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Introduction: Globalizing or Transcending Global Justice?[1]

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Global justice is one of the areas in contemporary political philosophy where one can guarantee almost without error that interesting conferences and new publications will jostle for the attention of scholars every new month. The diversity and widespread interest in this topic notwithstanding, an important issue that is hardly scrutinized is the way the story unfolds. In most cases, the texts on global justice begin with a narrative about how John Rawls classic, *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and the responses to it, most especially by Charles Beitz and Thomas Pogge, led Rawls to restate his views in another book, *The Law of Peoples* (1999). The narrative would then continue by making clear that the issue at stake is the contention regarding the possibility of extending Rawls' notion of distributive justice beyond the context he envisaged—within nations.

Depending on the dispositions and perspicacity of the author, the story of global justice then fragments at this point into distinct positions, with some authors professing to be cosmopolitans, others statists and, a few, the faithful proponents of all the in-betweens of the two divide. Understood this way, the idea of global justice would seem to have developed and progressed without any meaningful disjunction, the implication being that the provenance of the field is apparent and settled. In other words, the impression given is that there is an 'official' narrative regarding the idea of global justice we can harness when we

1 Over the years, my engagement with the idea of global justice and the broader field of political philosophy has profited from discussions with many colleagues. I thank Philipp Schink, Dorothea Gädeke, Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, Paul Nnodim, Katrin Flikschuh, Ward E. Jones, Anke Graness, Julian Culp and Scott E. Hendrix for sharing their perspectives with me and compelling me to clarify my views.

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develop syllabi for courses on the topic. This makes it unsurprising to encounter people who wrote their PhD on global justice but have little knowledge beyond Rawls and the fragmented positions emanating from disagreements about his views on the scope of distributive justice.

For people culturally and physically outside the context of this 'settled' narrative, engaging in the debate on global justice would necessarily invite questions. People interested in the sort of philosophy done outside the space where this settled narrative is embedded will have a hard time making sense of the parochial universalism of this 'official' narrative. To this end, a special issue on 'African philosophy and global justice' needs contextualization. For anyone aware of developments in the discourse on global justice, it should be clear that very little plurality exists with regard to the theoretical traditions informing the discourse. Comparative studies are few and far between. This leads people interested in African philosophy to query global theorists' lack of engagement with African philosophy. Put differently, why are people working on African philosophy not visible participants in the discourse on global justice, given especially the trajectory of this tradition of philosophy? One could, of course, hypothesize different reasons to explain the situation. It could be argued, for instance, that this lack of engagement is the result of uncertainty in African philosophy regarding who or what to engage with. Another possible explanation could be that global justice does not address the philosophical concerns of African philosophers. One could also hypothesize that the problem lies in the dearth of relevant resources in African philosophy—essentially, a sort of hermeneutic handicap. In addition, it could be argued that African philosophers are simply not philosophically productive with regard to questions about global justice.

Even if one were to accept these explanations as plausible (although they are not, as I will point out anon), that would still not provide a satisfactory answer to the question regarding the little contact between global justice discourse and African philosophy. This is because a tradition of philosophy could be part of a global discourse as a result of

its theories being harnessed by philosophers from anterior traditions. Most often, the purpose of engaging with other traditions of thought is to sharpen the inter-contextual validity of propositions—basically an attempt to refine the philosophical propositions we put forward by relating them to contexts other than our own. Western philosophical perspectives have been integrated, for instance, into contemporary philosophical discussions about the nature and scope of freedom in Asian as well as in African philosophy. Thus, it does not suffice to say that the reason African philosophy is ignored in important philosophical debates, such as the one on global justice, is because African philosophers do not actively contribute their perspectives to the discourse. It would of course be desirable for them to do so, but given that African philosophy is a tradition of philosophy accessible to anyone interested, its resources are available to be critically integrated into important debates by philosophers from anterior traditions. There is nothing stopping a theorist of global justice, whose work is embedded in Western philosophy, from engaging with Odera Oruka, Ifeanyi Menkiti, Kwasi Wiredu and other renowned African philosophers. In sum, what I am trying to point out here is that the possible failure of African philosophers to engage with the discourse on global justice does not absolve theorists of global justice from their failure to engage with the resources in African philosophy.

Perhaps the whole question regarding the failure to engage with African philosophy in the discourse on global justice is wrong or even perverse. It is surely odd to ask someone who does not speak to you to explain their silence. Certainly, that would only happen if the person is a subordinate. By implication, therefore, it could be argued that it is condescending and futile to inquire into the reasons that account for the silence of African philosophy in the discourse on global justice. I grant that this is an important perspective to consider. However, it seems to me that there is a nexus between the trajectory of African philosophy and the discourse on global justice that should make them natural dialogue partners. And this relates not just to the linguistic proximity of

both the practitioners of African philosophy and the prominent theorists of global justice (like majority of the works on global justice, most of the works in African philosophy are in English and French), but, most essentially, to the questions discussed in both contexts of inquiry.

Global justice explores the unjust nature of the inequality of the world in which we live. Its central question pertains to how global inequality should be addressed from the perspective of justice. Bruce M. Landesman recounts that global justice asks the following questions: 'Should we have a more equal world? Should we have a world in which everyone can provide for their basic needs and have their basic rights protected? Should we have a world in which people are roughly equally well off regardless of where they live? Or is the global inequality that now exists, or some ameliorated version of it, morally acceptable and just?' (Landesman 2011: 421). It should occur to anyone attempting to address these questions that one of the most viable starting points would be to investigate the theories deployed to explain this situation by the agents who bear the brunt of the impacts of the unequal and unjust world at the center of global justice discourse. As Anke Graness (2015: 128) rightly noted, 'about 20 years before it started to be a central topic in the Euro-American debates of the late 1990s, the Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka (1944–1995) used the concept of global justice in two key articles, "John Rawls Ideology: Justice as Egalitarian Fairness" (1981) and "The Philosophy of Foreign Aid: A Question of the Right to a Human Minimum" (1989).' It is worth noting that Oruka's systematic interest in issues relating to global justice was such that he continued to revise his position. For instance, he updated the perspective he put forward in his paper on 'The Philosophy of Foreign Aid' mentioned in the citation above in order to take into account Garett Hardin's life boat ethics and 'the concerns of the environmentalists in the 1980's and 1990's' (Oruka 1993: 22–23). Apart from Oruka's work, there are numerous instances in African political thought that have sought to analyze and critique the unjust arrangement of the world, most especially the unequal power relations that lie at the foundation of the

problem of poverty. Kwame Nkrumah, for instance, made the following observation as far back as 1966 'Africa is a paradox which illustrates and highlights neo-colonialism. Her earth is rich, yet the products that come from above and below her soil continue to enrich, not Africans predominantly, but groups and individuals who operate to Africa's impoverishment' (Nkrumah 1965: 1). He even went on to provide the sort of statistics that we find in the works on global justice discourse—figures that show the dire nature of the poverty, inequality and injustice characteristic of the world in which we live. Yet, the literature on neo-colonialism, the ethical problems related to structural adjustment programs in the third world, dependency theories and liberation philosophy have hardly found their way into mainstream theorization of global justice.

Although a special issue on African philosophy and global justice cannot remedy all of the cognitive inaccuracies and moral misperceptions engendered by the neglect of African and other non-Western philosophical traditions in the current discussion of global justice, what it can surely do is to begin the conversation. But to do this, it is essential to highlight some of the reasons that account for the lack of engagement with African philosophy in the mainstream discussion of global justice. To be sure, it is simply not the case, as hypothesized earlier, that there is no clarity in African philosophy regarding who or what to engage with when it comes to the question of global justice. Clarity regarding who or what to engage with emerges when we consider that African philosophy designates a critical and systematic reflection on the fundamental questions of life within the context of African experience. Thus, the concerns of the discipline will necessarily include, among other things, the African experience of the social and material conditions of existence. This means that the resources in African philosophy attempting to make sense of the social, political and material conditions of life are apt to provide penetrating insights into the disadvantage occasioned by the experience of global injustice. Against this background, I do not see the way the initial hypothesis alluded to

above will explain the lack of engagement with African philosophy by theorists of global justice.

Odera Oruka offers a meaningful explanation of the status quo. He avers that 'in philosophy, different perspectives can have dialogue only if each of the promoters of one perspective appreciates and respects the seriousness of the perspective of a different person or group' (Oruka 1990: 36). He explains further that even where this criterion is met, there is still need for a referee 'to conduct and judge the dialogue.' Although this role has, up till now, been played by history, 'many have been reading history wrongly or biasedly. They have read history to find a justification for their perspective and special position. That position can be of a conviction that one is a master or servant' (Oruka 1990: 36). To solve this problem, Oruka proposed a way out, namely, that we should 'use history to create a new history' (Oruka 1990: 36). When we contextualize Oruka's remarks, it could be argued that the history of Western philosophy is one of the factors precluding theorists of global justice from engaging with non-Western philosophies, such as African philosophy. If one insists on limiting philosophy proper only to the texts whose provenance is traceable in some clear ways to Thales, the proto philosopher, then, for that person, engagement with non-Western philosophy will remain an undesirable illusion.

Beyond what Oruka pointed out, however, I am persuaded that there are some important reasons embedded in the contemporary practice of African philosophy that account for the lack of engagement with it in theorizing global justice. As I have argued elsewhere (Okeja 2017), 'just like many contemporary African novelists who use their African experiences and background as resources for their work but are hardly accessible to their African audience, contemporary African philosophers are mostly not in conversation with one another and their context.' African philosophers are mostly dislocated today because their works, in most cases, seek to conform and address a non-African audience. One chief reason for this is the guidelines regulating research and career progression in African universities. The corporatized African university

today requires that African scholars, philosophers included, must publish in so-called accredited journals with impact. The outcome of this practice is the waning of the internal debate among African philosophers. Without a robust internal debate in a tradition of philosophy, it will be difficult to draw the attention of philosophers working in anterior traditions. Where African philosophers are in conversation, the engagement often whittles down into mutual admiration or suspicion. Compared to what obtained in the discussions among first generation postcolonial African philosophers in journals, such as *Second Order* and *Quest*, there is a general lack of robust discussion among contemporary practitioners of African philosophy in the academia. If African philosophy is going to be part of the discourse on global philosophical questions, part of the reason would be that it is a thriving tradition of philosophy. The implication is that African philosophers must be engaged in a robust internal and external discussion.

But then, why is it desirable to engage with African philosophy in the discussion of global justice? As noted earlier, global justice attempts to grapple with questions that are reflective of the lived experience of inequality and the global injustice it engenders. Thus, recognition of the agency of the people impacted by this situation should propel a theorist dealing with this dimension of their experience to engage with the perspectives their reflection on the situation offers. Most importantly, however, engagement with African philosophy by theorists of global justice is imperative due to the promise of global philosophy. Thom Brooks puts this point aptly. As an 'unbounded approach to philosophy', Brooks avers that global philosophy is motivated by focus on 'improved ability to address philosophical problem-solving' (Brooks 2013: 258). It 'is about our having an openness for the need to pursue wider engagement in order to improve potential argumentative power … [it] is not about speaking to all traditions but rather about speaking with diverse traditions' (Brooks 2013: 262). In contrast to comparative philosophy, global philosophy does not aim to 'compare and contrast

but to uncover new philosophical insights in order to further develop our own tradition' (Brooks 261).

Notwithstanding the merits of Brooks' proposals about the benefits of global philosophy, it is essential to underscore that what counts is substantive engagement with diverse traditions in the quest for philosophical understanding of global problems—such as poverty, global justice, identity, terrorism etc. As Leigh Jenco pointed out, engagement with other traditions often highlights the aspects that resonate with 'Western categories, rendering non-Western ideas, thinkers and traditions interesting as case studies but not themselves the domain of theorizing' (Jenco 2010:9). This definitely is not a viable approach. A substantive approach is one that pays attention to the contextual dynamics of anterior thought traditions, the goal being to understand, rather than to dismiss or uncritically appropriate.

Even with these elucidated points, questions could still be raised about the African philosophy one should engage with, the point being that Africa is 'big' and thus entails the existence of a plurality of philosophical perspectives. In effect, the idea is that the diversity of ethnic groups in Africa makes unclear which 'African' philosophy one should engage with. Effectively, what is implied is the 'Africanness' of African philosophy. Given that this issue has been explored by many African philosophers, the remark I should note in this regard is that this concern is not useful because it is incoherent. And I say so for two reasons. First, it equates African philosophy with ethnic philosophies or worldviews. This is clearly wrong and prejudicial. Secondly, it creates a duty of information for an external other in order to exonerate the powerful ignorance of the subject articulating the position. Since African philosophy designates written and oral texts that are accessible to people, the onus is on the subject of knowledge to inquire further about the insights it offers.

Redirecting the discourse on global justice through engagement with other traditions, such as African philosophy, is certainly not a favor to non-Western philosophers. Hamid Dabashi is certainly right to

emphasize that many non-Western theorists 'are no longer interested in whatever it is [European philosophers] fancy to be "hegemonic" or "counter-hegemonic" in Europe and for Europeans' (Dabashi 2015: 4). The West has become provincialized, hence, its grand narratives about universal philosophical theories, which are all too often parochial, have lost their magic. In global philosophy, it is offered another opportunity to reimagine itself as an equal partner in dialogue without any supercilious pretensions.

The essays in this special issue provide substantive engagements with aspects of global justice within the context of African philosophy. Ifeanyi I. Menkiti's paper titled 'Africa and Global Justice' analyzes the ways justice is employed and the complexities involved. He makes clear that it is essential to delimit the scope of justice in order to understand the place of mercy. Aptly, he concludes that 'for Africans, the choice then remains to join the debate on the peoples' side of things, not on the states' side. As peoples, Africans have already attained standing, but as states their grounding is precarious, the battles they are supposed to be fighting ethically suspect.' Katrin Flikschuh's paper extends the discussion by exploring the desirability or otherwise of African thinkers' engagement in the discourse on global justice, given the neglect of their tradition in the mainstream discourse. Her careful analysis shows the dimensions of the parochial universalism of Western philosophy, the formidable challenge it received from African philosophers and the implications of this experience for global justice discourse. Dennis Masaka's paper discusses the problem of epistemic injustice, the goal being to show that epistemicide is an injustice whose neglect does not conduce to any talk about global justice. He accounts for the link between unequal power relations between the global North and global South and epistemic hegemony. He aims in this regard to show that epistemic parity should be the prolegomena to any viable discussion of global justice.

Michael Onyebuchi Eze recalls cosmopolitanism from its wondrous sojourn in the far lands of the world to face a basic challenge—how

should we live with the stranger 'beyond the requirement(s) of the law'? Traversing a range of issues and positions in the discourse on cosmopolitanism, Eze shows that what is at stake is to determine 'who we can become as ethical beings'. Thaddeus Metz confronts development theory and practice within the context of a carefully formulated theory of an African ethic. Given the idea of communion or communalism characteristic of African mode of being, what are the plausible implications we can infer for the discourse on development? He examines this question in order to point out a viable grounding of 'social progress' and 'what justice demands from the West in relation to Africa.' Edwin Etieyibo provides an account of a cosmopolitan moral and political theory based on Ubuntu. On the basis of Ubuntu cosmopolitanism, he explored the grounds of the duty and obligations we owe to other human beings. Helen Lauer pursues another important goal in her paper. She deploys the resources of West African social and political practice to show, among other things, that global justice is a process, which means that it is a work in progress.

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