Multicultural Foundations for Philosophy of Education: A Propaedeutic

Huey-li Li
The University of Akron

Philosophical inquiry is an integral part of a reflective educational enterprise. There has been a widespread belief that philosophy, in terms of methodology and subject matter, is a universal discipline which is not circumscribed by any cultural scheme. Nevertheless, formal philosophical inquiry tends to stress an analytical mode of reasoning and logical argumentation, which are rooted in modern Western culture. To a large extent, this analytic philosophical tradition has shaped the development of philosophy of education as an academic discipline. Recently, "professionals" trained in the field of philosophy of education in North America have become more aware of the Eurocentrism and androcentrism inherent in the canon formation of philosophy of education. While feminist perspectives have emerged somewhat as legitimate voices in the field, non-Western philosophical traditions, especially African philosophy, have remained unexplored or marginalized in the field of philosophy of education.

Is patriarchy the ultimate conceptual root of oppression? Does feminist critique of androcentrism encompass a demystification of Eurocentrism? Has philosophy of education as an academic discipline adequately addressed DuBois's concern that the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of color line? Can philosophy of education that relies on a monolithic philosophical tradition enable us to create conceptual frameworks for understanding various educational issues in a culturally diverse society?

In order to gain a better understanding of the multicultural foundation for philosophy of education, this essay will first examine the recent metaphilosophical debates concerning the nature and existence of African philosophy. I point out that the dynamic and self-reflective nature of philosophical inquiry allows the universalist and the particularist conceptions of philosophy to become commensurable. In light of many philosophers' concerted efforts to reconstruct African philosophy, I further argue that the "professionalization" of philosophy of education must become attentive to diversified modes of thinking in ever changing social contexts.

The Nature and Existence of African Philosophy

In 1945, Placide Tempel's publication of *Bantu Philosophy* represented an initial effort to elucidate a distinctive philosophical tradition in Africa.[1] In the United States, African Americans' experiences of slavery and continuous racial oppression led to numerous attempts to articulate a "Black," or "Afro-American," and "African-American" philosophy in the early 1970s.[2] Since then, African Philosophy gradually emerged as an umbrella term to encompass various writings and discursive documentation that elucidate, interpret, analyze, and synthesize traditional African philosophical ideas, Africans' experiences of global Diaspora, and Africans' as well as African descendants' critiques of Western imperialism and Eurocentric modernity.

The naming of African philosophy has posed numerous questions. What constitutes African philosophy? Is "African philosophy" simply a geographical designation? Is African philosophy comparable to Asian or British philosophy? What are the distinctive characteristics of philosophical traditions in Africa? Is African philosophy essentially different from Greco-European philosophy? Should African philosophy specifically address Africans and African descendants' lived experiences? Should African philosophy focus on precolonial philosophical traditions? Or, are Africans' experiences of colonialism and African Americans' experiences of slavery integral parts of their philosophical tradition? Above all, what is the ultimate purpose of naming/designating African philosophy?

In response to the above questions, it is important to first inquire into why there have been seemingly endless debates on the existence of African philosophy in the last two decades, especially when there have been no comparable debates on the existence of British philosophy or even Asian philosophy. Racist beliefs in Africans' inabilities to reason certainly formed the basis for denying the existence of genuine African philosophical traditions.[3] Lack of a scrupulous documentation of philosophical traditions in most African societies also renders a justification for excluding African philosophy from the formalized discipline of philosophy.[4] In addition, scholars such as Franz Crahay, upon examining African philosophical thoughts, claim to invalidate African philosophy on the grounds that African thoughts are inconsistent with a formal philosophical inquiry that is supposed to be "explicit, abstract analytical reflection, sharply critical and autocritical, which is systematic, at least in principle, and yet open, dealing with experience, its human condition, and the meanings and values that it reveals."[5]

To a large extent, the debates about African philosophy remind us of women's struggle in critiquing the androcentrism inherent in the academic philosophical enterprise. It is noted that Euro-American feminists made a concerted effort to unveil gender biases (for example, women lacking the ability to engage in rational/logical thinking) in order to develop alternative perspectives.[6] Clearly, male dominance over symbol systems, cultural institutions, and methods led to the devaluation of women's ways of thinking. Refusing to acknowledge women's exclusion from participation in the creation of symbol systems, sexist maneuvers disclaim women's ability to reason philosophically, supposedly basing their deprecation on the absence of female counterparts to Plato or Hegel.

Similarly, due to Western cultural hegemony, it is not surprising that "professional" philosophers are inclined to use a Greco-European philosophical tradition as a comparative basis for determining African philosophy. Above all, formal philosophy has stressed the significance of written literacy for articulating and preserving a philosophical tradition. In contrast, Kwasi Wiredu points out that African philosophies "available today are folk philosophies. They generally consist of what 'elders' said or are said to have said."[7] Anthony Kwame Appiah further argues that written language contributed to the greater generality and abstraction of thinking that are essential to formal philosophy. He states that "without literacy it is hard to see how formal philosophy could have gotten started; it is not a sufficient condition for

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formal philosophy, but it certainly seems to be necessary. And, as we have seen, it is literacy that explains some of the features of formal philosophy."[8]

However, it should be noted that oral dialogues, as documented in Plato's writings in ancient Greece and *The Analects* in China, indicate that "philosophical thinking" can be an interactive and communal action. The nuances of such dialogical thinking have become lost in both written documentation and the oral transmission of philosophical knowledge. At the same time, both written documentation and the oral history contribute equally to an abstraction of the dynamic process of a dialogical philosophical inquiry. The oral transmission of traditional African proverbs and folklores reveal Africans' quest for philosophical wisdom. The well-known and often quoted African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child" is conducive to a cross-cultural as well as an inter-generational understanding of an abstract idea concerning the collective responsibility of educating children in a society. As discussed above, it is doubtful that oral transmission of philosophical knowledge contributes to less generality and abstraction. Moreover, literacy may be the necessary condition for formal philosophy, but written literacy is not indispensable for philosophical inquiry. Thus, I agree with Safro Kwame that "if one denies that a nonliterate people ever thought deeply or critically about fundamental issues of life, he or she will either have to be familiar with the details of their entire history or have to deny that they are human."[9]

In addition to their uneasiness with a lack of written documentation of philosophical traditions in Africa, many scholars have been critical about the forms, the contents, and the presentation style of African philosophy. To illustrate, Godwin Sogolo points out that "the available materials in African thought systems are submerged in a cloud of unreflective and dogmatic magio-religious claims which nevertheless contain ample evidence of philosophical elements that can be extracted and systematized into a body of knowledge."[10] V.Y. Mudimbe refers to traditional African thoughts as "gnosis" rather than "philosophy" because "it is only metaphorically, or, at best, from a historicist perspective, that one would extend the notion of philosophy to African traditional systems of thought, considering them as dynamic processes in which concrete experiences are integrated into an order of concepts and discourses."[11] Godwin and Mudimbe do not intend to undermine the philosophical significance of African thoughts, for they are deeply concerned about "Africanizing" knowledge. However, they agree with a prevalent belief that traditional African thought is yet to be transformed into more systematic and rigorous "philosophy."

H.O. Oruka identifies the following four trends in African philosophy: ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist-ideological philosophy, and professional philosophy. Ethnophilosophy represents traditional African worldviews, folklore, folk wisdom, myths, and beliefs. Philosophic sagacity refers to individual thinkers' philosophical perspectives in pre-colonial Africa. Nationalist-ideological philosophy represents some contemporary African thinkers' theoretical perspectives originating from traditional African values. Professional philosophy refers to the philosophizing of African scholars who are trained in Western traditions of philosophy.[12] While Oruka does not devalue ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity,

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and nationalist/ideological philosophy, he finds it necessary to distinguish formal philosophy from informal folk philosophy. Hountondji further argues that professional philosophers are able to demonstrate the rigor of deductions and the accuracy of analyses which have been absent in informal philosophy, such as African philosophy.[13]

As discussed above, Wiredue, Mudimbe, Appiah, and Hountondji share a common concern about philosophy as a universal discipline. To them, the "professionalization" of African philosophy is "in the making." To a certain degree, their attempt to exclude traditional African thoughts from formal philosophy indicates their belief that philosophy, in terms of methodology and subject matter, is not to be confined within any cultural boundaries. In other words, philosophy as a systematic theorizing should not be situated in any historic/cultural contexts such as Africa or Europe. It follows that philosophers' personal experiences should have no impact on their philosophizing transhistoric and transcultural issues. In brief, they argue that philosophical inquiry should embody the following features: (1) abstract, systematic, and nondogmatic thinking, (2) an adversarial approach in examining the soundness of arguments, and (3) a written tradition.

In contrast to the advocates for philosophy as a universal discipline, some African philosophers, such as Ayoade, Gyekye, Aodipo, and Onwuanibe, have argued that the nature and methodology of African philosophy is to be distinguished from formal philosophy, and the particularity of African philosophy is to be valued and legitimized.[14] For instance, Safro Kwame argues that the analytic methodology embraced by formal philosophy in the West is in conflict with African philosophical tradition.[15] Also, the authority of tradition has been regarded as a legitimate basis for philosophical justification in African folk philosophy, whereas the adversarial paradigm of formal philosophy simply does not accept the authority of tradition as the ultimate measure of philosophical arguments.[16] Additionally, there are traditional African concepts, such as witchcraft, which could never be legitimized by formal philosophy even though traditional concepts have historically shaped significant cultural practices in Africa.[17]

In view of the perceptual gap between the universalist and particularist conceptions of philosophy, Polycarp Ikuenobe points out that the universalist conception of philosophy represents a parochial understanding of the development of philosophy in Western society. In reviewing the development of philosophical traditions in the West, he points out that African philosophy is similar to the ancient, medieval, and modern periods of Western philosophy, which the universalists have assumed as valid philosophical inquiry. That is, if a lack of written literacy (that is, Socrates, Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes did not engage themselves in writing), dogmatism, collectivity, and a lack of systematic philosophizing are included in the tradition of philosophy in the West, it is problematic to disclaim the existence of African philosophy.[18]

Also, Lucius Outlaw points out that "all philosophical systematizing is a matter of strategy which pretends to be based on a complete system of self-evident or transcendental axioms." He further argues that "socially and historically situated,

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[the axiomatic concept] is inherently grounded in and thus conditioned by social life, not regulated by ahistorical transcendental rules governing reasoning above and beyond concrete social and cultural life."[19] To Outlaw, African philosophy, whether labeled as ethno-philosophy or ideological-nationalist philosophy, represents a deconstructive challenge to decenter the universalist concept of "philosophy" and to unveil its historicity.

Beyond criticizing the universalist conception of philosophy, it is essential to recognize the limits of the particularist conception of philosophy and/or African philosophy. According to the particularist argument, it is African culture that determines the unique characteristics of African philosophical inquiry. Since African culture cannot remain unchanged, the distinguishing features of African philosophy may change accordingly. More specifically, it can be noted that the primacy of witchcraft has been replaced by the far-reaching impact of colonialism and neo-colonialism.

The nature of philosophy itself is a philosophical question. The above metaphilosophical debates indicate that defining philosophy and African philosophy cannot be devoid of a critical and reflective examination of the interconnection between culture and philosophical inquiry. Furthermore, an inquiry into African philosophy is inseparable from a reappraisal of the West, and a reappraisal of Western philosophical tradition is consistent with the reflective nature of philosophical inquiry.[20] To adopt a more inclusive approach to integrate African philosophy into the field of philosophy of education is to expand professional educational philosophers' intellectual horizons. Professional educational philosophers need not exclusively rely upon universalist philosophical inquiry. For instance, the accommodative approach, rather than the adversarial approach, in many African societies may facilitate a more thorough and comprehensive analysis of divergent perspectives.[21] In brief, it is essential to recognize and explore various philosophical traditions in order to attain a genuine understanding of multiculturalism in education. In what follows, I will further explore the relevance of postcoloniality in African philosophy to the field of philosophy of education.

Postcoloniality in African Philosophy

Some Africans' belief that "what any other race in the world possesses, we as Africans also possess; otherwise we are less than human" might appear to be reactionary.[22] However, as Africans' and African descendants' humanity has been subjected to scrutiny and devaluation, it is important to be aware that many contemporary African and African-American thinkers share a belief that "the existence of African philosophy is part of our total package of liberation from the apron strings of Western intellectual colonization."[23] Consequently, the development of African philosophy represents a collective effort to challenge the dominant Greco-Eurocentric notions of idealized "man" and "civilized human" in postcolonial Africa.

However, systematized philosophy is relatively new in Africa, and the reconstruction of traditional African philosophy, to a large extent, relies on African-born and African descended philosophers trained in Western philosophy. The fact that

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African philosophy is written in English and French is a further irony not to be overlooked. Also, it is not surprising that African philosophy constructed by these professionals can be perceived as the intellectual products of alien cultures, and the authenticity of African philosophy is in jeopardy. In Sogolo's words, African philosophy seems to "clothe Western philosophy in African robes, what is now referred to as the domestication of the philosophies of other land."[24] As a result, the authenticity of African philosophy is in jeopardy.

Colonization is not an experience endured only by Africans; African Americans have long been aware of internal/domestic colonialism.[25] African-American philosophers also experience "alienation" in their attempt to articulate a distinctive African-American philosophical perspective. Michael Omi and Howard Winant point out that colonization can lead to "a dynamic of cultural domination and resistance, in which racial categories are utilized to distinguish between antagonistic colonizing and colonized groups, and conversely, to emphasize the essential cultural unity and autonomy of each."[26] In other words, cultural differences can be constructed, maintained, and polarized. At the same time, it is central to note that there has been an interplay between the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized. Colonization aims at cultural assimilation. In reality, colonization leads to development of a more diversified postcolonial culture. Trained in Western philosophical tradition, African and African-American philosophers' attempts to define and articulate "African philosophy" represent an effort of decolonization. In the process of decolonization, African and African-American philosophers develop unique insights in understanding the relations between racism and the construction of knowledge.

W.E.B. DuBois's conception of double consciousness sheds significant light on our understanding of the authenticity of contemporary African philosophy and the reconstruction of traditional African philosophy. According to DuBois,

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him to true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[27]

Frank M. Kirkland points out that the double consciousness can be duplicitous and dualistic. It leads to false self-perception and self-doubt. At the same time, the dyadic consciousness ultimately enables African Americans to strive for a true self-understanding.[28] African American's true "self" is not to be distorted nor torn apart. DuBois's conception of double consciousness emphasizes that the formation of self-perception is historically situated. Self-image can be subject to the gaze of the surrounding others, yet, the dyadic consciousness can always strive for true self-understanding. Undoubtedly, the initial self-deception and self-doubt are a high price to pay for true self-understanding. However, the ability of double consciousness to detect and rectify false self-perception also enables the colonized "self" to

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gain a better understanding of the dynamic processes involved in the formation of individual and collective identities within a given social context.

Colonization has become an integral part of contemporary African culture. The conceptual tools acquired by professional Africans and African Americans trained in the Western philosophical tradition may lead to a misinterpretation or mispresentation of traditional African thought. In other words, colonization can be what DuBois calls "a veil" for African descendants. However, professional philosophers nourished within African cultural traditions or immersed in Africans' shared experiences of racism can strive for a true understanding of the nature and mission of philosophy and African philosophy.

On the other hand, the ultimate ends of naming and reconstructing African philosophy need not solely focus on the liberation of African and African descendants. After all, as discussed above, an inquiry into African philosophy cannot be devoid of a reappraisal of the dominant philosophical traditions embraced by academic institutions. A critical reappraisal of dominant philosophical tradition can intellectually liberate all professional philosophers.

John Dewey points out that "if we are willing to conceive of education as the forming of fundamental disposition…philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education."29 Professionals trained in the field of philosophy of education need to be aware that the philosophical training process certainly leads to the formation of our personal as well as professional disposition. Living in a culturally diverse society, professional educational philosophers cannot overlook what DuBois calls "the problem of the color line." Because African philosophy sheds significant light on a more comprehensive understanding of Africans' and African descendants' experiences of colonization and global Diaspora, it is compelling to integrate African philosophy into the field of philosophy of education.

Conclusion

In the last two decades, the naming and construction of African philosophy leads to a critical reevaluation of the nature, methodology, and subject matter of philosophy. Upon reviewing the metaphilosophical debates concerning the existence of African philosophy, I argue that lack of a scrupulous documentation in Africa should not justify Africans' exclusion from the canon of philosophy of education. Rather, it indicates the need to critically reconstruct the oral traditions and to expand the substratum of philosophy of education as an academic discipline. I conclude that diversified philosophical traditions are not incommensurable. In fact, the nature of philosophy itself is a philosophical question. The representation and recognition of non-Western philosophical traditions can be the key to revitalizing this reflective educational enterprise.

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