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Teaching African philosophy alongside Western philosophy: Some advice about topics and texts

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In this article, I offer concrete suggestions about which topics, texts, positions, arguments and authors from the African philosophical tradition one could usefully put into conversation with ones from the Western, especially the Anglo-American. In particular, I focus on materials that would make for revealing and productive contrasts between the two traditions. My aim is not to argue that one should teach by creating critical dialogue between African and Western philosophies, but rather is to provide strategic advice, supposing that is a sensible goal to adopt.

Introduction

In the first instance, my target audience for this article is a philosopher trained mainly in the Anglo-American tradition, and to a lesser degree the Continental one, who is seeking guidance about how to integrate African philosophy into her curricula. Which African philosophers have been influential? What kinds of debates between Western and African philosophers would be interesting and fruitful?¹ What have African philosophers published that would be accessible to students? I seek to answer these kinds of questions here, by pointing mainly to articles, chapters and excerpts that could be assigned in a class (downplaying reference to books and other lengthy discussions).²

I also intend this article to be of use to a student whose lecturers are focused strictly on the Western tradition. Such a student might want to prompt them to reconsider the content of their curricula, or might care to broaden his horizons on his own beyond the lecture hall.

Those who have been trained mainly in the African tradition and do not know the Western one well might take something away from this article, but not as much as the previous sorts of readers. I use much more space to identify themes and approaches from the African tradition, usually presuming readers will be *au fait* with the Western concepts I mention.

I do not at all spend time arguing that one ought to have the goal of teaching African philosophy alongside Western philosophy. I have found it revealing and productive to do so, but I do not argue that it is justified on balance in the face of criticisms, let alone that it is ideal. Doing so would require a separate discussion in itself, one that takes up hotly contested topics such as what reasons there are to Africanise the curriculum and how to respond to epistemic injustice. Although those are fascinating and important theoretical topics,³ this article is strictly practical, offering concrete suggestions about which topics, texts, positions, arguments and authors from the African philosophical tradition one could usefully put into conversation with ones from the Western, supposing that is one's reasonable aim.

1 In this article I freely use geographical labels to signify what has been salient in a certain region for a long while that differentiates it from many other regions. For an articulation and defence of such an approach, see Metz (2015a).

2 For African philosophical sources (in English) that have been influential or are important, and without reference to Western ones, the reader might see a lengthy annotated bibliography (Metz 2011), from which I have occasionally borrowed some phrases. For discussion of how Western-dominated non-philosophical fields such as psychology, sociology, economics and the like have been influenced by African philosophy, and how they usefully could be, see Metz (2017a).

3 Some of which I have addressed in Metz (2015b, unpublished).

Another presupposition of this article is that the reader is interested in English-speaking writings. Again, I do not argue that African philosophy should be instructed solely by using written texts and then ones in English; it is simply that I have the most advice to give about that dimension of African philosophy, and also believe that most readers will particularly want that. Other ways of teaching African philosophy would be to listen to recordings of sages (or to interview them in person), to use texts written in an indigenous sub-Saharan language, or to engage philosophically with an art-object such as a poem, song or dance. I have not thoroughly explored these avenues myself, and do not mean to disparage them by failing to provide guidance about them. For all I say here, they could be equal or better modes of instruction in terms of conveying African ideas or in African ways.

Finally, I presume the reader is keen to become aware of sites where the African and Western traditions clash. I highlight differences between the two in this article, and only rarely mention similarities. What I have most appreciated about my engagement with African philosophy over the past dozen years is that it has given me new ways of understanding the nature of reality and value that demand to be taken seriously, views that had not often come my way when studying Anglo-American and Continental philosophy. My goal is to do what I can in this short article to enable the reader to likewise broaden her horizons.

Below I begin by providing a brief characterisation of salient overarching themes and approaches in African philosophy, and by suggesting some broad pictures of the field that might be of use to a newcomer. Then, I structure the rest of this article according to several of the major branches of philosophical debate. Specifically I address: meta-philosophy; epistemology; metaphysics; philosophy of mind; personhood; morality; and political philosophy.⁴ I cannot aim to be comprehensive, given the limits of this article and the number of topics discussed in it, and so for each major heading I usually suggest just two or three angles that the reader might explore.

Overviews of the field

Readers from the Western philosophical tradition who are unfamiliar with African philosophy can expect to find three major approaches in the latter that differ from much of the former. For one, sub-Saharan thinkers tend towards relationality, characterising reality and value in terms of dynamic, interactive properties between beings or forces, and not so much static properties intrinsic to individuals. For another, they often prize vitality, life or strength, traditionally understood in terms of an invisible energy that has come from God and permeates everything that exists in varying degrees. For a third, they routinely appeal to “spirituality”, or what is more carefully called the “invisible” or the “insensible” world, taken to include at least God and ancestors, wise founders of a clan who have survived the deaths of their bodies and who continue to guide the clan.

These are three salient orientations of academic philosophy informed by the worldviews of black peoples indigenous to Africa, which claim is not meant to suggest that they are either “essential” to African philosophy or utterly unique to it. My point is that they are salient in it and tend to make it distinct from, and to provide fertile ground for debate with, dominant trends in the Western tradition.

Even if one elects to focus on a narrow issue, say, how to allocate political power or whether one can know the mind of God, it would naturally be ideal to have some sense of how that issue is set in a broader context. Those seeking brief but fairly comprehensive overviews of African philosophical themes (as opposed to thinkers) might try Kwame Gyekye’s essay “On the idea of African philosophy” (1995, 189–212), which canvasses ontological, epistemological and axiological views recurrent amongst sub-Saharan worldviews, and Kwasi Wiredu’s “African philosophy in our time” (2004a), which introduces the reader to the field with headings such as “Morality”, “Democracy”, “Conceptual Decolonisation”, “Relativism” and “Time”.

Meta-philosophy

For much of the 1980s and 1990s, African philosophy was substantially preoccupied with issues regarding the nature of African philosophy itself, in particular what makes something count as

4 This focus means I do not address a number of sub-fields such as the philosophies of art (Anyanwu 1987), education (Metz 2015a) and religion (Metz 2017a).

“African”, but also what counts as “philosophy”. Regarding the latter, a typical Anglo-American understanding of the nature of philosophy is something like: argumentation in written texts about fundamental issues of human existence (and perhaps that is “universal” in the sense of being valid for all human beings). If that is what philosophy essentially is, then Africa has lacked philosophy until fairly recently, one reason being that a large majority of sub-Saharan cultures were oral, without a literate tradition.

Can there be a full-blown philosophy without a written corpus, and instead merely conversation? Or can that exist without systematic argumentation, and instead something like an interpretation of metaphysical or ethical perspectives? For affirmative answers from those in the African tradition, see Wright (1984), Oruka (1990) and Serequeberhan (1994); cf. Hamminga (2005a).⁵

Another interesting question is what the point of philosophy should be. One recurrent strain of thought in the Western tradition is that it can be apt to pursue some knowledge for its own sake. Recall Aristotle’s understanding of theoretical wisdom as a major constituent of flourishing; according to him, it is worth knowing about the nature of the “beings composing the universe”, which is “extraordinary, amazing, difficult and divine, but useless”, not counting as a “human good” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1141a20–1141b9). More recently, Bertrand Russell has also prized philosophical awareness for its own sake, as roughly a state of mind that is intrinsically good: “through the infinity of the universe the mind which contemplates it achieves some share in infinity” ([1912] 1959, 159). Indeed, according to Edmund Husserl (1935), the European intellectual tradition is uniquely characterised by a propensity to adopt what he calls “a purely ‘theoretical’ attitude” that is “thoroughly unpractical”.

The sub-Saharan tradition, in contrast, is noticeably pragmatic about knowledge, in the sense of invariably thinking that it must serve the function of improving people’s quality of life. When African philosophers have reflected on what the aim of philosophy and other academic enquiry should be, they have usually maintained that it ought to liberate African peoples, politically, economically and intellectually (e.g. Serequeberhan 1994; Wiredu 2002a) or more broadly that it “must be relevant to the current needs of the masses” (Nabudere 2006, 7). Roughly speaking, in terms of values often deemed fundamental in the African tradition, philosophical scholarship should either foster communal relationships between people or enhance their vitality, where metaphysical knowledge of the nature of the cosmos appears unlikely to do either to any significant degree. Should one stop assigning, say, the antinomies in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* to one’s students because it is not relevant and responsive to context?

Epistemology

Although under-developed compared to most other fields in African philosophy, there are fascinating approaches to epistemology that merit being compared and contrasted with the Western tradition. In the following, I address the issues of truth, justification, sources of knowledge and the content of knowledge.

Despite its well-known problems, the correspondence theory of truth has been the dominant one in the Western philosophical tradition. Wiredu contends that this view is a nonstarter in the philosophy of the Ghanaian Akan people because of their linguistic structure (2004b). According to him, the theory cannot be expressed by the Akan, raising fascinating issues not only about truth, but also the relationship between words and concepts.

Turning to justification, one interesting area of debate is about whether one has good epistemic reason to rely on tradition or the testimony of elders in an African context, or whether one should invariably seek out kinds of evidence that are internal to one’s mind. Of course, recent Anglo-American philosophy sports externalist and social accounts of justification; the point is that Western philosophy has also featured a major internalist strand that has been invoked to criticise “pre-modern” approaches to belief formation. One African philosopher has drawn on contemporary Western thought about the nature of justification to defend traditional African approaches to belief

5 Perhaps it is worth noting that some in the African tradition have given negative answers to these questions, most famously Bodunrin (1984) and Hountondji (1996), who look forward to a real African philosophy being developed.

formation, arguing that elders may be viewed as “reliable sources” who are reasonably believed even if one lacks an internalist kind of evidence for their claims (Ikuenobe 2006, 175–213).

Even where internalism is not forsaken, some African philosophers deny that argumentation is the essential sort of mental evidence for an individual to acquire in favour of a belief.

From the African point of view, arguments are a sign of weakness, of lack of power and vitality. A good, forceful truth does not need arguments...As far as truth is concerned, strength is not primarily felt through muscles but through age and wisdom. Wisdom does not exist of stockpiles of arguments (and is instead) felt as a force (Hamminga 2005b, 61).

On the one hand, the suggestion here seems to be that a justified belief is the product of a wise person’s judgment, while, on the other, a belief to consider true is one that “is not argued for but *felt*” (Hamminga 2005b, 61). Regarding the latter point, some philosophers, appealing to Leopold Senghor’s (in)famous views of the differences between white and black cultures (1964), maintain that intuition and emotion can provide epistemic justification independent of analysis. Consider the claim that the “African world of art is as fully knowing in its own right as the world of science” (Anyanwu 1987, 259).

The view that tradition, testimony, intuition or emotion can be sufficient grounds for belief is something of a stereotype—even if an interesting one—when it comes to African epistemology. However, two scholars who engaged in analytic philosophical exchanges with Yoruba shamans in Nigeria found that many indigenous Yoruba people believe that one knows something only if one has seen it (Hallen and Sodipo 1997). For them, to have evidence enough to know a proposition, it is not sufficient to have been told it by an authority; instead, first-person empirical verification of a proposition through perception is necessary for knowing it, a fairly unexpected and extreme form of internalism.

When doing Western epistemology, it is standard to consider sources of knowledge such as perception, introspection, reason, testimony and memory, and not much, if anything, else. However, should one add to this list paranormal cognition such as extra-sensory perception and divination? Some African philosophers appeal to distinctions and theories in contemporary analytic epistemology, as well as experimental findings, to defend the claim that paranormal cognition is a “mode of knowing”, as many traditional sub-Saharan societies have held (Mosley 2004; Ajei 2014).

Finally, when it comes to what is known or how to know it, African epistemologists often maintain that some kind of holism is particularly, or even solely, revealing. At least if reality is ultimately composed of forces that are thoroughly interrelated in complex ways, it appears that to understand the nature of something, one must consider it in terms of how it changes in relation to other forces and, especially, to the whole (Ramose 1999a).

This approach differs from the typical Western ones of analysing a thing’s nature in terms of its fixed, intrinsic properties and of trying to ascertain causal laws between local variables. Most strongly,

[t]here is no way to study forces in isolation...This implies that it makes no sense whatsoever to do controlled experiments in order to acquire knowledge of forces. In this view, Western scientific method lacks every shred of meaning. Experimental isolation of forces is unthinkable (Hamminga 2005b, 72).⁶

The puzzle of how to deal with *ceteris paribus* clauses when formulating scientific laws is some evidence in favour of this sort of holist approach to knowledge, beyond the putative metaphysical ground in terms of complexities of forces.

Metaphysics

When considering the ultimate nature of reality, Western philosophers have taken seriously the existence of evidence for God and a soul, even if these positions have been in serious decline.

6 This understanding of what is involved in knowing something is reminiscent of recent characterisations of East Asian approaches to it as contrasted with typical Western ones (e.g. Nisbett 2003). One might also compare it with the dialectical interpretation of knowledge that one neo-Hegelian has thoughtfully expounded (Kosok n.d.).

Traditional African religions posit entities (or rather forces) similar to those that monotheists believe in, but also contend that there exist insensible (“spiritual”) realities such as witchcraft, reincarnation and ancestors. Is the evidence for these as good as that for God and a soul, or even comparable to the evidence for the existence of theoretical entities such as sub-atomic particles? Some African philosophers argue for affirmative answers to these questions (Brown 2004; Menkiti 2004).

Another interesting debate concerns the nature of causation. As is well known, Western science is often defined in contrast to teleological explanations of the sort popular during the medieval period. Many African philosophers believe that a complete explanation, at least of most influences on human beings, would involve an articulation of both the physical mechanism that brought them about and the intention of an invisible agent who used that means. One argument for this account of a good explanation is that explanations are appropriate at least partly insofar as they serve interests, e.g. the physicist and the psychologist will provide different, but complementary, accounts of why a teenager started a fire. Perhaps a certain kind of teleological explanation, one appealing to the purposes of invisible agents such as ancestors, is essential to satisfy certain interests in an African context (Sogolo 1993), say, making people feel secure or supporting their culture.

Philosophy of mind

Under this heading it would be natural to discuss the mind-brain relationship, but African perspectives tend to be recognisably either dualist or functionalist. Supposing that the reader would prefer a greater “clash” of approaches between African and Western philosophers, she should turn to the topics of personal identity and free will, both of which involve claims about the nature of the self.

Regarding free will, recall the combinations of views salient in the Western tradition. On the one hand, if one holds a soul-based account of the self, it is usually conjoined with an indeterminist (namely, libertarian) account of free will, and, on the other, if one thinks that the self is physical, one typically accepts (hard or soft) determinism. Interestingly, in at least the Ghanaian philosophical tradition, one finds an insensible (“spiritual”) account of the self paired with a soft determinist account of free will (Gyekye 1995, 85–128, 163–169; Wiredu 1996, 113–135).

When it comes to the essential nature of one’s self, Western philosophers often think of it as an internal stream of consciousness, such as a chain of experiences, memories, desires and values. In contrast, African philosophers, and sub-Saharanans more generally, tend to conceive of the self relationally, as something constituted by, and changing in virtue of, relationships with others (Mpfungu 2002).⁷ For one way to see the plausibility of this approach, consider that it is reasonable to hold that who one is could not have been other than to be the one conceived by two particular gamete donors at a particular time. If those kinds of facts constitute who one essentially is, then why not also the community in which one has been reared? This is part of what John Mbiti, the influential theologian and historian, means when he famously remarks, “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am” (1990, 106, and 110, 113, 123, 141; see also Odimegwu 2008, 116–121).

Personhood

There are two kinds of debate that African philosophers often place under the heading of “personhood”. One is a descriptive or metaphysical enquiry into what a human being is and how she functions, while the other is a prescriptive or axiological enquiry into how to become a good person or what constitutes human excellence.

As the previous two sections suggest, when it comes to the former issue, African philosophers frequently believe that there is an essentially insensible dimension to human agency, one that came from God, can outlive the death of the body and is often thought (particularly by those in West Africa) to have a destiny. One eminent African philosopher argues that there is no non-question begging way to choose between this theory of human nature and a more Western, physicalist one according to which “a person is a body with a mind that resides in a brain” (Appiah 2004).

⁷ For a similar perspective in an East Asian context, see Markus et al. (1996).

With respect to human excellence, it is common for sub-Saharan ethicists to maintain that it is largely constituted, if not exhausted, by communal relationships (Nkulu-N’Sengha 2009) or by initiation into and acceptance of a clan’s way of life (Menkiti 1984). That conception of virtue is at the moral core of what southern Africans mean upon saying that “a person is a person through other persons”, such that those who are anti-social (either wicked or isolated) are often described as “non-persons” or even “animals”.

Although Western conceptions of virtue often include positive relationships, e.g. friendship and justice in Aristotle, they also tend to include many individualist or non-relational properties. Aristotle himself prizes temperance, toughness and knowledge, which do not appear to involve other-regard essentially, and many Westerners would be inclined to think that a person is better, the more authentic, unique or creative she is. These are *prima facie* counterexamples to the characteristically African conception of human excellence in terms of communion or community (discussed in Metz 2012; Tshivhase 2013), and it would be revealing to consider how one might plausibly respond to them.

Morality

Turning from human excellence to morally right action, the African tradition offers three major approaches that differ from egoism, utilitarianism, Kantianism, contractualism, discourse ethics, divine command theory, the ethic of care and a Foucaultian appeal to self-formation. After sketching these three African theoretical approaches to which actions are required, permissible or forbidden, I note how some applied ethical debates have been influenced by them.⁸

One of South Africa’s Nobel Peace Prize winners, Desmond Tutu, has summed up ethics from a characteristically sub-Saharan perspective this way: “Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague” (1999, 35; see also Metz and Gaie 2010). Harmony or communion is well understood as the combination of relating to others by identifying with, and exhibiting solidarity towards, them. Roughly speaking, right acts are those that promote or honour such relationships, ones of “I participate, I share” (Tutu 1999, 35), where wrong ones are discordant, involving separateness, subordination, harm and indifference.

Another moral theory one finds suggested by the African philosophical literature is the principle that actions are right insofar as they promote vitality. For example, one encounters these principles: “[A]ny action which increases life or vital force is right, and whatever decreases it is wrong” (Kasenene 1994, 140); and “[A]ll people and activities that diminish life are in all cultures considered as evil, while those that promote it are regarded as good” (Iroegbu 2005, 447). Although vitality or life force is traditionally conceived as an invisible energy that has come from God and constitutes everything that exists, the ethic *prima facie* merits consideration independent of that metaphysic.

The third prominent approach to right action in the African literature is Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism (1997, 35–76), according to which acts are right insofar as they promote the common good, without treating people’s dignity disrespectfully in the process. According to a more recent statement from him in an encyclopaedia entry on African ethics (2010), “[a]ctions that promote human welfare or interest are good, while those that detract from human welfare are bad”. Despite the consequentialism, this is not Western utilitarianism, partly because Gyekye focuses on needs (rather than pleasure or desire satisfaction), but mainly because he prescribes advancing welfare only in ways that do not harm or degrade individuals in the process.

These kinds of principles have grounded a wide array of applied ethical analyses that differ in interesting ways from typical Western perspectives. Most often, sub-Saharan applied ethics has appealed to a basic value of either vitality or communion and then teased out its implications for a contemporary debate about law, medicine, business or the environment. I briefly sketch some approaches to these four topics, but note that there are two large anthologies on applied African ethics that the reader could consult (Iroegbu and Echekwube 2005; Murove 2009).

8 Some of the phrasing in this section is cribbed from Metz (2017b).

When it comes to legal punishment, one recurrently finds an approach that focuses neither on deterrence nor on retribution, the two major players in Anglo-American philosophy. Instead, a characteristically African concern for communal relationship includes the judgment that wrongdoing should be responded to by human beings in a way likely to foster reconciliation between the offender, his immediate victims and the wider society (Tutu 1999; Louw 2006; Krog 2008).

In a medical context, consider the issue of confidentiality. Suppose that a basic duty either to foster life or to prize communal relationships entails weighty obligations on an individual to aid others, particularly (extended) family members. In that case, medical professionals are probably permitted to disclose information about a person's sickness to them, supposing it threatens to impair his ability to fulfil his obligations towards them (Kasenene 2000, 349–353, 356; Murove 2005, 170–171), a perspective that is far from the default position among Western bioethicists.

Regarding business, there have been many calls by African ethicists to share power in light of indigenous values. When it comes to decision-making, a major theme has been that those in charge of a firm should consult widely with workers before formulating policy, if not enable and encourage the latter to participate democratically in its formulation (Nussbaum 2003; Khoza 2006). Unilateral, top-down instruction of the sort typical in a Western firm is often viewed as wrong in itself to some degree, a failure to create communion or to release the energy available from workers.

Finally, whereas Western environmental ethics usually ascribes either full moral status to animals (utilitarianism, biocentrism) or no moral status to them (Kantianism, contractarianism), African perspectives recurrently offer something different. A common sub-Saharan approach is to think in terms of a “great chain of being”, where human beings are more important than animals because of the former's greater life-force, but where animals nonetheless matter morally because of their noteworthy vitality, such that we have direct obligations to them to avoid treating them in harmful or degrading ways (Etieyibo 2017). In addition, African thought about nature more broadly is often relational, appealing to analogies with a family and using talk of “harmony” and “community” (Oruka and Juma 1994; Behrens 2010), an approach that differs from both the individualist and holist environmental views that dominate English-speaking philosophy.

Political philosophy

Western political philosophers are used to thinking of democracy in terms of an adversarial contest between political parties, in which groups jockey for a majority of votes that would legitimate policy-making. However, a fascinating salient theme in African political philosophy is that this is an unattractive form of democracy, say, for failing to foster communion or to advance the common good. A better democratic polity would be consensual, in which legislators must obtain unanimous agreement on at least all major decisions affecting citizens.

Traditional sub-Saharan societies often sought to resolve political disputes through consensus. Although (male) monarchs were common, it was uncommon for them to make unilateral decisions and to do so on a self-interested basis; rather, they tended to seek unanimous agreement among deliberating subjects. For instance, sometimes a king would do what was unanimously recommended by a group of (usually male) elders who had been popularly appointed and who sought to resolve conflicts in a way that was to the benefit of everyone (Bujo 1997). Other times, a king would have all those affected by a dispute talk under the proverbial tree until they found a way forward that all could accept (Ramose 1999b). These cited African political philosophers have drawn on such traditional practices to advance ideas about how to allocate political power in contemporary states. Instead of a political party having the legal rights (roughly) to govern in proportion to the number of votes received and then to determine law, perhaps a Constitution should indicate that a statute is valid only if all parliamentarians have agreed to it (see also Gyekye 1997, 130–131, 142; Wiredu 2002b).

After consensual democracy, the next most influential and important contribution that the African tradition has made to political philosophy concerns the bearer of rights. The bearer of human rights is an individual, and the standard position in the West is that they are grounded on the dignity that inheres in a person, say, because of her capacity for autonomy. However, many sub-Saharan thinkers

have held that in addition to human rights, rights of groups should be recognised, with some (e.g. Ake 1987) contending that the latter have priority.

This approach to rights has informed regional law in the form of the African (“Banjul”) Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (Organization of African Unity 1981). While its preamble and initial articles routinely speak of individual “dignity” and “respect”, and while it includes the stock human rights to be found in the (largely Western) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), the Banjul Charter also posits peoples as the bearers of certain rights, e.g. not to be dominated and to resist domination as well as to access natural resources.

Would a consensual democracy be realistic, or is majoritarian rule alone feasible? Might what appear to be group rights be reducible to those of individuals, or is the bearer indeed a group, such as a people, that is distinct from its members at a given time? Like the other contrasts between characteristically Western and African philosophies explored in this article, I hope the reader finds these to merit exploration in the classroom.⁹

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