

African Philosophy Revisited

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It is more than thirty years since the debate about the existence or non-existence of African Philosophy began. According to Okolo (1995:106), the issue has finally been settled among African philosophers. A cursory glance at recent texts on African philosophy¹ reveals, *pace* Okolo, that it still remains a contested terrain. Why has African philosophy been subjected to the panopticon gaze? What is so special about it or the Africans to deserve such attention? After all, British, German, French, American, Latin American, Russian, Indian or Chinese philosophy have never been under such intense surveillance and interrogation.

In what follows, I shall attempt to show that Western valorisation of 'reason' is directly connected to the interrogation of the legitimacy of African philosophy; that rationality—the notion that undergirds Western philosophy's self-conception and self-image and its articulation of human nature—is primarily the source of this exclusionary attitude because it legitimises, encourages and leads to the (re)invention of beliefs, attitudes, and articulations of otherness. In the course of the discussion, I shall argue that not only did the dominant forces in Western philosophy express and articulate exclusionary expressions, statements and attitudes, but also that these articulations of otherness have had great impact on subsequent reception of African philosophy. I shall therefore begin by briefly examining Western philosophy's self-image and its consequent conception of human nature. Secondly, I shall articulate the European [Western] conception of African people. Lastly, I shall argue that this Western conception of Africans and the idealised logocentric self-image of Western philosophy together with its notion of human nature constitute the pillars around which the rejection of African philosophy is based. Two recent publications in South Africa will serve as examples of this denial.

¹ See for example, Serequeberhan (1991), Masolo (1994) and Shutte (1993).

Philosophy, Rationality and Human Nature

Western philosophical tradition from the pre-Socratic period to Plato and Aristotle, Descartes and Kant, Hegel and beyond, has defined itself and its activity in terms of the pursuit of 'Reason'. Because of the central position the concept of rationality occupied in the history of philosophy, notions of the universe, society, state, or human being hinged fundamentally upon it. The view of a rational world order, of an external world possessing a logical order, a universe with a rational *telos*, is an established metaphysical and epistemological principle held on to even today. Since philosophy is a human product this conception necessitated questions about the nature of human beings.

Basic to narratives about human nature is the attempt to deal with the perennial metaphysical question: 'What is Man?' Answers to this one question are usually purported to be descriptive but more often than not they become normative and determine moral, political and social arrangements and relations. The concept 'nature' in this context refers to that feature, characteristic or attribute of a thing that is permanently necessary to its being or continuance. If the necessary attribute is absent or lacking, then the thing cannot be; that is, the feature is one without which a thing cannot be. The nature of X, for example, is what makes X an X and not Y. X's nature prevents it from being Y. The notion of human nature, therefore, refers to the conception of an attribute that is distinctively or typically human and which makes human beings different from any other creature or being, and without which a being cannot be human. This concept functions as a given, a limit or constraint.

Heraclitus asserted that 'Reason belongs to all'; and by 'all' he meant all human beings. Plato affirmed the superiority of reason over the senses, reason through which the rulers or philosopher kings could gain true knowledge. A human being, declared Aristotle, 'is a rational being'. Those beings who do not meet the criterion of rationality, those who lack reason, are for Aristotle slaves. In Aristotle there is an equation of a natural relation between reason and power. Rationality provides the right to rule over those who lack reason. So, domination of those supposedly at the lower rung in 'the great chain of being' (Lovejoy 1960), by those regarded as occupying a higher up position is thought by Aristotle to be a natural condition.

Western philosophy held on fast to this belief with a theological and religious zest, vision and conviction. St. Anselm attempted to establish the existence of God through rational means. Aquinas, following the Hebrew-Christian tradition and obviously influenced by Aristotle, proposed the hierarchical conception of being. He conceived of being (*ontos*) as arranged hierarchically on a scale, with the zenith occupied by the uncreated God and descending in the order of rational to the irrational. Human beings occupy the

rational level, with the angels just above them and the sensitive but irrational animals, vegetative life and inorganic substances following in a descending order. For Aquinas, rationality determines moral agency. Since God is the most perfectly rational being, God is therefore the most perfectly moral. In this descending or ascending scale of rationality, the more rational, the more moral, the less rational, the less moral.

It was Descartes who gave rationality its modern respectability. Affirming Aristotle's conception of human nature, Descartes asserted that since humans are thinking beings (*res cogitans*), the distinctive and paramount feature of humanness is thought. Epistemological differences notwithstanding, Locke's empiricism actually preserved much of Cartesian rationalism². For, according to Locke, human beings are free by virtue of equal possession of rationality. Hence, a person who behaves 'irrationally', is a brute or animal who deserves to be kept in servitude. Rationality, Locke averred, is a mark of human subjectivity and so a condition of the necessity to be extended full moral treatment. Human beings are free because they are equally endowed in rationality (Goldberg 1993:27). Hence liberty and rationality are the basic features constituting human nature.

The influence of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and Locke on the Enlightenment became expressed in Kant who laid the philosophical foundations for a purely formalistic rationalism. Kant, Habermas notes, 'instilled reason in the supreme seat of judgement before which anything that made a claim to validity had to be justified' (Habermas 1987:18). In the moral sphere, reason or rationality occupies a central place in Kant's conception of the good or moral person. His moral philosophy therefore is perhaps the most explicit, and influential example of a philosophy which grounds morality on reason.

Despite his rejection of Kant's moral doctrine, as enshrined in the universalisability principle, Hegel, like Kant, maintains that what constitutes human nature, human society and human history, is rationality and freedom rather than feelings and inclinations. For him, 'Thought is, indeed, essential to humanity. It is this that distinguishes us from the brutes' (Hegel 1952:156). In terms of this conception, a human being is a thinking being (*homo rationalis*) distinguishable from everything else by the capacity to think. Hence Habermas's (1987:4) insistence that to gain access and insight into the project of modernity requires confronting Hegel head-on because he was probably the first philosopher to connect the Enlightenment project to rationality.

² For a sustained debate concerning empiricism's and rationalism's complicity in racism, see Bracken (1973; 1978), Chomsky (1975), Searle (1976), Squadrito (1979) and Goldberg (1993). According to Goldberg (1993:27f), both empiricism and rationalism 'facilitated the articulation of racism'.

Indeed it is through engagement with Hegel that rationality and modernity would reveal themselves as contaminated with exclusivist, ethnocentric, sexist and racist strains.

The centrality of 'reason' in Western philosophical discourse articulated since the Milesian period is, therefore, unquestionable. The essence of the universe, society and human beings is conceived as hanging fundamentally on the concept of reason. Philosophy as an activity, along with its practitioners, has also been defined in terms of the 'pursuit of Reason' uncircumscribed by the 'conditioning effects of historical circumstances' (Lloyd 1984:108). Rationality therefore, being the fundamental constitutive element of being, is supposedly the principle of unity among all humans.

Philosophers and Racism

It is upon such constructed self-images of philosophy as rational praxis expressed through the rational subject whose identity is '*male, rational male, of Greek (and subsequently of European) descent*' (Outlaw 1987:15) that denials of the existence of African philosophy are predicated. Since rationality is the *sine qua non* of philosophical activity its absence or lack entails lack or absence of philosophy. It was the intellectual heroes of the West who then set the stage for the denial of African philosophy by denying Africans the 'essential' element of humanhood, namely, rationality.

Montesquieu identified climate as the source of racial differences. He held that the real natural colour of human beings is white, that races with other colours (black, yellow, brown) degenerated from the original white and that a change in climate would restore the natural condition and thereby transform the barbarous into the civilised, the ugly into the beautiful. In his *Spirit of the Laws*, however, he goes on to make this biting remark about black people:

It is impossible for us to suppose that these beings [blacks] should be men; because if we suppose them to be men, one would begin to believe we ourselves were not Christians (West 1982:61).

Montesquieu does not explicitly provide reasons why he thinks blacks are not 'men'. It is Voltaire, 'Europe's voice of equality' (Goldberg 1993:33), who provides the real reason, namely, rationality. He declared that whites are 'superior to these Negroes, as Negroes are to apes and the apes to oysters' (Poliakov 1974:175). In his *The People of America*, Voltaire (see West 1982:62) says:

The Negro race is a species of men as different from ours as the breed of spaniels is from that of the greyhounds. The mucous membrane, or network, which nature

has spread between the muscles and the skin, is white in us and black or copper-colored in them

If their understanding is not of a different nature from ours, it is at least greatly inferior. They are not capable of any great application or association of ideas and seemed formed neither for the advantages nor the abuses of philosophy.

The inferiority and thus subhumanity of the Negro, for Voltaire, is a consequence of the Negro's intellectual capacity. The Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, Hume, is perhaps well known in some circles for his blatant racism. Rejecting monogenism, Hume in a well-known footnote to his *'Of National Character'* insists that negroes are congenitally inferior to whites. Proof of this is to be sought in their different cultural and mental capacities: whites are civilised whereas negroes are uncivilised, barbaric and primitive; whites are rational and scientific while negroes are irrational and magical. Only whites, he claimed, had produced science or artefacts of culture whereas negroes had no visible accomplishments to show. Thus he concludes:

In JAMAICA indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly (Hume [1777]1985:208).

Exceptions are for Hume obviously unlikely to be true because intellectual inferiority constitutes the essence of 'negroness'. The obvious contention for both Voltaire and Hume in particular, is that negro inferiority is a product of negro lack of 'understanding', 'association of ideas', 'speculation', 'ingenuity', 'learning', in short, an essential lack of 'rationality'.

One may consider it unfair that Hume has been crucified merely on the basis of a footnote rather than a full blown theory (see Barker 1983). However, that this negative response to a footnote is justified, it seems to me, is shown by the tremendous influence it had on the collective consciousness of Western philosophers. It legitimised and lent authority to the prevailing racist beliefs. As Popkin (1977/1978:211) points out:

Hume presented the theoretical basis for the most virulent form of racism of the period, and ... became the favorite authority for the extreme racists and the central figure to be combatted by the humanitarians.

Further, as Henry Louis Gates jr. (1987:18) appropriately noted, 'Hume's opinion on the subject, as we might expect, became prescriptive'. Hume's influence is evident in Kant's (1960) *'Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime'* where he wrote:

Mr Hume challenged anyone to cite a simple example in which a negro has shown

talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who are transported elsewhere from their countries, although many of them have even been set free, still not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality, even though among the whites some continually rise aloft from the lowest rabble, and through superior gifts earn respect in the world. So fundamental is the difference between the two races of man, and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color (Kant 1960:110f).

For Kant therefore, much more vehement than Hume, the differences between blacks and whites is 'as great in regard to *mental capacities* as in color'. Consequently, in response to a story in praise of a black man's progressive views concerning the treatment of wives, Kant's comment thereupon is unsurprisingly commensurate with the other Enlightenment philosophers' views on African rationality:

And it might be that there was something in this which perhaps deserved to be considered; but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid (Kant 1960:113).

For Kant, Hume, Voltaire, Montesquieu and a host of other Enlightenment philosophers, therefore, a person's skin colour determines his/her rationality. By virtue of their blackness, black people are excluded from the realm of the rational and the civilised. In his '*Physische Geographie*' Kant anticipates Hegel when he claims that blacks are lazy, passive (note that for Hegel they are not only passive but at the same time 'wild'), callous and thick skinned (Neugerbauer 1991:59). This is not surprising because the Enlightenment's construction of the racialised other almost always make a correlation between physical characteristics and moral qualities. Accordingly, a person is wild, lazy, callous etc. precisely because and to the extent that s/he is black. Conversely, a person is good, civilised, calm, considerate, etc. because white.

In his sexist mood, Kant differentiates males from females by ascribing the following attributes to men: noble; deep; sublime; deep meditation; sustained reflection; laborious learning; profundity; abstract speculation; fundamental understanding; reason; universal rules; capable of acting in terms of principles; etc. (Grimshaw 1986:43). From the above description of the black person as 'stupid', 'lacking in reason', 'lazy', 'thick skinned' and so forth, one needs no complicated Aristotelian deductive logic to figure out that by 'men' Kant is referring to a particular group of males (European) other than blacks. In short, Kant's universalism is a particularised universalism, one that excludes blacks from the category of human beings *qua* rational beings.

Hegel's racism has provoked stronger responses from within black

philosophical discourse³ than in Western philosophical circles where it is mostly unacknowledged. Even the supposedly left marxist philosophers prefer to be silent about it⁴. In *The Philosophy of History* Hegel (1952:196-199) claims that the African proper is wild and untamed, beyond the pale of humanity proper, cannibalistic, undialectic, ungodly or without a religion, and intractable and without history because incapable of any historical development or culture. For Hegel, therefore, Africans are not human enough to deserve freedom and respect precisely because they lack what is fundamental about existence, namely rationality. Hence he is able to conclude with reference to Africa that 'we must give up the principle which naturally accompanies all *our* ideas—the category of universality' (Hegel 1952:196).

What actually becomes evident is that human nature, whether construed as 'reason', 'rationality', 'morality', 'civility' or in some other way, is fundamentally gendered or racialised since it is implicitly alleged to be a property exclusive to European males and not to blacks or sometimes females. Whatever their differences, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, Kant, and Hegel, all accent the lack of reason 'logos' or 'nous' or 'rationality' in blacks thus positing 'with all of the authority of philosophy the fundamental identity of complexion [colour], character and intellectual capacity' (Gates 1987:18).

The dominant discourse on human nature, from Plato and Aristotle, to Descartes, Locke, Hume, Kant, and the Enlightenment, is supposedly universalistic; it defines human beings in terms of reason such that characteristics such as being political, social, economic etc. presumably do not enter into the question of whether a given individual is to be considered human or not. It is precisely on the basis of such universalistic claims that rationalists like Bracken (1978) and Chomsky (1975) can claim that if human nature is conceptualised in rationalist terms, then rationalism provides conceptual barriers to racist articulations and conceptions. After all, they argue, is it not evident that people universally possess mind?

This claim or 'pretension' to universality has led many philosophers to discern inconsistencies and contradictions in discourse on racism and sexism. As noted above, philosophers defined their activity in terms of the pursuit of reason, objectivity, and universality, notions which when properly understood, are sexless, colourless or ahistorical. Yet despite this professed

³ For critical discussions of Hegel's racism, see, for example Outlaw (1991), Asante (1990), Masolo (1991), Ramose (1991), Serequeberhan (1989). On Hegel's racist views against South Americans and other Third World peoples, see Larrain (1994).

⁴ Marx, for example, in his critique of Hegel, elided specific critique of his views about Africans and other Third World people. In fact, Marx himself was guilty of the same kind of attitude to British colonialism in India (see Serequeberhan 1989).

transcendence of contingent, historical and social circumstances, philosophy has been affected by racial and gender distinctions, and

[d]espite its aspiration to timeless truth the History of Philosophy reflects the characteristic preoccupations and self-perceptions of the kinds of people who have at any time had access to the activity (Lloyd 1984:108).

In other words, while rationality and universality are supposed to be raceless and sexless, they are however at the same time racialised and genderised within the very Western philosophical discourse itself. Popkin is much more specific when he says,

However, the very same people [Western philosophers who claim the equality of all men], who could develop these [universalist] theories of human nature, could also provide the bases for theories claiming that some individuals, in fact millions of them, were less than men because they were dark (Pagliano 1973:246).

The racist views of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, Kant and Hegel, seem sufficiently contradictory to their universalistic systematic doctrines which do not discriminate against races. There exists, therefore, an obvious tension or inconsistency between abstract universal principles and their concrete application, between theoretical inclusion and practical exclusion.

The racism of Hume, Locke and Hegel seems to contradict their more general views of human beings. For example, while Hegel's declaration that 'human beings are ... rational', that 'Descent provides no basis upon which to create a justification or invalidation of freedom or supremacy of a people' (quoted in Moellendorf 1992), would appear to be a rejection of racism, his immediate claim that the biological distinction which exists among races is part of a rational structure or scheme of things, that biological differences are necessary and therefore rational (Moellendorf 1992) or his racist statements about Africa and the Africans, seem to contradict the former assertion.

Contrary to this widely held conception, I want to suggest that there exists no contradiction between the theoretical views of the philosophers and their racism (or justification of racial slavery). We have seen that in the history of Western philosophy the centrality of rationality as constitutive of human nature and thus of humanity is indisputable. Aristotle's declaration that 'man is a rational animal' has been the guiding light of Western conceptions of personhood. Therefore, to be denied rationality is to be denied humanity since reason distinguishes humans from nature and other entities. Further, to posit *a priori*, that human nature entails the possession of a mind whose distinctive feature is rationality, does not in any way commit one to a position in which one is unable to deny that certain seemingly human groups (e.g. 'savages' or 'apes') lack this distinctive characteristic. It might just be

the case that certain 'human' groups—according to the criteria laid down as determinative of that feature—lack the required feature and thus cannot be treated as having or accorded the same rights, respect or whatever benefits those who fully possess the said feature deserve. The point is, human nature assumes a moral or evaluative role rather than a descriptive one; it is utilised as a moral and/or ideological weapon. Those who simply do not share the European logical apparatus, are accordingly not 'rational' and thus not human. What is called 'human' or 'humanity' thus becomes an exclusively moral concept. Viewed in this light, the alleged contradiction between the philosopher's racism and his general philosophical view seem to disappear because two categories are involved, namely, human beings and nonhuman beings. In accusing them of contradiction one runs the risk of—in fact it would be a case of—committing a category mistake. What might genuinely be questionable under these circumstances are the criteria laid as conditions or requirements for determining rationality. For example, this assumption of a single universal notion of rationality may be called into serious question by the idea that truth is relative to particular cultural, sexual, racial groups or orientation or still by certain historical moments.

It thus becomes evident that Hegel's racism, for example, is not contradictory to his more general theoretical views, but is, instead, compatible with them. Hegel, in a pointed and restrictive way, denies Africans the status of rational, historical beings. The often quoted introduction to his *Philosophy of History* (1952) excludes 'Africa proper' from rationality and world history. His assertion may be reduced to the following claims: Africa and the Africans are static, primitive, profligate, savage, non-historical, non-philosophical, childish, emotional, sensuous and physical (see Neugebauer 1991:54). It is easy to see that all these characteristics are subsumable under the thesis: Africans lack reason. The fact that Hegel makes value judgements based on questionable second hand missionaries' and travellers' information, the fact that the characteristics he equates or identifies with non-rationality are themselves questionable, and further, the fact that he uses specifically European male models of rationality which may be completely different from or probably antithetical to, for example, Chinese, Indian, African or female modes of rationality, is at this juncture secondary. What is primary for us is the fact that for Hegel, Africans have no reason. Because they lack reason, they also lack history, development, culture and civilisation. That they lack reason, this fact alone, disqualifies them from humanity precisely because the necessary condition of what it is to be human is rationality. By definition, therefore, Africans are non-human. This Hegelian argument may be guilty of begging the question or *argumentum ad ignorantium*, or naturalistic fallacy, or whatever logical error, but it certainly is not guilty of contradiction.

Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume and Kant, all articulated the view that Africans, in virtue of certain characteristics, especially colour, are precluded from the realm of reason and civilisation. Kant, for example, insists that blacks lack reason because of their colour, thus their difference from Europeans is 'as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour' (Kant 1960). If, as Kant says, blacks do not have rationality or reason, then it means they are excluded from the realm of humanity. If they are not humans, then universal moral principles applicable to humans cannot apply to them; nor can the imperative, 'never to treat humanity as means but always as an end', apply either. Blacks are simply not human. Because reason has excluded them from humanity, Kant's universalistic ethics cannot, in his mind, be self-contradictory or in contradiction to his racism as Neugebauer (1991), for example insists it is.

A contradiction would clearly have been committed if the terms of Kant's definition of humans included blacks. At best he regarded blacks as slaves when he recommended that because of his or her thick skin the Negro be beaten up with 'a split cane in order to cause wounds large enough to prevent suppuration underneath the negro's thick skin' (Neugebauer 1991:58f). But as we know, a slave, in Aristotle's terms is not a human being. The slave is a tool, a physically functional object, 'an animal of burden' like an ox.

The valorisation of 'reason' produced the construction of characteristics or qualities supposedly antithetical to it, thus creating binary oppositions. We owe to Descartes an influential and pervasive dualistic theory which provides support for a powerful version of racial differentiation. Following the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy, Western thought constructed contrasting binary pairs: reason - emotion, rationality - animality, culture - nature, civilised - primitive, moral - immoral, self - other, European - Non-European the list goes on. In each of these the first member of each pair is designated as an embodiment of a valorised ideal. The ideals of the European masculine sphere are idealised as identical to or convergent with those of humanity. Thus reason is associated not only with European male but implies the corresponding' ideal, or 'superior' qualities of civilisation, culture, beauty and high morality. The second member of each pair, on the contrary, represents qualities traditionally excluded, marginalised and devalorised. Since blacks are by definition lacking in reason, they *ipso facto* assume the qualities associated with animality, primitive, immoral, and the ugly. The racialised character of the binary oppositions is explicitly articulated in Hume's, Kant's and Hegel's characterisation of Africans as 'natural', 'wild', 'undeveloped', 'bodily strength', 'sensuous' ruled by 'passions' lacking in 'self-control', 'culture', 'civilisation' and 'science'. The moral implications of these constructed binary oppositions are quite obvious: since they lack

reason, blacks *ipso facto* lack morality. As Hegel (1952:198) puts it, 'Among the Negroes moral sentiments are quite weak, or more strictly speaking, non-existent'.

It is not to be supposed, however, that the above considerations constitute claims to the effect that all philosophers and philosophical doctrines in the history of Western philosophy are logocentric. On the contrary, challenges against the dominant logocentric discourse and its conception of human nature have been perennial features of philosophical discourse.

Veiled Denials of 'African Philosophy'

'What is African philosophy?', 'Does African philosophy exist?', 'Is there such a thing as African philosophy?' These are some of the questions that emerged following the publication of Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*. Normally, questions of the type, 'What is...?', 'Is there such and such?' or 'Does such and such exist?' are standard philosophical questions sometimes assuming, for example, the form: 'What is truth?', 'Does God exist?' and so forth. Why then would questions of the same sort about Africa generate so much heat, rather than mere philosophical curiosity? Aren't they as much philosophical as other questions of a metaphysical or ontological nature? If such questions about Africa and the African are simply standard philosophical questions, why, as we enquired earlier, are similar questions not asked in relation to the British, Chinese, French, Indians, etc.? What is common in the philosophies of all other peoples but which Africans supposedly lack? Is it a question of the written text? If so, what about Socrates? Besides, Molefi Asante (1990), Cheikh Anta Diop (1974) and Martin Bernal (1987) among others, have demonstrated the presence of the written text in Africa. There is therefore, obviously more to the questions than simply philosophical innocence. This paper has thus far implicitly been suggesting that what is actually at issue in the questioning of the legitimacy of African philosophy is the attempt to call into question the humanity of Africans, a humanness 'defined by the reigning Greek-cum-European philosophical-anthropological paradigm centred around the notion of "rationality"' (Outlaw 1992/1993:65).

Part of the reason why there is so much noise about philosophy and Africa is that philosophy is not only considered to be the most rational of human activities but also, as Anthony Kwame Appiah notes, 'the highest-status label of Western humanism'. The claim to philosophy, therefore, is 'the claim to what is most important, most difficult, most fundamental in the Western tradition' (Appiah 1992:88). It is this self-image of Western philosophy and the constructed identity of African otherness by Western philosophical heroes that is responsible for the denials—veiled or explicit—of African philosophy as a legitimate discursive field.

The response of African philosophers to the question of 'African philosophy' is now too well known and documented to deserve discussion here. Suffice to point out that paradoxically, some African philosophers such as Hountondji (1983), Wiredu (1980), Bodunrin (1984) and Oruka (1990) also deny the existence of African philosophy mainly for ideological reasons other than those posited by Western philosophers. In South Africa, the situation has been pretty much predictable because of the ideological history of the country. The ethnic divisions in the dominant voices resulted in explicit and veiled denials. The English speaking analytic philosophers, on the one hand, explicitly denounced African philosophy both on grounds of rationality and methodology. The Afrikaans, mainly continentally influenced, philosophers were, on the other hand, prepared to grant it a lower status in justification of the apartheid ideology of separate ethnic development and cultural differences.

Differences among the dominant voices notwithstanding, the rejection of African philosophy has been unanimous. A collection of papers proceeding from a conference at the University of the Witwatersrand bearing the theme *Philosophy in the African Context* is an example of such explicit and veiled denials of African philosophy (see Goergiadès & Delvare 1975). Again, in almost all departments of philosophy at South African universities, African philosophy has unsurprisingly not been considered worthy of inclusion in the philosophy syllabi. The current changing political and social conditions have, however, necessitated reluctant recognition of the possibility of the existence of African philosophy as a legitimate tradition⁵. Despite these gains, vestiges of the old Eurocentric conceptions still remain and manifest themselves in veiled or disguised denials of African philosophy. I shall briefly consider two such veiled denials.

In a book, whose title, *Philosophy for Africa*, reveals more about the author's conception of Africans than the contents, the opening statement is even more stunning in its revelation:

This is a book about philosophy and Africa. That philosophy and Africa should appear together in the *same* book might seem strange (Shutte 1993:5).

Part of the reason Shutte advances for this 'strange' combination is his geographical location. He is not only in Africa but also *doing* philosophy! 'Philosophy' and 'Africa' are presumably strange bed-fellows precisely because they are mutually exclusive.

⁵ Ironically, Historically Black Universities, with the exception of the University of Zululand have not included African philosophy in their syllabi either. Recently, Unisa has established a separate unit of African philosophy. Also, the number of South African philosophers who are publishing in *Quest* is rapidly growing.

According to Shutte, philosophy, in the Western sense of the word (as if there is unanimity about its Western meaning), is methodologically a rigorous, self-critical and analytic discipline. In this sense of rational activity, philosophy in Africa has been absent. What, however, has identified Africa is not philosophy *qua* philosophy but rather what he calls 'traditional African thought'⁶. Given this distinction, Shutte (1993:53) sets out to respond to two revealing

questions regarding the relation between Africa and philosophy Can traditional African thought be of help to contemporary philosophy? Can philosophy be of help to contemporary African thought?.

These questions, supposedly the main questions Shutte addresses in the text, interestingly assume the separation or unconnectedness between 'Africa' and 'philosophy' because the two together would presumably constitute an oxymoron. This means, therefore, that philosophy, in essence, does not constitute part of Africa; that Africa does not have a philosophy and therefore that African philosophy does not exist. The immediate question is: Why? Because, in Shutte's view, traditional African thought is neither rigorous, analytic, self-critical nor reflective.

For Shutte, African philosophy is possible only through the mediation of philosophy *qua* Western philosophy. Without the methodological apparatus characteristic of Western philosophy, African philosophy, in and by itself, is impossible and therefore implicitly non-existent. For example, he maintains that there has, until recently, been no African philosophy because African traditional thought and conceptions about humanity or community, as expressed through myths, proverbs, wise-sayings, etc., have not undergone rigorous, self-critical and analytical scrutiny characteristic of philosophy *qua* Western philosophy. Philosophy, he says,

as a rigorous, self-critical *intellectual* discipline is a comparative newcomer to modern Africa. But in the last thirty or forty years significant attempts have been

⁶ See Momoh (1985:79) who prefers to talk of Ancient African Philosophy rather than the locution 'African Traditional Thought'. According to him, 'The attempt to establish African philosophy as a respectable discipline has been impaired by this thought that it is traditional thought. Scholars are becoming increasingly aware that African pneumatological beliefs, metaphysical and moral doctrines, political and social principles, epistemology, logic, law, science and the scholars' own theories and extractions from all of these should not be indiscriminately labelled "African Traditional Thought". This gamut of African knowledge is not traditional because the word "traditional", in the thinking of those who foist it, rips with images of naivete, *low intellect*, stagnation and crudity. It is also not thought, because comprising this gamut of knowledge is African science—physical, chemical and biological' (Momoh 1985:79).

made by African *philosophers* [those trained in Western countries through Western methods] to subject such traditional conceptions to philosophical analysis and systematisation (Shutte 1993:8).

In his view, a classical example of a contemporary African philosopher who has subjected African traditional thought to Western philosophical scrutiny is Leopold Sedar Senghor with his concept of 'Negritude'.

Another veiled denial of African philosophy appeared in a recent piece by G.A. Rauche (1996). There are presumably two questions Rauche seeks to grapple with. Firstly, does African philosophy—in the strict Western meaning of the term 'philosophy'—exist? Like Shutte, Rauche's answer is an emphatic 'no'. Philosophy in its Western sense refers to thought that is conceptual, abstract, and *rational* whereas 'traditional African thought is mythological' (Rauche 1996:16). Thus, to the extent that philosophy is an activity requiring reason, it can not be African; rationality and Africanity are mutually exclusive.

If the answer to the first question is negative, the second question becomes: What conditions, then, should prevail for African 'traditional' thought to become philosophy? The following are for him the necessary conditions: Firstly, traditional African thought should be abstract rather than concrete, conceptual rather than symbolic, rational rather than intuitive. Secondly, it must have the capacity (which it does not possess) to differentiate 'between man (sic.) and nature, man and society'. Last, it must possess a concept of the self as a subject *vis-a-vis* an object or what is designated *natura naturans* (created mind) *vis-a-vis* *natura naturata* (created matter) (Rauche 1996:16).

Philosophy in general, according to Rauche (1996:15), is 'the search for knowledge of the truth'. Knowledge, according to him, should be understood as a 'methodological act' in terms of which theory is constituted through experience. Presumably, without methodology there can be no knowledge. More pointedly, Rauche (1996:16) defines philosophy as

an open *critical* discipline; a continuing *critical* and *self-critical* argument on the basic questions about *knowledge*, truth and authentic existence on the grounds of man's contingent experience of life (reality) as a universal experience.

The main operative concepts in this definition are 'critical', 'self-critical', 'knowledge', 'truth' and 'contingent experience of life'. While philosophy 'proper' is 'critical' there is, according to Rauche (1996:17), in traditional African thought

not yet the *critical* factor we find in Western thought, so that no philosophical argument on knowledge, truth and authentic existence has taken place.

Furthermore, since the presence of knowledge implies a methodology, African philosophy in its epistemological sense also does not exist because

There is in traditional African thinking no *methodologically* constituted philosophy, in this sense scientific philosophy in the Western meaning of the word (Rauche 1996:16).

Given these inadequacies in African thought, there is, therefore, no traditional African philosophy, that is, philosophy in the Western sense characterised by a capital 'P'⁷.

After denying Africa 'Philosophy' with a capital 'P', which is presumably the highest form of rationality, pure critical reason at its best, Rauche feels obliged to honour the African world-view, *Weltanschauung*, or collective wisdom by the term 'philosophy' with a small 'p', folk philosophy or what Hountondji came to call ethnophilosophy⁸. This assimilationist strategy is obviously designed to maintain power relations by giving acceptance and recognition to a threatening and radical upsurge in a non-dangerous sphere. Accept African philosophy as a marginally important enterprise, necessary for Africans, part anthropology, part ethnology and 'you do not have to give it full status as a philosophic investigation with universal significance' (Ruth 1981:50). A separate unit of African philosophy distinct from the department of philosophy at the University of South Africa, therefore, is less threatening and thus acceptable. Furthermore, since there is in every culture a folk philosophy, the aim, it seems to me, is an attempt to improve existing relations between Europeans and 'primitive peoples' by portraying the latter as more human than they actually are assumed to be, in fact, as cultural equals. Hence the force of the theory of 'truth-perspective'

⁷ This is Richard Rorty's distinction between 'PHILOSOPHY' and 'philosophy'. While we do not strictly adhere to Rorty's definitions of the two philosophies, we do however use this characterization of 'Philosophy' to refer to what Rauche calls philosophy in its Western scientific sense and 'philosophy' to refer to what Rauche calls *Weltanschauung*, collective ideas, collective wisdom, or myths, etc.

⁸ Rauche takes issue with Hountondji's definition of African philosophy. Ironically, both Rauche and Hountondji deny the existence of African philosophy. But, Rauche denies it at the level of what we have called 'Philosophy' with a capital 'P', that is, philosophy in the Western sense of the word and he then posits African philosophy at the level of 'philosophy' with a small 'p'.

Hountondji, by contrast, denies African philosophy as posited by people like Rauche and Tempels, that is, what he calls ethnophilosophy. He, together with Odera Orika, Kwasi Wiredu, Peter Bodunrin—the African 'neo-positivists' as Campbell Momoh refers to them—accuse ethnophilosophers of settling for an inferior and idiosyncratic conception of philosophy which lacks the intellectual rigour of philosophy with a capital 'P' and thereby virtually marginalizing African philosophy.

which is nothing else but a disguised description of cultural experiences and ethnic differences, and in point of fact, a reproduction of Tempels' ethnophilosophical ontology⁹. The theory's social, political, cultural and ideological implications are easy to discern. It is a veiled support of the separatist and particularistic thesis of apartheid South Africa which has recently assumed the mantle of political correctness since the deconstructive postmodernist valorisation of the politics of differences and diversity (see More 1995 and Van der Merwe 1994).

Even this ethnophilosophical articulation of African philosophy is not without problems. In Rauche's view as it was with Shutte, the existence of African ethnophilosophy is contingent on the mediative force of Western methodology. He declares:

The statement; There is no traditional African philosophy in the Western sense of the word [philosophy with a capital 'P'], is justifiable, whereas the statement, (sic.) There is no African philosophy, is not. This is especially the case in the light of modern developments, where the *Western methodological* approach has crept into contemporary views on African traditional thought (e. a.) (Rauche 1996:17).

The West (read Europe), according to this view, provides the main tools of pure reason, critical spirit, methodological know-how, while Africa can only offer the raw material in the form of proverbs, wise-sayings, or myths. Without Europe, there can be no African philosophy. The upshot is that in both meanings of 'philosophy' Africa does not feature at all.

Rauche then offers an interesting example to demonstrate, in a subtle way, the mediative role of Western philosophical methodology in the construction of African philosophy. He cites one of *his* African student's dissertation chapter entitled 'Hermeneutical Philosophy and African Thought: Objectivity and Subjectivity in African Philosophy'. We have here two pairs of decidedly different concepts in the chapter, one Western because it presumably contains a philosophical method and the other African because it is mere *thought*. A combination of the two thus produces 'African Philosophy'. Given the nature of relationships between students and some supervisors at South African universities, particularly if this relationship is between a black student and a white supervisor working on a topic and method that are Western at a Historically Black University, one wonders—without putting into question the intellectual capacity of the student—exactly how much of the work is an imposition or reflection of the supervisor. This is certainly not an *ad hominem* but flows directly from the argument presented

⁹ African philosophy in terms of Rauche, E.A.Ruch, Alexis Kagame and Placide Tempels is ontology. According to them, Africans, by their very nature, think ontologically; they are essentially what D.A. Masolo refers to as '*Homo ontologicus*'.

by Rauche himself. According to him, we can talk of African philosophy only on the basis of a dialogue which will result in an 'inevitable cross-fertilization ... It is within this context that there may be talk of an African philosophy' (Rauche 1996:16). This is a striking correlation indeed with the student's formulation of the chapter.

To claim that African philosophy can only be woven from a synthesis between Western philosophical methodology and African 'traditional' thought is to privilege the Western model over and above the African model¹⁰. It is to give credence to the European 'civilizing mission' (Wamba-Dia-Wamba 1991:218); a forced attempt to say that the African must necessarily possess a philosophy in terms of Western standards, criteria and norms even though such a 'philosophy' cannot really deserve the name of being what it is (Van der Walt 1975:91).

The refusal to acknowledge the philosophical content and significance of African thought systems, including proverbs, wise-sayings, etc., has been a standard feature of arguments against the existence of African philosophy. Instead, such African systems have been referred to as 'African traditional thought', a locution highly contested by Campbell Momoh in his 'African philosophy ... Does it exist?'. According to him, locutions such as 'traditional' and 'thought' have greatly obstructed authentic attempts to construct African philosophy as a respectable discipline because they conjure 'images of naiveté, low intellect, stagnation and crudity' (Momoh 1985:79). Indeed, the locution 'traditional' stands in opposition to modernity with all that the latter stands for in the eyes of the West, or it is used to conjure up images of Africa that can be contrasted with the West, especially Europe. In other words, 'traditional' has a pejorative implication to those who impose it. Pace those like Shutte who deny the existence of African philosophy by referring to it as 'traditional thought', Momoh aptly classifies it as falling under 'Ancient African philosophy'.

Conclusion

I have indicated that in terms of Western conceptions, philosophy is the 'pursuit of Reason', that since philosophy is a rational activity, then rationality is the essential characteristic of those who have the capacity to produce philosophy. Only human beings possess rationality. Those beings lacking in rationality can not produce the most rational activity, i.e. philosophy.

The intellectual heroes of Europe set the stage for the denial of African philosophy not merely by equating philosophy with reason but more

¹⁰ See MacIntyre (1988), Wilson (1970), Lukes & Hollis (1982) and Appiah's (1992) chapter 6: 'Old Gods, New Worlds'.

importantly by denying Africans the rational capacity and thus reducing them to brutes or subhumans. Africans, so the argument goes, lack rationality. therefore Africans are not human beings. Since they are not human beings, then they can not produce the most rational activity, philosophy. Therefore, there is no African philosophy.

The same considerations may apply to any discourse that may, for instance, be called 'Female Philosophy' or 'Feminist Philosophy' since, in terms of the 'rational male' of European descent, women share certain properties with Africans, including the absence or lack of rationality¹¹. One can imagine such a philosophy being rejected on the following grounds:

1. '[Female philosophy] is a 'specialized' pursuit, not part of the mainstream of philosophy'.
2. 'Philosophy is universal in scope, dealing with all mankind (sic.), but [female philosophy] only applies to a segment of the population'.
3. '[Female philosophical] issues are trivial compared to the ultimate questions philosophers ought to address'.
4. '[Female philosophical] concerns are transient, bound to a particular time and place: philosophy transcends particular time and space'.
5. '[Female philosophy] is sociological, political, or anthropological; it asks no genuinely philosophic questions'.
6. '[Female philosophers] haven't learned to argue properly; they have not learned to give proper evidence for their claims, no general principles, just vignettes and metaphors'.
7. 'Philosophy is neutral in its analysis, [female philosophy] is a bias' (Ruth 1981:48).

As Sheila Ruth (1981:48) concludes,

All in all, such statements mean to say either overtly or in veiled terms, that feminist philosophy is not 'real' Philosophy; feminist thought, its presuppositions, methodology and even its content, is somehow illegitimate in the enterprise.

Central to Rauche's and Shutte's arguments is their Eurocentric conception of philosophy in the Western sense as expressed by the dominant voices such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, etc.; a conception that portrays philosophy as the expression of human essence constituted by rationality.

¹¹ On philosophy, women and rationality see, for example Gould (1976), Plumwood (1993), Harding (1984) and Lloyd (1983).

Within this framework, therefore, it is not altogether surprising that underlying their efforts to legitimate the existence of African philosophy are veiled denials of that very existence. These veiled denials are both predicated on the belief that Africans lack rationality.

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