

The Question of Epistemic Justice: Polemics, Contestations and Dialogue

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Abstract

This essay, which reflects on the “unfinished humanistic project” of decolonisation in Africa, is an invitation to examine the problem of epistemic injustice from a philosophical standpoint. At the core of my argument is the position that there is an epistemic dimension to Africa’s problems, and the struggle for epistemic justice is as fundamental to humanity as all other struggles for social justice. Addressing the problem of epistemic injustice calls for multiple efforts and initiatives. Among these is commitment to new canon building across the disciplines, and adopting “strategic particularism” as a paradigm and philosophical framework in our academic projects. To confront epistemic injustice—and thus restore parity and equilibrium—polemics, contestations, and dialogue are inevitable. In this endeavour, the goal should be to reclaim Africa’s position in the conversation of humankind.

Keywords: epistemic injustice; decolonising knowledge; strategic particularism; African, know thyself; global justice

Introduction

The vision of a new society in Africa will need to be developed *in* Africa, born out of the African historical experience and the sense of continuity of African history. The African is not master of his own fate, but neither is he completely at the mercy of fate. (Ajayi 1982, 8)

Although this position may have been pronounced more than three decades ago, it continues to seize us to this day because that vision is yet to be realised. The submission captures a view shared by many African theorists who are concerned about the fate of Africa. While there are indeed forces external to the continent that have a hold on how much we can do, it is



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nevertheless important that Africa should strive to fashion its own vision of the future— informed of course by its own historical experiences. This essay focuses on the “yet to be concluded” project of decolonisation, by drawing specific attention to the problem of epistemic injustice in contemporary Africa. It is indeed true that some of the most provocative questions confronted by philosophers in Africa derive their impetus and direction from historical memory. These include, among others, a range of political grievances and injustices which no progressive African can afford to ignore. Recent developments in our universities associated with the Rhodes-must-fall movement and the call to decolonise knowledge, have once again brought to the fore some of the unfinished historical grievances and injustices which continue to define the present. Equally significant is that within my own subject area, the discipline of philosophy—arguably the mother of all disciplines and a discipline that was historically championed as the basis for conferring or denying the status of being human to different peoples of the world—there are at this moment serious questions surrounding our organisation, namely the Philosophical Society of Southern Africa and its alleged failure to transform. The question of how to transform the teaching of philosophy in (South) Africa, including the role that philosophers continue to play in the peripheralisation of African philosophy today, is among some of the contentious issues.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that in announcing its intention to launch a new society, to be called *The Azanian Philosophical Society*, the founding members ground its coming into being on the basis of the existence of “serious limitations of ethical, political and intellectual significance” in the current philosophical society—which some philosophers have for a long time identified. At the core of this struggle is how to confront the apparent “ethically sanctioned production of ignorance” (Outlaw 2007) as far as the practice and teaching of philosophy in Africa is concerned. There is a tendency to go about the business of philosophy, and to organise curricula as if there is only one universal world philosophy. Their point of departure seems to be that there is no reason why the African student of philosophy should not be steeped in his/her own heritage of philosophy before looking elsewhere (see Wiredu 1980). After all, wine acquires its unique character from the soil and climate in which the grapes are grown. Here the idea is not only to prioritise Africa as the place and intellectual territory from which philosophical activity takes place, but also to reposition the continent as a centre of creative possibilities. The desire is to re-centre Africa—to centre again—to ensure that in our theory and praxis Africa becomes a source of inspiration and reflection. Over the years, philosophy has been brought before the court of reason in Africa and it has been found wanting.¹ Park (2013) examines how, for self-serving reasons, philosophy has since the late 18th and early 19th centuries developed and deployed an exclusionary canon which has taken Africa and Asia outside the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy invariably teaches what philosophy was (its past) and what it is (the concept of philosophy). It is in this dominant modern history of philosophy that the problem lies. As philosophers, we must address this apparent paradox between the alleged universality

1 The meaning and substance of this statement is inferred from the article by Bernasconi (1998) entitled, “Hegel at the court of the Ashanti.”

of reason and the fact that philosophy, as the instantiation of reason proper, still finds itself defined by an exclusionary canon in its teaching and practice.

This essay is divided into three sections. The first section on the logic and practice of exclusion sets out the context within which the problem of epistemic injustice is to be understood. In the second section I pay close attention to the current struggle for the decolonisation of knowledge. This is a period marked by what I term “polemics,” “contestations” and “dialogue” in this quest for truth and justice. In the last section, entitled “African, know thyself” I propose at least two possible ways of dealing with the problem of epistemic injustice. Central to this argument is the position that there is no global justice without epistemic justice; and decolonisation of knowledge in Africa is central to the ongoing struggle for global justice.

The Logic and Practice of Exclusion²

By thus abandoning reason, they split mankind into friends and foes; into few who share in reason with gods, and the many who don't; into few who stand near and the many who stand far; into those who speak the untranslatable language of our own emotions and passions and those whose tongue is not our tongue. (Popper 1962, 441)

The reason to preface my discussion with this quotation is rather self-evident—particularly when the quotation is read from within the African historical context. The historical problem of reason—of who is and who is not a rational animal—in the story of humanity is foundational to understanding how the modern world has come to be ordered the way it is. In simple philosophical terms, the historical problems of our world are traceable to what the Greeks have identified in moral parlance as the “sin of hubris”—the arrogance of men who wanted to elevate themselves to the level of gods. These are men who have tried to arrogate unto themselves the prerogative to redefine and thus circumscribe the God-given status of being human. But as Ramose (1999) correctly argues, today human reproductive power appears to have provided the all-incisive blow to the myth that only a particular segment of humanity was exclusively and truly human while the rest were sub-human, if human at all. In other words, it was by simply abandoning the principles of reason that the story of humanity became what it is today. What is, therefore, required is a return to the truth concerning our ontological parity as humans. In the history of philosophy, a number of philosophers have been identified for their role in developing elaborate arguments based mostly on imaginary facts and hearsay to lay the foundation for the subordination of other peoples. These are philosophers who were instrumental in putting forward a hierarchical racial ontology as evidence of the natural order of races in which some found themselves on the lower rank in the hierarchy of human beings. Among these are some of the renowned European thinkers such as Hume, Kant and Hegel. In the history of modern philosophy:

Hegel's *Philosophy of History* remains the most exalted statement of European self-affirmation in opposition to other races, the most elaborate rationalisation of European

2 This subheading is borrowed from the essay by Ramose (2015) entitled “On the contested meaning of philosophy.”

ethnocentrism. It provided a powerful philosophical base for the chorus of denigration of the non-white races that accompanied and buoyed up the European colonial adventure throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. (Ogot 2009, 4)

Through an elaborate political and intellectual project based on scientific and spiritual racism the foundation of Western epistemic dominance over other peoples—including the indigenous peoples of Africa—was established. The hegemony of Western ideas and theories therefore took root at the same time as it silenced the indigenous epistemologies. In this way Europe's own particulars were able to assume unparalleled dominance and universality. As Serequeberhan (1994) correctly points out, more than physical force, Europe today rules through its hegemony of ideas, including its models of growth and development. Europe established its hegemonic centrism, which today we refer to as Eurocentrism, through the systematic marginalisation of other civilisations. Serequeberhan (1997, 142) defines Eurocentrism as the pervasive bias located in modernity's self-consciousness of itself, which is grounded at its core in the metaphysical belief or idea that European existence is qualitatively superior to other forms of human life. The challenge that confronts us today is how to move away from this hegemonic centrism and create a world in which multiple voices and alternative ways of being and knowing cannot only be recognised but celebrated. This, in a crucial sense, is the nature of the struggle for especially those defined as belonging to the periphery. These counter-hegemonic struggles are needed in almost every domain of existence in Africa—including the epistemic domain—in order help usher in a vision of the future that resonates with the people's own definition of existence.

It is indeed true that recent developments in our universities have reawakened most of us to the unfinished struggles of decolonisation. Many of our theorists have been woken from their dogmatic slumber and naïve belief in the sanctity of the system. To those with a philosophical inclination, the significance of Nkrumah, particularly the concerns raised in his book *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for Decolonisation and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution*, have been brought to the fore. Many are beginning to appreciate that as a man Nkrumah's vision and philosophical insights were far ahead of his contemporaries. Today the need to revisit his vision and to apply his political and philosophical ideas to resuscitate that African dream, which was carelessly thrown away and sacrificed for short-sighted individualistic ambitions by some of Africa's own crop of leaders, has become important. In the field of education his quest for the decolonisation of knowledge was very clear. For example, in his article entitled "Law in Africa," a speech which he delivered at the formal opening of the Accra Conference on Legal Education and of the Ghana Law School on 4 January 1962, Nkrumah argued:

The teaching of law in Africa would also be totally incomplete if it did not include a study of African law ... African law in Africa was declared foreign law for the convenience of colonial administration, which found the administration of justice cumbersome by reason of the vast variations in local and tribal custom ... But no law can be foreign to its own land and country, and African lawyers, particularly in the independent African states, must quickly find a way to reverse this juridical travesty. (Nkrumah 1962, 105)

And he continued:

African lawyers will have to do effective research into the basic concepts of African law, clothe such concepts with living reality and give the African a legal standard upon which African legal history in its various compartments could be hopefully built up. (Nkrumah 1962, 105)

While he singles out law on account of the occasion, what he says about its teaching applies with equal significance to many other subjects in our university curriculum. The need to embark on “effective research into the basic concepts of African thought, and to clothe such concepts with living reality and experiences of being African in Africa” is part of what we term today the Africanisation drive. I submit that it is our duty as scholars to retrace the epistemic thread in the fabric of our cultures and in the process reassert the intellectual heritage of Africa’s peoples.

Having made this point, it is critical that I return to the situation in my own discipline of training, which is philosophy. The points made in the introduction concerning the obtaining contestations in philosophy, have a long history. Ramose, one of the eminent philosophers of our time, makes the following submission:

For too long the teaching of [Western] philosophy in Africa was decontextualised precisely because both its inspiration and the questions it attempted to answer were not necessarily based upon the living experience of being-an-African in Africa. Yet, the Western philosophers that the teaching of philosophy in Africa emulated always drew their questions from the lived experience of their time and place. (Ramose 1999, 35)

There is no doubt that the position he expresses derives from his own experiences both as a student of philosophy and as a philosophy teacher, which unfortunately continues to be the case today—hence the recent attempts by students to dislodge Rhodes both literally and metaphorically. The fact that such practices are allowed to continue means that universities remain complicit in what Outlaw (2007) has described as the “ethically sanctioned production of ignorance.” This systematic production of ignorance in our institutions is made possible through wilful privileging of the knowledge claims, strategies and practices of a handful of scholars in particular traditions of thought, and by pronouncing on their ideas and theory without invoking the African historical reality. For example, there is still a concerted effort by many to present Western philosophers such as Kant, Hume, Hegel and others as “pure” philosophers, preoccupied only with “pure” culture and colour-blind philosophical themes in the sanctum sanctorum of the traditions of Western philosophy (Eze 1997, 103). And yet, as we all know, these philosophers produced some of the most damaging theories of raciology in the modern era— they were the true architects of the epistemology of imperialism. In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Lucius Outlaw (2007, 208) argues that “concerns for the right to life of anti-abortionists are much more likely to be explored in ethics courses in [our philosophy] departments than the right to life denied of the peoples inhabiting this continent when the explorers and settler-colonists from Europe arrived.” The danger is that such academic blindness fails to prepare graduate students for contributing meaningfully to society.

The Polemics, Contestations and Dialogue

In philosophical terms, our examination of the question of epistemic injustice has to be understood within the broader context of the overriding problem of global injustice. Our global world, according to Dussel, is characterised by overwhelming and yet contradictory realities. This is the problem of the modern world which has globalised its reach to the most distant corners of the planet at the same time that it has paradoxically excluded a majority of humanity (Dussel 2013, xv). It is in the context of such a world that the polemics, contestations, including possibilities for dialogue in relation to questions of epistemic justice that I examine here, have to be understood. We should also remind ourselves that every struggle must take into account the prison from which it seeks to exit. In other words, the methods by which we seek to extricate ourselves from the forms of domination and marginalisation on the knowledge front have to be informed, not only by being aware of the system that has been put in place to achieve such repression, but by understanding the source of its power and the fuel that keeps it alive. This is where contestations and polemics become important if we are to succeed in refusing “to live in the secure naivety of the system” (Dussel 1985, 179).

The online etymology dictionary traces the word “polemics” to two sources, namely Greek and French. It says the term “polemics” comes from the Greek term *polemikos* or *polemos*, meaning war, belligerent, or stirring up hostility. The term “polemics” also comes from the French word *polemique*, meaning disputatious or controversial. In both cases, it signifies a way of engaging with the other with an uncompromising desire or spirit to emerge victorious. It is probably for this reason that Foucault (1984) finds polemics ethically objectionable. In his view, polemics defines alliances, recruits partisans, unites interests and establishes the other as an enemy, an upholder of opposed interests against which one must fight until the moment this enemy is defeated and either surrenders or disappears. Polemics, for Foucault, also carries a sterilising effect on its adversaries. The polemicist sees the person who holds an opposing view as someone who is wrong and whose very existence constitutes a threat. For the polemicist then, the game consists not of recognising this person as a subject having the right to speak but of abolishing him as interlocutor from any possible dialogue. The final objective is to declare victory or triumph. The polemicist, Foucault argued, relies on a legitimacy that his/her adversary is by definition denied (Foucault 1984, np). In an ideal environment, what Foucault argues is very important. However, the question that we need to raise is whether it is possible and indeed desirable for Africans to respond to the epistemology of imperialism and its discourse without being polemical. In this quest for freedom and to reassert African humanity, it seems there is no other way but to match our response to the nature of the threat at hand. Contestations on the other hand point to variance of opinion; it points to disagreement, debate, and disputation, which is often settled through open engagement or dialogue. The term “dialogue” comes from the Greek word *dialogos* and is derived from the two words *dia*, meaning across, and *logos/legein*, which means speech/speak. Dialogue has an indisputable normative dimension to it in that it presupposes something desirable in terms of its intention, process and outcome. Once dialogue is taken as “reciprocal elucidation,” in search of truth and meaning, then the rights of each person are in

some sense immanent in the discussion. Parties to dialogue uphold the principle of respect for each other, including autocriticism.

If we are to look at the ongoing debate concerning the decolonisation of knowledge and the whole subject of decoloniality in particular, one can argue that it is at this moment defined at almost every stage by polemics, contestations and dialogue. For this reason, it has elicited varied emotions ranging from just entitlement, optimism, resistance, anger, fear, despair and even withdrawal. However, it seems all this is unavoidable if one were to look at the history of civilisations, including even the rise of science in the face of the then powerful theocentric worldview. It is, therefore, apparent that in order to dislodge a very strong and seemingly untouchable system one cannot just hope for dialogue and its promise. Although it is mostly celebrated, dialogue has its own downside which is often forgotten, namely its talismanic effect. The Brazilian historian, Plinio Correa de Oliveira (1965), reminds us that dialogue can be utilised as a talisman or magic word with the result that the different parties desire unity more than truth or justice. The potent magic in the term dialogue lies in its ability to create the irenic myth and to inaugurate an era of good will in which all argument dies with a new world order characterised by universal peace and serenity evolving. In other words, the pursuit of truth and justice may be discouraged because of the pressure to achieve harmony; a harmony that is in reality false and phony since it is not based on truth (Wierzbicka 2006). This fear is not unfounded, particularly in a context where some groups have been dominated and suffered unjustly. The talismanic effect of dialogue also lies in its ability to change the mentalities of people who would otherwise be fiery and polemical to become more accommodative and ready to make concessions. Thus, unlike its counterparts (polemics and contestations), which have an ode of pugnacity within them, dialogue can truly be disarming. My point is that before we can tout dialogue, it is important to allow space for all forms of activities and processes of diagnosis and meaning-making—from contestations to polemics—to play out in order to help us map the best option going forward. This is the stage at which I think the debate on the decolonisation of knowledge in our universities is at the moment. The polemics and contestations are necessary as a precursor to the dialogue on what should ultimately constitute the nature of our canon.

To help us make sense of the problem of epistemic injustice in Africa, I will make use of the analogy of map-making in which the politics and processes of demarcation, inclusion and exclusion play out. Throughout history, the acts of boundary-making have not been without their fair share of conflicts and controversy. In some cases, wars or battles have been fought, and to this day they remain worrying sources of conflict in most places across the world. This is because of what boundaries mean for identity, power, politics and recognition. This story of border-marking; that is, of demarcation, inclusion and exclusion, has also played itself out in the domain of knowledge (see Gieryn 1999). Without labouring on the analogy, the point I wish to make is that it was through the activity similar to border-marking and border-policing that indigenous knowledges in Africa found themselves outside the formal curriculum. New territorial markers were erected by which the process of disenfranchising African knowledge, including its practitioners, was accomplished. The language of practice, including the foundations for admission into the new territory of knowledge, was strictly enforced. As the

boarders of so-called true knowledge got laid out, certain forms of knowledge invariably found themselves occluded or pushed into the wilderness. In the process, the exclusive right of Western epistemology to judge knowledge and truth was ascended and its control over alternative ontologies asserted. This is the tyranny of Western epistemology that we bemoan to this day. In consolidating its authority and hence protecting its mandate, Western epistemology to this day has maintained vigorous border patrol and policing in order to guard against any possible encroachment from the supposed irrational. To this day, this monopoly is maintained through intellectual practices that are averse to alternative theories and theoretical frameworks in peer review rituals determining who and what gets published. What these champions of this monolithic civilisation seek to keep away from us, is the diversity which defines the world—including human ideas. As Santos (2012; 2014) has repeatedly proclaimed, “the diversity of the world is infinite” and the understanding of the world is much broader than any one particular culture can offer. There is not anywhere a cosmic register or answer book against which we can completely declare that particular worldviews and perspectives about reality are exact and therefore absolutely true. In the absence of such a cosmic register, all that prevails is the voice of the powerful—even if flawed.

Feminist philosophers have now demonstrated to the entire world how power and patriarchy influenced the truth in many aspects of knowledge and human existence. Today the crucial question posed by Code (1981): “Is the sex of the knower epistemologically significant?” in her article with the same title, has been answered with an unequivocal “yes.” The point I wish to underscore is that it is impossible today to discuss the subject of ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, morality, or any philosophical issue for that matter, without recourse to feminist perspectives. The feminists have successfully challenged the epistemic boundaries of yester year. They have developed a new ecology of concepts; in the process expanding the horizons of knowledge beyond its traditional demarcations. Cartographic work in terms of drawing and redrawing boundaries, and if possible destroying the existing boundaries of knowledge, is thus a challenge that remains in place for all academics—particularly those in the periphery. Through contestations and polemics, which have now led to their eventual recognition leading to dialogue, feminist philosophers have transformed the knowledge landscape. The reason why I dwell on this example is to demonstrate that what African theorists (driven by their belief in the efficacy of alternative theories such as Africanisation, decoloniality, and epistemologies of the South) need, is readiness to engage in cartographic work; that is, to redraw the epistemic map. That effort calls for engaging in polemics, and willingness to take part in critico-creative contestations ultimately leading to dialogue. The polemics and contestations, including dialogue in search of truth and justice, should help us to champion epistemologies of the South. Santos uses the term “epistemologies of the South” to refer to those “sets of inquiries into the construction and validation of knowledge born in struggle, ways of knowing developed by social groups as part of their resistance against the systematic injustices and oppressions caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy” (Santos 2014, x). These are epistemologies whose categories of analysis and ontological conceptions of being and thinking derive from “the densities of colonial experience that do not seek to overthrow existing ones but that build on the ground of the silence of history” (Mignolo 2002, 67). Our failure to champion these epistemologies continues to sustain epistemic

injustice. With this failure, humanity remains confined to a monolithic account of reality, thereby depriving us of the opportunity to learn from the diversity which this world offers. There are good grounds to hold that philosophy today and in the future (or any subject for that matter) will have serious shortcomings if it continues to discuss global questions only within the framework of concepts and methods derived from occidental lore (Wimmer 2010, 21). We live in a radically pluralistic world and therefore each alternative knowledge presents an opportunity for human beings to enlarge their understanding. After all, conceptions of knowledge, of what it means to know, of what counts as knowledge, and how that knowledge is produced, are as diverse as the cosmologies and normative frameworks that inform them (Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2007, xxi). If this were to be taken to heart in our epistemic encounters, then intercultural dialogue and not monologue would characterise our world. At this point I would like to proceed and lay out some potential routes that may be considered in mitigating the problem of epistemic injustice. I shall select only two of these for analysis in the section below.

African, Know Thyself

As with any disease, the first step towards finding a cure is accepting that something is wrong with the organism. This is then followed by a diagnosis and prescriptions for the problem (Gracia 1992). It is at this stage that the future health and or well-being of the organism has to be realistically calculated and ensured. In the case of Africa, the diagnosis is out—the continent suffers from a serious problem of epistemicide, which threatens to decimate any of the remaining particulars. Our intellectual heritage must be revitalised to prevent any further loss, while at the same time we maintain a healthy grip on the universal. By maintaining this balance we will not only be able to keep our identity but more importantly use that knowledge to contribute in the reconstruction of a truly universal civilisation. To bring out the precarious nature of our situation, I will resort to the use of yet another analogy.

As Africans we can analogise our predicament to that of sailors who are out at sea and have to rebuild their ship. There is a need to get the job done without the benefit of certain luxuries. In other words, “we are like sailors who have to rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle it in dry dock and reconstruct it from the best components” (see Cartwright, Cat, Fleck and Uebel 1996, 89). This challenge, which invariably extends to almost all significant aspects of our lives including economics, politics and the academy, is one that we must face as academics. The universities and the curriculum as it stands is the ship on which we are all on board. The ship has to be kept afloat, tight and water proof even as we renovate it. In other words, our academic integrity and reputation ought to remain guarded. To dismantle the entire ship, to destroy it completely out at sea in order to begin to build a new one, as you can imagine is completely out of question. That would be complete and stupid self-immolation. Therefore, the only reasonable option is to proceed with astute precision and of course step by step replacing plank by plank, part by part, until the new ship is complete. It is my considered view that when universities call for the decolonisation of knowledge they imply, among other things, the need to rebuild this very ship on which we are all aboard. This to me implies two things: a) new canon building, and b)

adopting strategic particularism as the guiding philosophy or *modus operandi*. I will now proceed to outline each of these briefly.

The New Canon Building

The online Merriam Webster Dictionary describes a canon as “a sanctioned or accepted group or body of related works”—while the online Oxford Dictionary describes it as “a list of works considered to be permanently established as being of the highest quality.” Both definitions allude to a process by which status is conferred to a particular body of works, of course, by human beings. And on the basis of that status, nobody can claim to be an authority in that particular field of knowledge without having read such authors or engaged their perspectives. It is important to remember that, although the conferment of canonical status is not some arbitrary exercise, it is, at the same time, a process that is not innocent of politics. The point I wish to make is that universities wherever they are have a special role in canon construction. Graness (2015) draws our attention to this canon-forming power of universities. Universities around the world possess special power which they exercise all the time with serious consequences for certain forms of knowledge. They have the power to confer or withhold credibility or recognition with the resultant effect that some people, who deserve to be counted as authorities, are simply ignored. By drawing from a selection of theories and concepts and leaving out or openly discrediting others, universities play an enormous role in the construction, elevation and validation of a particular set of works into a canon. This is one of the ways by which epistemic injustice continues to be perpetrated in Africa. It is important for Africans to draw from the canonising power of universities, which follows from their ability to select curricula as well as niche areas for research and funding in order to rebuild their ship. The unprecedented challenge to the legitimacy of universities in Africa and the growing calls for decolonising knowledge—which I alluded to in my introduction—is an opportune moment to begin the process of rebuilding our ship with a new and truly representative philosophical canon.

Strategic Particularism³

A veritable chorus of voices across Africa and the global South has drawn our attention to the question of theories and perspectives that simply ignore African experiences. This position begins from an acceptance of the historical fact that “because the colonialists and related personnel perceived African cultures as inferior in at least some important respects, colonialism included a systematic program of de-Africanisation” (Wiredu 2004, 1). The project of de-Africanisation took many forms, though it was ruthlessly executed in the domains of education, politics and religion. The negative consequence is that this has injured our sense of self and forestalled the mastery of our situation in the world (Wiredu 1996, 146). It is, therefore, critical that in our study of philosophy we pay specific attention to the construction and elucidation of concepts that derive from our own historical experiences. In other words, as Hart (2010) argues, it is no longer necessary to leave our indigeneity at the

³ The term “strategic particularism” is borrowed from the following article by Wiredu (1998): “Toward decolonising African philosophy and religion,” *African Studies Quarterly*, 1 (4): 17–46.

gate when entering the academy. There is again no reason to be afraid to venture alternative theories in the pursuit of epistemic projects that aim to de-marginalise the continent. Our reading of the works of eminent philosophers from other traditions must be informed by our own historical circumstances, much as they do in other places. The particularist approach in African philosophy sees philosophy “as coterminous with philosophical investigations having special relevance to Africa” (Hart 2010, 149). What we need, as Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986, 87) argues, is “the search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe.” Strategic particularism is never about isolationism or some other blind vindictive agenda. It is a deliberate attempt to integrate African insights fully into all the branches of philosophy in order to render the African voice audible in any philosophical discourse. As Wiredu (2011, 33) correctly puts it, “two virtues, then, are sought after here: one, to be particularistic enough to be capable of knowing ourselves; and two, to be universalistic enough to be capable of knowing others. Or perhaps these are two sides of the same virtue.” This balance undoubtedly should define the teaching and practice of philosophy in Africa.

Conclusion

In epistemic terms, the following two claims: “here is the truth as it is”; and “here is the truth as we see it” are two propositions of different epistemological order. In one of these we can discern the roots of epistemic injustice, which is one of the unfinished projects of our time. The former’s absolutism precludes any alternative voice, while the latter, by presupposing interpretational variations, places objectivity in parenthesis, thereby freeing space for dialogue and diversity. By restricting “philosophy proper” to the Greeks and their heirs, the West was priming itself to proclaim truth in the first of the two senses above. The challenge today is to reassert our philosophy not by jettisoning other philosophies, but by reading them from our own historical and particularistic location in the spirit of philosophy as the “conversation of humankind.”

Note

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