
Why Study the History of Philosophy? An African Response

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Abstract

It is arguable that the history of philosophy is plague with many rival doctrines. It has become a dumping ground for any theory in the name of superior argument or logic. There have been so many contradicting views as to the import and relationship of philosophy to its history vis. a vis. This work reopens that discussion within the ambivalence of African philosophy. It examines how African philosophy could strive and project its future without distorting its past. Furthermore, this paper examines the relevance of African philosophy to its past and projects the history of African philosophy as philosophy. This work employs the method of critical analysis to argue that the history of African philosophy has an intrinsic value in itself and should not be discarded if the discipline is to take its place alongside other world philosophies.

Keywords: Philosophy, African Philosophy, History, Study, Value

Introduction

There are so many books on the history of philosophy but only few has attempted to justify the need for us to study the ideas of dead philosophers. In this paper my intention, among others, is to ask the question anew “is it intelligible to teach philosophies and philosophers that has been discredited by events or refuted by their contemporaries or events?” Perhaps, this paper sets as its objective to propose a scientific history of philosophy which will eliminate falsehood from the history of philosophy. The idea of censoring philosophy is not a new one and I do not claim credit for it. The members of the Vienna Circle had a similar idea in their formulation of the verifiability principle but of what use is a principle that could not verify itself? Earlier on Plato had emphasized, in his Republic, the need to censor the curriculum of some courses. The courses Plato had in mind then include music, poems, drama, history etc. (Pause and think for a minute) Does historians teach everything? No. In music, do we play every song? No. In literature do we study all the novels? No. Then why should we study the chambers of history of discredited dead philosophers?

The issue I intend to deal with it falls under metaphilosophy by which I meant the philosophy of philosophy. For if there is a philosophy of other disciplines, such as religion, law, medicine, science, then there should be a philosophy of philosophy, that branch of philosophy that uses philosophical method to critically assess or question the questions in philosophy. It deals with questions such as “why ask why? And this brings to mind the response, “why not?”



It is not at odds to hear philosophers write or speak eloquently in many forums about the salient values of philosophy as did Bertrand Russell. However, given our present day realities, should we now say their views are obsolete, theoretical and ill-founded? It is true that we need a discipline that will assure us of bread in the long run even if it does not bake it. Not a discipline that starts with a man who was reproached of his poverty and surprisingly told us that his business is not to make money otherwise he would have rented all the olive presses in Miletus. Shame! It is shocking for a sage to say that there are three groups that goes to the Olympian games, while some go there to compete for medals, some go to buy and sell but the philosophers go to speculate. Think of the great personalities who studied philosophy and died in hunger, specifically Karl Marx. We need a course that bakes bread! 'Who philosophy epp?' Why are young African intellectuals not interested in the study of philosophy in general and African philosophy in particular? Why study philosophy? Is there a thinker's shop for a philosopher to do sales girl? Perhaps, why study the history of philosophy? But wait a minute. What is this thing called philosophy? Does it ring a bell if we prefix it with Africa? Can it be studied without its history? Does the history of philosophy constitute a philosophy in its own right? Do we ever make progress in philosophy as we do in sciences?

Philosophy as a discipline may strive in history on the grounds of the methodology applied. A lot of the discipline may then depends on its history and while students in other disciplines such as literature, music, linguistics may not necessary need to know the history of linguistics to be a scholar of the discipline, without a good knowledge of its history a student cannot excel in philosophy. Perhaps, how should one approach the history of philosophy?

2.0 The contested nature of the history of philosophy: thematic or chronology?

What does an historian study? One response could be the biography of great men and ordinary individuals. This is because some great men are the casual agent of history. By mere study of the biography of these men we become aware of the events that took place within the period which they lived. For instance, the study of the life and time of Martin Luther King will introduce the reader not only to the study of reformation, but it will inform the reader of modern Europe, the struggle for papacy and emergence of Protestantism. In this case, the historian of philosophy should approach the study by a careful analysis of the practitioners of the discipline. By so doing, we will be acquainted with the focus of the discipline at a particular point in time.

On the other hand, history could be seen as a record of events. The study of the events that took place in modern Europe such as the political, scientific or industrial revolutions will acquaint the reader with the life and times of Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and others. Thus the best approach by an historian of philosophy should be thematic study of the major issues and problems philosophers confronted at a particular epoch.

This brings us to the point that the story of philosophy has been told in several ways. Some have engaged the drama of philosophy by focusing on the characters in the play, while others narrated the plot by some selective themes. According to Copleston, the history of philosophy is certainly not a mere congeries of opinions, a narration of isolated items of thought that have no connection with one another. Thus for him, in order to understand Plato we should go and first study Pythagoras, Heraclitus or Parmenides. The opinions of philosophies are not to be treated in isolation. This brings to question whether philosophy is progressive. Following Hegelian triad it will be erroneous to think that the final philosophy of an epoch marks the

climax of the period's development. Rather, Copleston argued, what we have in philosophy is a logical sequence and not a necessary sequence in the strict sense. Thus, the nature of the history of philosophy is a curve line rather than a straight line. But if the history of a philosophy is so curve then how do we make progress?

The nature of philosophy, in Copleston, reflects man's search for Truth by way of discursive reason. His commendable work adopts *philosophia perennis* by which he meant Thomism. He argues that Thomism is not a closed philosophy given that the pilot could swerve it to any direction at any given point in history (Copleston, 1993:7-8). Historians could be sometimes biased since they write from a particular point of view. Though, every story has different sides, the philosopher's interest in its own history is a disinterested one, a pursuit of truth in an objective sense.

The above discourse can be divided into two broad camps, the presentist and the historicist. In this work, the presentists are those arguing against the engagement of philosophy with its history. On the positive side of their claim, they are of the view that to be progressive, philosophers should engage the discipline by engaging in recent arguments and only make use of history only to understand how a particular philosopher addressed that same problem. On the negative side of the claim, they hold that the history of dead philosophers plus their archaic views should make way for a more sublime, accurate and recent discoveries. Historicists are those arguing that philosophy has gone through several stages and these stages should be studied in their own right.

3.0 Why Study the History of Philosophy? Why Not?

Frederick Copleston has responded to some alleged reasons advanced for the presentist position. He argued that if a cultured or educated man is to know a little bit of history say Greece then he should know about Plato and Aristotle and if he is to know about medieval Europe then he should know about St. Augustine etc. Copleston further suggested that some of the works published by these great dead philosophers have intrinsic value in themselves and as such it is not a waste of time to study them. For him contemporary philosophy did not grow out of a vacuum rather it grew out of the past.

Copleston also objected to the claim that “the various philosophical systems of the past are merely antique relics; that the history of philosophy consists of “refuted and spiritually dead systems, since each has killed and buried the other.” (Ibid., 3) Imagine the critique of metaphysics by Kant and Hume. Major systems of philosophy such as Platonism have been challenged, some abandoned and never reconciled. Thus, he asked “why study the antiquated lumber of the chamber of history? His response is that errors are instructive. Philosophies of the past may have been challenged but they have not been refuted. Copleston also argued against the idea that a study of the history of philosophy may tend to induce a skeptical frame of mind, this to him is true but that does not mean that because Aristotle rejected Plato, that Plato's philosophy is erroneous. Why study the knowledge of dead philosophers when: (a) it creates a skeptical frame of mind, for philosophers quarrel, disagree and given the controversies in the discipline such as Heraclitus and Parmenides; or Rationalism and Empiricism (b) it is boring and has been debunked by current studies. Imagine Thales saying everything is water as if everything is drinkable and/or reducible to H₂O! Who will listen to him in 2020! Perhaps, future generations will also look at us as unintelligible and disregard what we spent so much to build. Indeed, when was the golden age of African philosophy or is it still in the making?

The history of philosophy is arguably plagued with critiques and betrayals with each rival party perceiving the other as a traitor. (Gross, Hare and Krogh, 202:4) Maria Rosa Antagnazza in her paper "The Benefit to Philosophy of the Study of its History," advances the view that the history of philosophy is both a kind of history and a kind of philosophy. Through a discussion of some examples from epistemology, metaphysics and the historiography of philosophy, her work explores the benefit to philosophy of a deep and broad engagement with its history. (Antagnazza, 2015:3) Her key point is that a study of the history of philosophy permits us to think outside the box of the current philosophical orthodoxies. What she failed to realize is the extent or limit of our thinking. Could it be just for a century or since time immemorial such that we might even become oblivious of the present realities or in short wherein then does the progress in philosophy lie since we must move away from the current into the past?

If Whitehead was correct then we need not study contemporary philosophers because their view is embedded in Plato's and Aristotle's view. If philosophy is progressive, why is ancient period of philosophy still the golden age of philosophy, other eras might have equal that era in intellectual development but known has surpassed it. For Ryan Nichols in his "Why is the history of Philosophy Worth our Study?" many historians of philosophy have failed because they erroneously thought that the value of the history of philosophy is derivable from the value of doing philosophy. He attempts to find a way of saying that the value of the history of philosophy is independent of the value of the practice of philosophy. (Nichols, 2006:1) He argues that if we assumed that doing philosophy is intrinsically valuable, where doing philosophy for him meant finding philosophical answers of a particular philosopher to propositions then there is need to study the history of philosophy.

A manual for understanding the debate over the study of the history of philosophy is *Ideas in context: Philosophy in History*, edited by Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner. The contributors of this book wrestled with settling the importance of studying the history of philosophy when that history constitutes an autonomous discipline itself. The essays of Rorty, Skinner, Schneewind are very instructive in settling this debate. However, Charles Taylor in his essay "Philosophy and Its History" vehemently stated that one attractiveness of the presentist claim is liberation from the dead weight of past errors and illusions. (Taylor, 1984:1) Perhaps, this may require a certain austere courage, because naturally we have grown comfortable, we have come to feel secure in the prison of the past. However, he argued that the task of the philosopher involves a rediscovery, re-articulation or reformulation which brings to question how much of past idea we have at our disposal. Alasdair Macintyre on his part traced the relationship of philosophy to its past. The dilemma Macintyre tried to resolve is

Either we read the philosophies of the past so as to make them relevant to our contemporary problems and enterprises, transmuting them as far as possible into what they would have been if they were part of present-day philosophy, and minimizing or ignoring or even on occasion misrepresenting that which refuses such transmutation because it is inextricably bound up with that in the past which makes it radically different from present-day philosophy; or instead we take great care to read them in their own terms, carefully preserving their idiosyncratic and specific character, so that they cannot emerge into the present except as a set of museum pieces. (Macintyre, 1984:31)

On his part, he concluded that the achievements of philosophy are in the end to be judged in

terms of the achievements of the history of philosophy. The history of philosophy is on this view that part of philosophy which is sovereign over the rest of the discipline.

Anthony Kenny identified two reasons for reading the history of philosophy. In his words: Some readers do so because they are seeking help and illumination from older thinkers on topics of current philosophical interest. Others are more interested in the people and societies of the distant and recent past and wish to learn about their intellectual climate. (Kenny, 2007:14)

In all, let us ask, is the history of African traditional thought, or philosophy itself a philosophy? Should we study the history of dead thinkers in Africa, such as we have in Claude Sumner's *Ethiopian Philosophy of Man*, *The Egyptian Mystery School*, etc or has Ogotemelli recovered his sight? Why study the history of African philosophy?

4.0 The History of African Philosophy as Philosophy

Although, we may credit Dismaris Masolo's *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* as the first chronological record of African philosophy, the manner and style in which that book was written failed in many respect as we will classify Stumpf's, Copleston's, or Russell's work as history of philosophy. Most authors who paraded their works as history of African philosophy are actually in the long run editors of anthologies.

African philosophy in its academic style could be traced back to the works of Fr. Placid Tempels. Although before him, there were scholars whose thinking and works could fall into the class of African philosophy, however Tempels is remembered for given the discipline its academic formulation in the face of Western epistemic injustice. Historically speaking, African philosophy struggled to be recognized as a discipline or a course in its own soil. From the Hegelian challenged, to Cesaire's rebuttal of French assimilation, and to the Bodija debate one issue stood out, if we are to do African philosophy what will be its style, substance, method, language and of course, history. This could have led the Kenyan born scholar, Oruka to formulate his trends in African philosophy and the life mission of some thinkers such as Sogolo, Masolo, Oguejiofor, Wiredu, Anyanwu, Ramose, Okere, Bodurin etc.

Bearing in mind Hountondji's critique of ethnological method in African philosophy, the idea of censoring the supposed works on African philosophy and settling the question of who is an African philosopher became an insurmountable task and the responses to this question will later project African philosophy in the near future. It also brought about the need to reevaluate what we take to be African philosophy and by extension a verification principle for demarcating between pseudo-philosophy and philosophy in an African context. By implication, fears and doubts were cast on the works of Senghor, Amo, Nyerere, Tempels, Kagame, Graiule, to mention but a few, as part of the history of African philosophy.

Edwin Etieyibo highlighted a number of issues in the context of the history of African philosophy and the progress that has been made following the metaphilosophical debate that began in the in the 1970s. He sought to address the question of whether one's origin as an African places an obligation on one to work in African philosophy? When he answers in the negative, he proceeded to react to the lingering issue of who is an African philosopher? His works also address two areas in which progress can be said to have been made in African philosophy and some areas where African philosophy seems to lag behind. As an aftermath of the great debate, he argued that African philosophy has moved away from metaphilosophical issues such as methods, nature and what African philosophy is. Furthermore, he contended

that African philosophy now engages itself with issues around:

African social political philosophy, consensual democracy, African jurisprudence, notions of personhood, African ethics, applied ethics (particularly environmental ethics and bioethics) and Ubuntu. In fact, some work and research in contemporary African philosophy now focuses on intercultural philosophy, which attempts to bring African philosophy into dialogue and engagement with other philosophical perspectives. (Etieyibo, 2018:25)

This brings to question, in our context here, is whether ancient African philosophy, medieval African philosophy, colonialism, African nationalist ideological etc are worth any value to demand our study today? Although, Etieyibo thinks the movement is a welcome development he also commends the present visibility of African philosophy globally.

Barry Hallen suggest the importance of openness to different methodologies and by extension, different periods or epochs in the history of African philosophy, however, he expresses his desire to see more work in African philosophy done in the mold of Kwasi Wiredu's linguistic analysis approach to philosophy. (Hallen, 2018:36) The journey of African philosophy in its own soil has suffered academic setback. When it eventually kick-started there were many narratives which needed to be upset, epistemic injustice which needed to be corrected. At the wake of day, despite the enviable works of William Abraham, John Mbiti, V.Y. Mudimbe etc which came up as early as 1960s, African philosophy was not taught in many African universities up till 1970s where few departments of philosophy in African universities began to incorporate African philosophy in their courses.

In Masolo's view, African philosophy is nothing but the Western discourse of Africa and the African response to it. (Masolo,^{1995:4}) If this was to be true then it follows that African philosophy dates back to the Western perception of African and the African response. This reactionary spirit was the underlying motivation for the works of Abraham, Mudimbe and Mbiti. Their aim was to react to the Western definition of 'rationality' which they saw as culture-bound. Perhaps, the contributions of Senghor and others in the Francophone world were also motivated by this same reactionary spirit.

After all said and done, Hountondji, Okere, Bodurin, Wiredu, and others now attempted to draw the line between what they called pseudo-African philosophy and authentic African philosophy. Okere, for instance, argued that African philosophy should follow the method of hermeneutic. But, since Senghorian negritude, Tempelsian Vitalism, Graiule's Dogonism and Kagame's Bantology did not follow this methodological stance, do they still qualify to be called African philosophy. Many disciples who felt sympathetic to Okere's method, sought to liberate their master from the apron strings of Okere by arguing that their master's work is indeed hermeneutical. One of such scholar is Obi Oguejiofor in his "Negritude as Hermeneutic." Now, if we took the suggestion of Okere as depicting the authentic nature of African Philosophy, are we still justified in studying Senghorian negritude? Even if this program has its own intrinsic value, are we to study the policy of assimilation, slavery and colonialism which the world as since discredited? Does the study of negritude have any heuristic value? Is the value worth its study?

Some cases in hand, are the controversies that are bound to happen in philosophy, as we have in Heraclitus and Parmenides debate over the notion of change and permanence. We also have among others the disagreement between Kwasi Wiredu and J.T. Beddu-Addo over the Akan concept of truth. The former had argued from the linguistic evidence of the Akan that truth reduces to a mere opinion and that 'nokware' which is the closest in terms of terminology, has a

moral undertone. However, Bedu-Addo argues that the Akan has a word for truth which he calls “nokwaredi.” Although, Sogolo has carefully noted that if these two scholars were discussing Akan concept of truth in language to an Akan audience, they would not have been face with the semantic task of the debate even though they might still disagree on the Akan epistemic claims. Now, which of these two theories as a matter of history are we to study as the Akan concept of truth? Or are we to follow the submission of Masolo about the openness to different methodologies and approaches to doing philosophy. Masolo want African scholars to follow in this type of sustained debate between Bedu-Addo and Wiredu. This type of engagement, he believe, will help in the development of “a tradition of philosophy” in Africa. Wiredu's linguistic analysis in African philosophy can be likened to the direction which the members of the Vienna Circle brought into philosophy. After their meeting, every aspect of philosophy was called into question, metaphysics, ethics, political philosophy, etc. one salient issue was that to be a logical positivist was also to reject that part of metaphysics which conflicted with contemporary science. Indeed, why study dead metaphysicians whose theory has been debunked or discredited? If Wiredu's method of doing African philosophy is plausible then why study those aspects of African philosophy which suspicion has already been cast on. Why study Tempel's vitalism when we are now aware of Tempel's intention and imposition of Belgian vitalism on Africans. This period of African philosophy should adopt a method and if this is done, it will help develop the state of African philosophy in Africa. Etieyibo and Chimakonam has studied the ways contemporary African philosophy is done, their suggestion is that:

Our study reveals that while a good number of universities that have philosophy programs offer courses in African philosophy or integrated African philosophy content with courses in Western philosophy, there is still a wide gap to be filled with regard to the development of African philosophy as a discipline. For example, we discovered that there are still a good number of universities that do not offer courses in African philosophy. (Etieyibo and Chimakonam, 2018:71)

one of such gap is due to not taken the history of African philosophy seriously. The history of African philosophy could constitute a philosophy. As regard Western philosophy, many departments of philosophy in African universities study; ancient Western Philosophy; medieval thinkers and modern scholars. But, if these courses are worth studying then the history of African philosophy is worth much more. Masolo reminds us that philosophy and the study of Africa does not start with commentaries on Tempel's. (Masolo, 2018:56)

5.0 Conclusion

Philosophy has been progressive in analysis, the progress in philosophy defers from the progress in science, for it does not provide new information rather, it presents to us the gift of understanding and hermeneutics. For a proper or adequate study of the history of African philosophy, there is need for an understanding of the historical context or cultural background which birthed such a system. There is also need for the historian to be sympathetic with the life story of the philosopher. Copleston would say the historian should know the philosopher as a man if possible. This is so because African philosophy and the history of African philosophy are one. And as such to disengage African philosophy from its history is to disregard the great genius which the discipline has made and their sacrifices.

We should not disengage African philosophy from its history. The history of African philosophy may have contributed to the present focus of the discipline as it is today. Hence, if

we distance African philosophy from its history, one may lack the value of where we are and how we got here. African philosophy has gone through several methods, surrealism, ethnology, hermeneutics, sagacity, complementarity, conversationalism, eclecticism, linguistic analysis but this is not to suggest methodological anarchism rather it is the power of the human mind. They all have their intrinsic value.

The history of African philosophy constitutes a philosophy in its own right and should be studied both thematically and chronologically. The thematic aspect of African philosophy will make room for understanding the key issues or themes such as personhood, time, that African philosophers have engaged themselves since time immemorial. Barry Hallen's *A Short History of African Philosophy* is a work in point, while the chronological study of the history of African philosophy will be able to appreciate the valuable contributions and advances which its forerunners have made.

Endnotes

¹ F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1: Greece and Rome, (London: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 7-8

² *Ibid.*, p. 3

³ A. Gross, M. Hare and M. L. Krogh (ed.) *Critique and Betrayal: Essays from the Radical Philosophy Archive*, (Exeter: Short Run Press Ltd, 2020) p. 4

⁴ M. R. Antognazza, "The Benefit to Philosophy of the Study of its History" in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 23, 2015, p. 3

⁵ R. Nichols, "Why is the history of philosophy worth our study?" in *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2006 p. 1

⁶ C. Taylor, "Philosophy and its history" in Richard Rorty, et al (eds.) *Ideas in Context: Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) p. 1

⁷ A. Macintyre, "The relationship of philosophy To its past" in Richard Rorty, et al (eds.) *Ideas in Context: Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) p. 31

⁸ A. Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007) p. 14

⁹ E. E. Etieyibo, "African Philosophy in History, Context, and Contemporary Times," in E. E. Etieyibo, (ed.) *Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy*, (Gwerbestrasse: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p. 25

¹⁰ B. Hallen, "The Journey of African Philosophy," in E. E. Etieyibo, (ed.) *Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy*, (Gwerbestrasse: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p. 36

¹¹ D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1995)

¹² E. E. Etieyibo and J. Chimakonam, "The State of African Philosophy in Africa" in E. E. Etieyibo, (ed.) *Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy*, (Gwerbestrasse: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p. 71

¹³ D.A Masolo, "History of Philosophy as a Problem: Our Case," in E. E. Etieyibo, (ed.) *Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy*, (Gwerbestrasse: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p. 56

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