

CAN PHILOSOPHY SAVE AFRICA?

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Abstract

Africa in contemporary times has become the sick child of the world; the prisoner, victim, and captive of the prevailing world order. Expectedly therefore, African scholarship, particularly in the humanities, has consisted, in the main, in liberation efforts and struggles. The relevance of each discipline and scholar has thereby become measurable by the extent of its correlation with the liberation struggle indices. Philosophy, whose very nature predisposes it to evaluation and self-evaluation, has had more cause than any other discipline to visit and revisit this question of relevance to the liberation struggle mandate. One of the recurring questions of relevance is the contribution of philosophy to the salvation or development of Africa. In this paper, we return to this inquiry with an analytic method and disposition to query the what and the how of the claims of African philosophy and philosophers to proffer viable solutions to the predicament of Africa. The paper concludes that philosophy can save Africa, but such a philosophy must be a transvalued philosophy which combines profound and critical thinking with profound humanity.

Keywords: Africa, African Philosophy, liberation struggles, African predicament, critical thinking, profound humanity

Introduction

The interrogative title: 'Can philosophy save Africa?' is posed on a number of presuppositions and/or implications. It presupposes or implies, for instance, that Africa is in need of "salvation." It does not obliterate the obvious difference between some parts of Africa and others. It does not, for instance, mean that all the countries of Africa are in the same state of political, economic and social development or underdevelopment. It only refers to the situation that comparatively Africa as a continent remains one of the worst regions of the world in many indices of human development. Again, the word salvation is not to be taken in the religious sense. In most religions, human beings generally need salvation understood as the intervention of the supernatural world for the well-being or ultimate liberation from the inherent perdition of the present existence. We are not therefore talking of any paradisaic situation in which all problems would be obliterated and all discontent would cease to exist or be

turned into eternal bliss. By philosophy saving Africa, we are simply inquiring about whether philosophy can have significant role in improving the obvious dysfunctionality of the current African society. It questions whether a turn to philosophy can be the magic wand in improving the current developmental backwardness of Africa.

The same issue is very often couched in the quest for development. The question of whether and how philosophy can aid in African development is arguably one of the most persistent questions in contemporary African philosophy.¹ It appears that in the context of economic and socio-political underdevelopment anyone whose main preoccupation is philosophy somehow needs to justify the importance of his discipline vis-a-vis the most pressing problems of the continent. Needless to say, most of the answers provided for the question are positive about the possibilities inherent in philosophy as a tool for development even though the specific manner in which this can be done may appear to be an object of dispute.² This is not to neglect the lone, and awkward view pushed by Stephen Theron that what is important is not what philosophy can do for African but what Africa can do for philosophy.³

The interest of philosophy in development should be seen more as a necessary contextualization. It is remarkable that notwithstanding the heavy colonial influence on the programmes of philosophy in the continent, contemporary African philosophy has been heavily concerned about the socio-economic and political problems of the continent. In this respect, what is generally regarded as underdevelopment in Africa takes the place of Theophilus Okere's non-philosophy in the process of hermeneutics.⁴ It

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1. Adesina Afolayan, *Philosophy and National Development in Nigeria: Towards a Traditional Nigerian Philosophy*, Routledge, London, 2020; Lansana Keita (ed.), *Philosophy and African Development: Theory and Practice*, Codesria, Dakar, 2011; Purissima Egbekpalu, "Philosophy and Human Development: Nigerian Context," *UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Philosophy*, 18 (2017); J. Obi Oguejiofor, "Philosophy of Development or Development of Philosophy?: A Dilemma in Contemporary African Philosophy," *UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 10 (2010); Anthony Kanu et al (ed.), *Dialogue on African Philosophy and Development*, The Association for the Promotion of African Studies, 2022; Felix Ehimare Enegho, "Philosophy as a Tool for Sustainable Development in Nigeria," *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 14 (2012); David A. Oyedola, "The Contribution of Philosophy to Africa's Development," *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 8 (2016); S. A. Ekanem, "African Philosophy and Development: A Contemporary Perspective," *Sophia: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 9 (2006). There are other themes that are narrowly related to the issue of development. See for instance G. Walmsley, *African Philosophy and the Future of Africa*, The Council for Research in Value and Philosophy, Washington, 2011; Gerald Wanjohi, *Philosophy and Liberation of Africa*, Nairobi, 2017.
 2. J. Obi Oguejiofor, *Philosophy and African Predicament*, Hope Publications, Ibadan, 2001 134-148..
 3. Stephen Theron, *Africa, Philosophy and Western Tradition: An Essay in Self-understanding*, 1995.
 4. Theophilus Okere, *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of its Possibility*, University Press of America, Lanhan, 1983, pp. 81 - 109

means that African thinkers are reacting to their context and that one of the important products of this reaction is their ideas on philosophy and development, which in our view is only another version of the question can philosophy save Africa?

Which philosophy? What philosophy?

The first step towards an answer to this question is itself another question: Which philosophy? Or what philosophy? If we seek to pose philosophy as a possible instrument of salvation for Africa, it is necessary that we first seek an understanding of philosophy. It would certainly be incorrect to assume here that philosophy is one whole and uniform undertaking for the very concept of philosophy has, in itself, been one of the most contentious issues in philosophy. Philosophy better understood is inherently influenced by its place of birth, and thus cannot but be differentiated in accordance with its context of naissance. That is indeed the import of hermeneutics, which, far from being merely a method out of several others in philosophy is in fact philosophy itself.⁵ Nevertheless philosophy is defined in so many ways which very often appear irreconcilable. Theophilus Okere's statement that there is "a hardcore of content, approach, and atmosphere, however broad and vague this may be, which unites all of them and stamps them as genuine moments in the project of philosophy,"⁶ may have some modicum of credibility, but philosophers have also arisen and outlined philosophy in defence of nefarious systems such as Nazism and failed ones like communism.

Still philosophy is defined as *explicatio rerum per ultimam causam*, a conception of philosophy that can also stand for the definition of metaphysics. It points to the ultimacy of philosophy in general even though not all we call philosophy can lay claim to this ultimacy. Philosophy is also defined by McManus as "the rational investigation of the truths and principles of being, knowledge and conduct." This definition is commendable since it takes care of some key branches of philosophy including ontology, ethics and epistemology. But it avoids the ultimacy of the *explicatio* and rests content with rational investigation. Of course, it is still very debatable whether the merely rational bespeaks of philosophy, and whether all philosophies can be adjudged as rational. Such possible issues only point to the difficulty inherent in any pretended unanimity in the understanding of what philosophy is.

However, these definitions are clear about one fact! Philosophy is not an engagement that aims at the production of concrete material things. And while some philosophers may have produced impressive systems of thought or actions, it must be argued that system-building is not the domain of pride of philosophy. And one reason for this,

⁵. Okere, *African Philosophy*, p. 15 .

⁶. Okere, *African Philosophy* p. 10.

which will be discussed further in subsequent sections of this paper, is the limiting imprint of the times and contexts of their production on the systems of philosophy. Essentially therefore, philosophy is not so named for its ability to lead to political, social and economic systems. Philosophy really finds its niche in raising questions and discussions which in themselves are very useful keys to the meaning of reality as such. If we take the history of Western philosophy as example, it is noticeable that the numerous disciplines that emanated from philosophy were able to do so when their fields of research started to give a modicum of concrete results. The agreement today about the benefits of democracy as a system of government was not possible when political science was just a branch of the discipline of philosophy.

Further on political philosophy and systems of government, it is remarkable that both Plato and Aristotle his student designated monarchy as the best form of government. Thomas Aquinas did exactly the same in medieval times. Today, it will be difficult to argue that such a system, even with lengthy qualifications, can be adjudged among the desirable systems of political governance. What is today generally taken as the best form of government is far from monarchy. And democracy which was described by the two great Greek thinkers as the ruler-ship of the ignorant mob is today regarded as the most desirable system of governance. While it may not be far-fetched to see that link between the operative systems of governance in their ambience and what they took to be the best, it still remains a pointer to the fact that each thinker is very fundamentally influenced by the world in which he lives. Philosophy is in fact the outcrop of the interpretative process on this world, mediated by the individual whose background and influence create a fulcrum that certainly influence the result of the interpretation. Following history, it is questionable that the best philosophers have been those loaded with systems or thought of actions they produced through their philosophizing.

It is now appropriate to raise the second question the answer to which we have broached in the above paragraph if only tangentially. Let us therefore ask again what philosophy has produced elsewhere especially in some climes where it has been given pride of place. The question is whether philosophy has really saved other people before we can expect it to save Africa?

The role of philosophy in intellectual and human development through history remains undoubted. Today one thinks of philosophy as a discipline that is at the periphery of so many other disciplines that are at the centre of human learning. However apart from the learned disciplines of theology, medicine and law, philosophy was at the centre of the evolution of most of other independent disciplines. While it was not really separated from the arts at the origin of the universities, with the rediscovery of ancient Greek philosophy and the translation of its numerous works, philosophy effectively supplanted the other liberal arts with which it formed the programme of obligatory first

year of university studies. It was at this point regarded as the compendium of human knowledge apart from the learned disciplines. It thus nurtured the growth of so many academic disciplines including the natural sciences. Philosophy, in its history, is therefore the place of birth of so many human and natural sciences, and it is not out of place to think that it can also provide the bedrock of similar growth in African political and social life.

Context, contributions and weaknesses of philosophy

Further, the growth of systems or theories that were of immense influence in the evolution of thought can also not be overlooked. Today democracy is taken as the best form of government, but the development of thought that led to its entrenchment owes a lot to philosophical thinking. A simple example can be the contractual theories of many philosophers where social relationship is taken as a hypothetical contract between the members of the civil society. Thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Rawls provided the foundation in which equality of the citizens which is a direct affirmation of certain rights played enviable roles in the growth of democracy. They all affirm that the legitimacy of political authority is owed to a hypothetical contract between the electorate and those they elect to govern them. Even though contractual theories are based on thought experiments, their affirmation as the basis of political authority is a long way from ancient and medieval thinkers for whom hereditary monarchy was the best form of government.

There are many other areas where philosophy has had immense contributions to the positive development of the society. However there has also been immense failures that should preclude foisting philosophy as infallible. Let us briefly examine the question of humanity by going to ancient Greek philosophy where Aristotle himself clearly posits in his *Politics* that slavery is natural to some human beings. According to Kevin Cherry, "Modern readers of Aristotle's *Politics* cannot help being struck by his defence, however qualified, of a certain kind of slavery."⁷ But this is not merely accidental slavery. He seeks the help of his philosophy to defend the practice, and pins it on the very nature of slaves. "Aristotle holds that there exist natural slaves, human beings so lacking in deliberative capacity that they ought to be ruled by those who have capacity."⁸ Richard Mulgan explains Aristotle's view by reference to the prevailing values of his society and the failure of the philosopher to be consistent with his doctrines. For Mulgan, the Stagirite simply adopts "the values of his own society" and is therefore "convinced from the beginning that there are natural slaves ... His arguments are therefore

⁷. Kevin M. Cherry, "Does Aristotle Believe Greeks Should Rule Barbarians," *History of Political Thought*, 35 (2014), p. 632.

⁸. Cherry, p. 632.

unsurprisingly particularly inconsistent and unconvincing.”⁹

Other writers have also severely criticised this view of Aristotle. Malcolm Schofield described it as unthinking and as “a nasty case of false consciousness.”¹⁰ While Sakhri Mohamed added that “Aristotle assumed the superiority of the Greeks over other people.”¹¹ However, there are other writers who come in defence of Aristotle. Mulgan describes the political consequences of Aristotle's support of slavery as “ambiguous,” while Lockwood rejects the view that he regarded Greeks as superior to other people: “Aristotle neither categorically distinguishes Greeks and non-Greeks nor does he endorse the claim that Greeks are categorically superior to non-Greeks.”¹²

It is pertinent to look back on the possible influence on Aristotle that probably blurred his vision, and the force of his intellect. The context of a philosopher's work unavoidably impacts on his thought. The direction of this impact cannot be traced in advance but can only be determined by careful analysis of his output. It is the hermeneutical dialectic of non-philosophy to philosophy and back to non-philosophy. With reference to Aristotle, Sakhri Mohamed talked of “certain limitations of thought caused by Greek conditions.”¹³ Mulgan lightly accuses him of adopting “the values of his own society,”¹⁴ while for Kraut, “Aristotle's investigation into slavery is intended to justify the tens of thousand (of slaves) in Attica.”¹⁵ It therefore goes without saying that philosophers do not necessarily operate above the ethos of their particular societies. All very often they, like other citizens, become unwitting participants in the negative thoughts and actions of their society.

Further examples can be drawn from the Enlightenment project. In the history of thought, this project has been praised for its ingenuity in upholding reason in place of authority and tradition. But again, what is their philosophic record when we turn to the issue of the humanity of the human? It is very remarkable that almost all of them, like Aristotle, followed the dominant trend of their epoch. Specifically on the humanity of the negro or black, all of them were guilty of unthinking racism; upholding the superiority of the white while denigrating the humanity of the negro just on the basis of colour.¹⁶ This judgement is solely based on the colour of the skin, and for John Locke and thinkers of his time, it is the skin colour that determines rationality. Voltaire (Francois-Marie Arouet) said of negros: “They are not capable of any great application on

⁹. Richard Mulgan, *Aristotle's Political Theory*, New York, 1977, p. 40.

¹⁰. Malcolm Schofield, “Ideology and Philosophy in Aristotle's Theory of Slavery,” in *Aristoteles Politik* (ed.), Gunter Patzig, Goettingen, 1990, p. 21

¹¹. Sakhri Mohamed, “Aristotle and the Decline of Greece,” 2021.

¹². T. Lockwood, “Aristotle's Politics on Greeks and non-Greeks,” *Review of Politics*, 2021 (Abstract).

¹³. Mohamed, “Aristotle and the Decline of Greece,” 2021.

¹⁴. Mulgan, p. 44.

¹⁵. Richard Kraut, *Aristotle Political Theory*, New York, 2002, p. 282.

association of ideas ...” And for Charles de Montesquieu based mainly on physical features negroes are not humans.¹⁷ Again, like Aristotle, these men of reason were not able to set any principles of human reason for classifying the African as inferior save the colour of the skin. They were not able to rise above the prevailing opinions of their age and society. That was the age of slavery when virtually all European nations, companies and institutions depended on slave labour for survival, business and profit. That an age distinguished in the annals of human history for intellectual prowess would fall so low on the matter of humanity tells of the power of social context over the claims of philosophic abstraction.

Karl Marx theorized on conflict between the bourgeois class and the proletariat, between owners of the means of production and the workers' class. For him there is an inevitable conflict between the two classes, and because the bourgeois class keeps on reducing, over time the victory will surely be that of the proletariat. This will install the dictatorship of the proletariat and create a situation where each one produces according to this ability, but earns according to his needs. This highfaluting theory gave rise to the communist revolution in so many countries, but ended up collapsing like a house of cards. The collapse is due mainly to the internal contradictions of Karl Marx's theory especially for not taking adequate account of what we would like to call human nature. Joseph Schumpeter¹⁸ points out that contrary to the projections of Karl Marx, the human being inherently does not simply aim to drag down and defeat the wealth owners of the society. What they really want is to become part of the wealthy class of the society. The class war between the haves and the have nots is therefore intended to make the proletariat co-owners of the wealth of the society. It means that fundamentally Karl Marx worked with a false conception of human nature and its fundamental tendencies in outlining his thought. Further to the false conception of human nature, there was the fundamental problematic foundation of materialism upon which Marx built his socialist system to sustain the claim to scientism. This materialist foundation justified the projection of the human as a being that could be studied and engineered like the objects of study of the natural sciences. In such context, human freedom was, in theory, emasculated in the procrustean bed of scientific categories and, in practice, in the iron cast policies of the communist state. The dramatic collapse of the various communist enclaves in a tsunami of revolutions and defections owe part of their cause to the bursting forth of human freedom from these theoretical and practical shackles.

In more contemporary times, a thinker of the stature of Bertrand Russell was

^{16.} Oguejiofor, *Philosophy and the African Predicament*, 2001, pp. 69 - 88

^{17.} Charles de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, Britannica Great Books, vol. 4, William Benton, Chicago, 1952, p. 110

^{18.} Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1942.

enunciating what he calls the principles of social reconstruction after the World War II. For Russell, among other avenues for peace in the world, Germany as a great nation has *right* to colonies.¹⁹ He failed to give adequate reason why Germany should own colonies, and also failed to inquire whether those who would be given to Germany as colonies deserve their independence or not. What is important to note is that it was the era of colonialism and like Aristotle and the men of the Enlightenment Russell was unthinkingly aping the prevalent conceptions of international relations without any critical evaluation of his opinion. His concept of human nature and human person did not seem to include the peoples over whom Germany should have right of colonization. His concept of the geography of the human could not stretch farther than the European or western horizon.

The implication of the above is that even though philosophy or to be more precise, Western philosophy made valuable contributions to human development, it has also its dark sides. Philosophers are not after all the pure or immaculate people you read about in the histories of Western philosophy. It is interesting though that that history still constitutes up to 90% of what is read in most departments of philosophy in Africa, and it is read in such a manner that students are unaware of the tainted history that they are reading. It means that academic philosophy in Africa is still following a tradition that is replete with inhumanity especially with reference to the African and their condition. Can such a philosophy save Africa?

What contributions? What lessons?

The so many negative elements of the giants of Western philosophy should not elicit total rejection. What is more beneficial is that African philosophy should be more discriminatory in its imitation of Western philosophy, and should also be more careful in its enunciation or recommendation of theories. There are quite a few theories in Western philosophy that can still be very useful for African development. One example is virtue ethics which is highly developed by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

Virtue is disposition, it is acquired by constant practice. It is described as the mean between excess and defect. The focus of virtue is that the human being in action is a product of habit, and the more that habit is inculcated by repetition, the more is the tendency to opt for the virtuous in one's actions. G. J. Warnock reflects on how virtue is very important in the human society.²⁰ For him, it is not possible to enforce the laws of any society by law enforcement agents alone. To do so would require as many enforcing agents as there are human beings in the society. It is therefore necessary that the society possesses people who are inclined to do the right things in the society, not because of the

¹⁹. Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, Allen and Unwin, 1916, p. 61.

²⁰. G. J. Warnock, *The Object of Morality*, Methuen, London, 1971.

law or its enforcement but simply because such actions are good.

There is currently a level of derailment in the public life of many African societies that such virtues are of great importance to reverse the trend of decadence. It is for instance often taken for granted at so many levels of public life in African societies that corruption is coterminous with service in public life. It means that it is understood that someone who attains a high position is both expected to help himself with the teal of public wealth, and also to help his “brothers and sisters” wherever such help is possible irrespective of whether it is morality right or wrong.²¹ While incidents of corruption are present in all the societies or countries of the world, it is also true that to a certain level, it makes the society very dysfunctional and almost impossible to experience ongoing socio-economic development. This is a clear example of how virtue is very necessary in public life in many African societies. Our point is that philosophically such positive theory should not be denigrated because it is well developed in Western philosophy.

Still given the history of Western philosophy, it is our view that there needs to be a transvaluation of philosophy. What African philosophy needs to do is to aim to develop in such a way that it does not fall into the pitfalls of the history of Western philosophy. To be useful in solving the numerous problems of Africa, philosophy must have a different focus. Such a philosophy must find a way to combine thinking rationally, clearly, precisely and imaginatively with a good dose of African communal philosophy. Merging philosophic and critical thinking with the humanity of African communalist philosophy will enable a transvalued philosophy in Africa to avoid the historic errors of Western philosophy and also provide improvement for African humanity.

Conclusion: Which philosophy can save Africa?

Our conviction is that if philosophy can save Africa, it must be a philosophy that is imbued with a good dose of Ubuntu as its foundation. “Ubuntu literary means being a person ... with Ubuntu it is not enough to simply be a rational thinking being.”²² With Ubuntu the scale of value is raised so high that the impact of every act on humanity of both the acting agent and his/her community members becomes the standard of goodness. It is a type of philosophy that does not take the human person as a given, one is challenged to become human on the basis of one's relationship with humanity. It also does not take the philosopher as a given. Under Ubuntu a thinker who denigrates the humanity of others would be disqualified as a true philosopher; and the same would be one who engages in negative nationalistic jingoism and thus grades humanity barely in terms of one's origin or other accidental badges.

In this regard, it is important to avoid a type of philosophy that applies partial criteria in

^{21.} Oguejiofor, *Philosophy and the African Predicament*, 2001, pp. 69 - 88

^{22.} Sabelo Mhlambi, (Interview), “Can an Ancient African Philosophy Save us From AI Bias,” *BU Today*, February 11, 2021.

its evaluation. That is why some major philosophers of the West failed in their appreciation of humanity while at the same time being enthroned as paragons of the philosophic engagement. Another tendency is to take a particular genre as the sole source of philosophic reflection. An instance is Gerald Wanjohi's book *Philosophy and Liberation of Africa*.²³ He gives special privileges to proverbs as the terrain of his interpretative engagement. For him proverbs are the seeds from which African people "found answers to the philosophical questions of "who are we?" (as a people), and "who am I?" (as an individual)."²⁴ The outcome of such an engagement can only emerge from the process of hermeneutics. However, it is ultimately the result of such reflection that can stand up and be evaluated as regards their importance in solving the numerous problems of the African society. If for instance the question of who are we as a people does not help in seeing ourselves as members of the same community with concomitant rights and privileges; if it does not whittle down the problem of ethnicity that remains an albatross to the progress of African societies, then it fails the test of Ubuntu and that of usefulness in saving Africa.

A philosophy that is just rational, critical and scientific is not enough to aid in the development of Africa. It must have very special emphasis on humanity and its numerous challenges. Ubuntu is an overarching principle that could obviate the historical failures of philosophy or philosophers and thus constitute a real force in the improvement of the African condition. It emphasizes harmonious relationship, and "it is through harmonious relationship with others that we become people; through meaningful relationship with nature, community and society that we enrich our own humanity."²⁵

Our answer to the question whether philosophy can save Africa is therefore positive with a big caveat. A philosophy that can make such contribution must learn from the failure of other philosophies especially Western philosophy. It must be a transvalued philosophy which combines profound and critical thinking with profound humanity of the type mediated by Ubuntu. It is only so that it can make lasting contributions to the amelioration of the problems of the African society.

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²³. Wanjohi, G. J.. "Under one roof : Gikuyu proverbs consolidated." (2001).

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²⁵. Mhlambi, Ancient African Philosophy, 2021.

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