

Ethnophilosophy as a Global Development Goal

Abstract

The ethnophilosophy debate in African philosophy has been primarily concerned with the nature and future direction of African philosophy, but I approach it in search of lessons about philosophy in general. I show how this ongoing debate has been obscured by varying understandings of “ethnophilosophy” and that a *de facto* victory has long since transpired, since “ethnophilosophy”, in the sense I recommend, is flourishing. I argue that the political arguments with which Hountondji and Wiredu initiated the debate in the 1970s supervene on the metaphilosophical view that ethnophilosophy, if philosophy at all, is of a poor standard. Showing that ethnophilosophy must indeed be philosophy, I argue that the critics’ low opinions of it depend on unrealistic assumptions about how philosophy makes progress. I conclude that Africa is lucky to have ethnophilosophies and that the rest of the world should hope to develop some.

Keywords

Ethnophilosophy; Metaphilosophy; African philosophy; Paulin Hountondji; Kwasi Wiredu

Word Count

8159

1. Rehabilitating Nkrumah's Universalism

Kwame Nkrumah, champion of Pan-Africanism and first head of state of an independent Ghana, was working for a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania from 1943-5, writing a thesis entitled, "Mind and Thought in Primitive Society: a study in Ethno-Philosophy with Special Reference to the Akan Peoples of the Gold Coast, West Africa". The terminology of "ethnophilosophy" seems to have been coined by Nkrumah as a natural development from discussions of various "ethnoscience" which date back to the late 19th century and which consisted in ethnographic studies of bodies of knowledge within oral cultures, such as concerning plants (ethnobotany) or animals (ethnozoology) (Hountondji 1997: 112-3; 2004: 533).¹ Nkrumah wrote a complete draft of his thesis, but still wanted to continue working on it after leaving the USA for London in 1945. He applied to the London School of Economics, but LSE were uneasy about the unfamiliar combination of social anthropology and philosophy, so tried to steer him towards a more purely anthropological study (Donnelly 2018). Nkrumah chose instead to transfer to University College London to work on logical positivism with A.J. Ayer and he never returned to ethnophilosophy.

Ethnophilosophy has since become a dominant strand of the literature of modern African philosophy. In fact, if you were to add up all that has written about ethnophilosophy, both for and against, as well as everything that might itself be counted as ethnophilosophy – if that notion is very broadly construed as: philosophy which is based on, inspired by, or embodied

¹ However, my colleague Stephen Leach has discovered an earlier use of the word in the Hungarian novel *Fej vagy írás* (1937) by Jolán Földes (Yolanda Foldes), which was translated into English as *Egyptian Interlude*: "One ought to create a new science, the philosophy of ethnology - what a nice sound ethnophilosophy has! If I could live my life over again I'd be an ethnophilosopher" (Foldes 1939: 114). The character in the novel is talking, whimsically, about ethnophilosophy as a study of the *odours* (!) of different cultures, the examples being the French and English, so clearly this has nothing to do with later uses, although since the theme of the novel is political unrest in Egypt it is certainly possible that it attracted Nkrumah's attention and gave him the idea.

within either African oral traditions or the views of what Henry Orika (1990) called the “sages” of traditional African societies – then I would wager that, in terms of wordcount at least, ethnophilosophy is *the* dominant topic in the literature of African philosophy. A recent volume on ethnophilosophy by its most prominent contemporary defender, Ada Agada, concludes with a discussion between Agada and six other leading African philosophers entitled, “Are We Finished with the Ethnophilosophy Debate?” (Imafidon et. al. 2022). While some might think African philosophers *should* be finished with that debate, the volume provides ample testament that it still goes strong some 50 years after Paulin Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu, and others, recommended that “ethnophilosophy” be regarded as a term of abuse and that African philosophers should scorn what it designates. Some still think they were right, yet ethnophilosophy, understood in the broad manner just outlined, continues to be produced; Agada, for instance, does not simply defend the legitimacy of ethnophilosophy, he is mainly focused on producing new work in that vein. As such, if you put aside wider metaphilosophical implications, and think of it as simply a debate Hountondji initiated in the 1970s about whether ethnophilosophy should be discontinued as a research project, it is clear that a *de facto* victory has long since transpired.

Nkrumah would have been pleased, presumably, although his ambitions for ethnophilosophy were far greater than those which have prevailed in the debate, in which the potential for it to provide a positive and distinctively African form of philosophy has always been the primary concern, often the only one. Nkrumah’s ambitions were universalist, in that although his particular interest was the philosophical views of traditional Akan society, in common with some of the best-known ethnophilosophy (e.g. Gyekye 1978; Wiredu 1987), he did not think of it as uniquely applicable to Africa, but rather envisaged “a synthetic ethno-philosophy” which would reveal “the basic and fundamental meanings underlying all cultures so as to arrive at a basic cultural Weltanschauung by which mankind may realize that even though

race, language and culture may be separate and distinct entities yet they are one in the sense that there is but one race: The Homo Sapiens.” The reason he thought there should be “no opposition between philosophy and ethnology”, as per the ethnophilosophical approach, is that the societal practices and beliefs the ethnographer is studying are laden with philosophical significance – “bound with primitive metaphysical notions” he says – and so can only be properly understood within the context of wider philosophical perspectives. So for Nkrumah, ethnophilosophy was important primarily for the role it had to play within the grand, universalist project he envisioned of understanding the different philosophies which different groups adhere to around the world, so as to make common ground between them for the purpose of “the building of international mind, spiritual unity and true cooperation”.²

As it transpired, Nkrumah’s abandoned thesis had little or nothing to do with the genesis of the ethnophilosophy debate. This was instead provoked by an enduringly controversial 1945 book by the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels entitled *Bantu Philosophy*, which Bernard Matolino aptly sums up as “an intriguing combination of racism and colonial fawning” that was written to “aid the success of the colonial mission” (Imafidon et. al. 2022: 304).³ For all its many faults, however, Tempel’s book was based on essentially the same premise and aim as Nkrumah’s thesis, namely that traditional African societies were possessed of philosophies, and that understanding these philosophies would promote cooperation between

² Nkrumah’s thesis remains unpublished in the Archives of Ghana, but the introduction and most of the first two chapters have been posted online by The Marxist-Nkrumaist Forum (<https://marxistnkrumaistforum.wordpress.com/karl-marx-the-poverty-of-philosophy/kwame-nkrumah-phd-dissertation/>) – my quotations are all from the introduction.

³ It makes for a rather sinister read these days, for example when Tempels recounts occasions when he became angry with the locals (Tempels 1945: 60), or when he offers the sardonic advice that anyone who considers Bantu people incapable of civilization “should systematically liquidate the Bantu; or, more wisely, that he should pack his bags and return to Europe!” (ibid.: 119). As this quotation suggests, Tempels was trying to counter attitudes even worse than his own, since by making the audacious claim, as he saw it, that Bantu people were in possession of something as sophisticated as a philosophy, he hoped to overcome, “the universally accepted picture of primitive man, of the savage, of the proto-man living before the full blossoming of intelligence” so that in “the unnumbered crowd of the primitive masses, in the faces falsely looked upon as bestial, we see the animal expressions which we lent to these savages fade” (ibid.: 109).

peoples; albeit cooperation between colonizing and colonized peoples, in Tempels' case.

Tempels' book was influential, spawning many similar projects by both Europeans and Africans, and this infuriated young, Western-trained African philosophers like Hountondji in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Hountondji labelled it "ethnophilosophy" as a term of abuse, memorably dubbing it a "crazed language accountable to nothing" (Hountondji 1976: 122), with his reason for using this terminology being that it was not really philosophy, but rather "a branch of ethnography mistaken for philosophy" (Hountondji 2004: 530).⁴

In light of Nkrumah's aspirational intentions, in contrast with the negative sense Hountondji introduced, it is easy to sympathise with Martin Odei Ajei's aim of "Rehabilitating "ethnophilosophy" to accord with [Nkrumah's] meaning of it" (Ajei 2022: 170; see also Ajei 2013). In one respect, namely Nkrumah's universalism, I shall be pursuing Ajei's project of rehabilitation in this paper. For if we think of ethnophilosophy as applicable to any group of people, not just Africans living in traditional societies, and if we also think of the term as naming a philosophy and not just a method, then the question arises of whether there are ethnophilosophies outside of traditional societies. For example, we might ask whether the British people, in all their diversity, are currently in possession of an ethnophilosophy? If not, should the British envy the Akan? Perhaps they should, since unless philosophy is worthless,

⁴ At the time Hountondji claimed to have coined the word (1976: 34), but he may have remembered it being mentioned in Nkrumah's autobiography (Nkrumah 1957: 51); this seems a distinct possibility given that *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Hountondji 1976) contains both the original ethnophilosophy critique and a chapter critiquing Nkrumah's conception of philosophy in *Consciencism* (Nkrumah 1964) – so clearly Nkrumah was on Hountondji's mind at the time. When Hountondji first read Nkrumah's thesis in 1996 it led him to ask, "would I have formulated my critique of ethnophilosophy had I known earlier of Nkrumah's thesis?" (1997: 116) – to which his answer is essentially "yes", on the grounds that Nkrumah's ethnophilosophy has similar faults to those he originally identified. As Bruce Janz has discovered (2022: 6-7), the word "ethnophilosophy" was used by at least two other authors between Nkrumah and Hountondji, namely Ethel Albert (Albert 1956) and Melville Herskovits (Herskovits 1959); and it was used before Nkrumah too (see footnote 1).

it seems better, all things being equal, to belong to a group of people who have a philosophy than to one which does not.

When viewed through a universalist lens, the significance of the ethnophilosophy debate is transformed, allowing it to be seen not simply as a debate about what African philosophy amounts to and how it should aim to develop, but as one which might shed light on the general nature of philosophy and how we should all want it to develop. As such, thinking of ethnophilosophy in Nkrumah's universalist manner takes what had looked like an internal debate among African philosophers and turns it outwards towards the most general metaphilosophical issues.⁵

2. Defining "Ethnophilosophy"

My broad definition of ethnophilosophy as, "philosophy which is based on, inspired by, or embodied within either African oral traditions or the views of what Henry Orika (1990) called the "sages" of traditional African societies" was intended to fix attention on the phenomenon in question while avoiding as much contentiousness as possible. It is the same phenomenon which, very contentiously, Wiredu called "the familiar witches' brew" and Hountondji called "purring on about Luba ontology, Dogon metaphysics, the conception of old age among the Fulbe, etc." (Wiredu 1976: 325; Hountondji 1976: 54). The basic idea, ever since Nkrumah, has been that from information about views and sayings prevalent within traditional African societies, an exposition is provided of the philosophical commitments being expressed. Although Nkrumah envisaged this as a combination of scientific ethnography and philosophy, in practice the former has typically amounted to nothing more than a philosopher informally consulting with people in the community in

⁵ This is only a change of emphasis – wider metaphilosophical considerations have always been integral to the ethnophilosophy debate.

question.⁶ Since there is no obvious reason why the ethnographer should be the same person as the philosopher – the advantages of division of labour suggest it would be better if they were not – it seems ethnophilosophy can proceed similarly to the history of philosophy. Thus, just as a philosopher might read Descartes and then provide an exposition and critical analysis of his philosophy, an ethnophilosopher (a type of philosopher) might read about statements of Akan tradition and then provide an exposition and critical analysis of Akan ethnophilosophy (a type of philosophy).

Thus if we deemphasise the methodological connotations of ethnophilosophy, we can think of it as what a philosopher does, and also what they produce, when they use source material about a people's or community's philosophy as the basis for their philosophizing. This is the usage the literature has mainly gravitated towards among defenders of ethnophilosophy, albeit not among its opponents, as we shall see below. My broad definition goes even further in the direction of generality, however, by allowing that "ethnophilosophy" can refer to either the philosophy of a people or community, or to the work of philosophers taking their cue from such a philosophy – and if we remove the references to Africa, we go all the way to Nkrumah's universalism. This has the advantage that it gives us an etymologically appropriate and already familiar label for something we have no other label for, namely the philosophy of a people or community, rather than the philosophy of an individual or professional movement; and it is this controversial idea which the ethnophilosophy debate has revolved around.⁷

⁶ For example, in Kwame Gyekye's *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, one of the most detailed ethnophilosophies to date (in my broad sense), Gyekye makes no claim to scientific methodology, saying only that, "As part of the research toward the publication of this book, I travelled to towns and villages in Ghana in search of traditional sages" (Gyekye 1987: xx). One of LSE's misgivings about Nkrumah's project was that he had done insufficient empirical work (Donnelly 2018). Nevertheless, Nkrumah and Gyekye (also Wiredu) were ethnically Akan, so were presumably already insiders to the traditional local philosophy to some extent.

⁷ "Public philosophy" would be a poor alternative since it already has a different established usage concerning engaging with public discourse (e.g. Sandel 2005), while "traditional philosophy" could just as well be used to refer to an academic tradition, such as Thomism.

To see how understandings which are more specific, and yet unregimented, have obscured the dividing lines in this debate, and thereby the issues, consider Wiredu, Gyekye and Oruka, some of the most acclaimed African philosophers to work in the field of ethnophilosophy in my broad sense, and yet who are all officially opponents of ethnophilosophy. In the cases of Gyekye and Oruka, the opposition is largely explained by their thinking that ethnophilosophy implies collective or communal thought – a conceptual impossibility according to Gyekye (1987: xix) – when philosophy must always be the product of individual thinkers. This is why Oruka sought out philosophical “sages” in traditional communities to provide their personal opinions, a method Gyekye also adopted. The extent to which this constitutes a different approach to ethnophilosophy, however, is far from clear (for Gyekye, see Majeed 2022; for Oruka, see Mosima 2022). On the face of it, it seems rather obvious that if a community can properly be said to have a philosophy, then to find out about it you would have to seek out the philosophical experts, rather as to engage in ethnobotany you would need to seek out the people in a community who knew most about plants. The idea of a communal philosophy which everyone came up with jointly and knows equally well is a straw man, and although there are hints that Tempels sometimes thought along these lines, as when he speaks of philosophical views “probably common to all primitive people” (Tempels 1945: 70), if opposition to ethnophilosophy means nothing more than opposition to Tempels it is trivial.

Wiredu provides perhaps the best illustration of this problem of apparent opposition to ethnophilosophy resulting from an idiosyncratic understanding of the term, since he was vehemently opposed to ethnophilosophy in the 1970s (Wiredu 1976), while in the 1980s he produced some of his most influential work on traditional Akan philosophy (e.g. Wiredu 1987). As Agada quite reasonably puts it, Wiredu’s work became “increasingly

ethnophilosophical”, and for this he thinks “African philosophy will be eternally grateful” (Agada 2022: 21). In 2004, however, Wiredu was still maintaining his loyalty to the “anti-ethnophilosophy school”, which he never rescinded. The reasons he gave were that ethnophilosophy can promote an “insufficiently critical stance” and can lead African philosophers to neglect other important philosophical issues (Wiredu 2004a: 4-5). But the concept of ethnophilosophy lacks any clear sense if Wiredu’s own work on Akan philosophy does not count as such.

Equipped with a broad and intuitive notion of ethnophilosophy, then, rather than one tied to a contentious notion such as collective thinking, lack of criticality, or simply the memory of Father Tempels, let us revisit the classic 1970s attacks on ethnophilosophy by Hountondji and Wiredu.

3. Politics supervening on Metaphilosophy

A good deal of what Hountondji and Wiredu said was essentially political and specific to their circumstances, in which the idea of distinctively African philosophy was spreading fast, popularized by Tempels’ success. In this vein, both object that it had been moulded by a Western demand for exoticism, with the result that African philosophers were passing over the cutting edge of international philosophy in favour of the belief systems of their ancestors. This had transpired both because ethnophilosophy was what non-Africans expected of African philosophy – exotic beliefs, not serious candidates for truth – and because Africans were looking for something pre-colonial to pin their identity on. The result, as Hountondji saw it, was that ethnophilosophers “betrayed our original cultures by showing them off” in a “collective cultural exhibitionism” which “played Europe’s game” (Hountondji 1976: 50, 67). Similarly, Wiredu saw the demand for ethnophilosophy as stemming from “African nationalists in search of an African identity, Afro-Americans in search of their African roots, and Western foreigners in search of exotic diversion” with the result that foreigners were

given a negative impression of African thinking, one which seemed to confirm their worst prejudices, while Africans were encouraged to identify with and perpetuate the kind of “backward” thinking which “enabled sparse groups of Europeans to subjugate large masses of African populations and keep them in colonial subjection” (Wiredu 1976: 325, 321).

This line of argument only works on the assumption that African ethnophilosophy is of a very poor standard – that it is much worse than Western philosophy. If Hountondji and Wiredu had considered African ethnophilosophy to be state-of-the-art, packed full of extraordinary ideas which would allow it to take the lead on the philosophical world-stage, then a political explanation of why African philosophers were pursuing it would not have seemed pressing. Even if the political explanation cast attraction to ethnophilosophy in a dubious light, its quality would ensure its endurance, so calling for African philosophers to shun it would amount to the odd recommendation that they pass the baton to non-Africans. As such, the political argument must be subsidiary to a deeper, metaphilosophical conception of what constitutes good philosophy. It is only because Hountondji and Wiredu think African ethnophilosophy is poor that politics is relevant – the political argument is supposed to explain how African philosophers became interested, making that interest seem unattractive, but it is the supposedly poor quality which explains why it should be discontinued. What motivates them both is the thought that African philosophers could and should do better⁸; Wiredu was practising what he preached at the time by publishing in world-leading philosophy journals on technical issues in logic and ontology (e.g. Wiredu 1975).

The same point about the politics supervening on a metaphilosophical judgement can be made about Hountondji’s “myth of unanimity” argument (*op. cit.*: 61), which is that ethnophilosophy embodies the condescending Western assumption that an African

⁸ This motivation was itself political to a large degree, as will be discussed at the end of this section.

philosophy would be something everybody in a community agrees about, a kind of identikit set of beliefs natural to Africans, unlike Western philosophies, which are the product of independently minded people. Tempels does sometimes write as if he assumes this, as already mentioned, but he seems to have assumed it of Westerners too, saying that “We hold a static conception of ‘being’, they a dynamic” (Tempels 1945: 34). Nevertheless, even if ethnophilosophical interest were necessarily connected to a condescending attitude to African thinking, this could at most provide reason to doubt the existence of philosophies within traditional communities, on the grounds that the collectivist philosophies being expected were an impossibility. So long as there actually were philosophies in traditional communities, however, unanimity would hardly be a problem so long as the philosophies were good. Suppose the Bantu people universally adhered to a process philosophy very similar to A.N. Whitehead’s, for example, and that Hountondji had been a disciple of Whitehead – in that case he would surely have thought unanimity to their great credit.

Underneath the political arguments, then, are metaphilosophical views about what constitutes good philosophy, and more fundamentally, what constitutes philosophy *simpliciter*. We shall begin with the latter.

Hountondji’s view is that traditional African communities do not have philosophies, but that African philosophers can produce African philosophy (of very poor quality⁹) by writing about these traditional views, since African philosophy is just “a literature produced by Africans and dealing with philosophical problems” (op. cit.: 63). So ethnophilosophy, in the sense of writing about the traditional views, can count as African philosophy so long as the author is African and they are dealing with philosophical problems. Hountondji confirms his thinking along these lines when discussing Anton Wilhelm Amo, the 18th century Ghanaian who was

⁹ Hountondji emphasises the low quality, presumably to avoid any impression of diluting his critique with this concession; see op. cit.: 63-4.

taken to Europe at the age of about four and became a philosopher in Germany. Hountondji says there is nothing African about the content of Amo's work (ibid.: 128) and that the expectation there should be is "unacceptable", since to "require thinkers to be content with reaffirming the beliefs of their people or social group is exactly the same as prohibiting them from thinking freely and condemning them in the long term to intellectual asphyxia" (ibid.: 129).¹⁰ So Amo wrote African philosophy simply because he wrote philosophy and was born in Africa.

The problem with this idea that traditional African cultures do not have philosophies, but ethnophilosophers writing about them are producing philosophy, is that if the latter counts as philosophy because it is "dealing with philosophical problems", then this strongly suggests that the traditional views are indeed philosophical; you could hardly weave a discussion of the philosophical problem of personal identity around Akan botanical views, for example. There are two possible rejoinders suggested by the text.

The first is that ethnophilosophers superimpose philosophical concerns not there in the sources – "while they were producing, they thought they were simply recounting," he says (ibid.: 38), and similarly, Tempels' book was about "not the philosophy of the Bantu but that of Tempels" (ibid.: 62). I find this hard to credit even in the case of Tempels, but with quality work in ethnophilosophy it simply cannot be taken seriously. Nobody who has read Gyekye's *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, for instance, could believe that the detailed philosophy it contains, based on unstrained readings of traditional source material, is all coming from Gyekye's imagination – philosophical interpretations of Akan views about the nature of the soul and moral responsibility are not simply the natural kind of interpretation,

¹⁰ This expectation which Hountondji finds "unacceptable" is to be found in Wiredu, who in an essay on Amo speculates that the reason for one of Amo's positions in the philosophy of mind was that "some recess of Amo's consciousness was impregnated by the concept of mind implicit in the language and thought of the Akans" (Wiredu 2004b: 204).

they lack competition. Hountondji might be thought to have identified a more limited danger, namely that philosophy will tend to be read into traditional views whenever possible, irrespective of original intentions. But since the aim is philosophical insight rather than ethnographical understanding, this seems inconsequential. If we can gain philosophical insight from a new interpretation of Heraclitus, philosophers need not care if he might have meant something different.

Hountondji's second option for defending the view that philosophy can be produced by writing about non-philosophy would be to maintain that philosophy must be written to be developmental rather than static, with development necessary to philosophy. Thus, he says we should "take the word 'philosophy' in the active, not the passive sense", such that a philosophy is not a "closed system to which all of us can adhere" but rather a process of "restless questioning" (ibid.: 51). Oral traditions are "cumulative" and so "perpetuate a conservative, traditionalist culture", while philosophy "keeps a diary" to preserve ideas in a way which "liberates the mind to make innovations" (ibid.: 104-5). As such, the "moral tales, didactic legends, aphorisms and proverbs" investigated in ethnophilosophy "are the expression not of an intellectual quest but at best of its results, not of a philosophy but at best of a wisdom" (ibid.: 105).

Although Plato entertained his doubts from time to time (e.g. *Phaedrus* 274c-277a), I doubt anyone now would deny that writing has been of the highest benefit to philosophical development; although seven hundred years of Platonist philosophy transpired between Plato and Plotinus, and some of the important figures did not write, such as Plotinus' teacher Ammonius – he may, for all we know, have played the greater part in this development. But in any case, development is clearly not necessary for philosophical status; a static philosophy may always be a bad one, but quality is a different issue. Undoubted philosophies are often static, if for no more profound reason than that their creators died. Spinoza's philosophy, for

example, is no longer the system of active questioning it must have been during his lifetime, but is rather what Hountondji calls a “closed system”, one which generation after generation of philosophy students tries to get to grips with. You might say it remains active because it might yet influence contemporary philosophy, but the same response could be made on behalf of African ethnophilosophies.

The rejoinders are not good, then. Given the simple metaphilosophical criterion which Hountondji naturally appeals to when defining “African philosophy”, namely that of dealing with certain problems and hence having a certain subject matter, together with his view that ethnophilosophers do indeed produce philosophy when they write about the oral traditions, the only viable explanation of this combination is that the traditions are philosophical.

Turning now to Wiredu, writing at around the same time, we find just as much antipathy to ethnophilosophy, although he is less committal about whether to count what he calls “traditional thought” or “African folk thought” as philosophy, saying only that *if* “deserving of the name ‘philosophy,’ these ideas should be regarded not as a part of African philosophy simply, but rather as a part of traditional philosophy in Africa” (Wiredu 1976: 324). This distinction needs to be understood within the context of a wider discussion in which Wiredu is arguing that it is a mistake to think of traditional thinking as specific to Africa, such that if “philosophy” is the right word, then we should expect to find traditional philosophy on other continents too. Thus, Wiredu is distinguishing traditional thinking / philosophy, whatever its geographical origins, from philosophy which has managed to “advance past the stage of traditional thinking”, with only the latter deemed worthy of a designation such as “European philosophy” or “African Philosophy”. Traditional philosophy is all much-of-a-much to Wiredu – spiritualistic, unscientific and regressive – whereas advanced philosophy has varied significantly across regions and periods, so should be designated accordingly, with a

distinctively African variety yet to be created.¹¹ Ultimately, however, Wiredu thinks “the march of modernization is destined to lead to the universalization of philosophy everywhere in the world” (ibid.: 326).

Once more we see a political argument supervening on the metaphilosophical assumption that ethnophilosophies are of poor quality, for otherwise claiming that other continents possess them would not provide a reason for African philosophers to pass over their own. As to Wiredu’s hesitancy about whether “philosophy” is the right word, the main reason he gives for scepticism is that they lack “the spirit of rational inquiry” (ibid. 324), that is, arguments. As such, we find Wiredu connecting his critique of ethnophilosophy with what were then his main preoccupations in Western philosophy, when he writes that, “the belief in abstract entities common among many Western logicians is not any more brainy than the traditional African belief in ancestor spirits. But logicians are given to arguing for their ontology” (ibid.: 321-2).¹²

To claim that criticality is necessary to philosophy is to make a claim of what I have elsewhere called metaphilosophical “exceptionalism” (Tartaglia 2016), that is, a claim that philosophy is exceptional among academic disciplines in not being distinguished by subject matter, and hence is unlike geography, history, mathematics, or any other discipline you might care to mention. I think exceptionalist theses, which tend to have some ulterior motive, such as promoting one approach to philosophy over another, can always be shown to be false. In this particular case it is easy to do, for if criticality were necessary to philosophical status then there could be no such thing as a philosophical statement; we could not say that “mind

¹¹ Hountondji also says African philosophy is “before us, not behind us, and must be created today by decisive action” (Hountondji 1976: 51); although this seems at odds with his authorial view of what makes philosophy “African”.

¹² Other philosophers have subsequently made clearer commitments to the view that traditional ethnophilosophies are not philosophies because they are uncritical, e.g. Appiah 1992: 91-2; Attoe 2016, 2022.

and body are distinct substances” is a philosophical statement but “tigers have stripes” is not, for example. Neither could we say of a man that he spouted philosophical opinions all night but was not prepared to back them up with argument; we might even be forced to regard an under-argued philosophy monograph as only a fraction of itself. The conclusion to draw, I think, is that although criticality may be necessary to good philosophy, as to good history or social science, it is certainly not necessary to classification as philosophical – only subject matter counts in that regard.

As we have already seen, Hountondji takes it for granted that philosophy is united by subject matter when he gives his criteria for “African philosophy”, and Gyekye, as a good example of a major figure on the other side of the debate (once disambiguated), was perfectly clear in his view that philosophy occurs when people, irrespective of culture, are “exercised about fairly similar questions or puzzles” (Gyekye 1987: xiv). I think the strongest argument for this view, from the perspective of the ethnophilosophy debate, is simply the debate itself. For if philosophy were not recognisable from its subject matter, why would anyone have ever suspected, rightly or wrongly, that the Bantu, Akan, or any other traditional African community was possessed of a philosophy? Why did Nkrumah instinctively call his study ethno-philosophy rather than ethno-something-else? Because it had been noticed, by insiders and outsiders alike, that there were views in these communities concerning the ultimate nature of being, the identity of a person, the root of moral obligation, etc. – this is simply what is *meant* by “noticing that they had philosophical views”, however you might seek to answer the further metaphilosophical question of how such paradigmatically philosophical topics are connected, if at all.

Since African philosophers have persisted to this day in producing ethnophilosophy, it seems clear enough that the traditional communities did have philosophies. Perhaps these philosophies were not terribly critical, since they were passed down as statements of wisdom

rather than as arguments leading to conclusions; although Gyekye is surely right that critical discussion and argument must have transpired over the generations to determine which were the statements of wisdom (ibid.: 24-9). But even if they are now entirely static and uncritical, it must be wrong to deny that they are philosophical. Heraclitus's famous statement about stepping into rivers twice is also static and uncritical, but it is the intended topic, namely the metaphysics of time and change, which makes it philosophical, and it suggests positions on that topic which have been explored in two and a half thousand years of critical philosophical activity. You might say that the fragments of pre-Socratic philosophy have been a "wellspring" for Western philosophy, rather as Agada calls ethnophilosophy the wellspring of African philosophy (Agada 2022).

Having now concluded that traditional ethnophilosophies are philosophies, we can turn to the question of why Hountondji and Wiredu think they are such poor philosophies.

In the case of Hountondji, he has always been clear, both in the original critique and in later reflections, that the driving issue for him was development in Africa (Hountondji 1976: 44-6, 66-70; 2004).¹³ He thinks that ethnophilosophy will not help Africa to modernize, and so it would be a mistake to adopt it as the official African philosophy, so to speak. To think like this shows an estimation of the value of philosophy which is now very unusual, when most thinking of development would look only to science, technology, infrastructure, etc. But having studied in the Marxist environment of 1960s Parisian philosophy, where he was taught by Althusser, Derrida and Ricoeur, Hountondji makes the Marxist assumption that philosophy effects real-world and large-scale differences.¹⁴

¹³ He was an important figure in politics in Benin in the 1990s, serving as a government minister, so political motivations are only to be expected.

¹⁴ See, for example, "The Role of the Universities" in Hountondji 1976: 167-9.

It would be odd now to think that ethnophilosophy has held back development in Africa, nor indeed made any noteworthy contribution to that development either way. It was a bystander, like academic Western philosophy of the same period – the logic and ontology that most interested Wiredu, and the Husserlian phenomenology which Hountondji once specialised in, have been no more or less useful to African development. Even if you hold that the technology which has driven that development is ultimately the product of European Enlightenment philosophy, the fact remains that joining the global technological advance has never come with the condition that other philosophies be renounced, whether African ethnophilosophy, French deconstruction, or even religious philosophies which actively oppose key tenets of Enlightenment philosophy – for fundamentalist regimes benefit from modern technology, too. That ethnophilosophy would not help development in Africa, then, was never a good reason to think that it must be low quality – quality in philosophy is determined in other ways, such as prospects for truth, for insight, or for provoking wider reflection.

Wiredu also thought Africa needed to modernize, such that if African philosophers were to play their part they needed to focus on state-of-the-art Western philosophy. His reasons for thinking ethnophilosophy poor are less political and more philosophical, however, probably because he was taught by analytic rather than continental philosophers, with the main philosophical feature he expresses disapproval of, alongside lack of argument, being spiritualist explanation. Appealing to spirits is a big problem for Wiredu, as it was for one of his teachers at Oxford, Gilbert Ryle, who of course dubbed Cartesian dualism the myth of the “ghost in the machine” (Ryle 1949). It is hard to avoid the impression, then, that a major factor in Wiredu’s low opinion of ethnophilosophy is that he saw it as incompatible with materialism, which he seems to have taken as both obligatory in light of the discoveries of modern science and emblematic of advanced philosophical thought. When Wiredu turned to

ethnophilosophy in the 1980s, it was to interpret the Akan concept of mind as a kind of materialism, unlike Gyekye, who saw it as a kind of dualism (Wiredu 1987; Gyekye 1987: 99).

Despite the popularity of materialism in the second half of the 20th century – arguably now waning because of its difficulties in accounting for consciousness¹⁵ – to take materialism as the key indicator of quality in philosophy would count against most of the philosophy ever produced. And as Agada (2017) has pointed out, in reference to Wiredu’s attempts to distance Akan philosophy from panpsychism, intimations of spiritualism are no longer a byword for superstition and irrationality in philosophy, with sophisticated forms of panpsychism now defended by leading analytic philosophers; even neuroscientists are joining in this new enthusiasm (e.g. Tononi and Koch 2015). As such, if African ethnophilosophies really do tend to lean towards some kind of spiritualism – or experientialism, to make it sound less exotic – then as things currently stand there is less reason to think this renders them outdated than to think it renders Wiredu’s opposition outdated. Our future of virtual and augmented realities driven by artificial intelligences will be a world of experience and not very solid to the touch.¹⁶

4. Through a Universalist Lens

What can we learn about philosophy in general from looking at the fact that the ethnophilosophy debate in African philosophy took place?¹⁷ What can we learn from the particular shape it took, and that a *de facto* victory has now transpired?

¹⁵ As Robert Koons and George Bealer (2010) have observed, the fortunes of materialism tend to wax and wane.

¹⁶ For an argument about the importance of philosophy to this future, see Tartaglia 2020.

¹⁷ According to Jay M. Van Hook (1997), there is no such thing as “philosophy in general”; influenced by Rorty’s neopragmatism, he thinks African and European “philosophies” are just different discourses with nothing interesting in common. Van Hook does nothing in his paper to undermine the default option that philosophy is united by subject matter, however – he mentions it (p. 389) but provides no arguments against it.

One important lesson might be that philosophy will always be the kind of discourse which embraces many different voices, thriving from differences of opinion, approach or emphasis, even among those largely of the same mind. If philosophy were like a train hurtling towards the truth, such that the philosophers in the front carriages were the most worth listening to, and the views of those not on the train were of no consequence at all, then Hountondji and Wiredu might have been right. They might have been right that African philosophers should have abandoned ethnophilosophy to get on the train, and then, like everyone else, tried to work their way to the front carriages. That, however, would depend on their having located the correct train, and since Hountondji and Wiredu belonged to different philosophical traditions, due to a combination of a historical rift in European philosophy and the colonial history of Africa, they would in fact have opted for different trains – one continental, the other analytic.

But in any case, philosophy is not like a train travelling towards the truth. There are well-known reasons for thinking that not even natural science is like that (Kuhn 1962), but unlike philosophy, it does at least create a semblance of linear progress, for it becomes incrementally more explanatorily powerful, thereby helping to advance our technologies. Philosophy, on the other hand, can at most overcome previous rounds of objections, ready for the next, with opposed philosophies perfectly capable of going through this developmental process simultaneously. Quite unlike a truth-train, philosophy is a vast historical conversation containing various broad positions that vie for the loyalties of people who ask philosophical questions. These broad positions, like idealism and materialism, or utilitarianism and virtue ethics, come in and out of fashion while undergoing endless variation, probably because truth

in such matters can never be decisively established, only rationally debated in a manner that hopefully leads to new insights and better formulations (cf. Russell 1945: xiii).¹⁸

Once philosophy is seen in this conversational manner, it can also be seen that so long as there actually were ethnophilosophies in Africa, there could never have been good reasons to be opposed to African philosophers working on them. African ethnophilosophy was an exciting new strand in the conversation, exciting because the views it offered had yet to be mapped onto the broad positions established within other traditions; and in undertaking this task it might have turned out, and still might, that African philosophy had the key to a new insight or an improved formulation – a new broad position was even a possibility. So, there were always excellent reasons for African philosophers to pursue ethnophilosophy and no real downsides either, since non-African strands could be pursued as well or instead. Once you join the conversation you can listen and respond to anyone within it. It was by taking their lead from German rather than British traditions of philosophy that 19th century British philosophers founded the British Idealism movement – which now seems very British.

African philosophers might in the future take their lead from Indian philosophy, for example, then use the inspiration to come up with something that eventually seems very African.

So, my suggestion is that the ethnophilosophy debate took place because of the influence of the truth-train model, which was imported from Europe to Africa by some of the leading pioneers of modern African philosophy – and due to the force of the political message they combined it with, what they were saying seemed powerful. The *de facto* victory then subsequently occurred because of the actual, conversational nature of philosophy, such that once the new strand had been discovered, developing it was irresistible, especially to African philosophers. Think of it on a miniature scale: a philosophy conference on topic X is held and

¹⁸ For a different explanation, according to which philosophy aims at understanding rather than truth, see Hannon and Nguyen 2022.

one philosopher mentions that there is a view on X which derives from a tradition only she knows about – do you think she would be allowed to, or be herself capable of, just leaving it at that? Of course not, and a good thing too, because philosophy thrives when philosophical conversation thrives; new conversational partners with different ways of looking at things are always to be welcomed. We are running out of those unfamiliar traditions to provide new conversational partners in this globalising world of instant communication, African ethnophilosophy may be the last we ever get.

A more important universalist lesson to take from the ethnophilosophy debate is specific to the idea of ethnophilosophy; the previous one was not because it could have been learned, in a counterfactual scenario, from a debate about the future of African philosophy sparked by the discovery in Africa of a forgotten library of indigenous philosophy – you can imagine some philosophers, inspired by the truth-train model, arguing that African philosophers had more pressing matters to attend to. The more important and specific lesson is simply that communities can possess philosophies, and that since this is the case, the development of more ethnophilosophies is a realistic goal. For even if you grant, with Oruka and Gyekye, that African ethnophilosophies are the product of forgotten individuals, and also that its best current representatives may disagree with the community view on any number of issues, the fact remains that they are philosophies which can be ascribed, on the whole, to a community of people. This shows that there can be not only philosophical literacy, but also broad philosophical consensus, within an ordinary human community. You would expect that kind of thing in Plato's Academy, but not from a community of people who did not gather for the express purpose of engaging in philosophy.

If I belong to a community – in virtue of living where I do, perhaps – then it certainly has no ethnophilosophy; if Gyekye or Oruka came to this town and asked for the local sage, nobody would direct them to me – they would most likely be told, “sorry, I don't even know what

philosophy is, let alone where to find a philosopher!” Statisticians could find out the percentage of people who believe in God in my town, but even if there was an overwhelming majority in favour of God’s existence this would not be because of an ethnophilosophy, for if it were there would be similar majorities on issues such as whether we are free, how to determine right action, the mind / body problem, and the meaning of life. I would expect the majority view on all these to be: no view at all. Not many people in the modern world have philosophical views, not beyond the basics of whether God exists, which tends to go along with a view on whether there is an afterlife and perhaps one or two other related matters. But a smattering of dismissive stock answers, or philosophical “intuitions” discovered on the spot, of the kind experimental philosophy measures (Knobe and Nichols 2008), can hardly add up to an ethnophilosophy comparable to those expounded at length in modern African philosophy.

Of those who would recognise and agree with this observation, some might think it a good thing, contending that conformity in philosophical matters is not to be encouraged. It seems better than conformity in philosophical ignorance and indifference, however, and although the conversational nature of philosophy is perhaps such that we can never expect philosophers to reach many consensuses on truth, the vast majority of people are not philosophers, so to expect the same kind of diversity of opinion in non-philosophers, who do not spend their lives thinking about these matters, is not realistic. A body of related, coherently meshing doctrines which people could sign up to, on the other hand – an ethnophilosophy learned about in school alongside other ethnophilosophies – is a more realistic aspiration, with the communities these ethnophilosophies belong to being thoroughly global, at least potentially, because online.

In this way, philosophical literacy might start to develop across the globe, and cease to be seen as only for those who happen to have a particular niche interest, which I think is

currently the dominant attitude. Such development should be regarded as a highly desirable at present, since if we are going to carry on inventing and developing technologies such as artificial intelligence, which will fundamentally affect the immediate human future, then the affected will need to be properly equipped to think through the issues if they are to have any say over how these technologies are used, which kinds of technologies we do and do not want to be developed, and ultimately, what kind of human future we want. As such, I think the development of ethnophilosophies available to all people capable of entertaining one should be regarded as a global development goal.

Of the seventeen goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the fourth concerns education, and includes Target 4.7, which is to:

Ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.¹⁹

What seems to be envisaged is teaching a certain political philosophy, a tolerant and liberal one affirming human rights and gender equality, among other things. The best way to develop philosophical views, however, is not to teach them as truths, as you might teach a body of established scientific knowledge, but rather as opinions which contend for the student's conviction, since if someone "embraces Xenophon and Plato's opinions by his own reasoning, they will no longer be theirs, they will be his," as Montaigne saw (Montaigne 1575: 135). The idea of an ethnophilosophy as a body of interconnected philosophical views dominant within a community suggests a more ambitious target for educational development

¹⁹ United Nations document A/RES/71/313 (2017), available at <https://www.un.org/en/>

than envisaged in Target 4.7, one more in accordance with Montaigne's ideal of "owning" philosophical opinions. This would be to teach a variety of ethnophilosophies with the aim of students coming to favour one; and even if ethnophilosophies were sometimes adopted without good reason at first, greater awareness of the issues might later inspire critical philosophical thought to develop. The ethnophilosophies might be traditional ones, as in the African case, or derive from religious traditions, such as Christian and Buddhist philosophies – so long as these were taught as reasoned-based philosophies rather than tenets of faith – or they might come from the history of philosophy more generally, such as a contemporary take on Stoicism, or a philosophy rooted in utilitarianism and scientific realism, for instance.

In addition to the general benefits of teaching philosophy (see Hand and Winstanley (eds.) 2008), most notably to develop independence of mind, it can help to address the democratic deficit in how choices are made about technological development, which is a prominent theme in the philosophy of technology (e.g., Jonas 1979; Winner 1986). Technological capabilities have advanced to the point where unprecedented choices will need to be made, such as, according to biologist Edward O. Wilson, "the greatest moral dilemma since God stayed the hand of Abraham: how much to retrofit the human genotype" (Wilson 2014: 14). If such dilemmas are to be resolved as consensually and rationally as possible among the global public that will be affected, then that public will need to become accustomed to thinking about philosophy. What I am suggesting in speaking of ethnophilosophy as a global development goal, then, is that rather than continue to see the ethnophilosophy debate as concerning the identity and future direction of academic African philosophy, we should reconceive it in the more optimistic and ambitious light of trying to develop philosophy outside of the academic context, with African philosophy showing the way.

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