

TRADITION *and* MODERNITY

*Philosophical
Reflections
on the
African
Experience*

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4.1 Universalism and Particularism in Philosophy

It is instructive to note that philosophers such as John Locke, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and John Rawls, whose socioeconomic, political, and moral ideas and arguments had telling influence on social and cultural values and institutions of their societies, were grappling at the conceptual level with the issues and problems of their times. They were giving conceptual interpretation to the contemporary experience, primarily of their own people. In saying that philosophy responds conceptually to issues and problems,

I have used such expressions as “a given society,” “a given culture,” “a given epoch,” “their own times,” and other kindred expressions to indicate the historical or cultural relations and matrices of philosophical ideas, arguments, and proposals. And one will also agree with the assertion by the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel that “Philosophy is its own *time* apprehended in thought.”⁴⁴ Now does all this mean that the relevance of the ideas, insights, arguments, and conclusions of philosophers—who necessarily have to belong to some time, culture, or society—is to be tethered to those times, cultures, or societies? The answer to this question turns on whether one perceives philosophical ideas or doctrines as particular, that is, as relative and relevant only to the times and cultures out of which they emerged, or as universal, that is, as transcending the times and cultures that begat them, and hence of transparticular (universal) applicability. Both particularist and universalist theses have been put forward by African philosophers.

The particularist thesis maintains the particularity of philosophical ideas or doctrines: it holds that the historical-cultural moorings of philosophical ideas and proposals are sufficient evidence of their particularity and of the inappropriateness of applying them universally to other cultures or societies, that those ideas—and the problems that gave rise to them—derive from experiences that are specific to cultures or historical situations, and that, consequently, philosophers unavoidably focus attention on issues and problems that interest them or relate to the experiences of their particular cultures and histories, unconcerned seriously to engage reflectively on the problems and issues of other peoples and cultures. The thesis appears to be bolstered by the assertions of some philosophers who make no bones about contextualizing their philosophical concerns by referring to the social, ideological, or cultural circumstances to which they were giving philosophical responses. The distinguished American philosopher John Rawls in his writings on the theory of justice describes his own work as having specific application in the American context.⁴⁵ Rawls observes: “In particular, justice as fairness is framed to apply to what I have called the ‘basic structure’ of a modern constitutional democracy.”⁴⁶ In his article on the principles of equality, Joseph Raz writes: “The starting point [i.e., of his thesis] is the existence within the western cultural heritage of an egalitarian tradition.”⁴⁷ References to such specific cultural or ideological contexts made by philosophers as the focus of their philosophical activity can be multiplied. Such approaches to the pursuit of the philosophical enterprise would seem to provide support for the particularist thesis.

One advocate of the particularist thesis is K. C. Anyanwu, an African philosopher from Nigeria, who rejects the notion that philosophy has a universal character. He writes: “I am saying that . . . African philosophy is a particular instance of philosophy as a cultural product. It is definitely unphilosophical to subordinate the different visions of all cultures to the European world-vision alone, and this is what the ‘perennial’ and the ‘universalist’ philosophers are trying to do. . . . I argue that every philosophy is

relative to its basic assumptions about the nature of experienced reality as well as its epistemological attitude or method. . . . And furthermore, different assumptions and models of experienced reality lead to different philosophical doctrines.”⁴⁸ The particularist thesis is sometimes mischaracterized or misunderstood. Odera Oruka, an African philosopher from Kenya, who rejects the particularist thesis and takes a universalist view of philosophy, to be explained presently, says: “Some wish to deny critical rationality, at least as it is understood in the West, to African Philosophy, claiming indeed that it is precisely lack of critical reasoning that helps to distinguish African philosophy from Western philosophy. Yet others think that philosophy, whether *African* or not, is not worth the name if rationality and logicality are ejected from it.”⁴⁹ (By “others,” Oruka is referring to those, like himself, who subscribe to the universalist thesis.) Oruka further says that whatever is the difference between African philosophy and Western philosophy, “it does not qualitatively lie in the use of *reason*. Reason is a universal human trait. And the greatest disservice to African Philosophy is to deny it reason and dress it in magic and extra-rational traditionalism.”⁵⁰

But the question is: does the particularist thesis deny rationality and the place of logic in African thought in the traditional setting? Of course, not. Neither Anyanwu nor any advocate of the particularist thesis would deny the place of rationality in human thought, African or non-African. The point of the particularist thesis is that the concept of rationality as understood in philosophy is a product of Western culture and that the way it is understood in that culture may not (necessarily) apply to other cultures, such as the African. But to say this is not, by any means, to imply a denial of the rational or logical character of African philosophy; what may be meant is simply that it should be possible or appropriate to provide a different understanding of, or meaning for, the concept of rationality. There have, in fact, been some discussions about whether or not rationality is a culture-dependent concept.⁵¹

I think that the particularist-universalist thesis is best confined to the *content* or *product* of a philosophy: to the ideas, insights, proposals, arguments, and conclusions of a philosophy, all of which can only be arrived at through *rational* and *logical* discourse. African traditional thought was not—could not have been—pursued without the underpinnings of rationality.⁵² And discourse, even ordinary conversation, would not be mutually intelligible in a literate or even preliterate society without the minimum understanding and application of logic, even if one were not conversant with its formal rules. This is not an empirical but an a priori truth. Now, the universalist thesis.

Peter Bodunrin, an African philosopher also from Nigeria, says that, along with his fellow “professional philosophers” from Africa, he takes “a universalist view of philosophy,” by which he means that “Philosophy . . . must have the same meaning in all cultures although the subjects that receive priority, and perhaps the method of dealing with them, may be dictated by cultural biases and the existential situation within which the philos-

ophers operate. According to this school, African philosophy is the philosophy done by African philosophers whether it be in the area of logic, metaphysics, ethics or history of philosophy. It is desirable that the works be set in some African context, but it is not necessary that they be so.”⁵³ The universalist thesis, thus, holds that the relevance of philosophical ideas, insights, and arguments can transcend the limits of the cultures and times of the philosophers who produced them, despite the fact that those philosophers were giving critical attention to the intellectual foundations of their own cultures, their cultural and historical experiences providing the setting for their conceptual explorations. The thesis does not deny the historical or cultural specificity of philosophical ideas or insights; but it maintains that this fact does not detract from the relevance of those ideas or insights to other cultures and times, and that they can therefore be considered universal.

I find the universalist thesis quite attractive. The universality of philosophical ideas may be put down to the fact that human beings, irrespective of their cultures and histories, share certain basic values; our common humanity grounds the adoption and acceptance of some ideas, values, and perceptions, as well as the appreciation of the significance of events taking place beyond specific cultural borders. This being so, problems dealt with by philosophers may be seen as *human* problems—rather than as African, European, or Asian—and, hence, as universal.

In critical response to the universalist thesis, however, I wish to say this: human problems are of course human; but this statement, as a logically necessary statement, is in itself innocuous. The main point, however—and this is a strident implication of the particularist thesis—is that human problems can invariably be contextualized, for they arise in, or out of, certain historical or cultural situations. This being so, the approach to solving them need not be the same; different ideas and therapies may be required, even though one need not deny that the required ideas and therapies may in fact be adopted from the experiences of other peoples and cultures. Also, to regard the problems of the various peoples of the world as simply human, and hence universal, is to imply that there are necessary or historically structured modes of societal development and approaches to tackling the problems of human societies. This is to endorse the doctrine of historical determinism that is belied by the fact that the mode of development of a colonized people, for instance, will most probably not be the same as that of a colonizing people: the problems of establishing stable democratic institutions in most developing, formerly colonized, nations of the world are a clear case in point. A straightforward adoption of the institutions of a developed nation may not be adequate in solving the problems of a developing nation. Different peoples, cultures, and nations have historically developed differently; the ideas that led or supported their development must, at least in some respects, have been different. The universalist thesis cannot, therefore, be unqualifiedly true.

In earlier sections of the chapter, I attempted to indicate that philosophy

speculates about and interprets human experience. It is pretty clear that human experience is excessively varied: the cultural and historical experiences of human beings do differ in some respects. The experiences of colonized and subjugated peoples would differ in most respects from those of the colonizer and the conqueror. If, in fact, the subject matter of philosophy is human experience, and human experiences differ in some respects, then we would expect the contents and concerns of the philosophies produced by thinkers with different cultural or historical experiences to differ in some respects. This is what I consider the essential point of the particularist thesis. And therefore, I believe the particularist thesis cannot be set aside cavalierly.

This is not to say that the particularist thesis is free from defects and wholly supportable; it is not. For one thing, it denies the possibility—and sometimes the necessity—of exploiting the ideas, values, and institutions of other peoples and cultures, where necessary, relevant, beneficial, and practicable, for dealing with the problems of a people. Because of our common humanity and because the values, experiences, and characteristics of human beings can in *some* respects be said to be common (as I discuss later), that possibility cannot be reasonably denied. For another, to insist on particularism is to imply that a thinker from one culture cannot understand, appreciate, and feel convinced of the content of a philosophy produced in another culture and give a positive assessment of it; but this is surely not true. For a philosophical idea to emerge from the experiences of a particular culture or people does not necessarily mean that there is no possibility of its taking on (sooner or later) a universal character; nor does it mean that its significance is necessarily tethered to its original cultural ambience. Even though the potential for universality of a philosophical idea—any philosophical idea—would depend very much on its quality and power of conviction, that potentiality cannot unconscionably be rejected a priori, as the particularist thesis seems to imply. Particularism fails to give due cognizance to the historical fact of cultural borrowing in the wake of contacts between peoples of different cultures (see chapter 8, section 1).

In the circumstances of our common humanity, a particular idea or fact, irrespective of its cultural or historical origin, may potentially be an exemplification of a universal principle. And those philosophers who do specify the cultural or ideological or social context that gave rise to their philosophical responses still entertain the hope, nevertheless, that their theses will some day have wider application. Thus, Rawls, after the second statement referred to above, adds: "Whether justice as fairness can be extended to a general political conception for different kinds of societies existing under historical and social conditions, or whether it can be extended to a general moral conception, or a significant part thereof, are altogether separate questions. I avoid prejudging these larger questions one way or another."⁵⁴ Thus he does not rule out the possibility of his theory having a wider, even a universal, application. Even though the concept of 'mentanationality' that I introduce in chapter 3 (section 3.1.2) as a new philosophy of the nature of the nation-state is inspired by reflections specifically on the African ethnic situation, I

certainly expect my analysis, nevertheless, to be universally acceptable and applicable.

Now, having made negative remarks about both the universalist and the particularist thesis regarding philosophical ideas and their relevance or irrelevance to peoples and cultures, I wish to maintain that, in the light of our common humanity, which forcefully suggests a common denominator of basic values and goals, the universalist thesis appears to be of greater intuitive appeal. One may therefore come down on its side. Human experiences or problems may not be shared by all humans. But the fundamental mundane *goals* of human beings can be said to be held, *ultimately*, in common by all. This fact of sharing in ultimate goals, in my view, makes the universalist thesis more convincing.

I deem it appropriate, however, at this point, to deploy a distinction between two concepts of universalism, a distinction that is rarely made. I distinguish between what may be called "essential universalism" and "contingent universalism." (The former may also be called "constitutive universalism" and the latter "functional universalism.") By essential universalism, I am referring to certain basic values and attributes so intrinsic to the nature and life of the human being that they can be considered common to all humans. The statement I have just made insinuates the notion of the objectivity of human values and will immediately be countered by those philosophers who maintain the subjectivity or relativity of values. But can it be seriously denied that there are values that human beings, irrespective of their societies or cultures, hold and cherish, values whose violation by, or in, some societies will provoke utter outrage and scandal in other societies? Surely not. Friendship, knowledge, happiness, respect for life, the avoidance of pain would be among such values. Any human society that fails, for example, to pursue the ethic of respect for human life cannot survive as a *human* society for any length of time. It is the existence of, and belief in, such commonly (universally) held values that grounds the legitimacy and justifiability of criticisms of societies or nations that violate them: otherwise, what moral right or justification would one human society have to condemn violations of such values by another? Essential universalism thus appeals to certain fundamental values of humanity. And a philosophical inquiry into such human values should be of interest to all people irrespective of their culture.

By contingent universalism, I have in mind the notion of a philosophical idea or a cultural value, practice, or institution becoming so attractive and influential as to be embraced in the course of time by practically the rest of the peoples and cultures of the world. Such an idea or value or institution attains the status of universality by virtue of its historic significance or relevance or functionality or power of conviction or some such quality. The difference between the contingent and the essential universal is that, whereas the latter's universal status is immediate, being, as it were, intrinsic to human nature or purposes, the former acquires the status of universality in time, as peoples outside the cultural origin of the idea or value become

increasingly enamored of it for several reasons and accept, appropriate, and exploit it for their own purposes. (An example is the idea and practice of the free market economy.) At this point that idea or value or practice would have become metacontextual, for it would have transcended its original cultural or historical context and would thus have, by reason of its quality or power of conviction, gained the widest currency elsewhere: an originally vertical idea or practice would thus have become horizontal. The notion of the contingent universal is the justification or explanation for the dominance of the ideas, values, and institutions fashioned by some particular peoples, cultures, or times of history. But it presupposes that the field of universality, to be populated by contributions from the various cultures of humankind, is open. Thus it makes it possible for every culture to make a contribution to the global system whether in the field of ideas, values, institutions, or some other, and for that contribution to gain appreciation and recognition far beyond the confines of its origin.

Within the framework of the distinction between essential and contingent universalism, an idea, value, or institution that masquerades as an essential universal may in fact be a contingent universal. A particular idea or value that fails to attain the status of contingent universality would continue to remain a particular idea but will continue also, of course, to be cherished by the culture that originated it. Particularity, then, would not be eliminated by the distinction between essential universalism and contingent universalism.

I conclude, therefore, that African philosophy, like the philosophies produced by other cultures, will have characteristics of both universality and particularity, for it will be concerned with ultimate goals that can be said to be shared by all human beings irrespective of their cultures and nationalities, and with social and cultural experiences and problems some of which may, in some sense, be said to be peculiar to the African people.
