

1.3

Is There an African Philosophy?

INNOCENT ONYEWUENYI

Preparing to Read

It is tempting to take the norms of our own culture as norms for all of existence. Especially for those of us who live in the Western world—the so-called first world—there is a strong temptation to assume that our economic and military prominence guarantee the superiority of our ideas and our worldview. It has been easy for us to dismiss the cultures and thought systems of Asia and Africa as “primitive” and to assume that our philosophy would be as welcome as our technology in these “backward” regions of the world.

We have been shocked when writers, even from the so-called third world, have dared to criticize the West and to suggest the superiority of their own ways of doing and being. Suppose I define higher order thinking as the ability to demonstrate extrasensory perception and declare that since you lack this ability you clearly have no possibility of becoming a philosopher? You would have several options open to you. You could accept my judgment and your implied deficiency, or you could question my definition and attempt to broaden it.

This is precisely what Professor Onyewuenyi does in the next reading. Calling Western philosophy a disease that “divorced thought from life,” he creates a broader definition for philosophy and demonstrates how the African version of it operates.

IN CONVERSATION WITH professors and students in America who knew I was teaching African philosophy, the question always put to me was: Are there African philosophers and what have they written? I have not heard or read of any. In other words, if there are no known academic philosophers in Africa, then there is no African philosophy.

Remember that I am in no way conceding that there are no academic philosophers in Africa. There are several of them, but their accounts were purposely withheld from history of philosophy books. . . . When they are mentioned they are grouped with Greco-Oriental philosophers. Little do some of us know that Plotinus, who wrote works on philosophy and opened a school in Rome, was from Lycon in Egypt. He made an attempt to travel to Persia and India to study their philosophies, but the expedition failed. Little do some of us know that the first woman philosopher, Hypatia, was from Alexandria and was murdered by Christians. Names like St. Augustine, Origen, Cyril, and Tertulian are not unfamiliar; they are black Africans. More pertinent to our subject is the fact that what today we call Greek or Western philosophy is copied from indigenous African philosophy of the "Mystery System." All the values of the mystery system were adopted by the Greeks and Ionians who came to Egypt to study; or studied elsewhere under Egyptian-trained teachers. These included Herodotus, Socrates, Hypocrates, Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and others. Are we not taught that Socrates is the first man to say "Man know thyself?" Yet, this expression was found commonly inscribed on Egyptian temple doors centuries before Socrates was born. Aristotle not only received his education in Africa, but he took over an entire library of works belonging to the Egyptian mystery system when he entered Egypt with Alexander the Great, after which we hear of the *Corpus Aristotelium*. Plato's alleged Theory of

Ideas is borrowed from Egypt. Parmenides's references to "charioteers" and "winged steeds" were already dramatized in the *Judgement Scene* of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.

One would have to read *The Stolen Legacy* by George G. M. James to get some idea of the apprenticeship of the so-called Greek philosophers under Egyptian Mystery Priests. From his reading of Herodotus, Pliny, Diogenes Laertius, and early historians of philosophy, James noted about Pythagoras: "We are also further informed through Herodotus and Pliny, that after severe trials, including circumcision, had been imposed upon him by Egyptian priests, he was finally initiated into all their secrets. That he learnt the doctrine of metempsychosis, of which there was no trace before in the Greek religion; that his knowledge of medicine and strict system of diethetics rules, distinguished him as a product of Egypt . . . and that his attainment in geometry corresponded with the ascertained fact that Egypt was the birth place of that science."¹

A contemporary African author, Willie E. Abraham, in his *Mind of Africa*, gives an account of a Ghanaian philosopher by the name Amo Anton, born near Axim about the year 1700. He went to Holland, entered the University of Thalle and in 1729 publicly defended his dissertation. He moved on to Wittenberg, and while Kant was still a boy, became Master of Philosophy there. In 1734 he defended a work in which he argued that sensation was not a mental faculty. (Amo was a rationalist philosopher after Leibniz, whom as a boy he met at the Duke of Brunswick's.) His performance was greatly praised. And the chairman and faculty members described him as a most noble and renowned man from Africa, extraordinarily honest, diligent, and so erudite that he stood above his mates. In 1738 he produced his magnum opus, a book on logic, theory of knowledge and metaphysics.²

There were philosophers in the university towns of Timbuktu and Jene in West Africa who wrote works on the subject. Basil Davidson quotes the historian Leo Africanus, who wrote around 1520 concerning African scholars in the Mali and Songhai empires, "By the sixteenth century, West African writers were at work on historical, legal, moral and religious subjects."³ Alexis Kagame has written on the concept of being among the Ruanda-Urundis. Adesany Adebayo has written on Yoruba metaphysical thinking. Placide Tempels sketched the worldview and ethics of the Congo. Joseph B. Danquah in Ghana did extensive work on the concept of God among the Akans.

Philosophizing: A Universal Experience

Be that as it may, my contention is that the philosophy of a people has little or nothing to do with the academic exponents of that philosophy. Philosophizing is a universal experience. Every culture has its own worldview. If you study the history of philosophy, you will find there is no agreement on the definition of philosophy. Some say it is the love of wisdom, others, the search for truth, and still others, the sense of wonder. What is generally agreed about philosophy is that it seeks to establish order among the various phenomena of the surrounding world, and it traces their unity by reducing them to their simplest elements. What are these various phenomena? They are things, facts, events, an intelligible world, an ethical world, and a metaphysical world.

These various phenomena of the surrounding world are the same in all cultures and societies. The themes dealt with in philosophy are universal. How each culture traces the unity of these themes, synthesizes, or organizes them into a totality is based on each culture's concept of life, namely the interrelationship between objects and persons and between persons and persons themselves. Hence it is that the order or

unity the people of a culture establish is their own order relative to their own conception of life in which everything around them becomes meaningful. No culture has *the* order or *the* last word. Hence the establishment of various truths of a spontaneous, logical, ethical, aesthetical, and metaphysical nature, not one of them being of absolute or universal validity.

This is the basis for calling a philosophy European, Asian, Indian, or American. If what we have said is true, we can and should talk of African philosophy, because the African culture has its own way of establishing order. It has its own view of life. And "life" according to Dilthey, is the starting point of philosophy. Georg Misch, summarizes him thus: "Dilthey regarded 'life' as the starting-point of philosophy; life as actually lived and embodied or 'objectified' in the spiritual world we live in. Life, according to Dilthey, is a subject for scientific investigation insofar as history and moral philosophy or the human sciences deal with it; but our knowledge of life is, above all, contained in certain cultural or personal views of the world—which plays a prominent part in philosophy as well as in religion and poetry."⁴

Hegel underscored the cultural and relative aspect of philosophy when he said: "But men do not at certain epochs merely philosophize in general. For there is a definite philosophy which arises among a people and the definite character which permeates all the other historical sides of the Spirit of the people, which is most intimately related to them, and which constitutes their foundation. The particular form of a philosophy is thus contemporaneous with a particular constitution of the people amongst whom it makes its appearance, with their institutions and forms of government, their morality, their social life and their capabilities, customs and enjoyments of the same."⁵ The notion of philosophy itself for Hegel, as can be deduced from his words, is a factor in the life history of the human experience of the individual mind and is subject to the conditions of race, culture, and civilization. A further

support to the issue of philosophical relativity was given by Victor Uchendu in his monograph *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*. He said, "To know how a people view the world around them is to understand how they evaluate life, and a people's evaluation of life, both temporal and non-temporal, provides them with a 'charter' of action, a guide to Behaviour."⁶

The African has an unwritten timeless code of behavior and attitudes which have persisted for centuries. The condition for the possibility of this, its explanation, lies in the presence of a corpus of coordinated mental or intellectual concepts. Placide Tempels puts it better: "Behaviour can be neither universal nor permanent unless it is based upon a concatenation of ideas, a logical system of thought, a complete positive philosophy of the universe, of man and of the things which surround him; of existence, life, death and the life beyond."⁷

Having shown that there can be and there certainly is an African philosophy, I now expose the content of this philosophy as briefly as possible. We are going to treat the core areas of philosophy, any philosophy—namely, metaphysics or ontology, epistemology, and ethics.

African Metaphysics or Ontology

Henry Alpern in his *March of Philosophy* said: "Metaphysics by the very definition that it is a study of reality, of that which does not appear to our senses, of truth in the absolute sense, is the groundwork of any theory concerning all phases of human behavior. David Hume, whom no one can charge of shutting his eyes to experience, said that metaphysics is necessary for art, morality, religion, economics, sociology; for the abstract sciences, as well as for every branch of human endeavour considered from the practical angle. It is the foundation upon which one builds one's career consciously and unconsciously; it is the guide; the author of the human interests; upon its truth or falsity depends what type of man you may develop into."⁸

The ideas from this quotation explain adequately the singular and unique importance of African ontology in the overall treatment and understanding of African philosophy. In recent decades, studies that were made of the scientific, religious, and practical human endeavor of Africans have accepted their foundation as consisting in ancestor worship, animism, totemism, and magic. These are only vague ideas, because no well-founded definitions of animism, totemism, and magic have been laid down, and the roots of these conceptions have not been explored. The root is in the fundamental concept of African ontology. When we understand this ontology, the concepts of magic, ancestor worship, totemism, and sorcery, as ethnologists apply them to Africa, become ridiculous if not foolish.

What then is ontology? It is the science of "being as such," "the reality that is." The metaphysics of Western philosophy has generally been based upon a static conception of being. In the African philosophical thought, being is dynamic. Existence-in-relation sums up the African conception of life and reality. The African does not separate being from force as its attribute. Rather "the Africans speak, act, live, as if for them beings were forces. . . . Force, for them, is the nature of being, force is being, being is force." When you say, in terms of Western philosophy, that beings are differentiated by their essences or nature; Africans say that forces differ in their essences or nature. There is the divine force, terrestrial or celestial forces, human forces, and vegetable and even mineral forces.⁹ When Western metaphysics defines "being" as "that which is" or "the thing insofar as it is," the African definition reads: "that which is force," or "an existent force." God of course is the Great Force. There is a hierarchy of forces starting from God, spirits, founding fathers, the dead, according to the order of primogeniture; then the living according to their rank in terms of seniority. After living men come animals, vegetables, and minerals, which are in turn categorized on their relative importance in their own classes.

The Interaction Forces: One Being Influences Another

The concept of separate beings, of substances, to use a scholastic term, which exist side by side, independent one of another, is foreign to African thought.¹⁰ I might add parenthetically that I am not so sure that this concept of separate substances might not be the ontological basis for so much individualism and personal freedom in the Western world. The African thought holds that created beings preserve a bond one with another, an intimate ontological relationship. There is interaction of being with being, that is to say of force with force. This is more so among rational beings known as *Muntu*, a term which includes the living and the dead, Orishas, and God. *Muntu* is a force endowed with intelligence, a force which has control over irrational creatures known as *bintu*. Because of this ontological relationship among beings, the African knows and feels himself to be in intimate and personal relationship with other forces acting above or below him in the hierarchy of forces. "The human being, apart from the ontological hierarchy and interaction of forces, has no existence in the conception of the Bantu."¹¹ So much for the ontology—sketchy though it may be.

African Epistemology or Theory of Knowledge

Theory of knowledge follows closely upon ontology. The view adopted by the African theory of knowledge is consonant with its metaphysics. Knowledge or wisdom for the African consists in how deeply he understands the nature of forces and their interaction. "True wisdom," Tempels tells us, "lies in ontological knowledge; it is the intelligence of forces, of their hierarchy, their cohesion and their interaction."¹² We said earlier that God is Force; God is also wisdom in that He knows all forces, their ordering, their dependence, their potential, and their mutual interaction. A person is said to

know or have wisdom inasmuch as he approaches divine wisdom. One approaches divine knowledge when one's flesh becomes less fleshy, to use Leopold Senghor's expression, that is, the older a person gets, the more wisdom he has. The same note of hierarchy comes into play here. The ancestors have more wisdom, followed by the elders, dead or living.

Distinction must be made here of the two levels of human intelligence. Intelligence can be either *practical* or *habitual*. Practical intelligence is cleverness, slyness in dealing with the contingent aspects of forces. Habitual intelligence is active knowledge of the nature of forces, their relationship. And this includes how man, the being with intelligence, makes use of things and activates the forces asleep in them. This kind of wisdom is different from book knowledge, which is not regarded as wisdom in the strict traditional sense. "Study and personal search for knowledge does not give wisdom. One can learn to read, to write; but all that has nothing in common with 'wisdom.' It gives no ontological knowledge of the nature of beings. There are many talents and clever skills that remain far short of wisdom."¹³ Having a college degree does not qualify an African as a wise person in the community. This in part explains why there has been confusion in Africa since the colonial era, because the colonial administrators regarded the educated as the wise people, and consequently and arbitrarily appointed them legislators and leaders in the community, contrary to African political philosophy, which took the eldest of the community, to be, by divine law, the repository of wisdom and the link between God, the ancestors, and the living. He is divine. Swailem Sidhom in his article, "The Theological Estimate of Man" lamented the state of things when he said: "Power is conceived by the African as something pertaining to the divine. Hence it cannot be placed into unexercised hands. But the hands are rarely exercised nowadays. Scheduled education has replaced experience and has toppled the accepted standards. Seniority of age does not

mean much anymore, and a father may now be instructed by the child of his bowels. Nevertheless, power is dangerous and it kills. Like a live coal from upon the very altar of God, it can only be cared for by those who have been graduated into maturity."¹⁴ This despair is understandable if you grasp the African's conception of existence and his philosophy of vital forces.

African Ethical Theory

Some foreign observers of the African scene have declared that the African has no sense of sin. An example is Edwin Smith, who said in his *African Ideas of God*: "It would seem that in general Africans are not conscious of any direct relation between their theism and their ethic of dynamism."¹⁵ Others maintain that Africans have but a vague idea of the Supreme Being, that he always keeps his distance and does not associate himself with the daily lives of men. All these and more are mere prejudices. The Nigerian writer, E. Adeolu Adegbola, said about African morality: "Everywhere African morality is hinged on many sanctions. But the most fundamental sanction is the fact that God's all-seeing eyes scan the total area of human behaviour and personal relationships. God is spoken of as having eyes all over like a sieve."¹⁶ Placide Tempels, who questioned Africans closely on this point, informs us that, "the influence of God in the daily life of man is recognized in many African proverbs and sayings. . . ." ¹⁷ He says that such authors, as I mentioned above, are speaking under the influence of Western moral theory, according to which the social order is mere conformity with conventionalized behavior. On the contrary, African morality and moral law are filled with fixed beliefs, unshakable principles held from conviction. They surely know the distinction between good and evil. They refer to moral evil as "stinking"; they feel it deeply in their spirit.

The norms of good and evil are objective and of universal validity; no room for subjectivism or solipsism and situation ethics. African ethical truths are not relative. Except for cases

of ignorance, there are little or no mitigating circumstances.

The root of their knowledge of good and evil is bound up with their philosophy. The Africans see a relationship between morality and the ontological order. Everything is associated and coordinated under the all-embracing unity of "vital force." In his judgment of his conduct the African takes into consideration the fact that he is not alone; that he is a cog in a wheel of interacting forces. He knows that the most important thing in his action is not how it affects him personally, but how it affects the world order, the spiritual republic, outside of which he does not exist as a *Muntu*, outside of which he is a planet off its orbit, meaningless and nonexisting. His life is not his own in a selfish manner. It belongs to God. The strengthening of this life and its preservation are in the hands of his ancestors and elders. In the life of the community each person has his place and each has his right to well-being and happiness. Therefore, what to do and what to avoid in order to preserve, increase, and strengthen vital force in himself and others of his clan constitute morality. "Objective morality to the Bantu is ontological, immanent and intrinsic morality. Bantu moral standards depend essentially on things ontologically understood."¹⁸

It follows that an act will be accounted ethically good if it can be judged ontologically good and by deduction be assessed as juridically just. The same idea is introduced by Plato in the *Republic*. The individual Greek citizen is to interpret an action good or evil, not in reference to selfish interests, but in reference to the community of which he is a part. The African ethical theory is what I would like to call metaphysical ethics in one sense and ethical communalism in another sense—where an individual takes into consideration the community of vital forces in deciding the goodness or evil of his proper actions.

Human positive or customary laws are made in reference to the growth or preservation of *Muntu's* vital force; otherwise they are meaningless. All customary law that is worthy of the name is inspired, animated, and justified from

the African's point of view, by the philosophy of living forces, or growth, of influence, and of the vital hierarchy. The validity and strength of the customary law of indigenous peoples reside in its foundation in their philosophy. This is why we say in African ethical theory that an act which is characterized as ontologically good "will therefore be accounted *ethically good*; and at length, be assessed as *juridically just*."¹⁹ "In contrast to the European sense of justice, which measures liability by material damage, it is according to African philosophy the loss in force, in joy of life, that is evaluated, independently of material considerations."²⁰

Conclusion

The rediscovery of African philosophy has influenced African scholars in writing about African personality or what the French-speaking Africans call Negritude. Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Chinua Achebe have written prose and verse to celebrate this philosophy—a philosophy of unity and complete encounter of all things and beings, which by reason of the dynamic character of African ontology, has surfaced on the communal structure of our society based on the division of labor and rights; in which man attains growth and recognition by how well he fulfills a function for the overall well-being of the community. We Africans have not yet yielded to the subtlety (and I pray we shall never) which would allow our traditional lawmakers and judges to design customary laws

divorced from our philosophy, from the nature of beings, as we understand them, and from our view of the world.

NOTES

1. James, *The Stolen Legacy* (New York, 1954), p. 43.
2. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (Chicago, 1966), p. 129.
3. Davidson, *A History of West Africa* (New York, 1966), p. 166.
4. Misch, *The Dawn of Philosophy* (London, 1950), p. 47.
5. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (London, 1968), 1: 53.
6. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York, 1965), p. 12.
7. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: *Présence Africaine*, 1969), p. 19.
8. Alpern, *The March of Philosophy* (New York, 1934), p. 99.
9. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, pp. 51 and 52.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
14. Sidhom, "The Theological Estimate of Man," in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi Dickinson (London, 1969), p. 115.
15. Smith, *African Ideas of God* (London, 1950), p. 22.
16. Dickinson, *Biblical Revelation*, p. 116.
17. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, p. 117.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture* (New York, 1961), p. 117.

Continuing to Think

Does Onyewuenyi make a convincing case for expanding the definition of philosophy? Does restricting the term "philosophy" to formal, academic philosophy narrow and distort its meaning? Putting Western labels on the worldviews of non-Western cultures allows us to discuss them using words we understand, but is anything distorted in the process?

A larger question, and the real purpose of writing the essay, asks: Is there an African philosophy? It is interesting that the argument uses the traditional, Western categories or divisions—metaphysics or ontology, epistemology, and axiology or **ethics**. Going back to the preceding example (from *Preparing to Read*), if you expand the definition of extrasensory perception to “knowing” when someone you love is in trouble, being able to “predict” how someone will react in a given hypothetical situation, and “sensing” who is on the phone before you pick it up, you may successfully include yourself in my definition. And, at the same time, you may demonstrate the unfair narrowness of my original definition.

This is somewhat the position Professor Onyewuenyi has taken. By demonstrating the existence of an African ontology, epistemology, and ethics, he establishes the existence of an African philosophy. Even if the African version differs from traditional, Western ones (being is dynamic rather than static, knowledge or wisdom involves understanding the forces of being rather than book learning, and injustice means loss in “joy of life” rather than material damage), this is no reason to disqualify it. X

The last category is particularly intriguing. Suppose it was considered as unjust to take away my “joy in life” as it currently is to take away my property? Would anyone seriously argue that property is more valuable than “joy in life”? And, yet, our laws fail to take this more devastating stealing into account.