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African philosophy and the method of ordinary language philosophy

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One of the vibrant topics of debate among African and non-African scholars in the 20th and 21st centuries centered on the existence of African philosophy. This debate has been described as unnecessary. What is necessary is, if African philosophy exists, we should show it, do it and write it rather than talking about it, or engaging in endless talks about it. A popular position on the debate is that what is expected to be shown, done and written is philosophy tailored along the stereotyped and paradigmatic sense peculiar to Western Philosophy. Interestingly, a non-African scholar, Barry Hallen argues that using the method of ordinary language philosophy, African philosophy is philosophy *per se*, and should be recognised as such. The focus of this study is to analyse what Hallen refers to as ordinary language philosophy and explain how it authenticates African philosophy as unique 'species' of philosophy, thus, putting an end to the controversy on the ontology of African Philosophy.

Key words: African philosophy**,** language philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

The debate on the existence of African philosophy, which is of central concern to most philosophers of the 20th and 21st centuries, Africans and non-Africans alike, is according to Makinde, unnecessary. What is necessary is, if African philosophy exists we should show it, do it and write it rather than talking about it, or engaging in endless talks about it (Makinde, 2007). As evident in the debate, what is expected to be shown, done and written is philosophy tailored along the stereotyped and paradigmatic sense peculiar to Western philosophy. However, Hallen argues that using the method of ordinary language philosophy, African philosophy is philosophy *per se*, and should be recognised as such. The focus of this study is to analyse what Hallen refers to as ordinary language philosophy and explain how it authenticates African philosophy as unique 'species' of philosophy. In what follows, this work explores the use of language as a tool to understand the epistemological, metaphysical, ethical, social and political beliefs and world-views of a human society.

Language as a tool for understanding Human Society

One of the peculiar and essential features that distinguish human beings from other species of beings that exist in the universe is language. As Pinker (1995) puts it, "language is the product of a well-engineered biological instinct". Moreover, it is through it that human beings can shape events in each other's brain with exquisite precision…simply by making 'noises' with our mouths, we can reliably cause precise new combinations of ideas to arise in each other's mind". Different kinds of people, with different languages, cause their speakers to construe reality in different ways. Hence, as many as there are different kinds of human beings, there are different kinds of languages through which reality is being construed. It is in this respect that language, as a tool in the formation of metaphysical and epistemological ideas, developing social and moral consciousness of a people, becomes important.

However, given the nature of language as "a complex, specialized skill which develops in the child spontaneously without conscious effort or formal instruction and is deployed without awareness of its underlying logic, is qualitatively the same in every individual, and is distinct from more general abilities to process information or behave intelligently" (Pinker, 1995). It follows that for language to serve as a pathway to understanding a people, its underlying logic must be made explicit. This is possible when the language is well understood, analyzed, and interpreted using the rules, logic and principles that are

are peculiar to the language itself. Through this analysis, some hidden facts about the people would be revealed. Moreover, analysis takes the language to a higher-level which stretches the reach of the language beyond its commonsensical boundary, thereby making it a technical, formalized and specialized enterprise. In this wise, one would need to learn the rule of the language for effective usage. The effect of this enterprise is that the conception of reality, knowledge, social and moral principles that guide a people would be different. In most cases, the agents of this technical, formal and special enterprise are alien to a language. In fact, the enterprise is, in most of the time, resisted. Despite this resistance, it naturally takes place.

The effect of this transformation process, through which languages are subjected to formal analysis, interpretation and clarification and by which human beings view things differently, is also explicit in human thoughts and beliefs. In other words, human thoughts and beliefs, which are made explicit in languages that had undergone this transformation, are themselves refined. As it is argued by Horton (1967), Ruch(1974), Oruka (1975), Wiredu (1991) and Makinde (2007) to mention a few, traditional African languages are not subjected to formal analysis, interpretation and clarification. This explains why African thoughts, beliefs, world-views and their conceptions of reality are considered pre-rational, pre-logical, anti-scientific and primitive. For some, it is on the basis of this non-development of critical and analytical inclinations that the possibility of African philosophy is denied (Makinde, 2007 and Wiredu, 1991).

Hence, prior to the contemporary African scholars' exemplary works or writings on what indeed qualified to be African philosophy, mere descriptive accounts and typical generalizations about 'the traditional world-views of African people, which were predominantly communal and largely unwritten'(Oladipo, 2000) were taken as African philosophy. In fact, as Wiredu (1991) puts it, the conception of African Philosophy, which is largely christened 'ethnophilosophy', was "implicit in the life, thought and talk of the traditional African". The statement of this conception of African philosophy is found in the works of Mbiti (1969), who notes that "'African Philosophy' here refers to the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act or speak in different situations of life". This is the conception of African philosophy challenged by Oruka (1975), who argues that ethnophilosophy is not philosophy because it does not meet some characteristics, which constitute the neces-sary conditions in determining what is philosophy in the exact sense The position that ethnophilosophy is not worthy of being referred to as African Philosophy be-cause it is not an 'adequate fulfillment of philosophy's historic function' is also canvassed by Bodunrin (1981) Hountondji (1983) and Makinde (2007) to mention a few. Arising from this challenge is the debate on the possibility or otherwise of

African philosophy, a debate that took the central stage in the larger part of 1970 all through to 1990. A new orientation popular among the contemporary African philosophers is based on the assumption that philosophy is 'a rational and critical study of which argumentation and clarification are essential elements' (Oladipo, 2000). Hence, since the documentation and records of African traditional thoughts, beliefs and world-views do not share these essential elements, they are not 'African philosophy'. However, this does not suggest the denial of these thoughts, beliefs and world-views as non-existent. What is denied, according to Oladipo (2000), is "that the unanalytical narratives of these (thoughts, beliefs and world-views) given by the scholars of the first orientation in African philosophy can produce an authentic modern African philosophy".

The minimum requirement that would make African ethnophilosophy worthy of the name 'philosophy' is when it subjects African belief systems to careful interpretation, clarification, analysis and critical evaluation. Hence, African philosophy can only "be seen as growing out of a history of systematic reflection on widespread, pre-reflective beliefs about the nature of humankind and its purposes; and about our knowledge of and our place in the cosmos" (Appiah,1992). In other words, it is when African traditional beliefs are subjected to systematic and critical analysis in which reasons and arguments play a central role that we speak of African philosophy. This marks the development of the analytic tradition in African philosophy. These analytical attributes include, but not limited to, what Wiredu (1989) describes as "the habit of exactness and rigour in thinking, (the pursuit of systematic coherence) and experimental approach".

Notwithstanding this metaphilosophical issue of the existence and nature of African philosophy, there are concepts such as, beauty, being, causation, evil, God, good, illusion, justice, knowledge, life, meaning, mind, person, reality, truth, right, understanding, and wrong, used by Africans to express their views and convictions. These concepts need to be analysed and examined. These tasks are in the domains of critical and analytic philosophy. The point of the analytic approach to African philosophy is not really concerned with whether or not Africans are able to analyze and synthesize the traditional beliefs; "of course, there might not be in every society people who pursued a systematic critical conceptual inquiry, but at least in every culture there is work for a philosopher, should one come along, to do" (Appiah, 1992). The point of the existence of analytic tradition in African Philosophy is that there are Africans, and non-Africans alike, who have arisen to this challenge of pursuing a systematic conceptual inquiry. Given that most, if not all of the contemporary African intellectuals,who laid the foundation of analytic orientation in African philosophy were all trained in the traditions of the West, the Western analytical framework and methodology is predominantly used in redefining African philosophical orienta-

tion. However, it is argued by some of these philosophers that there is the need to establish a conceptual framework or a methodology characteristic of a philosophy that would merit being considered African (Wright, 1977). While for some, there is no need to search for a distinctively African conceptual framework or methodology in the field of philosophy, the analytic orientation in African philosophy should follow the already established analytical pattern exemplified in Western philosophy. The features of this well established systematic aspects of Western philosophy according to Polycarp (1997) are: No reference to specific individual as sources of justificationIt studies individual view, not collective views, and confronts them in terms of logical argumentation, intellectual discourse, and debate It depends on literacy and a system for writingIn this respect, what derives from the analyses and syntheses of African traditional thoughts, beliefs, world-views, concepts and ideas is that they are only philosophy if they pass through the scrutiny of formal philosophy, which "is characterized by universal rationality, manifested in critical analysis, rigorous and abstract reasoning and argumentation" (Ikuenobe,1997). Granted that the tools of analysis are germane for the understanding of African world-views, thoughts and beliefs, the pertinent questions for Hallen are 'with what method should this be done?' Is it appropriate to use alien methods, using technical words and meanings which are foreign to African languages to analyze and clarify its concepts, synthezise its beliefs and conceptions of reality with "the habits of exactness and rigour in thinking, the pursuit of systematic coherence and experimental approach so characteristic of science?" (Ikuenobe 1997). Prior to Hallen, the only predominant answer to these questions is that there are Western standards and criteria which are not favourable to Africans. This is because Western languages, meanings and concepts, are used as paradigms of rationality to assess and evaluate African languages. Consequently, the apparent disparity between these two languages is taken to suggest illogicality and primitiveness of, of course, African languages. Whatever conception of reality, world-views, moral precincts and political systems built with these languages are regarded as pseudo. Hence, the analysis of how concepts are used in African languages and the metaphysical, epistemological, ethical and political beliefs and conceptions derived from such approach is not regarded as worthy of the title 'philosophy'. This is evident in 'the minimal, very minimal impression they have made upon the discipline of academic philosophy as a whole' (Hallen, 1996,1998). African philosophers are therefore, being urged to urgently cultivate these virtues, "not just because they are in themselves intellectual virtues but also because they are necessary conditions of rapid modernisation." (Ikuenobe, 1997).However, Hallen argues that the analysis of how concepts are used in ordinary language is an essential methodology of analytic philosophy. Such an approach he maintains constitutes "African philosophy, in so far as it may deal with the analysis of African languages (or meanings) and the evaluation of African beliefs expressed in these languages" (Hallen, 2002). In his view, deriving a philosophy from African languages will not begin until we can correctly understand and translate the relevant meanings of concepts in ordinary African languages. In the next section, this work shall critically explicate Hallen's method of ordinary language analysis, what it consists in, and how he puts it into practice in order to understand African beliefs, world-views and conceptions of reality as embedded in their philosophy. Barry Hallen and the method of ordinary language analysis in African philosophyAccording to Hallen (1996), the thesis of an ordinary language philosophy is characterized as follows: An emphasis upon *ordinary*, *common* and *collective uses* of language Greater importance being attached to *description* and to *analysis* rather than to criticismThe key words in the first feature of ordinary language philosophy, as italicized above, suggest that there are some other uses of language, which are not ordinary, common and collective. In this sense, usage of language follows some regimented or strictly controlled pattern. Any strange use of language that is contrary to this technical and strict sense of language is considered primitive, illogical and unreasonable. What the ordinary language philosophy suggests is that this strict and technical use of language, which is the feature of the mainstream philosophy, is not the only way of doing philosophy. As earlier asserted, language is a medium through which a people's beliefs, thoughts, traditions, customs, etc., are made known. Hence, every constituent part of a people's language counts if we are going to understand them. So every word, concept, sentence, etc., of a language is important and should be subjected to analysis, explication and clarification within the context of its use. This context would explain the background information and collective agreements that aid the description and analysis of the people in all its ramifications. The second feature of ordinary language philosophy removes what Polycarp calls the 'formal' or 'universalists' conception of philosophy, in which philosophy is construed 'as a systematic, rigorous, universal, and rational discipline', in which conceptual analysis, criticis-- of philosophy. What Hallen advocates is that while these features of philosophy are, though acceptable, theyare not final. Philosophy would still accommodate description and analysis of beliefs, thoughts and tradition. Hallen (1985, 2001) believes, and justifiably so, that Africans have the "prerogatives to describe, analyse and define issues of rationality generally as they relate to Africa's intellectual heritage", and the products of utilizing these prerogatives are, in their own rights, philosophy. What this implies for Hallen is that, analytic African philosophers should chart a new course of doing philosophy or enact an alternative system of reasoning, which may be peculiar to analytic African

philosophers and which can be developed into coherent and novel philosophical attitudes.In fact, there are arrays of philosophical articles and books written by African and non-African philosophers that underscore the points of these criteria of the method of ordinary language philosophy. The kind of issues, for example, generated by the concept of 'ori' (in discussing human destiny) among scholars interested in the Yoruba metaphysical world views- suggest that embedded in ordinary, common and collective use of languages- are a number of overarching themes in specific areas of philosophy, such as epistemology, ethics, logic and metaphysics (Makinde, 1985, Gbadegesin and Segun, 1998). In the same manner, "utilizing source materials derived primarily from oral literature – proverbs, parables, divination verses, etc. – philosophers, situated for the most part in Africa, set out to analyse the meaning of a concept that occurs in an African language and that they believe to be of philosophical prepossession and interest" (Hallen, 1998). In essence, without recourse to the rigorous critical and scientific approach of the West, African philosophers have analysed and described their metaphysical world-views, epistemological and moral views.Hallen enumerates six specifics that encapsulate the details of the methodology and effects of ordinary language philosophy in analytic African philosophy. Each of them is critically explicated.The first is that "the study of ordinary-language usage would provide philosophers with an independent, empirical data-base from which to undertake the systematic analysis of African meanings" (Hallen, 1996). To start with, it may be correct to argue that if the method of ordinary language philosophy is applied to African philosophy, it would be possible to gather appropriate first hand data needed to locate the systematicity and rational texture of African philosophical thought. However, what sort of data would this be? Would it be different from the resources derived from some sort of technical usage of an African language – say Yoruba – such as proverbs, parables, divination verses and incantations? If the kinds of 'independent and empirical data' Hallen has in mind are what derive from these resources, this paper doubts whether mere analysis of ordinary and common Yoruba words, concepts and expression can help. This is because these kinds of technical usage of Yoruba words, concepts and expressions as the case in proverbs, parables, divination verses and incantations, etc., require some skill in mastering their usages and meanings. However, this study surmises Hallen's point to be that if we pay close attention to some common and ordinary use of Yoruba words, concepts and expressions, apart from technical usages, it would reveal a collection of issues relating to metaphysics, epistemology, logic and ethics, which ordinarily are considered non-issues. For example, Hallen and Sodipo's (1994) analysis of Yoruba words, such as 'inu', 'ogbon', 'suuru' and 'ara', in their discussion of 'The keys to the structure of a Yoruba theory of the self' opens up other interesting problematic

issues that relate to the Yoruba understanding of the self, which were hitherto considered unproblematic. Moreover, until Makinde opened discussion on the philosophical implications – metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and even social and political – of the concept of 'ori', which features prominently in every Yoruba discourse on personality, hardly was it considered worthy of philosophical analysis. Again, an analysis of some words in Yoruba language, like 'ní láti', 'gbódò', in statements like 'O gbodo lo' or 'O nilati lo', reveals the inherent logical implication of 'mustness' or 'necessity' in the usage of the words, which may not be explicit to a potential Yoruba speaker (Adewole, 1990,1991). Hence, if the assumptions, beliefs, and sometimes common sentiments that underlie every word, every concept, and every expression in a language is subjected to analysis, it will be evident that there are embedded in the language many issues that are capable of engaging a philosopher.

However, it could be argued that when, as a result of analysis, the assumptions, beliefs and all sorts of sentiments (ranging from cultural to traditional) that underlie the meaning and usage of an ordinary language are understood, it is possible that the meanings of a word, a concept or an expression derived when it is subjected to the method of analysis could only accentuate the peculiar meanings and usage of such words, concepts and expressions for the particular users of the language. It is possible that this peculiar meaning could be strange when compared with some standards of meaning and other paradigms of rationality. However, this study supposes that for Hallen, this would not be a problem. This is because this relativity reveals facts about the indigenous and independent conception of reality, beliefs about the existence and nature of the universe, etc, which are peculiar to the people whose language is being studied. In fact, as Hallen (1996) notes in relation to African languages, "standard of verification, moral paradigms, aesthetic criteria embodied in and expressed by discourse in an African language – all provide examples of the human genius that invents languages and thereby imposes empirical and theoretical order on immediate experience". Hence, an African is entitled to invent her own meanings and usages, which might be peculiar to her.One question that may arise from the study and analysis of ordinary, common and collective usage of an African language could be: 'what is the essence of raising problems where there is seemingly none?' For example, hardly would anyone raise any question if a Yoruba person attributes his or her success in an endeavour to his or her 'good ori'. However, when we begin to analyse the concept of 'ori', a seemingly unproblematic concept becomes so entangled with many philosophical issues that make it difficult to use the concept without thinking twice. The question is – what is the use of a method that finds problems where there are none, and thereby impair communication and understanding among people? In other words, the method of

ordinary language analysis will introduce into a language, which is seemingly problem free, some traditional problems of philosophy that raise questions on some of the unquestioned common assumptions, beliefs and sentiments that aid agreement, communication and social relations in the society. For the method to be adequate, it could be said that it ought to proffer solutions to an existing problem and not create new ones. However, I think Hallen's second specifics of the ordinary language philosophy takes care of this concern. This is that 'as once was the case with English-language and ordinary-language philosophy, there need be no presumption that this kind of study will either solve or dissolve the traditional problems of philosophy.' It is not important that the method of ordinary language philosophy is able to solve problems. Apart from the fact that discussions and analyses of the ordinary language being philosophical in their own right (which is the position being canvassed by Hallen), "the conscious attempts at analysis, criticism and systematization is also called philosophy and the men who are concerned with that activity are called philosophers." What Hallen wishes to establish is that contrary to popular opinion that only the latter qualifies as philosophy, both are methods of doing philosophy. As pointed out by Hallen, one of the reasons why what is said to 'constitute a significant part of analytic African philosophy today has been ignored' is because it is adjudged to be nothing but mere anthropological descriptions, analyses and evaluations. However, this discourse assumes that Hallen is right to argue that this erroneous judgment is arrived at because the mainstream philosophers do not appreciate the rich African resources upon which they base their discourse. In other words, the western paradigms of rationality and/or of philosophy are considered ubiquitous, and are used to rank African discourse 'relatively low on the cross-cultural comparative scale'. In other words, what this study assumes is that, Hallen hopes to show with the focus on the role and value of ordinary language analysis in the African context is not that Africans should embrace ethnophilosophy as African Philosophy simpliciter, but that it will serve "as a tool that will enable philosophers to come to terms with pieces or portions of African fields of discourse." Hence, following the lead of ordinary language analysis, philosophers are able to appreciate that 'traditional thought systems (and a host of other beliefs and values, which had been described as 'precritical, prereflective, prelogical, prescientific and proto-rational etc') and as well can be a source of critical (…), speculative hypotheses about certain common human situations, institutions and problems that should be of interest to the academic philosopher." This is ordinary and common words, concepts and expressions used in packaging and presenting the beliefs, values and cognition of a people, are made accessible and acceptable to philosophers.

Moreover, in an attempt to correctly analyze a language, it is important to identify and be guided by the

essential vocabulary, paradigm cases, examples of correct and incorrect usage, empirical content and criteria for the correct application of a term etc which is peculiar to the language. With this in place, "philosophers would have at their disposal systematic, rather technical and fairly rigorous guidelines for the analysis in their own right (and for the translation into English, etc) of African meanings". This discourse further assumes that Hallen fell back into this unjustified mentality of translating languages to English as a test of acceptability. The fact that there are Yoruba words, which if translated to English would have more than one meaning, and would alter the immediate meaning, usage and understanding suggests that in studying an ordinary language, it is not really necessary to translate into English language. However, the fact that there are some deep senses of meaning, usage and understanding of ordinary and commonly used Yoruba concepts like 'inù jìn', 'ènìyàn' and 'ayé' etc, which suggest that there are some kind of technicalities of the language, which if not mastered by a non-native speaker, would inhibit philosophical discourse in the language, potentiates the need to study Yoruba language in just the way it is used in the ordinary and common sense.

As Hallen rightly observes, "most of the existent philosophical analyses of individual concepts in African languages take their source and reference materials from oral literature – a concept as it occurs in proverbs, parables, poetry and divination verses etc." This trend suggests that oral literature is the only source of data or materials that is worthy of philosophical discourse in Africa. However, using Hallen's The Good, the Bad and the Beautifulas as case study, Doris notes that Hallen still believes that "we must look to "ordinary language" – and not to the vaunted discourses of myth or the luminous surfaces of Yoruba art objects – if we hope to locate the systematicity and rational texture of Yoruba philosophical thought". In the same work, Hallen amply demonstrates that "on the level of everyday experience, Yoruba discourse in its own right reveals itself to be conventionally commonsensical, rational, and empirical." Hence, introducing a methodology that places its emphasis directly upon the use of the concept in the 'give and take' discourse or the everyday use of language should 'enable philosophers to site in the field of discourse (or conceptual network) of which it is a part and thereby to identify more clearly the criteria governing usage'.

Conclusion

On the whole, when concerned with ordinary language, "we are concerned primarily with the language we all speak in our everyday living, and surely we would ordinarily speak." Hence, what the ordinary language philosophy canvasses is that philosophy should not be limited to the rigorous, critical and technical activities that characterize Western philosophy. In fact, it is when a peo-

ple's beliefs, world-views and positions, expressed through ordinary language are accessed and assessed through philosophical technicalities that are alien to the people that such beliefs, world-views and positions are considered mistaken. It is on this basis that Hallen denies a common mode of cognition, and canvasses an African system of cognition peculiar to them. In fact, he warns that "if one of the responsibilities of African philosophy today is to re-evaluate the intellectual heritage of Africa's indigenous cultures, then this study would also advocate that it frees itself from this cross-cultural rational standard which is so indisputably of Western origin". The point is that ordinary language philosophy enables looking inwardly in order to appreciate and explore the invaluable and inestimable philosophical data inherent and peculiar to the language which, if subjected to description and analysis, can be developed into coherent, unique and novel philosophical ideas and ideals. Hallen in most of his writings, shows that there are enough philosophical issues and some solutions to most philosophical problems in indigenous African systems of cognition, which are embodied in African languages.

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