

Belonging to the Ultra-Faithful: A Response to Eze*

Ward E. Jones

The intellectual discipline of philosophy exists as a community with various recognized traditions of practices, dialogues, and continually expanding bodies of work. One question, discussed by neither Eze nor I, is whether African thought has in fact already more or less become a philosophical tradition, alongside the extant traditions of analytic, continental, Indian, Chinese, and others. It may be that philosophy is something that Africans, in some form or another, have been doing for a long time. If not, if Africans have yet to do what is properly considered philosophy, then hopefully it is an endeavor in which they will fruitfully engage in the near future.¹

In either case, there is a prior, less empirical question to be asked. What would African thought have to be like were it to be philosophy? Answering this question requires giving an account of the nature of philosophy. In his paper, Eze describes four positions regarding the nature of philosophy and the status of African thought as philosophy. The first he refers to as the 'ultra-faithful' position. The other three are *apparently* critical of the ultra-faithful: the 'cautious namer' [207-8], the 'anti-import' position [208-209], and Eze's own 'historicist' position [209-213].² In Sections 1 and 2 of this paper, I defend a combination of the first and third positions. I will return to comment directly on Eze's historicism in Section 3.

*This paper was written at the invitation of the guest editor of this issue, Richard Bell. Thanks to Emmanuel Eze and Chris Megone for comments on earlier drafts.

1 For discussion on this question, see the contribution to this issue by Polycarp Ikuenobe, as well as the book by Kwasi Wiredu to which Ikuenobe is responding, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

2 I will use numbers in brackets to refer to pages in Eze's paper.

Our concern with a second question runs throughout both Eze's and my papers. Why is it important that there be an established tradition of African philosophy? In addition to benefiting Africans themselves, I argue that other philosophical traditions—including analytic philosophy—can benefit from paying attention to work from a mature African philosophy.

1.

The ultra-faithful say that philosophical claims are necessarily characterized by their universal scope. Philosophers make claims, at a minimum, about all human beings. Philosophers say that human beings are or are not composites of two types of substance, they say that scepticism must or cannot characterize human representation of the world, they say that the practices that comprise all human morality are or are not best characterized by notions of virtue, and they say that the human practice known as *art* is or is not best characterized as a creative process by which emotions are communicated. The questions answered by such claims are questions not about particular types of human beings, but about all human beings.

As Eze writes, the ultra-faithful think that philosophy 'cannot be narrowed or contextualized by modifiers such as *African*, *Indian*, *German*, and so on' [203]. In so far as philosophy is so characterized, say the ultra-faithful, it takes on a meaning such as 'a tradition of philosophy done in Africa' or 'a tradition of philosophy done by Africans'. Such characterizations may refer to a highly developed and important tradition. 'German philosophy', for example, refers to one of the most enduring and remarkable traditions in philosophy, begun by Kant and carried on by the likes of Fichte, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger. This tradition has its own concerns, argumentative and writing style, and presuppositions. But as a tradition in philosophy, say the ultra-faithful, the concerns of the proponents of German philosophy are necessarily universal. If they did not concern themselves with all human beings, then they would not be doing philosophy.

Of the ultra-faithful position, Eze writes, ‘Although the impetus for philosophizing may arise from particular countries and even from diverse cultural and social contexts within one country, philosophy itself transcends divisions of culture, nation, or country’ [203]. While I agree with this statement, the *transcendence of philosophy* must be understood in a particular way. Philosophy transcends divisions between persons because it is about all persons, and not about any particular sub-unit of persons. It may concern itself with cultures in general, or with nations or countries in general, but it does not concern itself with particular cultures or particular nations.

One reason that philosophy has this wide scope is that we have quite deep questions about ourselves as human beings. We would like to know some of the traits that characterize us not as North Americans or as Africans, nor as women or men, nor as persons of color or not, but as human beings and persons. What metaphysics should human beings have? How and why do human languages work? How should human beings treat each other? This last question is of considerable importance in this context: discussing racism, sexism, and xenophobia is not merely to examine how particular types of people treat each other, but to delve into deep ethical issues concerning how all human beings should treat each other. Addressing bias in thought and deed must be undertaken with a background of commitment to universal claims about human beings as a group.

A second reason that philosophy has universal scope is associated with the methodology of philosophy. Philosophy is an intellectual endeavor that takes place, as it were, wholly from the armchair. Philosophy progresses by discourse, by people writing to and for each other. There is a good reason for this: the sorts of questions that they ask—those about very general characteristics of human beings—are not pursuable in any other way. There is simply no alternative methodology for us to utilize in answering these questions about the nature of human beings. If philosophy were to become otherwise, if it were to begin considering less universal aspects of human life, then its methodology would tend towards

the more empirical, and it would no longer be what we consider philosophy.

An empirical and descriptive examination of the history, beliefs, and practices of a certain sort of people is not philosophy, both because it is not universal and because it is not, ultimately, an armchair pursuit. This is not to say that such an examination cannot involve philosophy. It can, and in two very distinct ways. It can use universal claims to make judgements upon these people. ‘Because human beings must not cause animals pain, the practice of scientific experimentation on non-human animals is not right’, is one example. This is less philosophy than it is the application of philosophy.

Alternatively, a study of a certain sort of person can work in the opposite direction, drawing universal lessons from the study of these people, showing how their practices raise a question that has not been asked, or arguing that their practices suggest a right way for us *qua human beings* to view ourselves or the world. This is simply good philosophical practice. It is conspicuously and challengingly characterized, for example, by current feminist philosophy.³ What makes such work feminist is that it begins by characterizing some aspect of women and their relationship to the world, and what makes it philosophy is that it generalizes out from there to claims about human beings in general.

2.

The ultra-faithful think that one central and necessary aspect of philosophy is that it makes claims that transcend divisions among human beings. However, the ultra-faithful should not think that *philosophers themselves* can transcend such divisions. Philosophers, like everyone else, are not just human beings, we are necessarily also members of subgroups of human beings. And we have characteristics that flow not just from our

³ See, e.g., the metaphysical work of Christine Battersby or the epistemological work of Lorraine Code.

being human beings but from our being members of that subgroup. The danger is that these other kind-memberships may confuse our universal generalizations. A philosopher who advocates dualism or deontological ethics, for example, may justly face the accusation that she is biased or limited by her being a Christian. A philosopher who advocates physicalism or naturalism may justly face the accusation that she is biased or limited by her having been schooled in a society whose epistemic values are rooted in the successes of science. A philosopher who advocates a theory of substances in which they are posited as necessarily independent and separate may justly face the accusation that he is biased by having never been pregnant and given birth.⁴

The ultra-faithful say that when we do philosophy we must in some sense epistemically outreach ourselves. We must face the epistemic danger inherent in making claims about all human beings while being, ourselves, members of many subgroups of human beings. While the ultra-faithful see the claims of philosophy as transcending subgroups of philosophers, the claims are made by people who themselves cannot. Philosophical claims are universal claims made about all persons by persons who are necessarily members of some subgroups of persons.

It is for this reason that distinct philosophical communities and traditions must welcome the coming to existence or growing visibility (whichever it may be) of African philosophy. The availability of work by thinkers who belong to different subgroups from the rest of us, and our ability to engage with these thinkers, gives us more viewpoints with which to remove the threat of bias and limitation that is inherent in universalizing as thoroughly situated persons. As philosophers, we want to come to grips with certain aspects of human existence, and the only way to do so is to engage in a continuing dialogue with other human beings, so it is clearly best that we get as many *relevant types* of human beings as possible involved in the conversation. By doing so, we reduce

⁴ The example comes from Christine Battersby (although she may not endorse my appeal to it). See *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (London: Polity Press/Routledge, 1998).

the everpresent threat that our adherence to certain universal claims is biased by our necessary membership in certain subgroups.

Thus, the ultra-faithful need not, and I think should not, disagree with the third position that Eze outlines, that of the anti-importer.

Cross-culturality and interdisciplinarity need not imply a unilateral exporting of the 'analytic' tradition to 'African' philosophy. Theories, instead, should be able to flow from one place to another precisely because no one culture or tradition of inquiry has a monopoly on the production of knowledge. [206]

The *epistemic* reason that the ultra-faithful should embrace philosophy in Africa is the two-way traffic of conversation that will emerge. As Eze recognizes, African philosophy will be at its best and most original when Africans are thinking hard about their own lives. However, what Eze seems not to realize is that in so far as they are doing philosophy, they will be making claims about the human condition, and in doing that they will be engaging in issues that are of concern to all of us. And other current traditions of philosophy will be much the better for engaging with Africans who are addressing questions of similar scope. Philosophical work is something to be given to Africa, but it is also something to be taken from it.

3.

Eze's own position is perhaps most deeply motivated by his conviction that philosophers should work in full awareness that their concerns, methods of defense, and ultimately their claims, all derive from a contingent past. He writes,

... traditions, including philosophical traditions, always develop in historical contexts. The traditions of modern styles of philosophizing, for example, would have been unthinkable outside the context of scientific development ... Clearly, changes brought about by the collapse of medieval worldviews, the emergence of the European renaissance, and the birth of an intellectual and scientific world order

which Enlightenment movements systematized and promoted, all contributed to the emergence of philosophy as we think of it, in the mainstream, today. [206-207]

The ultra-faithful can agree with Eze here, but I think that they should disagree about what lesson we should take home from this realization.

Eze's own response to the realization that even intellectual endeavors are made by individuals with contingent pasts is to narrow, weaken, or otherwise temper one's claims. Because we are particular human beings with particular pasts, our claims must be narrowed accordingly. We must limit ourselves to making particular claims about the sorts of creatures that have our pasts and are appropriately like us. African philosophy should pursue and make claims about Africans. This would mean abandoning the universality of the ultra-faithful for a less bold pursuit of characteristics of some subgroup, our subgroup, of persons. If the view of philosophy sketched above is correct, then Eze is suggesting that Africans not do philosophy at all.

An alternative response to the realization that intellectual endeavors are narrowly informed stems from recognizing that this realization is itself a universal claim. It is a proper subject for philosophical study *qua ultra-faithful*, a deep and potentially insightful claim about the nature of human beings. The ultra-faithful can recognize as a perfectly good philosophical project the one Eze ascribes to Vico: 'understanding the ways humans, as individuals and groups, constitute themselves in society: how we collectively think, feel, act, and live as historical, meaning-making, beings' [208]. Such a project may be informed by thinking about ourselves as particular types of persons (e.g., Africans, women), but I would suspect that all good philosophical work starts from such thinking. In so far as the project generates claims about the nature of human beings, then it is likely that it will be what we think of as philosophy. If the ultra-faithful come to embrace the claim that philosophy is undertaken by people who necessarily have contingent and particular backgrounds, then they will embrace it as a philosophical claim, a claim

to be explored and developed in the ultra-faithful tradition. It may be a claim that will have deep effects on how philosophy is done, but it is far from clear that those effects will include the abandonment of bold and *a priori* universalization about the nature of human beings. On the contrary, I suspect that it will simply take such discourse in a new direction.

Eze writes that ‘I continue to believe that...African philosophy may indeed be considered a representative voice of counterhegemonic histories of modern philosophy’ [204]. Is the suggestion here that African philosophy should take up the challenge presented by the realization that all practices are narrowly informed, that it become a tradition of philosophy that explores the nature of the effect that agents’ particularity has on their universally theorizing about the world? That would be an important and worthwhile change in the tradition of philosophy, but there is no reason to think that the ultra-faithful will not welcome it.

Rhodes University