Philosophy and Logic

An Introduction

Edited by
OLUSEGUN OLADIPO
&
PATRICK AKINSANYA

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Preface

This book aims at satisfying the need of persons first coming in contact with philosophy and logic for a concise and accessible introduction to basic questions, concepts, principles and techniques in philosophy and logic. It covers the essential requirements for Philosophy and Logic as a compulsory course in Nigerian higher institutions of learning and, also, provides insights into the nature of philosophy as an academic discipline and the nature and value of logic as a tool of philosophy.

It is hoped that the book will be useful as a basic text on philosophy and logic for students and other persons who are interested in learning about philosophy and how to philosophise and think clearly

Olusegun Oladipo
Patrick Akinsanya

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CHAPTER FIVE

Issues in African Philosophy

Olatunji A. Oyeshile & Patrick O. Akinsanya

Introduction

In this chapter an attempt is made to outline and discuss some issues in African philosophy. In doing this attempt is made to highlight and review some of the major challenges that gave rise to African philosophy and the two predominant schools in it. Also, some major problematics in African philosophy and some challenges of its contemporary expressions are discussed. The goal of this chapter is to expose new comers into philosophy to African philosophy in a simple, concise manner.

What is African Philosophy?

Although there have been some contentions[1] concerning the existence or non-existence of African philosophy and its content some decades ago, African philosophers have put these contentions behind them and have started applying their philosophical tools to problems about Africa, be they conceptual or practical. In defining African philosophy, we shall take a cue from H.S. Stanniland's definition of philosophy as: "The critical examination of the ideas which men live by"[2]. These ideas which men live by could be about justice, morality, political and scientific ideas, cultural and religious ideas about God, spirit and so on. Let us note also that when a philosopher engages in the critical examination of these ideas he tries to accomplish two related goals – that of achieving understanding of these issues, which is of intrinsic worth and that of solving some conceptual problems which have deep-rooted implications for practical life.

Going by the definition of the tasks of philosophy given above, African philosophy can simply be defined as a critical analysis of the ideas which

Africans live by in their cultural setting. These ideas are not different fundamentally from the ideas which men all over the world live by, the only difference is in the cultural, historical and environmental contexts in which these ideas are formulated and scrutinized. It would be a misnomer to deny any race of philosophical ability because there is no human race that does not reflect on the puzzles of existence. According to Omoregbe: "Philosophy is essentially a reflective activity. To philosophize is to reflect on human experience in search of answers to fundamental questions"[3]

Challenges that gave rise to African Philosophy

When we talk about the challenges that gave rise to African philosophy, we do not mean that philosophical activity in Africa is a recent phenomenon. Rather, our aim is to look for those challenges that gave rise to African philosophy as an academic and intellectual preoccupation particularly after the achievement of independence by African countries.

The first challenge was a sort of response by African scholars to European scholars who claim that Africans were irrational and pre-logical. Lucien Levy-Bruhl, Hegel, Kant, Hume and even Marx were of this opinion. Levy – Bruhl, for instance, postulated that the African mind was pre-logical,[4] that is, a mind that dispensed with the canons of (European) Logic. Hegel, on his part, excluded the African continent from the movement of the Absolute spirit. He believes that the Absolute spirit is the European Mind on its way to perfection. In this vein, Hegel justified the subjugation of Africans by the Europeans. These Europeans scholars tended to undermine the integrity of other cultures. This provided a basis for the propagation of all sorts of beliefs and ideologies as African philosophy. These attempts are glaring in the works of Fr. Placid Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy* (1959),John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) and Bolaji Idowu's *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (1962)[5].

Another challenge for the emergence of African philosophy was the post-colonial experience which has shown that "freedom from colonial rule and racism has not guaranteed for Africans freedom from external economic domination, freedom from injustice and oppression and mental freedom".[6] It was this feeling of misery and frustration that engendered the

need for clarification about the idea of African culture which subsequently required the role of philosophy in African development agenda.[7]

The third challenge about the debate on African philosophy, according to Oladipo, "has to do with the process of social transformation in Africa"[8]. This simply bothers on the adequacy of African traditional beliefs for development in contemporary age of globalisation.

The Predominant Schools of Thought in African Philosophy

There are two major schools of thought in African philosophy concerning the debate on the existence and content of African philosophy[9]. The first school is known as the traditionalist school. It is also at times referred to as the particularist or relativist school. The second group is known as the Modernist school. It is also at times known as the Universalist or analytic or Neo-logical positivist school.

The traditionalist school emphasises the present in relation to the past. Their concern is the discovery of authentic African ideas and thought systems uninfluenced by alien accretions. This group thinks that the crisis of identity in which Africa is enmeshed is because Africa has lost its roots. The major protagonists of this school include K.C. Anyanwu and C.S. Momoh. The materials for philosophising of this group include African myths, folklore, social practices and oral literature and culture. This group, according to Bodunrin, had hitherto been referred to as ethno-philosophers, but the name has been dropped because of its perjorative connotation and for the fact that this group now carries out its discussion with greater analytic rigour and less dogmatism than previously.[10]

The second group, known as the modernist school, emphasizes the present in relation to the future. To this group, African philosophy should be pursued in the light of modernisation through science and technology which are the most useful instruments of development. The method of this group is akin to that of the Western Philosophers which is characterised by freedom of inquiry, openness to criticism, scepticism and fallibilism and non-veneration of authority. Prominent members of this group include Paulin Hountondji, Peter Bodunrin and Kwasi Wiredu. This group believes that Western scientific and philosophical categories should be used in the study

of African traditional culture which is largely dominated by intense religiousity, spiritism, authoritarianism and superstition.[11]

Let us note however that the two schools identified above are not mutually exclusive in present times. This is because each group has seen the need that the two approaches can be aligned in such a way that can aid the achievement of the goal of development in Africa.

Some Issues in African Philosophy

There are a many issues that constitute philosophical problems in African philosophy. These issues, it should be noted, are not only examined by Africans for intellectual delight, they also have implications for practical concerns in Africa. The issues presented in this section neither provide an exhaustive characterisation of the problems nor attempt any indepth discussion. The aim rather is to provide an insight into some of these problems. The following then provides a picture of the main issues in African Philosophy.

- ***God, Divinities, Man and Society***

A major issue in African philosophy has to do with the centrality of God – the Supreme Being – in the analysis of the worldview of the people. Long before the contact of Africans with the Europeans, African societies always had an idea of the Supreme Being, who to them is the creator of man, earth and all there is.[12] The Supreme Being is the most powerful and ever present force in African conceptions of reality. In Yoruba belief the Supreme Being is known as *Olodumare*, in Igbo belief He is known as *Chukwu*, in Akan belief, He is known as *Onyanme* or *Onyankonpon*. Apart from the Supreme Being, there are other divinities and deities who serve as assistants to the Supreme Being in the creation and sustenance of the universe. In Yoruba belief, we have such deities as *Orunmila*, *Obatala*, and *Sango*. Among the Igbo we have *Ala*, *Amadioha*. Among the Akan, we have *abosom*.

While the Supreme Being constitutes the main force, there are other malevolent forces such as witches and wizards and benevolent forces who can affect the destiny of man on earth. Africans believe that the

Supreme Being controls the universe and the destiny of man. So often, it is believed that whatever happens to man in society has been destined by the Supreme force. In this regard, there is a connection between man and the Supreme Being through *Ori* (personality God in Yoruba) and *Chi* (personality God in Igbo)[13]. It is commonly believed that whatever happens to man – in terms of success and failure – have been influenced by the individual's personality God. Some of the philosophical problems arising from our discussion include: Do human beings have freedom in a situation in which the Supreme Beings has apportioned a destiny to them? How did the Supreme Being create the world – out of something or out of nothing? What is the final purpose of man? Other issues related to the preceding discussion have to do with ancestor worship and reincarnation? For instance, it might be asked if there are ancestors who occupy the heavenly abode, is it not contradictory to hold a belief in reincarnation and vice-versa since it is believed that there is a migration from one realm to the other?

- ***Religion and Morality***

In African culture, religion and morality play prominent roles in the organisation of life and society. To many African scholars, religion is in fact seen as the major foundation of all other human values.[14] Apart from placing emphasis on religion, Africans also place emphasis on morality, believing that it is this sense of right and wrong that sustains society. In the Yoruba belief system, for instance, religion centres around the Supreme Being – *Olodumare*, with arrays of other divinities and lesser deities whose functions and power vary from one society to the other. Morality, on the other hand centres around the concept of *Iwa* (character), the goal of which is to produce *Omoluwabi* (morally upright persons) that will make possible a harmonious society. Often the Yoruba trace *Iwa* to *Olodumare*, given the fact that an individual who is not morally upright can neither succeed in his endeavour nor get the favour of God. Because of the centrality of the Supreme Being to morality in African traditional beliefs[15], many scholars have tended to argue that religion is the sole basis of morality, thereby relegating to the background the role of habit, custom, societal injuctions in forming character which is the basis of morality.

Some of the questions asked by the African philosophers concerning religion and morality include: What is the connection between religion and morality? How moral are the divinities? How do we resolve the problem of contradictory moral injunctions from the deities?

- ***Individual and Society***

A central problem in African philosophy, especially in recent times, is that of the nature of relationship that should exist between the individual and the society in which he finds himself. A preponderance of Scholars on African culture[16] – Mbiti, Idowu, Omoyajowo, Kudadjie, Menkiti to mention a few – believes that the community takes precedence over the individual. Following from this, it is believed that the individual should order and execute his plans in such a way that they will promote the well-being of the society in which he finds himself. Concerning this relationship, Mbiti expresses the precedence of the community over the individual in these words:

> The individual can only exist corporately in traditional life. This implies that he owes his existence to other people who are either living or dead. The individual is simply a part of the whole.[17]

The above statements are aptly summarised in the statement: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am"[18].

This shows that, contrary to the western conception, a family unit in Africa is more than just the husband, wife and children. In Igbo society, for instance, we can talk of "community consciousness". According to Oguejiofor: "The Igbo man views his community in relation to other individuals in the community"[19], Kwame Gyekye also illustrates this relationship with these Akan Maxims[20]. One, when a person descends from heaven, he (or she) descends into a human society (or, human habitation) and, two, solitariness (literally, walking alone) is a pitiable condition.

The communal approach to viewing life in society also influenced the political ideologies of foremost African political leaders, such as Nyerere, Senghor, and Kenyatta who postulated different versions of African socialism. Questions concerning society and individual relationship include:

Does the individual lose his liberty because of his communal being? To what extent is the community justified in restricting the freedom of its individual members? How can we reasonably be sure that the goal of the community is beneficial to that of the individual? These questions and others have forced some African philosophers, such as Kwame Gyekye, to advocate a moderate/restricted communitarian[21] theory of person in Africa.

- ***Identity, Self-Definition and Conceptual decolonisation***

The issue of identity and self definition has to do with the failure recorded by Africa, especially after independence, in the area of development. The question is asked whether we can retain our cultural peculiarities[22], which in their confrontation with the Western culture, seem to have failed us. This is related to the question of how we, as Africans, can retain what is good in our culture and borrow from other cultures without necessarily losing our roots. This question is important because a certain nationalistic zeal concerning our identity has made us to make a fetish of our beliefs such that we now pretend that values in other cultures do not really matter.

The issue of self-definition and identity is also related to the idea of conceptual decolonisation. Conceptual decolonisation[23] derives from the call that we should rid ourselves of alien mentality derived from the use of foreign language in conceptualizing intellectual problems in Africa. It is believed that we do not have a proper grasp of our problems because we have an European mind-set as a result of the colonial encounter. Decolonising our mind will involve having an African linguistic framework that can be used in addressing African problems.

The above points to the need to fashion out an indigenous language[24] of discourse for intellectual production in Africa.

- ***Socio-Political Organization***

One of the major problems in Africa today is that of social and political organisation. Many African states today are war-torn and there are still prospects of war because many of these states that were put together through colonial arrangements do not work because of such reasons of power sharing, resource control and ethnicity. In many African states today,

authoritarianism and despotism are the order of the day. Democracy is only a pretension as many African leaders are autocratic and do not allow for any reasonable opposition. Philosophers in Africa then ask the question: Is the problem with democracy or our culture or our leaders? Bello, for instance, believes that the problem is not with multi-party democracy but with our leaders. For according to him:

> This malaise is due to dictatorial, despotic and autocratic political leaders who are afraid of being voted out of power if they allowed free, fair and transparent elections, this has happened in recent times, for example; in the Kenya, Zimbabwe, Gambia, Liberia, Gabon and Ivory Coast[25]

The problems at the socio-political realm show the need for African philosophers to devote more of their research effort to analysis of the nature of these problems with a view to promoting the growth and development of the continent.

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The book is primarily an introductory text meant for students of Philosophy and Logic in Nigerian Universities.

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