

IN MEMORIAM

Africa and the Possibility of Philosophy: Paulin Hountondji's Intellectual Legacy

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Abstract

In this brief memoriam, I argue that Hountondji's methodological concern over the possibility of African philosophy led him to query the very idea of philosophy as the search for universal knowledge. Hountondji's lasting legacy thus consists, among other things, in challenging the image of Western philosophy as the repository of universal knowledge. To the contrary, philosophy will come into its own only through the critical construction of culturally and politically unrestricted discourse from different philosophical traditions.

Keywords: ethnophilosophy; extraverted knowledge; oral thought; philosophy as science; particulars versus universals

In his philosophical autobiography, *The Struggle for Meaning* (2002, French original 1997), Hountondji recounts how, having successfully defended his doctoral thesis on Edmund Husserl, he arrived at a startling conclusion: “to publish on Husserl was not the obvious thing for an African academic [to do]. But if such [was] the case, why research on Husserl as I had just done? Why lecture on Husserl endlessly, as I had just done for three years in Besançon, and was probably going to continue doing in Lovanium University in Kinshasa?” (73). The young Hountondji realized that there was the question of the public he would—and should—be addressing: the African public. However, “too many conditions still had to be met for Africa to be able to listen, without a feeling of self-repudiation or distraction, to a discourse on Husserl, or on any other such author or doctrine anointed by the Western philosophical tradition” (74). Hountondji concluded that “the time was not right”—that he would not be able to devote himself to Husserl studies, he would instead have to address the very possibility of philosophy in Africa.

What, then, were those times—why was it right to consider the possibility of philosophy in Africa? Among the other philosophical giants of postindependence Africa—Peter Bodunrin, Kwame Gyekye, Ifeanyi Menkiti, Odera Oruka, Kwasi Wiredu—Hountondji remains renowned for his abiding preoccupation with philosophical method: what *is* African philosophy and *how* should Africans engage in it? These questions have never been raised as insistently in relation to Western philosophical thinking, but it is clear that the question of African philosophy eventually resolved itself, for Hountondji, into the question of the possibility of philosophy in general.

In retrospect, this move from African philosophy in particular to philosophy in general is unsurprising. All first-generation postindependent African thinkers were educated in the respective metropolises of their former colonial powers: in the case of the Beninois Hountondji this was l'Ecole Supérieur in Paris. As such, it was inevitable that these thinkers' philosophical education would be steeped in the respective colonial traditions: French philosophy for Hountondji; Anglo-American for Wiredu, say, and for Menkiti. But within Western philosophy in general, the African connection goes much deeper: in contrast to the begrudging recognition of Confucianism, say, or Vedic and Islamic thinking, an image of Africa as the place of unreason has long been a mainstay of Western thought. For Hountondji, this long-standing negative image of Africa culminated in the 1945 publication by Placide Tempels—a missionary in what was then Belgian Congo—of a book on *Bantu Philosophy* (Imprimatur 1952, original French version 1945). Ironically, Tempels' declared intention was one of philosophical rehabilitation: against received Western wisdom, he contended that Africans could think rationally and that the Bantu did possess a coherent philosophy or “worldview.” However, Tempels also claimed that the Bantu were not reflexively aware of these facts about themselves: it still took a European to set that worldview out systematically both to the Bantu themselves and to the rest of the world.

Tempels' book provoked Hountondji's ire: he was incensed at Tempels' uncritical equation of philosophy with a “worldview”; but what infuriated him even more was the portrayal of “African philosophy” in terms of a timeless, unchanging collective unconscious. Far from putting to rest Western assumptions about African primitivism, Tempels' book ended up underwriting these prejudices by placing African philosophy in a category of its own: unselfconscious, uncritical, collectivist. In sharp criticism, Hountondji labelled Tempels' work “ethnophilosophy”: ethnology that masqueraded as philosophy.

Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy was eventually published as a book entitled *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1983, French original 1976). In it, Hountondji not only took Tempels and his followers to task for juxtaposing African collective thought to Western individual thought; he also derided the idea of philosophy as a “worldview,” countering it with his conception of the discipline as a science that had to meet standards of rigor, systematicity, rational communicability, and critical reflection. As a science, philosophy depended on constant critique, revision, and refinement among a community of scholars who engaged with one another's written arguments. These requirements led Hountondji to conclude that African philosophy exists in the future, not in the past.

Africa's oral traditions, though they contained much wisdom, did not qualify as philosophy in the strictly scientific sense.

African Philosophy: Myth and Reality divided the growing community of African academic philosophers. Many came to Tempels' defence—including Tempels' close followers, Alexis Kagame of Rwanda and John Mbiti of Kenya. Other critics included Oruka Odero of Kenya and Kwame Gyekye of Ghana, who objected less to Hountondji's critique of Tempels and more to his branding of the oral African tradition as "ethnophilosophy." Some of his critics charged that Hountondji was no less Eurocentric than Tempels: his conception of philosophy as a science merely revealed his debts to the French rationalist curriculum he had imbibed in Paris. Others were more sympathetic: Kwasi Wiredu of Ghana and Peter Bodunrin of Nigeria shared Hountondji's view of philosophy as a discipline, the critical rigor of which depends on its written form: even if much wisdom was contained in the oral tradition, to designate it as philosophy was anachronistic by the standards of professional (academic) philosophy.

The Struggle for Meaning describes the lively debate engendered by Hountondji's views on ethnophilosophy; the book also recounts Hountondji's gradual modification and refinement of his position, which crystalized into a contrast between the particular and the universal. Hountondji conceded that his wholesale rejection of African oral traditions had been premature—indeed, perhaps he had been overly harsh in his criticisms of Tempels' work. Despite its many flaws, the latter had inspired the systematization and written articulation by many African thinkers of formerly orally transmitted insights and beliefs. Much like Wiredu, who distinguished between folk philosophy and academic philosophy, so Hountondji belatedly acknowledged that philosophy as science—academic philosophy—grows out of the individual thinker's particular context and culturally inflected experiences. Whilst Hountondji did not give up on his conception of philosophy as science, and whilst he did not go so far as to concede that culturally engendered worldviews qualify as philosophies, his refined claim was that philosophy as science necessarily begins in reflection on local contexts and beliefs. This revision led to a new insight—one in respect of which Hountondji's position is distinct from that of Wiredu.

As noted, Wiredu distinguished between folk philosophy—the particular—and academic philosophy—the search for) the universal. In his work on the subject, Wiredu demonstrated how a number of philosophical concepts that pass for "universals" in the Western philosophical canon fail to apply in his Akan linguistic context: Wiredu designated these concepts "false universals"—they claimed universal validity yet possessed no more than culturally specific validity. Although Wiredu's analyses showed that Western philosophical thought is itself more particularist than its universalistic self-image suggests, Wiredu is philosophically committed to the givenness of a determinate, culture-transcending human nature. What that nature is like had been misidentified by the Western tradition; however, a renewed focus on the issue by African and Western thinkers alike can lead to convergence on that which is of universal validity for all humans, whatever their particular cultural contexts.

Hountondji's position is different. Although Hountondji agrees with Wiredu that numerous Western philosophical concepts constitute "false universals," and

although he further agrees that this necessitates a comprehensive revision of the Western philosophical corpus, he does not think of the universal as a given waiting to be discovered. One way in which to specify the difference between Wiredu and Hountondji is to say that, for Wiredu, the philosophical universal is substantive: it is indexed to a determinate, if frequently misidentified, human nature. In that case, what that nature truly is like is in principle discoverable by anyone. In principle, Western philosophy might have discovered true universals about a determinate human nature, even if it turns out that, in fact, it didn't. By contrast, for Hountondji it is impossible to alight on the philosophical universal unless all who have a stake in this debate are heard on the matter. For Hountondji the very possibility of philosophical universals depends on scholarly inclusivity. Hountondji's philosophical universal is thus discursively established and dynamic: it is that which emerges at any given point from genuinely equal and open scholarly debate and remains, moreover, continually contestable and revisable.

But if the philosophical universal is a function of universally accessible discourse, then the conditions for free and equal philosophical exchange needed to be created. It is perhaps at this point that the politics of philosophy became increasingly obvious to Hountondji. Investigating the politics of philosophy took the form of inquiring into the historical and institutional conditions of knowledge creation. What better place to start than the university system itself, with its divisions into so many distinct yet interrelated disciplines! Philosophy had historically been at the helm of the Western university set-up. We saw that the Western philosophical tradition explicitly excluded Africans from possible participation in rational discourse on grounds of their supposed a-rationality. With the increasing differentiation of academic disciplines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Africans were excluded from these as well. Moreover, when shortly before independence colonial powers did establish universities in colonial capitals, these taught the very curriculum that Africans had for centuries being debarred from. The long-term consequence was what, borrowing from Samir's economic analysis, Hountondji called "extraverted knowledge": "what struck me was the similarity between the structure of economic activity and that of intellectual and scientific activity in the colonial context" (227); "the theoretical demand comes from elsewhere, just like the economic demand" (229). Extraverted knowledge is the acquisition and dissemination in (post-) colonial contexts of forms of knowledge that are rooted in alien social and cultural contexts, and hence more often than not inadequate to the challenges of African contexts. Given its longevity as well as its institutional embeddedness, the dislocation of extraverted knowledge and its replacement by forms of scientific inquiry and knowledge production that are relevant to African contexts came to be recognized by Hountondji as a challenge that began in philosophy yet extended beyond it into virtually all disciplines of theoretical inquiry.

What, then, is Hountondji's philosophical legacy? I think the record here all too briefly narrated speaks for itself. I shall simply return to my opening remarks—and to the poignancy of Hountondji's initial recognition that, in his case, the time for Husserl scholarship was not right—he needed instead to

consider and respond to his particular research context. *The Struggle for Meaning* speaks of a “pause” in this regard, as if Hountondji initially expected the interlude to be temporary and to take up his Husserl studies where he had left off. Instead, the “pause” became Hountondji’s life work—his philosophical subject matter became the possibility of doing philosophy itself. In this inquiry, Hountondji proved relentless, and relentlessly honest. His initial apparent optimism regarding Africa’s philosophical future—her equal participation in universal discourse—gave way in later years to an acknowledgement of the enormity of the task in addressing—and redressing—the problem of extraverted knowledge. One might persuade oneself that the problem of philosophy raised by Hountondji is a specifically African problem. This is not so. In accounting for what it would take for philosophical discourse to be truly universal, and thereby live up to its own self-image, Hountondji, like Wiredu, confronted the Western tradition with its own history of exclusions. This means that Hountondji’s methodological inquiries are as relevant to Western philosophy as they are to African philosophy. One might sum up Hountondji’s lifelong question in a Kierkegaardian manner: “among the philosophers, is there a philosopher?” In Hountondji’s own case we can, I think, answer in the affirmative.

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