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On Paulin J.
Hountondji
and The
Notion of
“Influence” in
Modern
African and
Africana
Intellectual
History: An
Interview with
Carmen De
Schryver (Part
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University and Africa editor at *Borderlines* interviewed Carmen De Schryver, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Trinity College on her work on Paulin J. Hountondji, and how to think about the idea of influence in African and Africana intellectual history.

Zeyad el Nabolsy: The Beninois philosopher, Paulin J. Hountondji, is a central figure in the development of African philosophy in the twentieth century, yet the reception of his work, especially in the Anglophone world, seems to be solely focused on his critique of ethnophilosophy. Other elements of his work have been neglected. One interesting thing is that you and I both work on Hountondji, yet we approach his work from very different angles. How do you approach Hountondji in your own work, especially in relation to the history of phenomenology?

Carmen De Schryver: My work examines the relationship between Hountondji and the founder of European phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. The main

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methodological in nature. A lot of the literature around the relationship between Husserl and Hountondji tends to read Hountondji 's work through the lens of Husserl's work, and it carries the implication that Hountondji is deriving a lot of his central concepts, including his conception of philosophy - but also, importantly, his conception of universality - from Husserl.

According to the received view, Hountondji is seen as taking this relatively narrow conception of philosophy as well as a Eurocentric and outdated conception of universality from Husserl. I think that Hountondji 's conception of universality is in fact far more interesting, and we can see that when we read Husserl through Hountondji. So rather than reading Hountondji through Husserl I suggest that we effect a reversal. This methodology allows us to see what is really unique to Hountondji 's thinking as well as what remains phenomenological in his thinking without presupposing that his work is merely derivative.

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Eurocentric thinker by his critics. In fact, I have seen some authors who call him “whitewashed” and so on. I think in part, this has to do with the way that his intervention in the debate about ethnophilosophy has been received. Can you speak a bit about this debate on ethnophilosophy?

C.S.: This was his career defining intervention, where he offers a critique of what he calls the ethnophilosophical elements of African philosophy in mid-twentieth century. The main target that he is concerned with is Placide Tempels who was at the time really considered the founding father of modern African philosophy because his book, *Bantu Philosophy* (1945), really puts the question of African philosophy on the table for a European audience. Tempels is arguing against the current paradigm at the time, associated with Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, that there is no such thing as philosophy on the African continent or indeed within the colonized world.

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modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo (this is the Luba population, but he calls them “the Bantu”), have a philosophical system. It seems like this is really a quite generous gesture, and one that then gets taken up within modern African philosophy, where there is an effort to tease out a philosophical system that belongs to an entire people, but that is taken to be implicit. Hountondji argues that this gesture looks generous although it is, in fact, fundamentally ungenerous. This population is seen to have a philosophical system, but it is fundamentally inferior to European philosophy, and it is almost an ersatz version of “real philosophy”. So, he says that what is happening is that we are combatting the myth propagated by Lévy-Bruhl with another myth that is no less colonial and no less harmful.

Now, as you rightly point out, he has been taken to task for reiterating a certain kind of Eurocentrism in that criticism, because in order to make this criticism he is essentially saying that what is called an African philosophy is not philosophy proper.

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requires literacy. And then there is this question “well, is that not just what the activity of philosophy has been called within the European continent, and it might be something else if we look elsewhere?”

Z.N.: Thank you. That's very helpful. Tempels also pathologizes Africans who he seems to think are deracinated in a certain way. In the sense that they are taking on some, in his view, “modern Western” cultural norms. And again, if we look at this in a more general colonial context, there was tremendous hatred towards Africans who wanted to assimilate some elements of “modern Western” culture. They were seen as dangerous individuals, unstable individuals, who no longer have a tribal network to stabilize them. Hence, it is understandable that Hountondji would think of this as a negative gesture. Even if Tempels himself had “good intentions”. So, I think Hountondji is doing something very interesting where he is not just looking at the intention of the developer of a certain

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C.S.: Yeah, exactly. And one thing to add there: how do we understand the place of the myth of absolute difference in this discourse? It seems that Tempels is really contending with Lévy-Bruhl. Lévy-Bruhl argued that there is a difference in kind and not degree between European colonizers and colonized populations. So, what Tempels is doing looks slightly more hospitable, but there is still this great deal of investment in this essential difference. The difference for Tempels is a developmental difference, but the difference still gets sketched out in terms of the particularity of colonized culture, a particularity from which Europeans cannot necessarily benefit or learn. This is contrasted with the universality of European culture and of course, Christianity. So, the fact that Tempels was a missionary is also very relevant here.

Z.N.: It is interesting because if you look at the way Tempels thinks about this issue, it appears that, for him, what is valuable about "Bantu philosophy" is that it is

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which, as a Christian theologian, he can try to show that Catholic philosophy has this autonomy in relation to the modern sciences. And he thinks that "Bantu philosophy" offers an example of uncontaminated philosophy. So again, there is this assertion of difference, but it is relativized in the sense that he thinks that there are a lot of similarities between Bantu ontology and Christian theology, or a specific form of Christian theology, but he also thinks there is an absolute difference between a disenchanted worldview and Bantu philosophy. And it is almost as if he wants to cordon off the Bantu people's implicit philosophy, so that it does get contaminated by modern science. And obviously, Hountondji is very much hostile to this project for a variety of reasons. One reason is that he thinks that if you look at educational policies across different colonies, if we look at French colonies, British colonies, Portuguese colonies, there was a clear emphasis on the depriving Africans of literary education and depriving them of education in the modern natural sciences.

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look at the notion of "influence" that you sketch out in your work, because you do something very interesting in terms of understanding how intellectual influence is supposed to work. On the one hand, it is clear that Hountondji is influenced by Husserl, and he says as much in his autobiography, and he wrote his dissertation on him. Yet on the other hand, you show that the way that people have conventionally understood the notion of influence in the relationship between Hountondji and Husserl is not quite correct. Can you elaborate on that?

C.S.: I think that, as you say, there is no question, that there is a relationship of influence here. However, I think a relevant point of comparison is the way that we conventionally tend to discuss influence within a European context. Within the tradition that I mostly work on, namely, phenomenology, we think about, for instance, people like Jean Paul Sartre or Martin Heidegger. Both were influenced in a significant sense by Husserl, but we also think

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break with Husserlian phenomenology. So, they are also philosophers in their own right. When the Husserl-Hountondji relationship gets discussed, by contrast, there is often a sense that we are just encountering sheer repetition of Husserlian ideas. And that really does a great disservice to what is original in Hountondji's own thinking. So, one tool that I develop to counteract this tendency is rather than beginning with a European philosopher and then reading, in this instance, an African philosopher through that light, what I suggest is that we begin with the thinking that has been marginalized, i.e., begin with Hountondji.

Z.N.: I think we can relate this to wider debates in African studies. Hountondji himself touches on this problem which is that in a lot of theoretical discourse on African phenomena, the African continent is treated as kind of a data mine, but it is not treated as a place where you go to encounter theories which can be applied, not just to African phenomena, but even to European

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is a kind of asymmetry operating here and Hountondji himself of course, was, and is, very much active in combating this approach.

C.S.: Yeah, absolutely. So, part of the background to this methodological intervention that I make are really these debates within African studies, that Hountondji is a part of, but also within decolonial theory more generally. I am thinking of people like Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Achille Mbembe, where there is really an emphasis on what is sometimes called de-marginalizing or re-centering. So, beginning from the perspective of the Global South and thereby also really relativizing the European perspective and no longer treating it as the only legitimate perspective, or as the central perspective. This speaks to this ongoing project of provincializing Europe, I think in several really interesting ways, but it has various applications across different disciplines.

Z.N.: One question that I think you and I are both interested in is that if

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like decolonial theory broadly speaking, there is something very interesting in Hountondji, which is that despite the fact that he is a vehement critic of Eurocentrism and Eurocentric approaches to philosophy, he does nevertheless seem to have a rather narrow conception of philosophy. I was wondering if we can discuss that, because that is a way in which I find Hountondji to be quite interesting because he does not seem to think that the response to Eurocentrism is to say, 'well, look, a lot of these things that you thought were not philosophy are in fact philosophy, we just need to broaden our definition'. That does not seem to be the route he is taking. I was wondering if we can speak a bit about this.

C: Yeah, that is, to me, really the central question in Hountondji scholarship, and there seems to me to be a productive tension and I mean, productive from an interpretive point of view between on the one hand, as you rightly say, this seemingly rather narrow conception of philosophy, which he

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critique, but then on the other hand, and this is something that I see, especially in the later work, this emphasis on and commitment to a kind of epistemic openness, which is closely linked for him, as far as I understand him, to the philosophical gesture being one of engaging with every possible insight in order to get to a truly universal form of knowledge. This ongoing work of traversing the margins of philosophy itself being the work of philosophy. So that is where he seems to be more in conversation with some of these decolonial philosophers where the demand is that we need an expanded conception of philosophy. But this is of course in tension with what you see, especially I think in his earlier work, with respect to the emphasis on the necessary conditions that something would have to meet in order to count as philosophy in the first place.

Z.N.: What is his conception of philosophy?

C.S.: I see his conception of philosophy as really having to do

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connected, and this to me is what I have always regarded as what philosophy at its best is, i.e., something that aspires to this universal reach. But then this raises all these interesting questions. How do we get there and what do we include and what do we exclude? I think that is how I would characterize it most broadly, i.e., that philosophy characteristically has to do with the attempt to raise claims that are valid beyond the context of their utterance. So, this, I take it, also informs the critique of ethnophilosophy where part of the problem with ethnophilosophy is that it really takes on the form of ethnology. In that, what is characteristic to ethnology is describing a worldview, but a worldview that does not make any claims on the population that does not hold it. But philosophy does make a claim on whoever it is speaking to no matter what their identity is because that is characteristic of the endeavor. That would be my first shot, but I would be interested to hear what you have to say about this.

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different perspectives and this actually shows the fecundity of Hountondji's thought because you approach it through a genealogy of a certain strand of phenomenology; Africana phenomenology. And I am interested in it from the standpoint of theories of science. Sometimes Hountondji seems to be saying that really philosophy is just a theory of science (including history and sociology of science). And that is interesting because when you try to think about why he could think that he gives a Neo-Kantian answer.

There are places where he seems to be saying, 'yes, all of those ethnophilosophers are doing something interesting, but they all ignore Kant'. His message seems to be 'look, it does not really matter if you are an African philosopher, you cannot do rationalist metaphysics while ignoring Kant and just go on your merry way'. He seems to have a very neo-Kantian conception of philosophy as a kind of dynamic historical epistemology of science. I want to return to a point which you raise in your work: namely overcoming philosophy. And I was wondering how do you think this

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understanding philosophical discourse, but have been sort of suppressed in philosophical discourse? Because one of the things that Hountondji is interested in is sociology of knowledge, specifically sociology of scientific knowledge in the peripheries. So, he has actually quite a sophisticated account of how canons are formed, of how certain geographical locations come to be seen as centers from which theories are disseminated across the world, which is something that philosophers tend not to think about a lot.

C.S.: On this question of overcoming philosophy, or as I believe Hountondji puts it, 'transgressing its limits', I think there is a really interesting number of themes in Hountondji's work, which really have to do with, insofar as philosophy is the field that aspires to universality, this kind of premature dismissal of certain forms of knowledge as non-philosophical, just in their very nature, and often because of their non-European geographical provenance, is really a disservice to philosophy, and means

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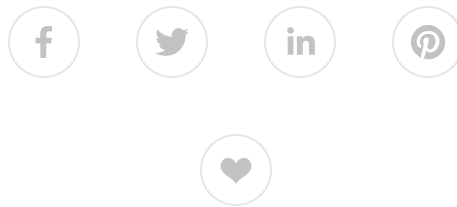
not yet merited. So, philosophy cannot be what it pretends to be, unless it is much more open than it has previously been to what it has routinely dismissed as just specific or just ethnological. This is really where I see his later work on what he calls "endogenous forms of knowledge" as extraordinarily interesting and as requiring this real methodological openness to forms of knowledge that have not yet been recognized as legitimate forms of knowledge.

And that has, I think, a lot of interesting implications for contemporary debates regarding canon expansion, regarding these meta philosophical questions about what philosophy even is and what it means to break with this overly European conception of philosophy. I see him doing that, I would say in two ways to, to just sum this up. One is geographical, so transgressing the limits of philosophy means going beyond the self-conception of philosophy as both universal and as just European, so challenging that paradox. But then there is also this

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philosophy's limits, where
philosophy continually has to
engage with forms of knowledge
that might not yet be regarded as
philosophical.

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this interview.



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