

EPISTEMIC CONTEXTS AND PHILOSOPHIZING

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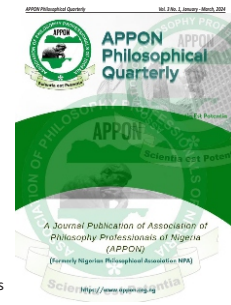
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Abstract

Two incompatible tendencies persist in philosophy. The first is the tendency to undermine emerging philosophical traditions, with the sole aim of restricting them to the margins of the philosophical debate. The other is the tendency to embrace minor philosophical traditions. Both tendencies are well represented in philosophy and were on display at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy (1998). Organized around the broader theme of *Paidia: Philosophy Educating Humanity*, the congress organizers aimed for inclusivity by accommodating hitherto unrecognized philosophical traditions. This proposal was well received by one school of interpretation, and only cautiously received by another. The former school of thought's favourable disposition was quickened by the consideration that although the major philosophers have been influential none of them exhausted the philosophical discussion. Following from this, it advised openness to alternative approaches to philosophy. The latter, however, distinguished between philosophy and non-philosophy, contending that since the non-philosophical traditions do not take reason as the initial ground of their philosophical inquiry, they are merely advocacy paradigms, failing the philosophical test. The author identifies and reviews a selected available literature in order to determine where to locate his analysis. The present discussion will come down on the side of the former school of thought rather than the latter, and contends that theories grow out of contexts, even as they may not be reduced to their contexts. Obviously, it is the wish of every theory to attain certainty while seeking to eliminate error; however, this objective cannot be met in practice. Viewed against this background, theories could be shown to be products of their time and space, and, therefore, historically situated. Understood as such, the distinction between philosophy and non-philosophy should not arise, even as some theories enjoy notoriety over others. To be sure, theories enjoy notoriety over others not because they are necessarily normative but because they are part of the familiar or dominant discourse. In this way, therefore, the discussion acquires also elements of power and domination.

Keywords: Philosophy, epistemic contexts, normativity, the given and perspectivism.

Introduction

There are tendencies to undermine certain philosophical traditions and their authors. Andrea Nye observes that these tendencies are old in philosophy and date back at least since Plato, and derives them from philosophy's attempt at "self-definition," and "self-renewal." Self-definition attempts may be genuine or sinister; genuine if they constitute philosophy's conversation with itself for the purpose of self-improvement. They may also be sinister if they are utilized to demean certain traditions within philosophy in order to restrict them to the margins of the discipline as Nye observes. It is the attempt to disparage other traditions that is the scope of the present inquiry, especially the proposal of the World Congress of philosophy to reverse this state of affairs and the reaction it generated.

Organized around the broader theme of *Paidia: Philosophy educating Humanity* the twentieth World Congress of Philosophy hosted by Boston University (1998) aimed to be all-inclusive by seeking to foster symbiotic exchanges among the various philosophical traditions:

Not only were the most important representatives of the various major and minor Western schools of philosophy present, but distinguished leaders of thought from south and east Asian cultures were heard, as were the philosophers of the Islamic world, of the African, and of traditional cultures such as the Native American and Oceanic.¹

It was the hope of the organizers that from there going forward, no one would undermine other philosophical traditions as

inferior or non-philosophy². This proposal was well-received by some and only cautiously received by others. One school of thought argued that philosophy is enriched by the various traditions, pointing out that as great as the greater philosophers and their system have been, none of them single headedly brought the philosophical enterprise to an end.³ Consequently, it encouraged openness to alternative systems, including the ones one with which we may be uncomfortable. Another school of interpretation, however, was suspicious of the proposal, insisting that any tradition worthy of its name must take reason as its initial ground of philosophical inquiry.⁴

The author comes down on the side of the former school of interpretation in this conversation, and defends the position that theories are products of their time and space. And that understood as such, they are historically situated, even as they may not be reduced to their contexts. The essay shall proceed in the following manner. Section one explores the philosophy/non-philosophy distinction. Section two takes up the issue of the disinterestedness of reason as the initial ground of philosophy argument. Section three explores Fred Evans notion of society as a multivoiced body as the way forward for philosophy, and then rounds up the discussion. Understandably, Evans is huge on justice issues.

Framing the Debate

Consistent with the ideal of the twentieth World congress of Philosophy, one school of thought argued against tendencies to discriminate against others paradigms by

¹ Jaakko Hintikka, *et al*, "Series Introduction." *Modern Philosophy* 7. In The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy. Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Centre, (2000), ix-x.

² Jaakko Hintikka, *et al* "Series Introduction", x.

³ See Peter F. Strawson, "What have we Learned from Philosophy in the Twentieth Century?" Daniel Dalhstrom, ed., *Contemporary Philosophy* 8. The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy. Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Centre, (2000), 269-274.

⁴ John R. Siper, "Paidia: Philosophy educating Humanity" Daniel Dalhstrom, ed., *Contemporary Philosophy* 8. In The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy. Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Centre, (2000), 89.

advising caution. He remarks:

One was the mistake of supposing that only what has been published in the last two or three decades is worth serious attention; the other was the mistake of supposing that any one philosopher, however great, has a valid and exclusive claim have got things finally right on some substantial matter. And that goes on, I now add, equally for Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hegel, Frege, and Wittgenstein-or anyone else you may feel inclined to add.⁵

Two things must be borne in mind. The first is what the author describes as the politics of publishing. The thought has been widespread, erroneously though, that newer insights in philosophy necessarily surpass previous ones. This idea is illustrated by one professor's ridicule of an academic journal owing to what he considered the obsolescence of the sources utilized by the contributors – the most recent source was thirty (30) years old. While newer insights avail scholarship the facility of current trends in a field, they may not necessarily by an advance upon their predecessors. For example, Norman Kemp Smith's commentary on *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* is one of the earlier ones, published in 1918; yet it remains one of the more influential commentaries on Kant.

The second rehearses a well-known thesis within philosophy: no one philosopher or tradition, no matter how influential exhausts the philosophical conversation. Paul Weiss is even more direct and emphatic in advising openness to alternative traditions. He writes: "I would strongly advise students of Philosophy to read major writers with sympathy, especially ones that their teachers disown or

neglect, and then pursue the issue with unrelenting thoroughness".⁶

According to Weiss, due to the fact that philosophy remains an un-deciphered field, we may be well advised being open to alternative standpoints.

Another school of thought, however, was only cautiously open to the idea. This attitude finds expression in the thought of John Silber. Silber distinguishes between what he considers philosophy and non-philosophy. For him, any philosophical tradition worthy of the name must be secured on the initial ground of reason, otherwise it remains a movement. With this distinction in mind, Silber launches attacks on the so-called non-philosophical traditions, describing them dubious projects, further accusing them of complicating philosophy's attempt to attain certainty.⁷ By formulating the debate in either/or terms, Silber is able to define contrasting philosophical traditions as "other," in the process providing justification for discriminating against them. Furthermore, Silber could be read as suggesting that there is a mind-independent reality that could under the right circumstance be grasped in its objective existence beyond experience. Still similarly, he could be read as suggesting that any philosophical theory worthy of its name must have the capability of transitioning us from "here" to "there." It is the author's opinion that experience will continue to challenge our way of understanding our cognitive relationship with nature, and that experience will always call for new ways of responding to those challenges.

Silber launches similar attacks on traditions he judges guilty of catering to parochial cosmologies, including but not limited postmodernism, perspectivism, feminist philosophy, and cultural

⁵ Peter F. Strawson. "What have we learned from Philosophy in the Twentieth Century?" 270.

⁶ Paul Weiss, "Philosophy as an Adventure: Reflections on the Twentieth Century." In Daniel Dalhstrom ed., *Contemporary Philosophy* 8. The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy. Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Centre (2000), 266.

⁷ John R. Silber, "Paidia: Philosophy educating Humanity," 87.

philosophy. He remarks:

Similar objections to those I have raised regarding the feminist perspective can be raised when a member of a minority claims that no one outside his or her race or ethnic group can understand the nature or burdens of that group or its hopes, fears, and dreams. The claim that only women can understand women is echoed in the claim that only members of a race can understand other members.⁸

med with his reason alone, Silber can claim to possess all that he needs to do philosophy and that he does not need to be a woman or a member of a minority grouping in order to connect with or understand their issues.

It is for similar or relational concerns that Cambridge University community protested the honouring of Jacques Derrida, a postmodernist thinker in 1992. The protest was quickened by the fact that Derrida was not a philosopher. Cambridge University is home of analytic philosophy. Derrida is a postmodern thinker who does not postulate Archimedean principles in philosophy, in terms of foundations or structures. Other philosophers that belong to the canon of postmodernist philosophers include Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty. For the most part, a postmodernist philosopher is likely to embody certain characteristics, including but not limited to privileging subjectivity over objectivity, preferring personal God to organized religion, respecting the environment, promoting the cause of justice, and so forth.

Silber and Strawson adhere to analytic philosophy, and yet approach things differently. Analytic philosophy is understood as a philosophical tradition that “places its greatest emphasis upon the study

of language and its complexities”.⁹ It is an influential tradition within the wider Western philosophical tradition, which was originated partially as a reaction against German idealism, the notion that the subject must in a way contribute to the object it cognizes. Broadly speaking, the Western philosophical tradition reached its watershed moment in Plato and Aristotle who revolutionized philosophy quite considerably by the quality of debate they were able to generate. As well, they established Western philosophy as the dominant tradition, in terms of setting the stage, the agenda, and developing the concepts philosophy would engage for a long time. The continuing influence of Plato and Aristotle could be detected in the thought of Descartes, Hume, Kant, Hegel and others, whose intervention in the debate has gone a long way to sustain that dominance. The dominance of Western philosophical tradition partially explains why Silber thinks it the philosophical tradition par excellence. But the tendency to demean certain philosophical is older than Silber. Nye observes:

It was with similar reservations that Aristotelians at Medieval universities discouraged their colleagues from discussing the work of the upstart Descartes, German academics ignored the Vienna circle's logical positivism, and at the present moment, some analytic philosophers discard feminist and multicultural thought as mere “politics.” Far from illustrating clear-cut disciplinary division between what is not philosophy, however, such refusals mark a distinctive feature of philosophy as a body of thought constantly in the process of redefinition.¹⁰

⁸ John R. Silber, “Paidia: Philosophy educating Humanity,” 91.

⁹ R. R. Ammerman, ed, “A Short History of Analytic Philosophy.” *Classical Analytic Philosophy* (New York: McGraw Hills, 1965), 2.

¹⁰ Andrea Nye, “It's not Philosophy.” Uma Narayan and Sandra Hardings, ed., *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial and Feminist World*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 102.

Nye encourages practitioners of feminist philosophy not to be distracted by this state of affairs, pointing out that it also happened to Western philosophy's blue-eyed boy, Descartes. Nye further intimates that those that harbour this kind of thinking assume rather than advance a discussion. Otherwise, even Plato the so-called father of Western philosophy had his views shaped by the Peloponnesian and the execution of Socrates. Relative to Descartes, he is an important figure in transitioning philosophy from medieval times to the Modern, and moreover, secures his system on reason. The problem was that Descartes challenged Aristotelianism, the dominant philosophical tradition of medieval period. The example of Descartes suggests that there is more to the distinction between philosophy and non-philosophy than meets the eye.

If Lucius Outlaw is correct, the practice of naming philosophical traditions after groups or regions is not unique to traditions within the broader contemporary philosophy.¹¹ Outlaw explains that it is this practice that accounts for the presence of such insights as British empiricism, German idealism, and so forth, even as the figures associated with these traditions have gone ahead to develop original systems of their own. Nor is it unusual for scholars of philosophy to identify with schools of philosophy and still be open to rival traditions as Strawson is wont to believe or to utterly disregard other traditions as Silber has demonstrated. Relative to African philosophy, one wonders what Silber knows that others do not. Otherwise, one would have thought Tempel Placides answered the question of African philosophy as far back as 1949. Since Silber is obsessed with the neutrality argument and tends to that next and disparage philosophies founded on other principles, we will consider he neutrality of reason argument next.

The Neutrality of Reason Argument

Silber's obsession with Western philosophical tradition is understandable. He supposes that philosophy properly understood must be based on reason. Even more importantly Silber fears that the current developments may affect traditional philosophy adversely. His fears may already be upon us. Recently, a post-graduate student in defending his choice of social-political philosophy claimed that as far as he was concerned metaphysics was obsolete. Two things jumped out on me. The first was what his definition of metaphysics, since metaphysics defies a normative definition. And second was the extent to which one does philosophy without metaphysics. It is my sense that these considerations taken together lead Silber to romanticize traditional philosophy. He writes:

All the great philosophers and most of the rest have been committed to the use of reason. Philosophy is an essentially rational enterprise and only as such, central to the education of mankind. It is philosophy that has taught us the distinction between right and wrong, opinion and knowledge, desire and need, good and pleasure, sincerity and truth. It was Plato's insistent rationality that led him and us too, if we attend this argument to demonstrate the essential equality of men and women. It was reason that led him to discriminate only on the off genuine differences in nature rather on inherited prejudices devoid of rational justification. Philosophy has likewise provided the moral principles that have exposed the immorality of racial prejudice and the measures that should be taken to end the injustices imposed on minorities and the poor.¹²

In this regard, Strawson seems to agree with Silber. He notes that "some of the great dead

¹¹ Lucius T. Outlaw, "African, African American, Africana Philosophy." In Jon Pittman, ed., *African-American Perspectives and Philosophical Traditions* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 73.

¹² John R. Silber, "Paidia: Philosophy educating Humanity", 89.

thinkers may still have a unique wright and substance for us; that the great dead may speak to us more powerfully and suggestively than even the most gifted of our own contemporary”.¹³ But philosophy also has to find a way of being present in the market square, source of the seeming disagreement between Silber and Strawson.

Dwelling on the etymological definition of philosophy as love of wisdom, Silber wonders whether philosophy is constituted differently now than it always has been, and avers that if indeed it is constituted differently now, someone should better acquaint him with its new import and signification. It is for the same reason that he praises Kant for anchoring his philosophy on reason rather than his pietist Lutheran faith.

The argument often invoked is that reason is neutral, and should, therefore, found philosophy. Outlaw protests:

It would be mistake to focus on the evaluation of thought constructs solely in terms of their logical cogency. Nor would it be any more sensible to be guided by uncritical adherence to those prevailing agendas and methods of academic philosophy that disregard the relevance of sociocultural histories.¹⁴

According to the author, it is emphatically the case that we have a common discipline of philosophy but different experiences, part of the reason we may adopt different approaches. And one thing about which Silber seems to be silent is how unreason dwarfed reason with respect to minority populations, especially Blacks as is evidenced by historic atrocities and injustices perpetrated against minority populations. For example, neither Plato nor

Aristotle saw anything wrong with slavery; rather they advocated humanness in the treatment of slaves. It is also the case with other major philosophers such as Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, among others, who supported slavery and colonization. Consequently, minority philosophical traditions reject the neutrality of reason argument, claiming that it is a ploy to obscure the White male Anglo-Saxon bias of the so-called mainstream philosophical traditions.¹⁵ Otherwise how does philosophy explain the absence of works of female philosophers such as Asclephena of Athens (c. 350BCE) and Hypatia of Alexandria (c. 415CE), who may have been contemporaries of Plato and Aristotle.

With respect to the Black race, behind the facade of the neutrality of reason discourse, the Black person can detect the unreason that contributed to inhuman projects like slavery and colonialism. Silber adheres to analytic philosophy, one of the major traditions within Western philosophy. Plato and Aristotle revolutionized Western philosophy considerably by the quality of debate they were able and continue to generate. As well they established Western tradition as the dominant school of philosophy, in terms of setting the stage, the agenda, and developing the concepts the enterprise would engage for a long time. The continuing influence of Plato and Aristotle were could be detected in the thought of other greats such as Descartes, Kant and Hegel and others, whose intervention in the debate has gone a long way to sustain the dominance in question. Moreover, they loom in the background of virtually every philosophical discussion. The dominance in question partially explains the temptation of Silber to romanticize it as the philosophical

¹³ Peter F. Strawson, “What have we learned from Philosophy in the Twentieth Century?” Daniel Dalhstrom, ed., *Contemporary Philosophy*, 270

¹⁴ Lucius T. Outlaw, “African Philosophy: Origins and Prospects.” Kwasi Wiredu, ed., *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 93.

¹⁵ Ken Angwe Agede, “The African Woman and the Burden of Gender” *Majop: Makurdi Owl Journal of Philosophy* (March/April 2019), 10.

tradition par excellence. Outlaw is not impressed after the atrocities perpetrated in the name of objectivity:

It would be a mistake to focus on the evaluation of thought constructs solely in terms of their logical cogency. Nor would it be any more sensible to be guided by uncritical adherence to those prevailing agendas and methods of academic philosophy that disregard the relevance of sociocultural histories.¹⁶

The fear here is that the victim of discrimination may become what she resents or embark on a wholesale rejection of Western philosophical traditions, something against which Outlaw advises. He writes:

There should not be a wholesale rejection of disciplinary resources simply because they have been determined to be 'Eurocentric.' Rather, here too careful, critical, comparative considerations must be worked out to settle issues regarding the viability of resources for assisting thinking in the interest of the black peoples, and others. In particular, getting at the philosophical thought of African and African-descended thinkers in multiracial or multiethnic New World societies will require informed and critical understandings of quite complex cultural dynamics.¹⁷

Outlaw supposes that White frameworks do not necessarily translate to intrusions or colonialism. While theories are appreciated if situated within the context that influenced or informed their formulation, they should not and cannot be used for something that has been attempted within scholarship but being rejected in this essay. In this way, one can sift and retain what enhances

philosophy regardless of the tradition or their authors.

Ordinarily, securing philosophy on reason is a worthwhile development but Nietzsche's reservation need to be taken seriously; namely, that reason alone cannot resolve the problems of humanity.¹⁸ If we liken philosophy to a tool kit we may appreciate why different philosophers favour different philosophical traditions. This partially explains why minority philosophical traditions cannot forget historical atrocities and domination, injustices easily because they do not think that a finite human being has anything beyond experience as Fichte rightly argues.¹⁹ It is for this reason that Fichte quite remarkably credits the French Revolution with inspiring his system. In a draft of April/May 1795 to Baggesen, he writes:

My system is the first system of freedom. Just as France freed man from the external shackles, so my system frees him from the fetters of the things in themselves, which is to say, from the external influences with which all previous systems-including the Kantian- have more or less fettered him. Indeed the first principle of my system presents man an independent being. During the very years when France was using external force to win its political freedom I was engaged in an inner struggle with myself and with all deep rooted prejudices and this is the struggle that gave birth to my system. Thus the French revolution assisted in the creation of my system. Indeed it was while I was writing about the French revolution that I was rewarded by the hints and intimations of my system.²⁰

¹⁶ Outlaw, Lucius T. "African Philosophy: Origins and Prospects", P. 94.

¹⁷ Outlaw, Lucius T. "African Philosophy: Origins and Prospects", 94.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich *Gay Science* (Trans. Walter Kaufmann) (New York, Vintage Book, 1974), 125.

¹⁹ J. Gottlieb Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, 1st and 2nd Introduction. Translated by Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 6

²⁰ F. Fichte, "A Letter of April/May 1795 to Baggesen." In *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, Trans. and

By suggesting that he drew inspiration from the French revolution, Fichte references that fact that the French revolution offers new ways of understanding our cognitive relationship with nature, in the process challenging the hitherto unchallenged notion of normativity. Specifically, Fichte thought it underscored the role of the human agency in the constitution of phenomena, previously made the reserve of the divine. For present purposes, it suffices to say that for Fichte, the French revolution provided the blueprint for the liberation of thought, a paradigm he used to introduce speculative dimension to thought by making the subject turn to itself for knowledge. Based on his speculative to the question of knowledge, Fichte dismisses the notion of a mind-independent reality as a mere invention devoid of reality, further insisting that the notion in question should be eliminated from philosophical consideration if thought is to be unburdened and set free.

By describing his system as the one of freedom, Fichte distances from his predecessors, whom he accuses of destroying the freedom of the subject by locating activity in the object and passivity in the subject. Fichte is a post-Kantian German idealist who is impressed by Kant's displacement of the activity from the object and locating it in the subject in his quest to gain knowledge. However, he is disappointed by Kant's retention of an abstract notion of subjectivity. One major insight the French revolution was the inspiration to transform Kant's abstract notion of subjectivity into a finite one.

From the foregoing, two options are available to a minority person: resentment or dialogue. If theories grow out of context and are partially meant to explain the events of their day, it could be shown that not many people would like to engage a philosophy "born out of struggle." Seen in this way, it

could be argued that the transcendental a priori talks partially represent attempts to unwillingness to assume responsibility for injustices or atrocities.²¹ The other is openness and dialogue. Since resentment fails, we turn to dialogue, and use Fred Evans notion of society as a multivoiced body.

Society as a Multi-Voiced Body

Evans advocates the hybridization of voices within philosophy. According to him, as a multi-voiced body, society is composed of voices that are diverse or co-implicated in each other without one dominating the discussion. For him, the benefits of this hybridization are enormous, including the phenomenological. He writes:

Phenomenologically, we encounter ourselves apart from a dialogue, either with ourselves or either others. When we awake, we are already involved in an exchange that will continue throughout the day, switching interlocutors and topics, but always pulling us along in its train. To break from all dialogue would literally mean our disappearance as self-beings, as 'existences for ourselves.' Much else goes on inside and outside us besides speech, but we register these in terms of what we can or cannot say about them, whether in poetry or prose. Dialogue, then, is an omnipresent and defining feature of our lives: we are dialogic creatures.²²

For Evans, even the self is a dialogue that cannot be avoided. It is the author's contention that dialogue among various philosophical tradition yields a different kind of truth. While it is the intent of every to achieve the certainty Silber desires, that ideal cannot be met in practice because of our finitude. It is for this reason that scepticism will remain an important

²¹ Lucius T. Outlaw, "African, African American, Africana Philosophy", 94.

²² Fred Evans, *The Multivoiced Body: Society and Communication in the age of Diversity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 60.

component of philosophy for a long time. It is my contention that our finitude leads us to the realization that theories are products of their time and space, and, therefore, shaped by their contexts. This was suggested by Kant, in whom philosophy turns critical. In this way, unlike Silber, Kant rejects the notion of a mind-independent that could be grasped in its objective existence. Outlaw speaks for me when he ties the demonstration of our knowledge claim to the human person who is interested in the knowledge question. He however, refuses to reduce theories to her contexts, insisting that theories require reflection and that “systematic reflection” employed by philosophy makes it transcend its context.²³

Conclusion

This essay, examined two incompatible tendencies in philosophy: the tendency to discriminate against newer traditions, and the tendency to be open to them. The one school of interpretation opposed to difference invokes the etymological definition of philosophy as the love of wisdom to argue that any tradition that does not take reason as initial ground of its philosophical investigation remains a movement and, therefore, it should not be entertained. The other school of interpretation is open to alternatives arguing that philosophy could be begun from anywhere. Unlike the former school of interpretation, it encouraged all philosophers to show all philosophical traditions love and respect. The author specifically rejected the neutrality of reason argument, pointing out how reason failed philosophy and minority groupings when they needed it most. In advocating openness to all philosophical traditions, I am aware that all philosophical traditions have an origin or beginning that is well-known. And that it is matter of time before philosophical traditions on the fringes of society becomes mainstream.

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²³ Outlaw, Lucius T. “African, African American, Africana Philosophy”, P. 73.

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