

GYEKYE AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: A NOTE

Lansana Keita

In this "Note" I want to discuss some of the points raised by Professor Kwame Gyekye of Legon in his interview with Ulrich Lölke (*Quest*, Vol XI, 1997). In the interview Professor Gyekye discusses metaphilosophically the idea of African philosophy and makes the following points:

- 1) African philosophy consists of fundamental inquires and analyses into the African cultural and historical experience.
- 2) African philosophy consists of two main areas: a) analytic investigations into traditional beliefs and assumptions, b) modern African philosophy: researches and studies of contemporary African issues, founded on the contemporary African cultural and historical experiences.
- 3) African philosophy will not be an appendix of European or Western philosophy if African philosophers focused on the fundamental assumptions of African traditional thought and the analytical interpretations of the African cultural experience. Then, their philosophical output and their intellectual creations can be called African philosophy.

Gyekye's definition of African philosophy may be contrasted with the definition proposed by thinkers like Paulin Hountondji who believe that African philosophy is any philosophical work done by African philosophers regardless of content (p. 84). Gyekye argues that African philosophers who write commentaries on Kant would not be making contributions to African philosophy but rather to an aspect of German philosophy -- Kantianism.

I want to argue, however, that both positions (Gyekye and Hountondji) can be synthesized to produce a much more comprehensive and workable definition of African philosophy. I begin with some examples. Arabic philosophy, which Professor Gyekye has studied, is viewed by many as essentially translations and commentaries of Ancient Greek philosophy yet we would not go so far as to deny the historical moment of Arabic philosophy. I believe it was the British philosopher D.N. Whitehead who stated that Western philosophy (British, German, French, and so on) is not much more than footnotes to Plato and Aristotle. On this basis there would be no genuine British or French philosophy. But such is not the case. In fact most philosophical movements in the world have been either local adaptations of other paradigms as in the case of Chinese Buddhism, Chinese Marxism, Russian Marxism, or the qualitative transformations of local theories on account of heavy infusions of ideas from non-local sources. We can think of philosophical movements such as American pragmatism, British idealism, and French phenomenology as examples of such.

Thus if a school of modern phenomenology develops in some African university and is highly influential (despite the early influence of German phenomenology) to the extent of developing creative research and exchanges between African philosophers and others, then over time such a program could best be described as (*pace* Professor Gyekye), say, the Legon School of Phenomenology. I see nothing wrong with a school of thought labeled as African Kantianism developing somewhere in the African world provided that there is a sufficient number of Africa scholars to support that trend within the world of philosophical research.

In fact if one accepts Gyekye's definition of philosophy as applicable to other forms of human intellectual and creative endeavor, then we would have to argue that modern European artists, whose abstract motifs have been influenced by Mondrian and Picasso, are really making contributions to African art and not to European art. Similarly, European and Euro-American musicians who work in the genres of contemporary popular music and jazz would be really making contributions to African musics.

In the strictly intellectual realm let us note that there are the similar examples of the history of theology in Europe and the history of technology and mathematics in Europe by way of Greece. We know that Christian theology owes its origins to the neo-Platonism of the Egyptian philosopher Plotinus (his home was in Lycopolis in Upper Egypt) and the North African theologian Augustine. Should we then argue that European theologians such as Anselm and Aquinas were really making contributions to African Christian theology instead of establishing a genuine Western theology. And what about the arguments proposed by African scholars Diop, Obenga, and Asante that Greek mathematics, technology and philosophy were local adaptations and development of the intellectual ideas of the ancient Egyptians. In fact it is just this question of the indebtedness of Greek (and Western intellectual history) to Africa that has exercised and intrigued (and irritated) Western scholars such as Martin Bernal (*Black Athena*) and Mary Lefkowitz (*Not Out of Africa*). Should one adopt Gyekye's definition of intellectual paradigm and argue that the classical Greek scholars were really making contributions to Egypto-African intellectual history instead of establishing Greek intellectual history.

Thus it seems evident that the best model for African philosophy is a synthesis of the positions taken by both Gyekye and Hountondji. African philosophy (as would be the case for African mathematics, engineering, and so on) is necessarily the philosophical work carried out by African thinkers in African sociological milieus but the content of such work could be any combination of locally generated ideas and locally adapted external ideas. This has been the career of human intellectual history worldwide. After all, the issues that Kant raised in his theory of ethics apply to *all* human societies: should our behavior be based on contingent cost-benefit analysis or should we be guided only by golden-rule universalist principles? Similar considerations

apply to Hobbes's solutions to the problems of human social organization: how should humans optimize freedom, responsibility and authority in society?

In fact the Gyekye-Hountondji synthesis is most applicable to philosophy given its universalist scope. Gyekye points this out when he writes that philosophy is "the most comprehensive of all the intellectual disciplines, quite different from the specific sciences, both natural and social sciences" (p. 88). The reason for the comprehensiveness of philosophy derives from the fact that whereas the special disciplines are founded on *specific* epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies, philosophy is concerned with exploration in *general* epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies. In fact the human brain functions only within contexts of general and particular epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies as is demonstrated by explorations of any human language.

It is because of the comprehensiveness of philosophy that an African philosopher inspired by the work of Gödel in the field of metamathematics could develop a new school of metamathematics in an African research center in which there are creative exchanges on the nature of mathematics between this hypothetical philosopher, colleagues and students. Over time the research efforts of this new school could be correctly viewed as an aspect of African philosophy of mathematics.

I summarize the above discussion as follows: African philosophy is best understood as philosophical and theoretical research undertaken within the context of African (continental or diasporan) universities. Under these conditions African philosophy would be necessarily generated from within the context of African sociological conditions. Over time the African environment would necessarily influence philosophical production regardless of the origins of the topics researched. But given the universalist scope of philosophical inquiry, contributors to African philosophy in general or British philosophy, say, in particular need not necessarily regard themselves as "African" or "British" respectively. Robin Horton has contributed to African philosophical debates on the nature of knowledge (epistemology); similarly, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper have contributed to British philosophy in highly significant ways.

Thus what is most important in the question concerning African philosophy is the research locale and its interlocutors. In this connection not only questions of content and orientation would be raised and settled but also questions concerning models of linguistic expression. At the moment much research of a synthesizing nature is being conducted. Interestingly enough Professor Gyekye's recent *Tradition and Modernity* is a good example of this present period of African philosophical expression.

In this sense then of this more comprehensive definition of African philosophy, research in African philosophy would include discussions of the ethical implications of human cloning, say, or discussions on the nature of time in modern physics. After all, there are departments of biochemistry and physics

in African universities. Again, African philosophy in its larger context would recognize the importance of rethinking all forms of pre-modern and contemporary knowledge. Much epistemological work needs to be done with respect to the metaphysical (including religious) and empiricist modes of thought imposed on Africa during colonial times.

This general epistemological inquiry would also include analyses of the systems of pedagogy introduced during colonial times. Such systems of pedagogy are maintained without much question as to their contextual meaningfulness. Indeed it is remarkable that many years after political independence Africa's systems of pedagogy are almost identical with those of the ex-colonial powers. And we are yet to witness concerted developments in post-colonial African jurisprudence, theory of law, social and political theory, theory of natural and social science, and so on, that are meaningful for the African sociological environment. In recent times the pioneering work of theorists such as Blyden, DuBois, Faron, and Diop have not yet become structurally embedded in the intellectual paradigms of contemporary African theoretical thought.

Again, I agree with Professor Gyekye's emphasis on the research locale as an important element in the development of African philosophy: all such discussions and research mentioned above should take place in African sociological environments. In the case of African philosophy let one hundred African philosophical violets bloom.