

Introduction

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The Challenge of this Special Issue

The challenge undertaken by the contributors to this special issue is that of providing the readers with new perspectives regarding African philosophy. This challenge should be read as twofold: on the one hand, as perspectives *about* the field and on the other, as perspectives *within* it.

In the first sense, the new perspectives provided here consider African philosophy as an established discipline and suggest novel and innovative approaches to strengthen, enrich, and widen the scope of the field. In the second sense, the aim is to reread or reassess existing debates and situations within the field itself, focusing primarily on discussing African authors and concepts or political issues related to the African context. In any case, the perspectives offered here share the same feature: they are all original understandings aiming at fostering and furthering discussions about and within African philosophy beyond traditional approaches to this discipline.

Struggling With Tradition

Most contributors have chosen to overtly depart from tradition in examining their objects. However, a careful reader will notice a situation I did not wish to conceal or arbitrarily silence by harmonizing the different argumentative paths followed in this volume.¹ Indeed, although all authors seem to agree on the fact that decolonization is a vital need for philosophy in any considered tradition, meticulous readers might witness that performing the action of decolonizing the philosophical discourse is a highly challenging task because established concepts and conventional wisdom resist this endeavor more or less actively, more or less consciously. And unsurprisingly, the first concept to resist decolonization is that of philosophy itself.

Traditionally—which, to a large extent, also means colonially—philosophical reflection is associated with the higher faculty of knowledge, commonly referred to as ‘reason.’ It is therefore seen as a product of rationality, by which human beings are considered different from non-humans but also from not-quite-human individuals and societies with the vigorous and more or less explicit distinction between civilization and primitivism that also roughly traditionally aligns with the distinction between Europe and all the others.² The historical and academic quarrel over African philosophy initiated in the 1940s proceeded undoubtedly from these premises, whether on the European or the African sides, as some proponents assumed that the term philosophy bears some specific characteristics associated—in proper or not—with the historical and intellectual development of this discipline in Europe, while some opponents challenged this affirmation by claiming a specific, cultural, and racial nature of philosophy, by which this term changes its meaning, signification, and expectations when one moves from one context—whether considered initial or not—to another. On each side, philosophy identifies as the rationalized form that takes on the claim to authenticity: either people—mostly reactionary

in this respect—do not want to share it with others³ or only under specific—and allegedly rigorous—circumstances and conditions,⁴ or people—mostly revolutionary in the same respect and sometimes with regard to their honest and profound ambition—aspire to participate in it as the ultimate expression of their rightful appurtenance to humanity. As such, philosophy unavoidably exerted a remarkable fascination. For the most part, this fascination still plays a decisive role in narrating the history of philosophy and presenting the stakes in African philosophy. Consequently, one can still agree with Kwasi Wiredu that conceptual decolonization is an imperative in contemporary African philosophy (see Wiredu).

The contributors to this volume prove to be aware of what is at stake in traditional concepts and distinctions, especially when applied from the outside to a context and people who were considered, not very far ago, foreign to any kind of rationality and, therefore, to philosophy. The noticeable philosophical tension between decolonizing approaches to concepts, distinctions, ideas, etc., and the maintaining of their original colonial functioning with regard to African philosophy reflects the concrete political tensions these options rest on and carry in their wake. Ultimately, this tension reminds the readers that decolonization is neither a view of the mind invented only by dishonest or lazy intellectual ‘activists’ to bring to the forefront irrelevant issues designed for their personal interests. Nor is it a granted situation whose claimed benefits are already established, following the political account of the concept.

By its form and organization, this volume testifies to the fact that decolonization is an ongoing struggle—not only in African philosophy but in philosophy in general—that none of the authors gathered here would claim to have settled.

Presentation

Evaristus Emeka Isife’s paper opens this special issue by providing a “critical synthesis” of decolonization in African philosophy, examining the corollaries between the two concepts. In its first three sections, the paper offers definitions of crucial concepts: colonialism, decolonization, and African philosophy. The crux of the paper is undoubtedly its penultimate section, where Isife not only identifies crucial areas in urgent need of decolonization in the African context but also suggests what decolonizing these areas would mean and imply. The paper concludes that decolonization is not only a theoretical matter but also touches on social and political institutions. As such, it aims at affirming African voices on the global scene.

The following two papers mainly have a theoretical focus as they seek to open traditional approaches to philosophy to new concepts and influences. Michaela Ott’s paper does this in relation to German philosophy, while Lawrence Ogbo Ugwuanyi advocates for an account of creative arts in African philosophy.

Ott’s paper revisits traditional European perspectives on the person by providing a new paradigm to understand personhood. This new paradigm, which Ott calls *dividuation*, emphasizes that the person is the product of necessary and unavoidable entanglements with others, especially at the social level. As such, the definition of the individual must acknowledge this situation by which an ‘individual’ is never separated from the influence of other individuals. Thus, an individual is directly at the core of a network of interactions that help define their identity. Ott goes on to show, with interesting detail, how this approach to personhood resonates with similar endeavors in African and Antillean philosophy aiming at capturing this particular situation, a view confirmed by a later piece in this volume by Justin Sands.

Lawrence Ogbo Ugwuanyi’s paper takes on a traditionally overlooked aspect of African philosophy, namely its relationship to creative arts. Central to Ugwuanyi’s argument is the idea that creative arts can—and therefore should—inform the African philosophical practice by offering new venues of expression by which creativity can support the development and the vulgarization of philosophy on the continent. With examples taken from the traditional Igbo

intellectual and cultural context, Ugwuanyi shows how philosophical thought and creativity are interrelated and how contemporary African philosophy can use this situation to its benefit to seek popular relevance beyond the academic spheres, which Ugwuanyi poetically refers to as “pen and paper.”

The next group of papers addresses two political issues in Ethiopia and Cape Verde, respectively.

Eskendir Sintayehu Kassaye’s paper is concerned with modernity in Ethiopia and interrogates the significant challenges to democracy and modernization in this country. Kassaye aptly reminds the reader of the debate on tradition and modernity in African philosophy and shows how, to some extent, the same debate persists in contemporary Ethiopian politics, where people disagree about the foundations on which to build Ethiopian political modernity. Drawing intensively on Messay Kebede’s work, Kassaye argues that what hinders the advent of political modernity, namely democracy, in Ethiopia is, on the political level, the resistance to the idea of political membership that transcends traditional criteria, such as ethnicity and religion, and on the practical level, poverty, structural injustices, and the absence of a proper Ethiopian bourgeoisie.

In a sense, Kassaye’s paper interrogates contemporary Ethiopian political identity, which is somewhat what Andrew Bumstead’s paper does in relation to Cape Verde, however, with a clear emphasis on the linguistic aspect of the concept of identity in a postcolonial context. Bumstead examines the sociopolitical content of the two languages spoken in Cape Verde, namely Kriolu and Portuguese, and their interactions in everyday life. Bumstead concludes that those interactions display a postcolonial linguistic crisis in the country, whose origins and manifestations he explores by explaining, for example, the construction of Cape Verde as a Portuguese colony and the birth of Kriolu as a subversive language to resist Portuguese oppression. The paper ends by suggesting a solution to this crisis, namely acknowledging the unique hybridity of Cape Verde’s linguistic and, thus, sociopolitical identity.

The following two articles clarify certain concepts within African philosophy from two different perspectives. The first focuses on traditional philosophical systems in Congo and Nigeria through the Baluba and Yorùbá concepts of *ntu* and *àṣẹ*, while the second examines a modern reappraisal of the Akan conception of personhood by Kwasi Wiredu.

In their paper, Angela Roothaan and Saheed Adesumbo Bello provide a much-welcome genealogical analysis of the concept of ‘vital force’ popularized by Belgian missionary Placide Tempels in his seminal *Bantu Philosophy*. Through a detailed analysis, the paper shows how the concept of ‘vital force’ results from translating original Dutch words employed by Tempels, namely *levenskracht*, *levensterkte*, and *sterkte*. In doing so, Roothaan and Bello renew the scholarship on Tempels, particularly his *Bantu Philosophy*, by addressing the issue of the translation of his work and how the latter affected Tempels’ original intent, which they consider anticolonial.⁵ The most striking effort of Roothaan and Bello, however, lies in the comparison between the concept of vital force and the Yorùbá concept of *àṣẹ*, as expressed in *Ifá*, the Yorùbá divination and knowledge system. Drawing on an insightful interpretation of *àṣẹ*, Roothaan and Bello establish intercultural intersections between the two concepts and point to their current relevance in African philosophy.

Justin Sands’ paper examines Kwasi Wiredu’s conception of personhood, notably his argument that as a status, personhood is earned rather than granted by virtue of being born a human. In this respect, personhood is a quality whose characteristics must be recognized by one’s community as demonstrated by an individual within it. One way of acknowledging the originality of this perspective is to contrast it with Kant’s views on the person, which he conceives primarily as an abstract entity one must approach idealistically and only then practically. On Wiredu’s side, however, things are reversed, and the person is primarily a practical entity and only then an idealistic one. In short, in Wiredu’s enterprise, anthropology replaces metaphysics as the first philosophy, a position that entails several consequences in terms of conceptual decolonization,

especially concerning the dialectics of the universal and the particular as it relates to the dialectics between African and European traditions.

The last set of papers delves into ongoing debates within African philosophy. These debates include the interpretation of traditional philosophical systems, the exegesis of influential books, and the introduction of new methods to support the development of African philosophy as an established discipline.

Abidemi Israel Ogunyomi's paper explores the Yorùbá thought system from the perspective offered by the question of evil. Departing from E. O. Odùwólé's and Kazeem Fáyẹmí's interpretations of this issue, Ogunyomi proposes an existential approach according to which the philosophical problem of evil arises in Yorùbá thought with regard to the very existence of the Yorùbá person and the Yorùbá society, hence, his reference to existentialism. Ogunyomi's argument runs as follows. First, he presents some contentions and (mis)conceptions related to the problem of evil in Yorùbá thought, in particular regarding the nature and relationships of *Ibi* (evil) to *Ire* (good), the attributes of Olódùmarè, the Yorùbá God, and Kazeem Fáyẹmí's claim that the only relevant philosophical formulation of the problem of evil is logical. Second, he articulates, in a compelling way, his existentialist conception of evil in Yorùbá thought with examples (primarily proverbs, sayings, and *Ifá*) from the Yorùbá culture.

Adoulou N. Bitang's paper challenges the conventional agreement on Fabien Eboussi Boulaga's most famous philosophical essay. By delving into the relationship between this book and Marcien Towa's philosophical views and convictions, the paper sets the stage for a thought-provoking discussion that aims to clarify the critical extent of Eboussi Boulaga's book with regard to this central figure of the debate on African philosophy in the 1960s–1980s. Drawing on the preface to *Muntu in Crisis*, Bitang examines two case studies whose findings allow him to refute the claim that Eboussi Boulaga criticizes Marcien Towa in his book. However, evidence from the same preface suggests that contrary to popular belief, there is a clear filiation between Eboussi Boulaga and Towa, which the former even explicitly acknowledges.

In his paper, Jaco Louw explores the extent to which philosophical counseling can relate to African philosophy. He identifies two main issues the philosophical counseling discourse shows, namely method and disinterest in non-European philosophical traditions. On the first issue, Louw argues that contrary to the current debate which relates to the discussion of methods within this practice, philosophical counseling can be seen as a method in itself. On the second issue, Louw regrets that, in its current form, the philosophical counseling discourse is primarily informed by the Western philosophical tradition. He therefore makes the case that there is a need for African philosophy in it. Tsenay Serequeberhan's and Jonathan Chimakonam's approaches to African philosophy help Louw articulate his understanding of what such a discipline means and entails, and how it can inform philosophical counseling while benefiting from it at the same time.

In conclusion, the papers gathered in this special issue offer refreshing understandings and accounts of African philosophy, both in general and with regard to specific topics, issues, and debates within the discipline. I am confident, therefore, that the insights presented here will leave no one indifferent and will, I hope, inspire and invigorate the ongoing scholarly discussions within the field, thereby further advancing African philosophy and its study.

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Notes

- ¹ In the same vein, I have chosen to respect each author's preferences regarding English conventions as long as they remained consistent throughout their papers. As a result, the reader will notice that there is no uniformity in spelling and other language conventions from one paper to another in the volume, which is a conscious decision on my part, as I did not want to impose my own preferences on the contributors.
- ² These distinctions are usually sustained by “dishonest equations,” such as “*Christianity=civilization, paganism=savagery*,” which bear “abominable colonialist and racist consequences” toward “the Indians, the Yellow peoples, and the Negroes” (Césaire 33).
- ³ See Towa (10–22).
- ⁴ See for example Franz Crahay's seminal and influential essay setting forth the ‘Conceptual Take-Off Conditions for a Bantu Philosophy’ (Crahay, notably 63 ff).
- ⁵ The interested reader may wish to compare this article with Fabien Eboussi Boulaga's rereading of Tempels, who maintains that while Tempels and his fellow missionaries appear to disagree *prima facie* on the sources, foundations, and methods of their mission as connected to ethnography as an academic discipline, they fundamentally agree on some key points directly related to it, namely “the superiority of their race and its civilization” (Eboussi Boulaga 57. My translation). They also “unite in depreciating others, in the conviction that their tutelage is a necessity and a blessing” (57). From this, Eboussi Boulaga concludes that “Tempels adheres to the common colonial prejudice, with its attitudes and language. It is through it that he sees, hears, and judges” (57).

Works Cited

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