

With this issue, we are launching a new section co-directed by Daniela De Leo and Giorgio Rizzo, dedicated to research works revolving around applied phenomenology and hermeneutics. This initiative is in collaboration with the Department of Philosophy and Applied Ethics at the University of Zambia and the International African Center of Applied Phenomenology at Saint Bonaventure University.

The aim of this section is to create an interdisciplinary and international platform for dialogue, focusing on exploring the challenges and applications of phenomenology and hermeneutics in both theoretical and practical contexts, with particular attention to African and global cultural and social dynamics.

*The Overcoming of the Particularist/Universalist
Thesis in African Philosophy*

The Place of Thinking

Odera Oruka, in his “Four Trends in Current African Philosophy”¹, classifies the works of African philosophers into “ethnophilosophy”, “philosophical sagacity”, “nationalist-ideological philosophy”, and “professional philosophy”. And as concerns the last group, he divides it, notwithstanding the lack of any uniformity, into two other subgroups, namely, “particularists” and “universalists”. If according to Kwasi Wiredu, universalists see African philosophy as «coterminous with philosophical investigations having a special relevance to Africa»², particularists agree with the conception that no philosophy is African philosophy unless it deals with a specifically African theme or topic. The appeal of the particularist position consists in the fact that philosophy should be intended as the criticism of the ideas we *live by*. For this reason, introducing topics such as logic and ontology, the theory of substance and the idea of immortality — that is, philosophical positions belonging to

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¹ H. Odera Oruka, “Four Trends in Current African Philosophy”, in A. Diemer (ed.), *Philosophy in the Present Situation of Africa*, Franz Steiner, Wiesbaden 1981, pp. 1-7.

² K. Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1996, p. 149.

another philosophical tradition — into African philosophy one will miss the point about the existential necessities of cultivating African philosophy. On the other end, however, the universalist agenda seems more inclusive than the particularist one and for this reason a serious study of African culture ought to be *critical* and *reconstructive* in order for the result to qualify as philosophy. Moreover, every contemporary African philosopher should try to exploit all the philosophical insights and resources that come from abroad. All philosophizing, at any rate, involves assertions, explanations and justifications that require an attitude common to all philosophers. Africans, according to this point of view, cannot pretend to *uniqueness* or *purity* in the matter of philosophy, since they have been influenced, for better or for ill, by other cultures³. It is apparent from the foregoing discussion that there are two basic schools of thought on the question of definition of African philosophy. The first maintains that African philosophy is the traditional philosophy that has been inherited by today's Africans through their oral traditions. And according to this view, the task of a contemporary African philosopher is to collect, interpret, and disseminate African proverbs, folktales, myths and so on. The second school of thought maintains that African philosophy ought to take cognizance of modern developments in knowledge and reflection. Those who advocate the second approach to African philosophy do not believe that in modern times philosophy can remain a communal body of thought. Hountondji, to make an example, has been particularly keen on emphasizing this aspect of the matter when he notes that many African philosophers were churchmen, trying to find a psychological and cultural basis for rooting the Christian message in the African's mind without betraying either. The consequence was that these authors were compelled to conceive of philosophy on the model of religion, as a permanent, stable system of beliefs, unaffected by evolution, impervious to time and history, ever identical to itself⁴. It seems as though the word "philosophy" automatically changes its meaning as soon as it ceases to be applied to Europe or to America and is applied to Africa. Applied to Africa, philosophy is supposed to designate no longer the specific discipline it evokes in its Western context but merely a collective worldview, an implicit, spontaneous, perhaps even unconscious system of beliefs to which all Africans are supposed to adhere. Because of the historical accident of colonialism, the main part of the philosophical training

³ Cfr. A. G. A. Bello, "Some Methodological Controversies in African Philosophy", in K. Wiredu (Ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Blackwell, Oxford (UK) 2004, p. 263.

⁴ Cfr. P. J. Hountondji, "African Philosophy: Myth and Reality", in T. Serequeberhan, *African Philosophy. The Essential Readings*, Paragon House, New York 1991, p. 115.

of contemporary African scholars derives from foreign sources, but philosophical truth has to be disentangled from cultural contingencies⁵. Kwame Appiah asserts that if African philosophy shares neither the problems nor the methods of Western philosophy, one is bound to wonder what the point is of calling the activity “philosophy” at all⁶. The ways the universalist thesis can be construed are different and can be summarized in the following:

- 1) Philosophy is the body of knowledge which philosophers have discovered or hope to discover;
- 2) Philosophy is a set of enduring problems or topics;
- 3) Philosophy is the method of inquiry which governs the practice of any activity which may legitimately be called philosophizing;
- 4) Philosophy is something everyone can do.

Propositions (1) and (2) construe the universality of philosophy to consist in its *content*. Proposition (3) takes the universality of philosophy to consist in its *method*, meanwhile proposition (4) construes philosophy as a universal attitude among peoples⁷. Paulin Hountondji, to make an example, construes the universalist thesis along methodological lines, appealing to the essential unity of a single discipline even if admitting that there may be differences of philosophical content from one country to another. His main concern is to exclude from philosophy communal worldviews which are not critically examined⁸. However, critics of the universalist thesis see it as an attempt to universalize a Western particularity, allowing the West to dictate both the rules and the agenda of the philosophical enterprise. Western *logocentrism*, according to this view, would be an alien paradigm for an African philosophy since it would force on an African context cultural and historical views that can be found only among Western philosophers. These critics claim the methodology as well as the content of African philosophy should be radically different from Western philosophy and they doubt that there is either a universal philosophy or a universal method to govern the activity of philosophizing. According to Charles Anyanwu, for example, it is not

⁵ Cfr. K. Wiredu, “On Defining African Philosophy”, in T. Serequeberhan, *African Philosophy. The Essential Readings*, cit., p. 98.

⁶ Cfr. K. A. Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York 1992, pp. 92-3.

⁷ Cfr. J. M. Van Hook, “African Philosophy and the Universalist Thesis”, in *Metaphilosophy*, 28, 4, 1997, pp. 389-390.

⁸ Cfr. See P. J. Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Hutchinson, London 1983.

possible to accept the view that there is *one* Philosophy which is valid for all men.

As a matter of fact, philosophy is determined by what people have lived⁹. As well stated by Kwame Gyekye, the philosophical enterprise is not an *ivory tower* intellectual pursuit, unrelated to the practical problems and concerns of human society.

A celebrated allegory of the most well-known Platonic dialogue, *The Republic*, shows that the intellectual ascent, beginning in the world of the ordinary human being, toward the attainment of philosophical knowledge or understanding or appreciation or insight ought to be followed by a *return* to that world for the purpose not only of enlightening its inhabitants but also of helping to deal with concrete problems thereof, such as the problem of ruling a society¹⁰. If it is true that philosophy is concerned with the whole range of the human experience, providing conceptual interpretation and analysis of that experience in order to respond to the basic issues and problems generated by that experience, it is also true that much of the importance and thrust of the conceptual interpretation done by philosophy will depend on the kinds of ideas, issues and problems that attract the attention of philosophers belonging to a geographically and historically determined *context*.

We should avoid, in accepting the context-dependence of philosophy, the idea, favored by a strict rationalism, that this intellectual activity has to be guided by strong rational parameters without which it resolves into contradictions or, even worse, into a kind of verisimilar *fiction*.

Even without falling into an ethnological approach, we may agree with the idea that, as declared by Marc Augé, there are «le discours, les initiatives, les revendications les plus personnelles en montrant comment, par-delà leur prétention à l'originalité, ils sont dictés, directement ou indirectement, par une pensée pré-personnelle, un ensemble de norms et d'exigences qui sont toujours déjà là, antérieures au sujet qui s'affirme ici et maintenant»¹¹. In such case, philosophical analysis converges with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, that of the *linguistic relativity*.

⁹ Cfr. K. C. Anyanwu, "The Idea of Art in African Thought", in G. Floistad, *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey*, Martinus Nijhof, Dordrecht 1992, p. 237.

¹⁰ See K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity. Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, Oxford University Press, New York 1997, pp. 16-19.

¹¹ P. J. Hountondj, "Une pensée pré-personnelle. Note sur 'Ethnophilosophie et idéo-logique' de Marc Augé", in *L'homme*, 2008, 185-186, p. 359. Cfr. also M. Augé, *La construction du monde. Religion, représentation, idéologie*, Maspero, Paris 1974.

The Notion of Place

There is a theme common to any philosophical investigation: the question of being, of being as such, $\text{ov } \eta \text{ ov}$. Much of my argument can be put in the terms of the idea that the question of being is indeed permeated by a more *radical* question, namely the *question of place*. Questioning place means to investigate into the *topos* in which all human experience, practical or theoretical, has always come to pass. Yet what place is and how it ought to be understood in order to go beyond any narrow-minded debate on the particularism or universalism of philosophy is what is here in question. More generally, when it comes to place, the tendency is either to assume the notion, or to assume some specific reading of it, or else to view it as a secondary and derivative concept. Place has increasingly been seen as secondary to space—more in particular, to a particular notion of space as homogenous, measurable extension — and so “reduced” to the notion of position, simple location, or mere site. What is then the place of philosophy, if it has one? The place in which we cope with any philosophical issue, be it Italy or Zambia, the place in which philosophical questioning first arises, is the place in which we first *find ourselves*. And that place is not an abstract world of ideas, *eidōs*, not a world of mere sense-data, not a world of theoretical objects. Being-in-a world, *In-der-Welt-sein* using the Heideggerian jargon, means finding ourselves already “in” a place, already given over to it and involved with things, with persons, with our lives, with particular affective and emotional atmospheres. I am aware of the fact that being in South Italy or in Zambia is not without consequences to my thinking attitude. Just to mention something that makes a difference, I experience, while being in Zambia, my second home, an inclination towards a way of thinking which favors existential issues or practical interests rather than theoretical or even worse “metaphysical” constructions. I feel also a stronger involvement of my body, my *Leib*, in doing philosophy in Zambia as if my thoughts were more responsive to the emotional and affective atmospheres surrounding me, more responsive to the *chair* of the world surrounding me. Questions of philosophy are questions in which the philosopher is herself already entangled, already bound up so that philosophy cannot be understood anymore as an abstract and impersonal undertaking, but drawing on the philosopher’s own existential situation. Philosophy, then, is not something to be applied *to* life, but much more it comes *out* of life and is lived as a *part* of life. The idea that there is a simple relation of “application” that holds between a prior theory and a practical situation is, therefore, to be disproved. Our existence is a matter of the way

our being is *already* given over to a *situatedness* in the world from which we cannot stand aside. And situatedness, as such, always opens out a set of possibilities (theoretical, practical, artistic) that can present themselves as questions (it is enough to remember the Kantian questions: “What can I know?”, “What should I do?”, “What can I hope?” each of which will take on a more specific form in each cultural, geographical and social context). In a Zambian context, to make an example, knowledges, actions and hopes can be expressed in *forms* that can be very different from the European relative ones, so different that we can dare to admit that they are incomparable with each other as unique and singular *language games*, to adopt Wittgenstein’s jargon. Common to every human being is also the possibility to question the way he/she should understand himself/herself as the sort of being who can stand in relation to the horizon of the world from which questions like those above may arise. The notion of situatedness (of the human being) can, in this way, solve the fruitless debate between universalists and particularists since it recalls at the same time the idea (Heideggerian) that our “being-there” is instantiated in a community, a geographical and cultural context, and the unquestionable (ontological-transcendental) *factum* that the “being-there” embodies our (universal) innermost nature. Situatedness, moreover, may be construed in temporal terms, since it is an opening into a future from out of a determined and pregiven past. And, in addition, it has also an essentially *topological* character inasmuch it is precisely a gathering, a “happening of belonging”, in which elements are brought together within a larger domain or region in way that also allows those elements to appear in their distinctive ways. Living for a long period of the year in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, I experience the gathering of the elements which surround me in a way very different from that lived by in my town, Lecce, Italy. First of all, the relations of *nearness* and *remoteness* are, in some way, restored in their ontological dignity: I can feel, experience, and live remoteness in a city (Lusaka) in which distances are felt as more noticeable in comparison with places of the European context in which distances are like deleted (fast trains, buses and airports everywhere). Now if we agree that the distinctive question of philosophy is the question of being and if we admit that this question as such is inseparable not only from the question of being as it arises in respect of any specific being but also from the question about our own being, then it is easy to mark the *topological* character of the philosophical undertaking since beings are very different from context to context. Everybody, not only professional thinkers, is given over to such questioning inasmuch everybody is given over to a certain situatedness, to a world, to a “there”. We are gathered

into a place so that questionability always presupposes *topos* and vice versa. Such situatedness may also become apparent to us through our moods and affectivity, through the way we “find ourselves” (what Heidegger calls in *Being and Time*, «Befindlichkeit»). One can encounter place in *boredom*, and in such a mood nothing in the world seems to matter; another one can find place in *anxiety* [*Angst*]. In my own experience, I found my place in Zambia in *wonder* (*Wunder* in German, *thauma* in Greek). At any rate, the idea of situatedness reconnects us with a sense of the urgency and genuineness of our own lives, bringing philosophy close to the personal, lived experience that gives it real motives and directions. The things which surround me varies according to the place in which I am, or I *dwell*. I *am* is I *dwell*. And this is not irrelevant to the philosophical questioning since, most of the time, we are *attuned to* things as if they were *ecstasies*. The form of a thing exerts an external effect, radiating into the environment, taking away the homogeneity of the surrounding space and filling it with tensions and suggestions of movement, and, most of all, creating (affective) *atmospheres*. Space, so, is “tinctured” through the presence of things, persons, or other affective constellations, that is, through their *ecstasies*. It is a sphere of presence. We are not able to think if not in such atmospherical (not geometrical) spaces: of joy, grief, and ecstasy. What the universalist and particularist thesis fail at is the disregard of the assumption that thinking is always *attuned to* an environment of things. Put in other words, thinking is a *pathic* experience before being a cognitive activity. And by “pathic” I do not mean pathetic or pathological, but rather the affective involvement that the perceiver feels unable to critically react to or mitigate the intrusiveness of. Philosophically, rehabilitating pathicity means valorizing the ability to let oneself go or to be a means of what happens to one rather than subjects of what we do¹². Therefore, a philosopher should be interested, first of all, in our ordinary (naïve) sensible experiences, taking into serious consideration the criterion of affectivity— of how “one feels” when experiencing the copresence of something surrounding her or him: the wind, the water, a particular smell and so on. What is felt is not a visual quality but a face of the world, a certain *atmosphere* expressing itself, like that one I experience when I walk early in the morning through Lusaka’s compounds, each one with its idiosyncrasies and *Lebenswelt*—Kamwala, Kabulonga, Chibolya. And the appropriate attitude is not that of interpreting or deciphering but that of feeling in an

¹² Cfr. T. Griffero, *Quasi-Things. The paradigm of Atmospheres*, SUNY, Albany 2017, p. VII.

immediate way, like in the moment when one feels the storm in the air or when one feels joy or sadness. Only starting from such experiences, thinking and poetizing, *Denken und Dichten*, are taken home to that well or source from which they arise. They, put in other words, become *heim-isch*, at home. Thinking, in short, is nourished by characters like night and day, nearness and farness, sound and silence, soil and water, experiences like my romantic journeys with my partner Abigail in a old colonial boat along the Zambesi river in Livingstone, situations, quasi-things, orientations of the felt-body perceivable by the soul only by prescinding from the scientist reductionism that made the world disenchanting and erased its «content of distance», tearing away its *mimbus*, the eros of distance¹³. Thinking, in my point of view, is this and not a mere collection of notions, informations. Thinking, in the last period of my life, is the “scent” of Africa, the cognitive but, most of all, the pathic experience of it. *My thinking, my Africa.*

I wish to avoid, however, a misunderstanding: if thinking needs, as a *conditio sine qua non*, a place or *topos* in which to grow, it doesn't mean that the condition of thinkability of an African philosophy has to be found in a mythological bond with an ancestral territory, that is to say, «dans le rapport du territoire e de la terre»¹⁴. As sharply noted by Eboussi Boulaga, the *logic of belongingness* is the logical tool used by the philosophy of the colonizers to monitor every land outside of Europe, making of philosophy a means of war and occupation. A tool inadvertently employed by every ethnological thought. The logic of belongingness adopted by Western culture disavows *de jure* every alterity or, better to say, every cultural claim not inscribed into the hegemonic project of modernity. If I assert that thinking retains a relationship with the “soil”, I take “soil” to mean something which «ne cesse d'opérer un mouvement de déterritorialisation sur place par lequel elle dépasse tout territoire: elle est déterritorialisante et déterritorialisée»¹⁵. What is then the *topos* of thinking? And how does it affect the specificity of a possible African philosophy? Every philosophical enterprise emerges from a place, having so a topological character, nothing, however, can come to light if not from a particular perspective or context, here the particular character of philosophy. *Logos* doesn't point to an *impersonal* or *anonymous* activity, since, as language, it unfolds in different orientations which are historical and social. Words *name* things and things differ in the way they are named by the

¹³ Cfr. Ivi, pp.24-35.

¹⁴ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Qu'est ce que la philosophie?*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1991, p. 82.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

different languages which are present on the earth. Language, *per se*, as a matter of fact, is not a neutral system of signs, free from any cultural or historical determinants and experience always is *voiced* and *embodied* each time in a specific language. Phenomenologically speaking, language has a relevant impact not only on thought but even in perception. The Tanzanian writer Euphrase Kezilahabi, emphasizing the importance of using African languages in literary works compared to the use of foreign languages writes: «Such foreign languages objectify [Africans'] views within [their] signifying systems and push [them] to orchestrate peculiarities of [their] own cultures». ¹⁶ As a consequence of this state of affairs, African literature becomes «a literature of *odes to exotica* and vulgar anthropology and a phenomenology of prostitution» ¹⁷. This is what Hountondji calls the theoretical «extraversion» ¹⁸ of knowledge in Africa perpetuated by ethnophilosophy. To speak a language is more than using words to communicate with others. A language is the expression of beliefs, customs, collective attitudes which connote a particular social, political and cultural context. This is the reason I appreciate so much the fact that my great friend Father Angelo Palleri, a Franciscan Father, administrative director of the Saint Bonaventure University in Lusaka, speaks very good Nyanja, the local dialect. I admire him since mastering a language allows you to get in touch, in an immediate way, with the people surrounding you understanding much more than just the semantic value of the words. A language, after all, is what let beings manifest themselves. Thinking so is the *topos* in which the gathering together of things and persons is *thought*. And many are the paths which thinking can take to articulate that gathering. In Austin Mbozi's essay, *Problematizing Western Reparations for Colonial Injustices: Clearing the Way for African Ubuntu*, the focus is Western theories of material compensations and reparations for colonial injustices. The author highlights seven theoretical and practical problems associated with material compensations for Africa and he defends the African ethicists' emphasis on restoring the dignity of victims, supported by the equal sacrifice principle. Mbozi then, finds the equal "sacrifice/dignity" restoration alliance a plausible

¹⁶ E. Kezilahabi, "African Philosophy and the Problem, of Literary Interpretation", unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison 1985, p. 359.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ Cfr. P. Eldridge, "Hountondji and Husserl. Subjectivity, Responsibility and Phenomenology in the Critique. Of Ethnophilosophy", in A. Olivier, M.J. Lamola, J. Sands (Eds.), *Phenomenology in an African Context. Contributions and Challenges*, Suny Press, Albany 2023, pp. 121-122.

solution. The co-authored essay of Julius Kapembwa and Matende Wedu focuses on the disposal of the dead which differs across cultures and times due to prevailing factors including traditional beliefs, normative worldviews, and resource availability. The paper seeks to explore the views of the Batswana regarding disposal of the dead through a case study of Ledumang Ward in Gaborone, Botswana. Frederick Njumferghai delves into a comparative analysis of the metaphysical concept of the human person in the Yoruba tradition versus Western philosophy. It explores the tripartite nature of human person in Yoruba culture, consisting of the body (*ara*), the soul (*emi*), and the significant element known as the inner head (*ori*). The Yoruba view emphasizes predetermined destiny through the *ori*, in contrast to the body-soul division commonly found in Western thought. John Mundua, in turn, focuses on that ontological conception which grounds an environmental ethics which is independent of any human ascription. According to such conceptual framework, he considers the African “cosmotheoandric” worldview as an ontology that implies intrinsic value of the environment. The main argument of his paper is that, from the African worldview, we can have an African extraction of environment ethics as a viable alternative for the care of the planet as the common home of humanity. Moses Muyuya’s essay, last but not least, is a case study, that is, an inquire on Amina Changwe’s situation through a counseling-client relationship by transference and counter-transference. After a clear examination of her case, the author moves onto mixed therapeutic measures which don’t exclude even pastoral counseling.