Self-Reflexive Engagements and Intellectual Pathways in African Philosophy

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Abstract

Philosophy is self-reflexive when it is able to turn attention back on itself and to take into consideration the place out of which the activity of philosophical engagement is undertaken. In so doing, it allows itself the opportunity to develop inner strength and to define new intellectual pathways always in response to the real issues confronting society. In this article, the focus is on African Philosophy and on the following specific question: What ought to be the defining character of the practice in the contemporary circumstances in which we find ourselves, and for what reason? The concern is not just a normative one but an attempt to redirect philosophy to its original destination, to the very place within which questions of ethics and politics arise. It is about defining more promising pathways and nodes of intellectual engagement for African Philosophy. There are priority issues that impose themselves on the philosophical practice in Africa, and these deserve our attention. Ultimately, the intellectual pathways that African Philosophy may take will only be limited by our capacities to imagine what is possible.

Keywords: African Philosophy; intellectual pathways; self-reflexivity; emancipative philosophy; justice

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Introduction: The Promise of Philosophy

> Plato sits at the foot of the bed, a pen and a scroll beside him, silent witness to the injustice of the state. He had been twenty-nine at the time of Socrates' death […] Through the passageway, Socrates' wife, Xanthippe, is escorted from the prison cell by warders. Seven friends are in various stages of lamentation. Socrates' closest companion Crito, seated beside him, gazes at the master with devotion and concern. But the philosopher, bolt upright, with an athlete's torso and biceps, shows neither apprehension nor regret. That a large number of Athenians have denounced him as foolish has not shaken him in his convictions [...] He is shown finishing a philosophical point while at the same time reaching serenely for the hemlock that would end his life, symbolizing both obedience to the laws of Athens and allegiance to his calling. We are witnessing the last edifying moments of a transcendent being. (De Botton 2000, n.p.)

This passage, which is featured in *The Consolations of Philosophy* by Alain de Botton (2000), describes the scene of Socrates' last moments as captured in a 1786 painting by the 38-year-old Jacques-Louis David. The epigraph, which is perhaps one of the most famous stories ever told of philosophy, signifies the rebirth of philosophy through tragedy. "The Passion of a Dying Socrates" is one story that philosophy loves to tell itself. It is a story "which allows philosophers to reanimate, theatrically and sometimes in front of their students, the passion that founds their profession and which, it seems, must be retold" (Critchley 1995, 17). This is to commemorate the courage and commitment to truth that defines the practice. In our case, Socrates came "metaphorically as Western Philosophy" (Ramose 2014, 72) to Africa, and he remains an important dialogue partner. While the story of Socrates ultimately signifies the triumph of reason, it is also a perennial reminder of the tragic inhumanity that, at times, characterises the human species.

The Socratic spirit of questioning and relentless prodding not only makes dialogue central to philosophy, but it is also a reminder of one of its outstanding characteristics, namely, that philosophy is always open and incomplete. It is a continual invitation to dialogue with oneself (in the sense of a continuous review of one's own views and presuppositions) and with others and other traditions of thought that are different from one's own. To conceive of philosophy as always being incomplete is also to emphasise its self-reflexive nature, that is, its ability to turn attention back on itself as an object of reflection. This is perhaps the reason why the question "What is philosophy?" (that chief meta-philosophical question that philosophy poses to itself) enjoys an unparalleled presence in the discipline. It provides philosophers with the opportunity to consistently review the assumptions and presuppositions of their practice in a manner that takes cognisance of other important developments within the world.

The Socratic narrative of defiance and commitment to truth, including philosophy's own openness to dialogue and continual self-renewal, serves here to underline the promise of philosophy and its unrelenting commitment to finding answers to the difficult

questions of life. Philosophical practice, as exemplified by the figure of Socrates, is ineluctably linked with the social and political. As Malpas (2018, 214) makes clear:

> The starting-point for philosophical reflection is not a world of empty space or inhuman objects, nor a realm of purely subjective sensation or "sense-data". Instead it is […] a world of other persons and a world in which we find ourselves […] it is to *this* world, and to the place in which it unfolds, that our philosophical explorations must always be addressed, and to which they must always return.

The conditions of existence in Africa, which form the theoretic space for the discourse, demand a philosophy and a form of intellectual responsibility that not only brings to the fore the challenges confronting our people but instead champions the imperative "to rebuild the world in the direction of justice" (Taiwo 2022, 174).

This article is divided into three sections. The first section, which is the introduction, is followed by considered attention to the question of what ought to be the defining character of African Philosophy and for what reason. Taking the history of Africa as its point of departure, this section draws attention to some of the priority issues that define the practice in order to argue for the continued articulation of a transformative philosophy. Two significant challenges faced by the continent, which epitomise the unrequited questions of injustice in the form of places of dwelling for the poor in urban landscapes and the global crisis of climate change, are then critically analysed in a manner that brings to the fore some of the specific challenges that African philosophers in particular must attend to if their philosophy is to speak to the existential realities of their people. Beyond the preoccupation with metatheoretical questions regarding the conditions and methods for African Philosophy, there must be space to nurture intellectual pathways for practically engaged philosophy. Real problems of society must inspire our philosophical engagements and the search for solutions, while a sense of history and place must be foundational to the practice. Because philosophy, by its very nature, is always open and incomplete, philosophers must take up the intellectual responsibility to expand the horizons of the discipline and to reimagine what is possible. I argue that the route to a desirable future and the intellectual pathways that the African philosophical practice can take are only limited by our capacities to imagine what is possible. This third and final section is the conclusion.

African Philosophising – Engaging with Ethical Responsibility.

As a result of history, philosophising in Africa has revolved around efforts to lay down possibilities for a future that is different from the present. Contemporary African Philosophy, Serequeberhan (1994,7) argues, must be oriented "toward thinking the problems and concerns that arise from the lived actuality of post-colonial independent Africa". The intellectual undertaking must, therefore, have within its purview an ethical commitment to the people and to the place within which philosophy takes place. This is an implicit recognition that the practice of philosophy is invested with a certain level of moral expectation by virtue of the place within and out of which the activity of

philosophising is undertaken. There are specific imperatives that inform the practice by virtue of the place out of which it is undertaken (Mungwini 2020; 2024). It should never be forgotten that "philosophy always functions in the context of a given culture, receiving from it impulse and direction" (Gracia 1992, 160). Philosophical engagement grows out of and is inspired by questions and problems that have their provenance in the very society where the philosopher exists. The existential conditions in Africa, which constitute, in the words of Serequeberhan (1994, 18), "the theoretic space for the discourse of contemporary African Philosophy", demand the articulation of an emancipative philosophy. It is this which implicates African Philosophy in the daily struggles of its people for justice and dignity. As a philosophy born out of specific historical circumstances – a history that confers on the enterprise a unique set of priority questions – it demands a practice that can help to raise the critical consciousness of society. Africa's own founding fathers of the revolution, that first crop of leaders in independent Africa to which Wiredu (1996) refers as Africa's own philosopher kings, had no illusions about the practical importance of socially engaged philosophy. They were aware that independence alone would not translate into any meaningful change for the continent unless it was backed by a strong social and political philosophy as the practical guide to action. Through the articulation of various philosophies and ideologies, they sought to cultivate the rightful mentality needed for a sustained political and ethical offensive against colonialism. It was crucial for them to promote reflective awareness and to ensure that their people do not remain oblivious to the real threats posed by neocolonialism. They had to be vigilant to avoid being unwitting collaborators in the structures and systems that dehumanise them (Mungwini 2024). In the true Socratic spirit, the African intellectual and philosopher, in particular

> should constantly disturb, should bear witness to the misery of the world, should be provocative by being independent, should rebel against all hidden and open pressure and manipulations, should be the chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations, should be a witness to their mendacity. (Karabel 1996, 205)

Through their efforts, African philosophers must not just exemplify these qualities but, more importantly, they should strive to infuse this questioning spirit in their own communities. The role of philosophy is also transmission – not just in the sense of passing down traditions from one generation to the other (which belongs to every learning endeavor) – but in the sense of ensuring that the spirit of questioning, which is itself the defining character of the enterprise is instilled in the next generation. It is that spirit which, in the context of Africa and the conditions in which it finds itself, must never be allowed to extinguish itself to ensure the continuity of African society by preventing as much as possible a repeat of that tragedy which almost resulted in a complete capture of our imagination as creators of our own history. Philosophy should always be in the service of something more than itself – the emancipative quest and commitment to truth and justice must rank high among its preoccupations. The depiction in the epigraph above, where "he [Socrates] is shown finishing a philosophical point while at the same time reaching serenely for the hemlock that would end his life,

symbolizing both obedience to the laws of Athens and allegiance to his calling" is apposite.

Because it calls for a more demanding engagement with history, African Philosophy realises that over and above the preoccupation with technical-theoretical issues of the discipline, philosophers must answer to the demands imposed on their practice by the circumstances of history. For the African philosopher, the question of what it means to do philosophy in a place marked by all kinds of inequities is always, therefore, paramount. Serequeberhan (1994, 30) reminds readers that "philosophy constitutes itself and fulfils its calling – to think that which evokes thought – in the situatedness of the present". Philosophers, such as Janz (2017, 156), have spoken of the geography of African Philosophy in the sense of "how thought emerges and forms in relation to issues such as location, migration, narratives about belonging and disenfranchisement from place, the memories and hopes about place, [and] the conflicted places in which people exist". In this article, the question then becomes: What are the range of issues that provoke thought and scream for attention in (post)colonial Africa? By placing the "post" of postcolonial in brackets, I am agreeing with the contention by Eze (1997) that the term postcolonial is a misleading marker of history, and the parenthesis serve as a reminder of the unfulfilled promises of independence, including the neocolonial character of the present. There are undoubtedly many issues that cry for attention from the philosopher, but in this article, I shall only focus on two such challenges, namely: (1) the places of dwelling; and (2) the challenge of climate change. The latter, in the case of Africa, threatens to compound the severity of already existing injustices.

The Places of Dwelling

As decolonial theorising took centre stage across many disciplines, several areas of knowledge that had thrived as politically innocent and objective were exposed for what they were. It is interesting to note that even cartographic representations of space, called "maps", also elicited significant scrutiny. In his canonical essay entitled "Deconstructing the Map", Harley (1989) draws readers' attention to the manner in which cartography is implicated in the discourses of power and representation. Far from being innocent representations of space, maps are in and of themselves "silent arbiters of power". There is always, as he states, "the omnipresence of […] power in the cartographic representation of place" (Harley 1989, 1; 13). The point I am making is that decolonial theory has clearly shown, therefore, that even the seemingly innocent business of cartography is entangled in all kinds of politics, including the hierarchisation of space, which render maps "complicit in telling a story that itself is a consequence of judgments about what is important to know" (Smith 2017, 36). Maps can, therefore, operate as effective instruments of erasure and the appropriation of history. History has shown that both the calendar and the map are instruments through which power is projected all the time in the sense that only those who hold power are able to designate certain days and places as worthy of commemorating.

There are many significant places and landmarks in Africa that warrant philosophy's attention for what they communicate about existence, politics and the mendacity of power; however, the significance of some of these places in the philosophical narrative of the continent is often underemphasised. African Philosophy can also be complicit in not telling certain stories about Africa, and this silence effectively helps to erase them from the discourse through its judgments about what is important to know. I wish to redirect philosophy to cast its reflective gaze on one such topic within the domain of space by drawing attention specifically to what I have called here "places of dwelling". In its complex totality and as both a geographical and political entity, Africa constitutes a veritable philosophical text that needs to be fully read and understood for what it reveals and conceals. It is, therefore, amenable to hermeneutical interrogation at many levels depending on the selected point of entry, including its cultural, geographical, political, economic, social and religious makeup, among others. For example, by paying attention only to its built landscape, we may be able to delve deeper into the forces that shape existence, including legacies of historical injustice that still impact the present several years after independence.

Places of dwelling across Africa's urban landscapes are one area that invoke serious ethical and philosophical considerations. Take the places of dwelling where the poor live, for instance. These places, which the poor call home, are a conspicuous feature of the continent's urban landscape anywhere we bother to look. And if the philosopher does not choose to be an accomplice to erasure and a silent witness to the injustice, these places cannot fail to elicit their reflective scrutiny or considered intellectual attention. Writing on the phenomenology of dwelling and drawing attention to the spatial constitution of human life, Bollnow (1961, 3) points out that

> to dwell is not an activity like any other but a determination of man in which he realises his true essence. He [man] needs a firm dwelling place if he is not to be dragged along helplessly by the stream of time [read as he/she].

In those places where the poor live, we are able to zero in and reveal not only the mendacity of power, but also the stories of depredation and enduring injustices, stories of despair, of hope and resilience etched on the landscape in the material structures that constitute their habitats.

Starting from the nature of the built-up structures and their layout, an entire philosophical text, complete with its own themes and subthemes on the ontology of existence and of being African in Africa, can be decoded. Other than the material structures, a much more revealing hermeneutic engagement can focus on the nomenclature, that is, the system and practices of naming deployed to designate these places across the breadth of our continent. A whole text on the manifold dimensions of life and the socio-political issues of existence can be reconstructed. In these toponyms, we cannot fail to decipher echoes of the history of the liberation struggles, the silent songs of resistance, the groaning pain of the inherited wounds of injustice, festering

anger, unanswered grievances, as well as questions of human dignity and well-being. By paying closer attention to these place names, the philosopher is able to reconstruct entire narratives from the ambivalent discourses of the love of one's country, cries of despair, of being forgotten, to resilience, hope and dreams for a better future.

In these places of dwelling and their carefully chosen toponyms, are found compressed narratives of what could be called daily existence in Africa reflective of the myriads of promises on which post-independence Africa is yet to deliver. The structures which people call home are a vivid reminder of this wanton neglect. In a number of cases, these informal settlements bear the names of famous struggle icons in the liberation of Africa, rendering them not only significant living memorials but also silent witnesses of betrayal. They are acute reminders of the struggle for a dignified existence, which was at stake in the liberation struggles but which today lies forgotten. There is no doubt, therefore, that by adopting these names of highly celebrated liberation struggle icons for their informal settlements, they wish not only to reaffirm their unwavering commitment to taking the liberation struggle to its logical conclusion where all shall live in dignity. But with this gesture, they also wish to relive the spirit of resistance and defiance in their own fight for justice.

Ultimately, in these places of dwelling, which can be found throughout the continent, the African story of enduring struggles and unfulfilled promises of decolonisation and perseverance, even in the face of untold hardships, is everywhere apparent. These are issues of social justice which, at their core, reveal both the history of Africa's colonial past and the present (post)colonial political ineptitude. But perhaps it is here where Africa's own cohort of "organic intellectuals", as described by Gramsci, can become of real service in terms of raising society's critical consciousness. It would thus be remiss of the African philosopher to concentrate on all other philosophical issues but fail to articulate a philo-praxis of liberation which the situation of their own people's demands. Both freedom from want, dignity and security are central to the experience of life. Informal settlements, a rather emotively neutral term for what are effectively squatter camps, are synonymous with the African continent despite the fact that the land-to-population ratio is perhaps the lowest compared to many other places in the world. Through systematic processes of exclusion, which persist despite independence, whole communities remain squatters in their own motherland. It is an injustice that should not be allowed to escape philosophical attention.

Philosophy in Africa must continue to ask difficult and fundamental questions that leave no specific area out. As mentioned above, issues of social justice demand a particular orientation in the practice of philosophy where real problems ought to feed the reflective meditations of the philosopher. These are the kinds of issues that demand, as Brister (2021) correctly points out, "engaged philosophy", which takes as its point of departure the nature of the social problem and then proceeds from there to identify ways of contributing ideas in addressing the problem. Instead of simply being a cultural commentary on society, philosophy must be a practical guide to action. "Philosophical

knowledge and skills [must be put] at the service of achieving social justice [and] other problem-solving goals" (Brister 2021, 399).

Philosophy in Africa cannot, therefore, afford to be apolitical, and neither can it be a fugitive from history. Its practice must be coterminous with the pursuit of social justice in the real lived experiences that constitute Africa's (post)colonial condition. It is true that, according to Eze (2001, 213),

> philosophy's relationship to the historical or the political would not diminish its intellectual seriousness or academic rigor; nor should philosophy's relationship … to the histories of neglected or politically abused peoples of Africa diminish philosophy's claim to universality. African issues are, first and above all, *human* issues.

Thus, African Philosophy must continue to advance approaches and intellectual pathways that align with the emancipative mission on the continent. Finding answers to the fundamental questions of ethics and politics, as exemplified in the figure of Socrates, must continue to inspire the contemporary practice of philosophy in Africa.

The Challenge of Climate Change

One challenge today that philosophy anywhere cannot ignore is the crisis of global climate change. This crisis testifies to what has come to be an inescapable reality – the global interconnectedness of today's in many ways and at many different levels. The asymmetries of power are juxtaposed with the ineluctable reality of a future that is under threat for the whole of humanity. Judging from the ferocity of major weather events being witnessed across the world, the threat of climate change and the looming global ecological catastrophe is one problem people must all face together. It is increasingly becoming clear, despite the pretensions of sceptics, conspiracy theorists and their outspoken climate deniers, that expressions, such as, "we have declared war on nature" and "nature is fighting back", are not mere figures of speech divorced from reality. In this fighting back, nature appears to show neither regard for proportionality nor the precise identity of the culprit, and people should not expect that it will honour any principles of the "Just war" theory (Mungwini 2022a). There is arguably no part of the world that has not been impacted by the ever-increasing series of devastating weather events triggered by global climate change and, indeed, by centuries of fossil-fuelled development. Not many would disagree with Kovel (2014, 10) that we live in an era of both economic and ecological crises in which "the dominant system of production [capitalism] appears hell-bent on destroying the natural foundations of civilisation as it thrashes about in response to economic difficulties". These crises are facets of a much deeper crisis, which Kovel (2014, 10) characterises as

> an estrangement from nature stemming back to the origins of [modern] civilization, which has now reached global proportions and appears to be on a trajectory headed toward a Dark Age such as has never been known before, and one that could even foreshadow our possible extinction as a species.

Philosophy everywhere, not only in Africa, must strive to promote intellectual pathways through which not only the exchange of philosophical ideas is made possible, but also the inherent human spirit of imagination can be reawakened through worldwide collaboration. It must help people to define a new way of being and a renewed rootedness in the world, a sense of higher responsibility and inner relationship to others (Havel 1978, 76) to face the global challenges as a collective. Emphasis in this collaborative endeavour must be on the universalness of philosophy as a reflective undertaking inherent to all people without at the same time falling prey to its exclusionary universalism. It is beyond dispute that the problems and topics of philosophy acquire new light and new meaning when viewed from different standpoints and from the perspectives of the marginalised whose struggles have never been given adequate consideration.

At no point has the need for international collaboration been so important and so urgent as it is today. For philosophy, this entails shifting more attention to strengthening intercultural philosophy and pathways for cross-cultural engagement. Contemporary philosophy anywhere must exhibit a practical and theoretical commitment to engage with perspectives of knowing from different cultures on issues affecting the world. This practical and theoretical commitment translates into dialogue, and within such dialogue, people must begin to find a better understanding not just of themselves, but also of what it means to exist with others. Any philosophy today which does not champion these intellectual endeavours perhaps does not deserve attention. There is indeed something different, if not more urgent, about philosophy today, which is the need to create spaces where practical and theoretical questions arising out of global challenges can be answered not from any single tradition but from the perspective of world philosophies. This is what it means to engage with ethical responsibility.

For African philosophers, the challenge of climate change has no doubt compounded already existing injustices. The disproportionate distribution of the consequences of climate change caused largely by centuries of fossil-fuelled development in the West adds a completely different layer of complications to the plethora of injustices being experienced in Africa. This in itself calls for the articulation of philosophies that speak not only to these challenges but also draw from the indigenous resources of our cultures to rebuild a better relationship with the environment. In Ubuntu, the people have a philosophy that celebrates both the totality of existence and the mystery of being, as well as a worldview that refuses to circumscribe rigid ethical and normative boundaries between different entities in the world. With its distinct relational orientation, which is capable of fostering a greater sense of responsibility, Ubuntu philosophy offers an intellectual pathway not only for Africa but for the rest of the world capable of addressing problems of the estrangement from nature, including the underlying logic of modernity, which resulted in this crisis.

From the perspective of global justice and of African Philosophy, the challenge of climate change brings two things to the fore, namely, the principle of intergenerational

mutual responsibility; and the question of reparations for Africa (Taiwo 2022) as a disproportionate sufferer and victim of centuries of fossil-fueled development to which it has contributed very little. A philosophy capable of sponsoring an intellectual pathway that responds in an acute manner to these two exigencies is of utmost necessity at this point in Africa. The point I am making here is that other than calling for a transformation in thinking at the global level where intergenerational mutual responsibility can be fostered, the challenge of climate change calls for alternative frameworks for theorising issues of global justice inspired by philosophies other than those that have overly dominated the discourse thus far. African philosophers must assist with framing a conception of justice and of being in the world that speaks to issues of redress and compensation for the disproportionate amount of suffering wrought by centuries of injustice and now climate change on the African continent and the global South in general.

To articulate a politico-ethical framework that is based on Africa's own indigenous ideas and capable of mounting a universal appeal at the level of facts, logic, and theory is the duty of every philosopher who cares about global justice. Ubuntu philosophy has been proffered as one such intellectual pathway, but others, too, should be popularised and made available. Issues of injustice and concerns and calls for redress caused by past wrongs of slave trade, colonialism, and now climate change, are matters that have seized and will continue to seize the attention of many African communities, and each has principles inbuilt within their cultures that can be developed and elevated to theoretical frameworks to address these challenges. There has to be renewed intellectual effort to prize open the centuries-old traditions for their varied riches; strengthen the foundations of African Philosophy; and inspire new thinking that opens other vistas for the enterprise and allow crucial aspects of these traditions to come back to life (Mungwini 2022b, 33). Yes, the preoccupation with metatheoretical questions is laudable and an important part of the discourse in African Philosophy, but we could do well to redirect philosophy to its original destination, to the very place within which questions of ethics and politics arise. This will no doubt help the practice to remain closer to where it is needed most, in the trenches alongside its people grappling with the existential conditions on the continent.

Conclusion

To speak of philosophy as always being open and incomplete is to reject the imposition of rigid methodological fetters on the discipline, which would be akin to the mortal silencing of Socrates. Philosophy is a living practice that must continue to adapt and readapt in the light of new intellectual demands within the field and in view of developments in other cognate disciplines with which it is in a constant relationship. It is, in other words, to reaffirm the position that the future of the discipline cannot be subordinated to how it was conceived by a few dominant individuals in its history. The urge to understand and to find out, which is inherent to philosophy itself, must neither be stifled nor sacrificed by the need to defend any singular conception of the discipline.

The point I wish to make is that true philosophy has no space for fundamentalists nor the hubris of an inward-looking self-sufficiency. Philosophy is true to itself when it recognises its own incompleteness and thus allows itself to be enriched "through dialogue and exchange (relationality) of what is shared across [the different traditions] and [from] the *gaps* that emerge" (Monahan 2019, 86). It is this dialectic that drives new thinking and the articulation of new concepts. As a practice and on its part, African Philosophy must always be in a state of continual self-renewal in a manner that encourages the celebration of different intellectual pathways and the exchange of ideas even as its practitioners prioritise different approaches, presuppositions and assumptions. The imperative for self-reflexive engagement, in the sense of consistently casting the reflective light on itself and its own internalities as a practice, is integral to the discipline.

In this article, I have demonstrated through an examination of two problems confronting Africa, the need to redirect the focus away from too many metatheoretical issues and to grapple with the real questions of existence and of life as they manifest on the continent. The African philosophical terrain is an open arena, and so are the intellectual pathways of engagement that it is capable of fostering. The passion of a dying Socrates captured in the opening epigraph must continue to drive the quest for truth and justice. African Philosophy must continue to find its voice on contemporary questions, and what it can become, including its mission, is only limited by human capacity to imagine what is possible.

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