Hegel’s Historical Denialism and Epistemic Eclipse in African Philosophy

Leye Komolafe
Department of Philosophy
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

African philosophy remains bedevilled by relics of Hegel’s racist chants against the rationality of Africans, and this situation deserves revisitation and reevaluation for reconstructive purposes. In this paper, I implicate Hegel’s concatenations as necessitating the reactive fervour within which a significant portion of the themes, thesis, and content of African philosophy is locked. This influence, which partially eclipses African philosophy, I term historical denialism. In an attempt to repudiate Hegel’s constructs, some philosophers in Africa seem ideologically contrived into developing or discovering an authentic philosophy for Africans, and in the process, advocate cultural essentialism as determinants of philosophy—at least logically. Averring that philosophy is not the sole representation of thought, I proceed by exploring other trajectories which could have informed a non-reactive and multifarious possibilities.

Keywords: African Philosophy, Cultural Essentialism, Decolonisation, Epistemic Eclipse, Historical Denialism, Reactionism.

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1 I rather consider the body of thoughts of what is referred to as African Philosophy as Philosophy in Africa. I must admit that this position is not uniquely mine. There are many philosophers who equally consider this as an apt conceptualisation.
2 This erratically means occupants of Hegel’s Africa proper.
they explicate calls for reengineering African philosophy for a political project. Eze, through the consolidation of a counter hegemonic thesis, christens ‘a representative voice of counter hegemonic histories of modern philosophy’ [Eze, 2001: 207]. Emmanuel Ifeanyi Ani equally recognises this re-active ardour of the development of African philosophy through an explorative approach contending that African philosophy is replete with claims of ideological motivation [Ani, 2020: 52].

It should be noted that at the formative stage of the formalisation of African philosophy, and upon activation of the reactive fervour, African philosophers were fractionalised into particularist/ universalists on the other side, contending that African philosophy is replete with claims of ideological motivation [Ani, 2020: 52].

While the former denotes philosophy as an enterprise constitutive of identified authorship, I presume it is the responsibility of universalists of the identified authorship to demonstrate that by doing it. Without prejudice to the universal categorisation or fixations. A case in context would be that if one reads Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze’s African Philosophy and the Analytic Tradition literally, the claim that philosophy is a critical enterprise entailing activities of conceptual clarification, is indicting of analytic philosophy—more prominently, the linguistic turn of the analytic tradition. Eze subsequently terms some defenders of this brand of universalism ‘the ultra-faithful’, referring to those committed to the analytic tradition in which they had been trained as professional philosophers [Eze, 2001: 207], while Ikuenobe [1997] conceives the universalist school’s presuppositions reductive and exclusive. Without prejudice to the universalist tradition, this is at least one strand of universalism. However, quite all universalists seem to agree that individual thoughts of a critical nature qualify as philosophy, thereby satisfying the condition of identified authorship.

Moses Akin-Makinde attempts an interventionist thesis on the existential dismissive subject of African philosophy, by contending that if African philosophy exists, then it is the duty of philosophers to demonstrate that by doing it. However, it could be argued that some assumptions that the controversy on the existence of the subject had been laid to rest [Makinde, 2010]. Within context and contestations, the re-fore, D.A. Masolo’s, African Philosophy in Search of Identity, V.Y. Mudimbe’s The Invention of Africa, E.A Ruch’s Is There an African Philosophy, Peter Bodunrin’s The Question of African Philosophy, and a compendium of essays in Second Order, a journal that bears a near-perennial witness to the debate on the existence of African philosophy, give careful illustration and historical references to the description of culturalism and universalism in African philosophy.

Recent anthologies such as P.H Coetsee and A.PJ Roux’s The African Philosophy Reader, Kwasi Wiredu’s A Companion to African Philosophy, Eze’s Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader, Adeshina Afolyan and Toyin Falola’s The Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy, Edwin Eteyibo’s Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy, and others, strengthen various debates and contestations on the themes, methods, and issues in African philosophy, as well as present demonstrative and contentious scopes of African philosophy from both camps, through issue-based, author-based, and sceptical explorations. Whether or not the debate on African philosophy has ended is not a decisive focus of the current discourse, hence, hibernating the question may be warranted here.

Now, a return to the initial identification of Hegelian historical denialism is germane, as African philosophy could either be logically, in a non-exclusive sense, conceived as originating first, as a reaction to Hegel’s racist view, or secondly as the philosophical induction of African worldviews.

In either case, Hegelian denialism is extended. The extension is direct in relation to the reaction to Hegel, and indirect in the second case signified by the presentation of African worldviews as philosophy. What makes the latter indirect is that Hegelian import is one of numerous sparks necessitating the attempt to christen African worldviews as philosophy, while in the first case is a direct reaction to Hegel’s racist postulations. Some Western philosophers, ethnographers, and anthropologists, especially those of the enlightenment era, had equally dismissed Africans’ capacity for critical reasoning by stating that certain conditions, especially ontological, are responsible for Africans’ lack of capacity for reasoning. That such racist thoughts are represented in the works of David Hume [1974], Immanuel Kant [2007], and Lucien Levy-Bruhl [1975] is egregious.

What the racist thoughts in the works of other identified thinkers demonstrate is that Hegel was not alone on this path of denialism, as Levy-Bruhl’s pre-logical argument exhibits some basis of sentiments against Africans’ capacity for critical reflections. In How Natives Think, Levy-Bruhl dismisses the possibility of Africans’ philosophical endeavour on the basis of assigning mysticism and pre-logicality to their thought process and understanding of the world [Kebede, 2004]. However, despite other thinkers’ assertions, Hegel is a ubiquitous figure within African philosophy discourses and conversations on philosophy in Africa. From dialectical conversations on the existence and practice of African philosophy, either through contextual interpretations, nationalism representation, cultural validation, rationality defence, methodological proposals, universalist critique, or particularists’ affirmation, I aver that a significant context and content of what is thus known as African philosophy seems to be continuously and surreptitiously shaped by Hegel’s repulsive thesis. And just as Olufemi Taiwo opines, Hegel’s ghost is yet to be fully exorcised in philosophical discourses in Africa [Taiwo, 1998].

One may ask why African philosophers’ attention is further drawn to Hegelian disruption. First, by tying his denialist postulation maximally and more ferociously than others to history, Hegel elicits enormous and perennial responses because an affirmation of a people’s history can be perceived as a major edifice on which cultural meaning-making notions are built. Acting on the contrary to repudiate a people’s space in the universal history, and in that process denying their rationality as Hegel did, is tantamount to a tragedy of delineating a people from humanity [Cabral, 1973]. Another perspective is in the contention that since reason is a major component of human existence, and philosophy is one of the most expressive modes of reason, then Hegel’s attempt at deactivating Africans’ rationality might be construed as irredeemably necessitating such rapt attention.

These expressions are not solely reflective in Hegel; they exist disjointedly in Hume, Kant, and Levy-Bruhl. However, Hegel’s position seems more comprehensively in this dismissal, and for that, the attendant centrality of Hegel in discourses aimed at affirmation of reason and history could hardly be prevented, I suspect.

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3 This refers to the period when African philosophy started developing as a professional endeavour.

4 In this essay, I will use culturalist more often as particularism aligns more with relativism. I take the culturalist position to be a major element of essentialism. This view makes it possible to apply concepts thoroughly by avoiding category mistakes.

5 If any respondent views this perspective as a reactive agenda of satisfying earlier queries of critics or denialists of African philosophy on grounds of unidentified authorship, I presume it is the responsibility of universalists of the identified authorship conviction to respond appropriately.
Implicating Hegelian Denialism in Epistemic Eclipse in African Philosophy

A critical implication that can be drawn from Hegel’s historical denialism is what I term epistemological eclipse. By eclipse, I mean a structurally restrictive and reductive conjuring of African philosophy. It is structurally restrictive and reductive, in the sense that it foregrounds African philosophy as a sole tool for asserting the rationality of Africans, while also contributing African philosophy into a reactionist model. Owing to the first reflection of the eclipse, in order to respond appropriately to Hegel’s claims, African philosophy implicitly takes the route of affirming the self, strictly, in a rational capacity. Hence, in a sense, African philosophy emanates as a reaction to Hegel’s claims against Africans’ capacity for reason. The restrictive character of the eclipse incidentally foreclosed other possibilities of conceiving African philosophy as the reactive fervour of Hegel’s demand. Epistemic eclipse accruing from Hegelian denialism also refers to incomprensive conception of philosophy in Africa. And closely tied to this are a plethora of proposals for radical racial boundaries and cultural essentialism, in discussing or formulating African philosophy.

Yet, without Hegel, the context of the development of African philosophy might or would have been different. There are many ways to articulate this, but for this discourse, I will expand the topic by interpreting epistemic eclipse through the notion of extant externalism. By permitting the reactive fervour, construction or evolution of African philosophy is willed to fervour, construction or evolution of African philosophy is willed to ernalism. By permitting the reactive fervour of Hegel’s claims against Africans’, while the former suggests a totalitarian assertion, the latter does not.

8 These terms are used cautiously with proper understanding that “African rationality” is not synonymous with ‘rationality of Africans’. While the former suggests a totalitarian assertion, the latter does not.

We could link the reactive dimension of African philosophy and the culturalist scope of African philosophy without logical inconsistency. In fact, taken from a normative point of view, the culturalist perspective of the essentialist bend aligns easily with a repudiation of Hegelian postulation, thereby suggesting we could create a necessary connection between culture and philosophy. One aspect of the normative dimension informs some opinion that the essence or duty of African philosophers is to promote African views and philosophies, or as philosophy. And the enclave that asserts this is by no means negligible [P’Bitek, 1970]. Such a proposal is both pre-emptive and reductive. But for Hegelian denialism, geographical isolation of thoughts championed by essentialists might not have been the case as it is now, as African philosophy may have arisen differently. To invert Leibniz’s dictum, the culturalist motif is not the best of all possible worlds. However, essentialists’ reverberating agenda tends to suggest it is.

A people have a right of responding to any charges they presume worthy of reaction, and I think placed within historical antiqui- ties, responses to Hegelian claims may appear pertinent. However, construing African philosophy as an end item of such reaction, in anticipation of justifying Afri- cans’ capacity for reason may be unnecessary. Yes, while philo- sophy entails application of reason, not all endeavours that accommodate reason necessarily qualify as philosophy. There are many ways to apply reason, and philosophy is just one of many of such categories. A reactive African philosophy must take this into cognisance in order not to undermine or foreclose other possibilities of constructing the subject.

Existing culturalists’ construction of African philosophy has not been able to convincingly dispel the claim that philosophy is not necessarily group thinking. If anything—and I mean by its basic constituent—philosophy often amounts to a critique of culture; an accidental tool for assessing cultural beliefs, but critically. However, when unchecked cultural enthusiasm is made a sacro- sanct precondition for philosophising, as some culturalists are wont to do, thoughts become fossilised, and in that process, the critical tool of philosophising might become moribund as pandering towards cultural thoughts becomes attractive. By ascribing philosophy to cultural worldviews or collective thoughts as some claim, the individuated thought pattern that swells the boundaries of philo- sophy is sandwiched. And through this, the sceptical and critical spirit of philosophy is not done good service, and neither is the aim of some culturalists satisfied beyond mere reactionism, symbo- lic as they may conceive it. Garbing cultural views as philosophy is unnecessary, and neither does doing so legitimately affirm ca- pacity for reason since, as earlier affirmed, philosophy is not the all and only means of affirming rationality. When philosophy is thus garbed, anachronism becomes not just only what Michel Foucault would call the regime of truth, but also a living burden to the philo- sophier.

We may further our query of the logic behind culturalists’ position on essentializing culture in deter- mining philosophy. Philosophical postulations often begin in scep- ticism, meanwhile, acceptance of cultural worldviews as philosophy seems to eliminate the question- ing capacity philosophy requires, as quite many culturalists, out of inclination towards the essential difference between Africans and Westerners are readily happy to signal communitarian ideals as the spirit behind African philo- sophical thoughts. It is suspicious to see where a sceptic fits in such a structure, let alone an individual critical thinker whose views run contrary to the seemingly-fossili- sed group thoughts and legislative assumptions. In the meantime, it is aggregable that our critical individual would otherwise qualify as a philosopher; this is if we consider critical and logical thoughts as ingrains of philosophy, and there are convincing preconditions to accept such perspective. How- ever, since our sceptic’s views run contrary to group thoughts, by the communitarian ideal of the cultu- ralists’ model, they would hardly be a true African, let alone being an African philosopher. After all, being African is ontologically premised, if we go by some cultural- ists’ construction.

Reconstructive Explications of How African Philosophy Might Have Been

Given that insufficiency of the reactive fervour is a major concern here, we may ask how an alternative view of the development of African philosophy could be expressed. We may also seek clarification on the reference of its conceptual or existential framework. In response to this, African philosophy, I contend, could have emerged as a compen- dium or grouping of the works of African thinkers on a particu- lar philosophical subject, or as a critical interrogation of any mat- ter without essentialism. Such an attempt could be similar or coinci- dential with the ascription of the term ‘German philosophy’, ‘Brit- ish philosophy’, ‘French philo- sophy’, and so on, to works produced by philosophers in those territories, regardless of the diver- sity of thoughts involved in them.

A major implication of the idea should be obvious by now. It is an insistence on the delineation of philosophy from cultural va- lidation, as though philosophi- cal thoughts may be developed within a cultural context, it does not translate to the validation of cultural edicts. We may cite re- volutionary works in the field as examples. John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* could be read, and ri
I am aware that this line of thought could be pushed into the purview of the analytic tradition in philosophy. It could be said that such an approach in Western philosophy is a number of criticisms of universal thoughts could describe it thus with varying degrees of scepticism. Here, Eze comes in handy in dispelling the analytic bend of such narrative. A charge of using Western categories in describing what philosophy is or ought to be—would be reminded by Saffo Kwanema—inappropriate as there ought to be a unique African approach to the study and development of African philosophy. African philosophy is authentic, Kwanema [1992: 29] would emphasise. Hegelian denialism, I presume, could be neglected while reflecting on philosophical issues in Africa, and this would not be restricted so as to assert that there is no African philosophy. We may admit that one of the current concentrations on Hegel’s remarks in Philosophy of History [1992] advocate. Matolino is right in saying the teaching of the history of philosophy without observation of the foregoing short-changes the discipline of philosophy, as there are observable cases of this approach. The history of philosophy should not entail haphazard representation nor be imbued by selective ideology of the sort Bernard Matolino [2020] and Mesembe Edet [2002] advocate. Matolino is right in saying the teaching of the history of philosophy ought to entail critical reflection of the discipline within which a philosophical postulation is made. Yes, this is true. Nevertheless, I think Matolino’s assertion is an extension of what a critical teaching of history ought to be, as no historian of philosophy worth their onion should be predisposed to teach the history of philosophy without proper elucidation of circumstances that influenced and could have influenced such postulations. If we search within the development of important texts in the history of philosophy, we would find some convergence on this approach. For example, taken in isolation, Bertrand Russell’s treatment of John Locke as one of the luckiest political philosophers in history based on the happenstance of Locke’s Treatises on Government and the concurrent battle for American independence, thereby earning his theory of rights a place in the American declaration of independence and its subsequent constitution. Russell’s identification of the theocratic concretisation of Aquinas’ legal theory as a probable consolidation of the latter’s Catholicism are quite a point of reference in this regard. Rationalism and empiricism comprehensively, perhaps, not only could Russell’s History of Western Philosophy be taken as a mere documentation of the history of philosophy in Western thought systems, but it could also be interpreted, for its contextual elucidation, as a philosophical commentary on the history of Western ideologies and its extended foundations. This is one way, and a convincing one at that, to understand and teach the history of philosophy with its numerous contextual possibilities, but not with a preconceived cultural fos-silisation.

Conclusion

The foregoing brings the thought in this paper to some concluding remarks. Should Hegelian denialism not be excoriated while furthering the conversation of Hegel’s other philosophical thoughts? Would a comprehensive approach to conceptualising African philosophy, in hindsight, not serve the purpose of re-engaging the history of the discipline? Would Hegel’s ghost not be expunged altogether within the matrix of alternative thoughts towards how things might have been? This, perhaps, should interest philosophers currently researching decolonisation in African philosophy, or decolonising philosophy in Africa.

Reactionist basis of African philosophy is questionable enough, and to add the claim of essentialism to the construction of the discipline, African philosophy gets locked into a closet of difference—within which exists a reasoning that attempts to separate Africa from the rest of the world. The paradox of this trajectory is that rather than the nationalists’ attempts to deduce the logic of racial difference which underlines the logic of racist charges against the rationality of Africans, African philosophers are on the contrary systematically reinforcing claims exhibiting similar disintegrative tropes through assertions of uniqueness and peculiarity, but with a different political shade. We find a sharp expression of such in Lucky Uchenna Ogbon-naya’s exploration and advocacy for a method of African philosophy and a subsequent proclamation that African ontology is different from Western ontology [Ogbonnaaya, 2018: 121]. We could once again allude to Leopold Sedar Senghor’s impulsive disintegrative claim that reason is Western, while emotion is African, as an existing example that glosses such thought also. Meanwhile, one should be warned of the invalidity of such an essentialist split.

In this paper, my expressed view of non-dependence on philosophy as the only source of reason is largely premised on a conviction that African philosophy need not be construed on the basis of reacting to wanton criticism of Africans’ rationality. Responsive constructions repudiating such racist claims abound, and it is critical to also dis-suade philosophical postulations that attempt to essentia-lise philosophy in the name of authenticity or Africaness. Instructional, this is, for discernive conception of African philosophy on the one hand, and pedagogical continuity of philosophy in general on the other.
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