

Enhancing the Growth of Knowledge through Comparative Studies of Western and African Philosophies

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Abstract

There have been questions about the nature of philosophy. Some scholars are of the view that there is only and one philosophy. For them, philosophy is a universal discipline and all those who want to do philosophy must adhere strictly to the standards of doing philosophy. Philosophy anywhere is philosophy everywhere. On the other hands, some scholars have also argued that there are different philosophies. According to them, the method of philosophizing in one area or region may be different from the methods adopted for doing philosophy in other places. For these scholars therefore, philosophy is a relative discipline. This paper argues that though there are different philosophies and methodologies in philosophy, yet, there are melting points among them. The paper put forward ways of comparing philosophies so that the goal of the course which is to seek the knowledge of reality might be achieved. The scope is limited to Western and African philosophies. It adopts a philosophical method of analysis.

KEYWORDS: PHILOSOPHY, WESTERN PHILOSOPHY, AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY
COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed today, unlike in the past, that there are indeed philosophies as against the philosophy. Omoregbe, (2004) argues that every philosophy is a philosophy of culture, and that the culture of a people forms the foundation of the philosophy of that culture. According to him:

Philosophy is unavoidably influence by culture... people who live in different environments in different part of the world develop different cultures. The philosophy of a people is a part of their culture. There is no philosophy that is a cultural, i, e, not influenced by any culture and not developed within any particular culture. Such a philosophy does not, and cannot exist. Omoregbe (2004; 1)

Given this assertion, it is reasonable to submit that, whether in the loose or in the strict sense Oguejiofor (2010) of the word, philosophy is not a discipline of a given or particular race or people. In other words, since there are different peoples and different cultures, and since philosophy is a function of a culture, then, there are different philosophies. If there are different philosophies it means that philosophy is not one and the same. There must be something that is common to these different philosophies that qualify each of them as a philosophy. It is in this sense that Comparative Philosophy is an important part to the entire philosophy. Our task in this paper is to address how there can be a promotion of comparative studies between two philosophies, western and African. We shall start by considering the meaning and nature of philosophy. Then, we shall discuss how and how not to compare philosophies, particularly, those of the African and the western, before our conclusion.

2. MEANING AND NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY

According to Fasoro (2004; 93) “If Philosophy has other names, the first among them should be ‘controversy.’ This, no doubt, shows the nature of a discipline where people see things from different angles, there is no higher authority to appeal to for the correct point of view. Etymologically, philosophy is said to have been coined out of two Greek words: Philo and Sophia both mean, love of wisdom for knowledge Aboluwodi (1998; 2). Staniland (1979: 8) gives a more rewarding definition of Philosophy as “The criticism of the ideas we live with”. The author went further to expatiate on what she meant by criticism thus: “By ‘criticism’ of ones means not negative appraisal but rational, impartial and articulate appraisals whether positive or negative. To be critical of received ideas is accordingly not the same thing as rejecting them.” Philosophy in another way can be seen as a rejection of both dogmatism and extremism in all facets of human endeavors. It is called to question to received ideas,

believes, assumption and customs. From this, it is cleared that philosophy is a rational and critical discipline, and its major tool is reason or reasoning. It is a discipline where nothing is true or correct unless sufficient reasons have been provided in support of the claim made.

3. WESTERN PHILOSOPHY: ORIGIN, MEANING AND NATURE.

To some people like Bodunrin (1990: 5), Western philosophy is the only philosophy that can be called philosophy. He writes that:

By philosophy, I mean western philosophy... whatever else maybe philosophy, and it is not as if we are absolutely free to foist any meaning that suit our fancy on a concept that has its birth in another culture. Whatever else maybe philosophy and whatever else there also maybe philosophy, western philosophy, one may tautologically assert, is philosophy.

Bodunrin: (1990; 5)

Although, the above indentation (and many others) have generated a lot of controversy in the discipline of philosophy the point we are making is the general acceptance of this philosophy, not only by western writers but also writers from other cultures. According to Russell (2000: 14) philosophy began in Greece in the 6th century B.C. Before this time, people have been asking questions concerning issues around them, but their answers to those puzzles of life were largely theological.

Then came the Ionians thinkers like Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes who offered rational and materialistic explanations to those puzzles. The main pre-occupation of these philosophers was the original stuff from which the universe came. Philosophy progressed with the like of Democritus, Pythagoras, Heraclitus and Parmenides. These and other philosophers of this period were traditionally called pre-Socratic philosophers because they came before Socrates.

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who are known as the Socratic philosophers had the Sophists like Protagoras and Gorgias as contemporaries. They introduced analysis into the business of philosophy. They inquired into the nature of just society. This can be seen in the classical work of Plato, *The Republic*. After them were the medieval philosophers like Augustine and Aquinas who tried to synthesize *Platonism* and *Aristotelianism* with Christian theology. What is usually called modern philosophy

came with the likes of Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes. A tincture of science was integrated into philosophy, laying the foundation for the British empiricists like John Locke, David Hume and Berkeley. The analysts, traditionally called the Logical Positivists, only took the positions of the empiricists a bit far. According to them, for any word to be meaningful, it must be verifiable by experience. What has been said about Western philosophy is not exhaustible, but it gives us how the philosophy originated and developed.

4. AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY; MEANING AND NATURE.

A lot has been said about the meaning, nature and existence of African Philosophy. If the second name of philosophy is ‘controversy’, African philosophy is more controversial. It has been doubted if there is anything called African philosophy. The denial of African philosophy has been linked to the comment made by Hegel in his *Philosophy of History*. In the said book, Hegel, relegated Africans and Africa to the background. According to Hegel, the Negro people have non-history, and that they should not be spoken of because they lack rationality. He says:

The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our natural ideas the category of Universality. In Negro life, the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence as for example, God, or Law-in which the interest of man’s volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. This distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained; so that the knowledge of an absolute Being, another and a Higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting. The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality all that we call feeling if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character. (Hegel; 99)

The above reference forms the foundation of which western scholars, and even philosophers of African origin with western background of philosophy, argue against the existence of African philosophy. The denial of African philosophy however generated responses and reactions on the part of some Afro-centric writers such as Placid Temple who wrote the *Bantu Philosophy* and the likes of Mbiti's *African Religions & Philosophy* (1969) The works of these philosophers have been tagged *Sage Philosophy* (1990) by Oruka. Our take on the existence of African philosophy is that, if Aristotle was right to have opined that philosophy starts in wonder, then, it will amount to racial prejudice that a people cannot, and do not philosophize. This is because, there can be no culture or people who did not encounter strange things that caught their attention and ruminate over. Oyeshile (2008) armed with the tool to the Universalists, explains that reflection, logicity and criticism are crucial to anything that can be called philosophical. He says:

For anything to be philosophical, it has to do with the reflection on the experience of a society, group or an individual. This reflection has been necessitated by wonders about some compelling problems of life and existence. Another essential ingredient is that such reflection must be critical and logical. As long as anybody or group meets these requirements such a person or group can be said to engage in what is call philosophy. (Oyeshile: 2008; 43)

Works in African philosophy meet these standards, and so, we are justified to talk of African philosophy. The justification for the existence of African philosophy does not interest us as such in this paper but just to show how the controversy began. According to Agada (2013), the existence of African philosophy is now beyond dispute. Agada himself does not seem to have thought that African philosophy has become fully grown. He says:

The greatest challenge to African philosophy is that of negotiating the transition from ethno-philosophy to individual thinking independent of the tribe. The future of our tradition lies with originality and individuality. (Agada: 2013)

If there is an African philosophy, and we can speak of it in the same manner we can speak of the Western and the Oriental philosophies, then, we must show what it is so that we can have a platform for its comparison with the Western. Just as philosophy by definition generates so many controversies, so also is African philosophies, Jinadu (2014) contends that African philosophy should not be restricted to the Africans to the exclusion of other races that are interested in the discipline. According to him:

African philosophy should not be constructed or understood as the philosophy of the people of Africa rather, it should (*sic*) seen as a course that is existing independently of the existence of either Eastern or Western philosophies. It is (African philosophy) not culture-bound but rather a course that has its distinctive features like other philosophies which is studied not only in African but other continents of the world. (Jinadu: 2014)

African philosophy as a discipline can be undertaken, like other philosophies, by anyone that is interested in the discipline irrespective of where he or she hails from. In the same vein, we can have philosophers of African origin who are not interested in African philosophy. The fact that they are philosophers from the continent of Africa does not qualify them as African philosophers. African philosophy can be seen as the kind of philosophy that looks into the African traditional beliefs and culture in an attempt to solve the political, social, economic, cultural problems that are confronting the peoples of African continent.

Wikipedia encyclopedia (2014) defines African philosophy as: “Philosophy produced by African people, philosophy which presents African worldviews or philosophy that use distinct African philosophical methods.” This definition of African philosophy coincides with the view of Makinde (1988) who opines that: “only African writers on African philosophy can be called African philosophers.” One wonders why non-Africans with genuine interest cannot write on African philosophy and be qualified as African philosophers, after all, there are African scholars that can be called Western philosophers. As pointed out, African philosophy does not necessarily have to be undertaken by scholars of African origin.

We can therefore attempt a definition of African philosophy as that scion of philosophy that takes cognizance of African culture, beliefs, environment, history and experience in an attempt to proffer solutions to her political, social, economic, educational and religious problems. This discipline can be undertaken by anyone from any part of the globe. Wiredu, according to Onah (2002: 68) was said to have asserted that such an African philosophy is “still in the making.” This may be true then, considering the fact the assertion was made as early as 1970s. Since then, (even if one does not agree with him) Wiredu, and others like Soglo, Odera Oruka, Segun Gbadegehin, Olusegun Oladipo, J.O Fasoro, and even literary writers like Kofi Awoonor, and Wole Soyinka, have produced works that can be regarded as African philosophy.

5. MEANING AND NATURE OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Littlejohn, in the *internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* describes the discipline of Comparative Philosophy thus:

Comparative philosophy-sometimes called “Cross-cultural philosophy”- is a subfield of philosophy in which philosophers work on problems by intentionally setting into dialogue sources from across cultural, linguistic, and philosophical streams. The ambition and challenge of comparative philosophy is to include all the philosophies of global humanity in its vision of what is constituted by philosophy.

The goal of comparative philosophy is to promote cross-cultural thinking with the view of having access to the thinking in other culture so as to enrich human knowledge and understanding. It is never the aim of this discipline to see the irrationality of other cultures that has monopoly of the knowledge about the reality which philosophy seeks. If comparative philosophy is successful, then, it will be clear that there is always something to learn in every culture. Also, through comparative philosophy, some mistaken ideas can be corrected as a particular culture may discover that it has not been correct in having and holding on to a particular idea. When intellectual humility is cultivated in the process of comparing philosophies, ideas will be generated which will improve our general knowledge. How can this comparison be successful? This question shall be attempted shortly in this paper.

6. METHODOLOGY FOR DOING COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF WESTERN AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHIES

It has been argued above that through comparative philosophy, knowledge about the reality will increase. It can also be said that through comparative philosophy it can be discovered that some cultures hitherto regarded as being irrational and lacking in logicity, may be found to have exhibited some forms of rationality in their thoughts. This seems to be the point Jinadu (2014) was making in the indentation below:

If scholars could explore some of the hidden truths in African philosophy, value would be added to knowledge and the gap between knowledge and ignorance will be bridged. If African philosophy is given a pride of place in the scheme of knowledge, the frontiers of human ignorance would be pushed back. (Jinadu: 2014)

True as this position may be or seem the question is; how do we do this comparison between the African and the western philosophy so that this goal might be achieved? This is bearing in mind the large gap between Africa and West both in terms of technological advancement and in the history of the development of philosophy. In both cases, the west has an edge over Africa.

It is suggested here that an important factor to be considered by anyone in the field of Comparative Philosophy, especially when comparing the west with its scientific and technological advancement and its Africa counterpart with glaring low level of technology, is openness. Such a researcher must not assume to have known everything about these two different cultures. He must try as much as possible not to bring to bear the Hegelian notion that Africans are irrational. He must, instead consider each of the cultures in equal levels. This suggestion is similar to what Nussbaun (1997) described as ‘chauvinism.’ This error is committed when a researcher is trying to look for an idea in his culture and uses it to judge another culture that seems not to have such an idea. The point about chauvinism is that, such a researcher has already known what he is looking for and anything that fails to correspond to it is regarded as irrational.

Take for instance, the Aristotelian *Laws of thought*, Russell, (1992), especially, the Law of *non-contradiction*. According to this law, a statement must not contradict itself. Armed with this law, a researcher into the Yoruba culture who finds out that the culture does not obey this law might conclude that the people are irrational. There is no contradiction when a Yoruba man tells you that he is coming but you see him going. All the Yoruba man is saying is that he will soon come. As difficult as this appeal to remove all forms of pre-conception of other cultures may seem, if the goal of Comparative Philosophy must be achieved, every researcher must suppress his initial belief or thinking about the cultures he wants to compare. This task requires intellectual and racial humility otherwise the goal of Comparative Philosophy will not be realized.

No culture must consider itself as being superior to the other just as no culture is inferior. Western philosophers who have read and internalized Hegel's *Philosophy of History* will find it almost impossible to do a comparative analysis of the western and African philosophies without bias towards the west.

Again, in doing Comparative Philosophy, especially, while comparing the western and the African philosophy, periods should be considered. Philosophy as we know it today has passed through many phases and trends, not only in the west but also in Africa. For instance, Orla (1990) identifies four trends in African philosophy: the ethno-philosophy stage, the philosophy of sagacity, the nationalistic and the professional stages. Analysis of these trends is not a focus here but just to show that, just as the western philosophy is not static, responding to the issues of time and environment, so also is African philosophy. In comparing these two philosophies, periods should be considered. For instance, the ethno-philosophy stage in Africa, going by Orla's classification, should be compared with the speculation period of the Ionians. This is however not the case with most western scholars who are into Comparative Philosophy. They tend to compare the traditional philosophy of Africa with the scientific period of the west. They do this diagonal comparison closing their minds to their history as if they did not start like the Africans with their traditional thought. This seems to be the point of Jinadu (2014) was making when he observed thus:

Some of these commentators argue as if one is to believe that Africans were (and perhaps are) not capable of philosophizing. The traditional African practices and thoughts that have always been the focus of western scholars ought not to be compared with modern philosophy. Rather, such a comparison should be done in a relation to the periods preceding the birth of philosophy by in Ionia. (Jinadu: 2014)

The point been made here is that, comparison between the African and the Western philosophies should be done horizontally in relation to periods instead of the vertical comparison that obtains now in some of the works of the comparative researchers

However, there seem to be some challenges to comparative research in philosophy. One of such is the role of language. Language is an important part of a people's culture and philosophy. Language depicts or mirror reality. However, language is universal. No matter how versed a person may be in another man's language, there are some terms or words that cannot be translated into another language without losing their original meanings. When the Yoruba describe somebody as the *Omoluwabi*, the nearest word to it in English language is integrity. But a good speaker of Yoruba language knows that the real meaning of *Omoluwabi* is not conveyed in a man of integrity. This problem was noticed by Oladipo (2004:44 - 45) in his work on Wiredu. It was noted in the work that there is no word in *Akan* language that can be translated into the western conception of the soul. According to Oladipo, this is a good example of philosophical problems which are 'tongue-dependent.'

This challenge will no doubt undermine the goal of comparative philosophy. western oriented philosophers who are not Africans will continue to suffer for their inability to understand some concept in the African philosophy while the value of African philosophy will not be fully appreciated by these foreigners. This problem is similar to the *Ontological Relative* of Quine (Ozumba,2002). According to quine, language is culturally relative, and in an attempt to translate it into another language, some values are lost.

Another challenge to the successful achievement of the goal of Comparative Philosophy in general, and the comparison of western and African philosophies is the racial bias, not only on the part of the Euro-centric scholars, but also on the part of the Afro-centric scholars. Ronnie Littlejohn argued that comparative philosophy did not receive the blessing of *the mainstream western philosophy* for a very long time and that articles on the subject were rejected for publication until 1939. The reason for this attitude, according to him, was that the mainstream western philosophy looked down on their 'philosophies' and did not see the basics of such comparison. In a similar vein, it was this spirit of nationalism that dominated the minds of the earliest writers of African philosophy who wrote on everything they could lay hands upon, and labelled it 'African philosophy' just to respond to the world that Africans are capable of doing philosophy. That is what Fasoro (2004) calls 'over reaction'. The point we are making here is that of objectivity must be the hallmark in the process of comparing western and African philosophies.

7. CONCLUSION

Comparative Philosophy in general and comparing western and African philosophies in particular can be a veritable venture. Doing that however requires basic standard, not only because a given race or culture may be at the receiving end, in this case, Africa because of our low level of development in the areas of science and technology when compared with the west, but also, and more importantly, the role of such venture enlarges human horizon for the understanding of the reality. Objectivity is the watch word for such a discipline. Besides, comparison, in terms of such periods, should be done horizontally. Racial prejudice and extreme rationalism have been identified as some of the challenges that confronts this discipline. Unless these challenges: racial prejudice and vertical comparison, are eliminated or reduced to the barest minimal Comparative Philosophy will lean to the favour of the west and at the expense of not only other cultures but also and more importantly, the entire goal of Comparative Philosophy, which is the knowledge of the reality.

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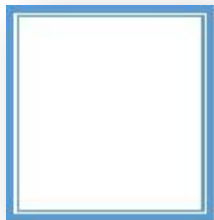
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