years ago, the intelligentsia in Europe was forced

²⁷ Hountondji, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

²⁸ Available references for the philosophical thought of the ancient Egyptians are as follows: Walter Scott, *Hermetica*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1924; G.R.S. Mead, *Thrice Greatest Hermes*, London, John Watkins, 1949; A.J. Festugière and A.D. Nock, eds., *Corpus Hermeticum*, 4 vols., Paris, 1945-54. Students of literate medieval African thought could consider the following: Sadi, *Tarikh es Soudan*; Kati, *el Fettach*; Ahmed Baba, *Tekmilet ed dibadje*.

²⁹ Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 46.

³⁰ Hountondji, *op. cit.*, p. 170 *et seq.*

to communicate in the language of Latin. Yet Hobbes, Descartes and others believed that the writings of the Ancients (Greeks and Romans) were of particular importance to them despite the fact that Greek and Latin were alien languages. And it should be recognized, too, that the writings of the ancient Greeks were first translated from Arabic, the language into which these writings were translated and debated during the heyday of Moorish scholarship. The point is that a history of ideas in Africa cannot ignore its literate ideas.

But these ideas belong to another era, and the African problematic is one of the here-and-now. The best compromise is for the contemporary African philosopher to be cognizant of the literate and nonliterate traditions of Africa and to evaluate them in terms of their significance to the problems now being discussed by the contemporary African natural scientist, social scientist and writer. It seems to me that African philosophy would make much more useful contributions to modern Africa if it sought to help resolve questions raised by the African political scientist, economist, historian, technologist, *et al.* The African philosopher is admirably placed to bridge the gap between the ideologies that justified traditional social orders and those that accompany modern society in its various forms. The point is an important one since neither the contemporary African political scientist nor economist, for example, has really resolved the issues concerning the nature of the modern African state or economy. The ideas of the contemporary African researcher are usually identifiable as those of his metropolitan mentor.

Thus it is evident that the political and economic realities of contemporary Africa make it incumbent on professional philosophy to confront these realities, thereby assuming a direction different from that of orthodox professional philosophy. And its mode of confronting reality would be by means of the special empirical disciplines still not weaned from their metropolitan paradigms.

II

In this section, I would like to elaborate on the last point made above. I begin by asking the pragmatic question about philoso-

phy—what function can philosophy serve? In fact, there are good grounds for arguing that the ontological question about philosophy—what is philosophy?—does not fully explain philosophy since it presupposes the belief that philosophical ideas should be examined only from the standpoint of their intellectual content. According to this viewpoint, philosophy is to be regarded as the embodiment of thought for its own sake.

But I am inclined to believe that it is the pragmatic question about philosophy that would lead to a fuller understanding of philosophy in general. Thus, if philosophy is understood as a human product with its particular historical emphases, then it will be possible to understand more fully the potential historical role of philosophy in Africa.

In orthodox Western philosophical circles, there is the general belief that philosophical writings should be regarded first as examples of the exercise of reason for its own sake, and that philosophy is properly concerned to examine eternal questions like: what is truth? what is existence? what is the good? etc. One often hears that philosophy begins in wonder, which, it seems to me, is a kind of mystification of philosophy. To fully comprehend “philosophy” as an intellectual product, a *meta-analysis* of the activity of philosophy is necessary. Why, for example, is Plato generally regarded as a distinguished and famous philosopher and Protagoras not, or Kant (a rather obscure thinker), representative of the European mind at its best, rather than Wolfe? The reason for this, it seems to me, is that the societies in which these thinkers lived derived some pragmatic value (psychological or material) from accepting the ideas expressed by Plato rather than Protagoras, Kant rather than Wolfe. Philosophical thought like any human product derives its value according to its perceived usefulness. In this regard, one can map the career of philosophy in the West. Can we define philosophy, therefore, as any set of ideas which seeks to construct an ontology appropriate for a given age or era? A received philosophy may be defined, in the main, as any set of ideas that seeks to explain the world in terms coherent, understandable and empathetic to interested parties, groups or classes in society. The role of skepticism, criticism, probing epistemological questions, the hallmark of philosophy, are merely tools employed by those interested in replacing one ontology or world-view with another, or

defending a received ontology from the criticisms of others. In Western thought, for example, Hume's strictures against orthodox metaphysics were not without motive. And Marx is still quite unpopular in the West since his writings are not perceived as being in the interests of the intellectually and economically dominant classes there.

When a received philosophy loses its appeal it should be regarded in the history of thought as the truth of an age—an ideology. Of course, this is not to deny that individual philosophers may be genuinely and personally concerned to explain the world as it appears to them. But individual versions of truth are rejected or gain in popularity in terms of their being truths for or against a given world-view. Witness, therefore, the construction of European philosophy from Plato to Quine with negative ratings for generally regarded controversial thinkers like Marx. It would appear, then, that Western philosophy as a whole is in reality a construction, a device which served and serves practical social needs. Philosophy in the West first sought to offer a general intellectual support for societies greatly influenced both by Greek thought and Christian doctrine. A happy conciliation between economic interests and technological pursuits led to the final validation of the usefulness of organized empirical knowledge. The result of this was the supersession of philosophy by empirical science as a means of understanding and exploiting nature. It is in this regard that two dominant post-medieval schools of thought, rationalism and empiricism, prepared the way for the theoretical foundations of modern science. And the theory of modern scientific methodology was increasingly being applied to all modes of human experience. Thus all facets of human behavior were being subjected to scientific analysis.

The significance of the above for the career of professional philosophy in Africa is as follows: the function of philosophy in the West can be viewed as being instrumental in shaping the ideological and technological outlook of that particular civilization. The construction of European philosophy was indeed a self-conscious effort on the part of European thinkers to utilize the most complex products of human thought to fashion a self-interested civilization. Thus those African thinkers who are concerned to formulate an African philosophy might want to reflect on the fact that the shapers of articulate European thought sought

little inspiration from the genuinely traditional European thought systems: those of the Gauls, the Vandals, the Celts, the Normans, the Visigoths, the Vikings, etc. Articulate European thought was founded rather on the sophisticated literate thought of those ancient Greek thinkers whose ideas were borrowed, then analyzed for the needs of that civilization. But despite the fact that there is some doubt as to whether classical Greek thought could be properly recognized as European thought,³¹ it nevertheless served as the foundations of medieval European thought. I assume too that the same kinds of claims could be made for the historical careers of the thought systems of Asian civilization.

Given the above analysis of the career of European philosophy, the question as to the specific causes why contemporary European philosophy has developed the way it has, necessarily arises.

Three trends are noticeable in contemporary European thought: (1) orthodox philosophical analysis concerned with the analysis of concepts and their meanings. Philosophical analysis is not generally expected to add to the existing fund of knowledge, or to offer prescriptions as to ethical conduct. This evolutionary end result of philosophy is found more in the Anglo-American universities than elsewhere. It is less so on the continent of Europe where philosophical movements like phenomenology and existentialism, with their more human concerns, are quite popular. (2) Marx's attempts to present human thought not as an end in itself but as a heuristic means to aid man in his struggle against nature, may be regarded as another evolutionary result of European thought. Thus one witnesses, from the Marxist viewpoint, all the special disciplines being influenced by Marx's philosophy. (3) One witnesses, too, the phenomenon of the special research disciplines having broken away from philosophy, but inheriting at the same time theoretical assumptions derived from philosophical inquiry. How else could

³¹ Recall that the Greeks had no notion of Greece being a part of Europe. Furthermore, a sober anthropological analysis of the Greek physical type and Greek culture both ancient and modern would favor describing Greek civilization as not really European. An African visitor to Greece would immediately recognize that Greek cuisine, music, racial type and general culture are not what one would expect of Europeans. If Greek culture (ancient and modern) is not truly European then what is it? Middle Eastern? Asiatic? Afro-Asiatic? If any of these, then what should one make of the received doctrine that Western thought began with the Greeks?

one explain the different schools of thought and paradigms in the special disciplines?

III

In light of the above, the theoreticians of philosophy in an African context must attempt to construct a modern African philosophy with the notion that its formulation would be geared towards helping in the development of a modern African civilization. Any analysis of the contemporary world demonstrates that the more successful civilizations are those which are the most technologically advanced.³² Recall that man's confrontation with nature is mediated by (1) his knowledge of the workings of nature, including himself, and (2) the level of sophistication of the tools he employs in his exploitation of nature. It is also clear that man's knowledge of the workings of nature determines the kinds of technology he fashions for his own usage. Since man's knowledge about the natural world is not acquired instinctively, societies, in general, provide training centers in which instruction on the knowledge of the world is passed on to their members so that this instruction is eventually employed in the maintenance of the social order.

It is instructive to point out that this educational instruction may be divided into two parts: (1) knowledge of the natural world and of the applications of different forms of technology to this world, and (2) instruction in the relevant value judgements and cultural assumptions necessary for the maintenance of the society in question. Again, historical research shows that a society's value judgements are ultimately determined by man's knowledge of the natural world and the application of this knowledge to forms of technology.

Thus philosophy in the African context must pay attention to the above observation. Its function should be to help in the imparting of knowledge of the natural and social world and to assist in the constant discussion of the optimal set of value judgements

³² The idea expressed here has been vigorously defended by Marcien Towa in *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle*, Yaoundé, Editions Clé, 1971. Towa argues that it is only by assimilating and acquiring the scientific techniques of the European world that African society could make material progress, a necessity for the gaining of true independence.

and cultural assumptions that social man must make to take the fullest advantage of the sum of scientific knowledge available.

An examination of the thought systems of the technologically advanced societies demonstrates that the educational instruction of those members of society necessary for its functioning has been taken over by disciplines that may be regarded as the intellectual descendants of philosophy: the natural sciences and the social sciences. Philosophy proper is relegated, for the most part, to the history of ideas, mainly in the form of textual analyses of the original writings of philosophers, (2) studies in the methodology of the special sciences, (3) analysis of concepts and terms, and (4) subjective reflections on the human condition. Yet the important point to recognize is that modern Western society does not look to philosophy for solutions to technological and social problems. Philosophical debates, if they are of any importance at all, are carried on within the special disciplines themselves but for purposes and orientations peculiar to given social and political contexts.

It would be an error, therefore, for the philosopher in the African context to assume that philosophy as it is practiced in the Western world should serve as a model for the practice of philosophy. A useful approach, it seems, would be to regard philosophical activity as an engaging in theoretical analysis of issues and ideas of practical concern. But in modern society, it is the social and natural sciences that discuss ideas and issues relevant to practical concerns. Thus the practice of philosophy in the African context should be concerned first with the analysis of the methodology and content of the social sciences, etc. for it is the methodology of research of a given discipline that determines the orientation of research in that discipline and the kinds of solutions to problems ultimately proposed. Furthermore, analysis of the methodology of the sciences of human behavior would be constantly alert to the notion that the modes and objects of human thought are potentially value-laden. And this is indeed the case with the existent research programs in African universities, inherited as they are from the colonial period.

In this connection, it would also be incumbent on the African philosophers to raise questions concerning the epistemological basis for the analysis of human behavior in terms of the special disciplines. In other words, is it possible, for example, to fully

understand man as an economic being without paying attention to the total sociological man? Or can one fully understand political institutions without regard for the study of history, etc.? These theoretical questions are of practical concern in matters relating to the formulation of university curricula, critically important for the training of adequate manpower. In these critical times, the African philosopher's contributions to African development in the areas of economic theory, political theory, historiography, anthropology, and the other sciences of human behavior should be of significance. For, by the very nature of his enterprise, most of which consists of critical analysis, the philosopher is less paradigm-bound than his social science colleague, more inclined to see how the particular fits into the universal—to see the whole picture. As an historical note, it is no accident that Marx, one of the great theoreticians of the social sciences, was trained in philosophy.

Again, the practice of philosophy in the African context should be much concerned with the study of the methodology and applications of the natural sciences and their relationships to the social sciences. And the point to be recognized is that despite the evident universality of the methodology of the natural sciences, it is still instructive to recognize that the pursuit of empirical science is not just simply a matter of performing experiments: the methodology of scientific research is founded on a number of important theoretical assumptions which, if recognized by the researcher, could lead to investigative approaches that are more creative, hence potentially more fruitful. In this regard, it is instructive to consider the importance of the theoretical analysis of the foundations of empirical science as a possible encouragement for research. The role of theoretical analysis of scientific research in Africa is evident. Economic development and technological development usually proceed simultaneously.

Yet the above discussion and proposals require some comment about the modes whereby such ideas may be implemented. It has been argued above that the history of ideas in Europe may be understood as being partially determined by the material and psychological needs of that society. It follows, therefore, that there are no commanding reasons why the structure and orientation of knowledge in African society should correspond exactly to those of ex-metropolitan Europe. In this connection, and in the light of

what has been discussed, a review of the academic status of philosophy in African universities is in order.

It would be useful, for example, if the methodological issue concerning the different disciplines themselves be discussed from within the context of the disciplines themselves. Thus the philosophy of the social sciences would be pursued from within the confines of the various social sciences. The same requirement holds for theoretical discussions on the natural sciences. One might also consider the hypothesis that discussions of the methodological issues in the special areas of knowledge be more competently carried out by those who have had extensive training in the relevant disciplines. Given the above, I recommend, therefore, that further research in theoretical and methodological issues beyond the most advanced degree hitherto granted in African universities be required in order to generate adequate competence in the area of philosophical analysis.³³ Thus the researcher concerned to examine theoretical issues in, say, applied physics would be trained to the level of physicists practicing in that area and beyond. Also, philosophers concerned to examine the theory and content of traditional African thought would have had training in linguistics and cognate disciplines. I assume that the results of this remodeling of the received systems of instruction in the African context would do much to shape modern modes of inquiry to fit African realities and to encourage creativity in research.

IV

Although a number of issues have been discussed above, this essay's main purpose is to discuss a possible methodology for a modern African philosophy. It is generally agreed that there is some sensed intellectual discomfort at the idea of philosophy in

³³ The mode of implementation of this new program is subject to discussion. But the idea is a useful one. One might consider as a working model the practice in Western medical schools of requiring that further research of two years beyond training in medical school be engaged in before competence in psychiatry be achieved. Consider, too, the practice in some European countries of offering more than one type of most advanced degree. French universities, for example, offer three kinds of doctorates each requiring different amounts of research.

contemporary Africa being a replication of philosophy as practiced in the ex-metropolis. The genesis of the concepts of “traditional African philosophy” and “philosophic sagacity” derives from this issue. But I argued above that there are questions as to how traditional African philosophy and philosophic sagacity fit into the new scheme of things in contemporary Africa. I believe that intellectual effort in the African context should be much geared to the training of personnel in modern techniques of natural and social scientific inquiry, appropriate for applications in the ongoing transformation of society. Clearly, whatever beliefs and theoretical ideas that characterize traditional African thought systems, that are proven vital for contemporary development, are to be nurtured and incorporated into the social philosophies and technological orientation of modern Africa. In this context, research in traditional African thought systems has an important role to play.

But if the pursuit of research in traditional African thought is to serve the narrow purpose of proving to others that “Africans knew how to think consistently before colonial times,” and that “African world-views were not inherently irrational,” then it is difficult to see how this debate could be of any great moment in the current transformations taking place in African society. Perhaps purely academic debates among minorities of university scholars can be afforded in the universities of the Euro-American world, but there is some doubt as to the viability of similar kinds of debates in African universities.

A cursory study of any African language demonstrates that consistency and coherence of expression should be taken for granted. How else could there be intralinguistic communication within a given society, unless consistency and coherence were assumed on the part of its members?³⁴ It seems to me that the old colonial

³⁴ It would seem to me that any language that contains terms for conjunctions, negation and disjunction, equality and inequality, and prepositions denoting spatial positions already contains the essentials for consistent logical thought. Soussou is one of the urban languages of West Africa and a cursory examination of its basic structure reveals a language equipped to formulate consistent propositions and to pose questions and answers, a necessary requirement for scientific inquiry. For example, the term “*mufera*” suggests an explanatory “why,” while “*nba*” introduces an explanation. Furthermore, “*xa...nba*” corresponds to “if... then,” or “either...or,” constructions that are crucial for scientific and logical explanation. The answer to the Levy-Bruhls is not to demonstrate that traditional African thought contains

ideology that dichotomized the worlds of Europe and Africa as those of reason and unreason is obsolete. The problem of Africa today is that of adapting modern techniques and modes of knowing to societies being transformed from those in which the most important factor of production was man himself, to those in which the machine constitutes the major factor of production. Of course, the traditional beliefs concomitant with the traditional society are giving way to new beliefs. And the important question arises as to what should be the nature of the new beliefs.

A study of the historical development of European and Asian societies demonstrates that important ideological debates and subsequent transformations of social orders and accompanying modes of thought were witnessed in Europe and those parts of Asia now in the age of modern technology. Research will also show that a similar function is demanded of those who, in the African context, engage in intellectual pursuits.

V

The discussion in this paper was engendered by the question raised by Oruka concerning the status of African philosophy. Oruka's thesis that philosophic sagacity replace ethnophilosophy as a legitimate representative of the foundations of African thought was criticized on the grounds that the assumed distinction between ethnophilosophy and philosophic sagacity was not supportable. It was also argued that if the definition of philosophy as proposed by Oruka were accepted, i.e. philosophy as consistent and coherent, though unwritten thought, then there may be some problem in demonstrating this claim without recourse to some publicly recognized medium of recording, like writing. But then this would contradict the thesis that philosophical ideas need not be expressed in writing to be regarded as philosophy. It was also mentioned, as an aside, that if the orthodox definition of philosophy as critical, written thought were accepted, then there was an evident philos-

cosmological concepts but to show that the spoken language in question is founded on a set of syntactical rules that can support complex empirical analysis. The appropriate methodology should proceed along the lines of the above.

ophical tradition in Africa: the recorded philosophical ideas of the ancient Egyptians and scholars of medieval Africa.

Oruka was also concerned to show that contemporary African philosophers would be ill-advised to ignore the belief systems of traditional Africa in their quests to establish a viable African philosophy. There was also the impression given in his paper that Oruka regarded philosophy as a discipline which ought to be pursued for its own sake.³⁵ Curiously enough, Oruka does not recognize that this definition of philosophy is the modern Euro-American definition of philosophy, especially in Anglo-American circles. It was pointed out above that philosophy has often served in an ideological capacity in the course of history.

Given the fact that in recent times the ideological function of philosophy has been usurped by the special disciplines, philosophy, in the West, is not regarded as a discipline of much practical importance. It has become essentially an intellectual praise-song to Western civilization.

In this paper, a different path and function were proposed for philosophy in an African context. It was proposed above that philosophy in contemporary Africa should be concerned not only with theoretical analysis but also within its practical applications. Thus philosophy has an important role to play in the debate concerning solutions to the social and technical problems faced by societies undergoing social transformation. It was also pointed out that the question of the role of traditional African thought systems in contemporary African philosophy is meaningful mainly in this context. This paper attempts to promote, therefore, the following conception of philosophy in the African context: a dynamic philosophy in the vanguard of each of the research disciplines, committed to the formulation of new or modified concepts and modes of knowing appropriate for social and technological development.

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³⁵ Oruka, *op. cit.*, p. 391.