

# Can Philosophy Be Intercultural?

## An African Viewpoint

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As we push closer to the twenty-first century, it is relevant to speculate whether the different peoples of the world can have any prospect of a more peaceful coexistence in the coming millennium than hitherto. It seems reasonable to suppose that intercultural dialogue in philosophy can be of service in the pursuit of this ideal and ought therefore to be promoted or, at least, cherished by all philosophers of goodwill. In this way they would be playing their part in the re-education of humankind. But if "ought" implies "can" then whether philosophy can be intercultural is a prior and more fundamental question.

Actually, the question of whether philosophy can be intercultural must sound highly redundant to contemporary African academic philosophers, most obviously because their philosophical discourse is generally in the language of some foreign culture, either English, French, German, Spanish, or possibly Portuguese. One direct implication of this is that the philosophies of our own cultures, as expounded in such languages must, in principle, be intelligible to the people who own the languages concerned. And if they can understand, they can evaluate, for to understand a proposition is to know what it means for it to be true or for it to be false, which entails the possibility of knowing in what circumstances these truth values hold.<sup>1</sup> And, most importantly, this last consideration implies the possibility of common criteria of intellectual evaluation.<sup>2</sup> Such criteria are, in fact, constantly used in the work of philosophers, of whichever culture, who make comparative expositions of African and Western philosophy. To put it in a little more detail, some African philosophers teach both African and Western philosophy to African and Western students, and some Western

philosophers do exactly the same. One could, of course, bring Oriental philosophy into the ambit of this remark. In this case there actually are historical illustrations of interaction. Some of the great philosophers of the Western world, for example, Schopenhauer and (more controversially) Hegel, are known to have derived some parts of their doctrine from some Eastern sources, though the indications of this intellectual traffic are not voluminous. Still, one thing is clear: none of this would be possible in the principled absence of some common semantic and logical canons of thought.

What do these considerations show? They show not only that philosophy can be, but also that it has sometimes been and sometimes still is, intercultural. This is obvious but sometimes denied by implication. Thus it is sometimes thought to be sufficient proof of error to comment that somebody is using Western intellectual canons to evaluate some African conception. No, that can never be sufficient. One must go further to show that there is something wrong with the specific canons in question or that they are inapplicable for specific reasons. This law of criticism would apply also to someone criticizing another for using some canons of reflection deriving from African thought in evaluating some doctrine in Western philosophy. The point now is that one can only go beyond such parochialism by a mode of reasoning intelligible to both the African and Western sides, in other words, by what I have called independent considerations.

However, this is anticipating somewhat. Let us return to the reason why an African philosopher would have to work hard indeed to totally conceal from herself the intercultural character of philosophy, at least, as she routinely does it. The first reason, already noted, concerns our use of foreign languages in our philosophical discourse. This is something that history has forced upon us and we will have to live with for the time being. One consequence that I have touched upon is that, if for no other reason, the very medium of our message renders it immediately open to intercultural scrutiny. But there is a more subtle aspect to the language situation. It is connected with the fact that words frequently carry more cultural baggage than immediately meets the eye. In philosophy that baggage could be a whole history of conceptual errors. In truth, it would not matter much even if the words in

question were laden with conceptual insight, for insight not consciously realized remains out of sight, even though of a controlling power at some recess of consciousness. Either way, carrying Western doctrinal connotations uncritically reflects no glory upon African philosophy.

Since this may sound a little too abstract, I am happy to illustrate. Close to the beginning of chapter 3 of Idowu's classic exposition of the Yoruba conception of God in his *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*<sup>3</sup> we are told that "someone who has done a careful study of the material which our sources afford will have no hesitation in asserting that Olodumare is the origin and *ground* of all that is" (18, my italics). The notion of the *ground* of existence is very much steeped in Western metaphysics, as also is my good friend Gyekye's account of the Akan conception of God when he says "Onyame [God in the Akan language] is the Absolute Reality, the origin of all things, the absolute ground, the sole and whole explanation of the universe" (in *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*,<sup>4</sup> another classic of contemporary African philosophy). Consider first the word "ground." Logically, a ground is a factor of argumentation; it is the reason for asserting something to be true. It is not, and cannot be, a being or an object, although, of course, a proposition that is a ground for another may mention an object. So how can the Supreme Being be a ground? In Western philosophy this happens in the following way. For many influential philosophers in this tradition – philosophers, generally, of the rationalistic persuasion in the technical sense of the word – the existence of the universe depends on God in a special sense. The dependency is of a piece with the relation of entailment that exists between the conclusion and premises of a valid argument. It is thought to be warranted to assert not only that necessarily if the universe exists then God exists, but also that necessarily if the universe exists then God necessarily exists, thus endowing God with an attribute of a logical construct, namely, that of being a necessary ground. This awarding of a logical property to a supposed existent is felt to be necessary because the universe, in being allegedly contingent, lacks an explanation of itself and therefore necessitates a self-explanatory origin, which must be a necessary being, or else regress infinitely. In the upshot we have

gone from "It is necessary that there should be a reason for the existence of the universe" to "There is a necessary being that constitutes the reason for the existence of the universe." Notice that the reason or explanation sought after is not an explanation of why some thing or the other is the case rather than not, but rather why there is anything at all. We behold here a procedure of hypostasis, that is, the objectification of a conceptual category into a being or an entity, which, in my opinion, is the bane of much Western metaphysics.

But there is more. What is an "Absolute Reality"? Epistemologically, the word "absolute," when used affirmatively, signifies a theory of cognition in which knowledge and truth are credited with a certainty that amounts to nothing short of infallibility. Absolutes, then are truths eternally incapable of error. One might wonder what relevance such wonders have for human cognition. But we must let this pass and move on to associated metaphysical complications. From this angle, an absolute appears to be a kind of existent untouched by, or, to use the metaphysically preferred term, transcending the empirical conditions of human life. Such talk is, at the very least, parasitic on those idealistic speculations that reach their apotheosis in the absolute idealism of Hegel. It must now dawn on us that a phrase like "Absolute Reality" is loaded with a heavy assortment of Western epistemological and metaphysical conceptions. Again, in my opinion, they are some of the most tangled of the incoherencies of Western philosophy. Are we supplied with any evidence that the Yoruba or the Akan have woven for themselves the same web of philosophical fallacies?

To be sure, it may well be that conceptions are not fallacies, but rather philosophical profundities. Further, it may well be that Gyekye and the late patriarch are right in their apparent assumption that the African peoples concerned are of a like mind with the Western metaphysicians in question on these rarefied topics. But, surely, so remarkable an intercultural congruence of thought deserves some explanatory ceremony. The assumptions that emerge from the metaphysical vocabulary under discussion are indeed very substantial. It is supposed, for example, that there is such a thing as dependency of being, not just of the state of a particular being. Furthermore, the notion that it makes sense to talk of

a necessary being is presupposed by any talk of the ground of existence or of absolute reality. Nor is it a trivial supposition that predicating existence of the universe or wondering about its explanation is intelligible. Regarding all these ideas I suspect that any African who tries to think them in her own language will become exceedingly cautious about attributing them to her people.

For our purposes here, however, what is to be emphasized is the rather less remarkable fact that there is an intercultural dimension to any exposition of the thought of one culture in the language of another. The particular instances we have been looking at stand out only because of the subtle meanings and labyrinthine implications of the vocabularies involved. Any such exposition, however innocent its terminology, involves, ostensibly at least, thought formulations in a given conceptual framework in one culture and their translations not necessarily into the conceptual framework, but unavoidably, into the language of another culture. Here is the difficulty of the enterprise. How can you translate any thought content into a language without putting it into conceptual receptacle of language so to speak? But this metaphor does not evince an adequate sense of the flexibility of language. The same language can, in fact, harbor several incompatible conceptual frameworks, as is well known in Western philosophy. It follows that there is a certain level of discourse at which language, any natural language, is *relatively* neutral philosophically. By and large, it is this level of discourse, indispensable but almost indistinguishable, that makes intercultural philosophical interaction possible. Intercultural congruencies of thought, when real, are, of course, also a boon to that interaction. Given these possibilities, it is always, in principle, feasible to avoid unwitting trafficking in unexamined foreign conceptualizations in the process of philosophical translation.

But it is not at all easy to do so in our particular situation in African philosophy. In being constrained by history to communicate philosophically in foreign languages we are thrown into a situation in which we are constantly doing translations and reformulations of our own thought and the thought of our own people into somebody else's language. If we are open-eyed in this enterprise – which, unfortunately, may not uniformly be the case – we would constantly be trying to disentangle basic connotations

from philosophical accretions in our employment of foreign vocabulary. This means that African philosophizing in our time is a continual exercise in interculturalism. There is, however, a certain complication in this interculturalism. Because of our colonial history our very education has been, not just in foreign languages, but also in foreign philosophies – analytic, hermeneutical, phenomenological, Thomist, etc. This forebodes the danger that our own understandings of the philosophies of our own cultures may already be conditioned by our externally induced conceptual predispositions. The exhibits previously adduced would seem to be conditioned reflexes of this kind. The bad news is that this seems to be a mental condition from which none of us can claim total immunity. The good news, however, is that once we are fully aware of this danger, we can be conceptually vigilant; which, perhaps, is half the battle won. The other half will have to consist in that constant practice, which, if the adage is right, makes perfect.

Interculturalism, then, is currently almost an involuntary aspect of African academic philosophizing. The question is: does it penetrate philosophical thinking in other cultures in anything like the way it does African philosophical thinking? It is indifferent whether one answers in the affirmative or negative. In either case there are significant qualifications, moderate in some cases and massive in others; and these are the important considerations. In the oriental world there have been great instances of intercultural receptivity in philosophical thinking. Until recently the dominant philosophy in China was a philosophy originating in the Western world, namely, Marxism with some Chinese tinges. But this did not affect the conceptual integrity of Chinese classical philosophy, which now seems to be coming again into its own. In India, for another example, contemporary philosophers are creatively cognizant of both their own longstanding traditions of written philosophy and the philosophical offerings from the West. It is apparent from, for instance, Margaret Chatterjee's *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* that the prizing of their own traditions has not made Indian philosophers unwilling to appropriate whatever of value they might find in the Western traditions of philosophy. But if we compare the Indian and the African situations in this regard, we find a significant difference. Indian philosophy written in English neces-

sarily involves translation. But because classical Indian philosophy possesses a technical terminology codified in a long tradition of written meditations, it does not appear that the translations shroud the involuntary transference of Western philosophical connotations into Indian contexts of thought. In this sense contemporary Indian philosophy is more steeled against philosophical neocolonialism than its African counterpart. However, for Africa, the remedy does not lie in abjuring interculturalism but rather in cultivating it with eyes more widely open.

Even more striking contrasts emerge when the African situation with respect to interculturalism is compared with that of the West. As previously noted, Western philosophy has not been totally immune to external cultural influence, since Oriental philosophy has had some effects upon some Occidental giants. But neither historically nor in the contemporary era has that effect been so sensational or wide-ranging as to make itself felt in the average philosophic consciousness. The best scholars of Western philosophy, such as Father Copleston – see his *Philosophy and Cultures* – are cognizant of the importance of interculturalism in philosophy. But in the normal run of things nothing is easier than to develop an outlook of parochialistic universalism in Western philosophy. The inconsistency of this designation is in appearance only. In reality it designates the tendency to suppose consciously or presuppose unconsciously that, a priori, all philosophy that matters is Western philosophy. The assumption is a priori because it cannot be based on a serious study of any non-Western philosophy. To be based on such a study would be to concede the case for interculturalism in philosophy.

One reason why the parochialism just referred to is so easily possible in Western philosophy is that, holistically, it has seemed to be self-sufficient. It has not had to proceed by continual or even episodic translation into the language of another culture. Of course, if you view it more microscopically, it becomes unmistakable that parts of it have lived by translation and even transplantation. Thus, philosophic English is an amalgam of Greek and Latin with hardly a touch of Old English. And, though, in terms of doctrine, the fundamental fallacies of classical British empiricism, for example, may have been home-grown, the head and spring of the broad

tradition of British philosophy are Greek and Roman, a fact which suggests that having to philosophize in a foreign language need not necessarily reduce one to philosophical ineffectuality.

Let us, however, return to what might perhaps be called our cultural psychoanalysis. We may note that another circumstance that has facilitated parochialistic universalism among some Western philosophers is the success their tradition has had as a correlate of Western colonialism. In this, religion has gone hand in hand with philosophy, as Christian evangelism has converted great numbers of Africans (and other non-Western peoples) to some Western ways of thinking. Colonial education too has had a similar effect on an even larger scale. But, most of all, the connection of Western philosophy, not always in a positive or straightforward way, with science and technology, has given that tradition of philosophy a certain, not altogether illusory, germaneness to the conditions of modern existence; and this has exercised a great deal of influence on the thinking of non-Western peoples engaged in the search for modernization.

Whether these last remarks on the origins of parochialistic universalism in the West are completely accurate or adequate, the unsoundness of the attitude itself is easy to see when one comes to think about it. Neither advance in science nor faith in a particular religion can confer infallibility on the philosophical efforts of any culture. The scientific way of thinking does not automatically translate into wisdom in metaphysics, ethics, and politics or even in the philosophy of science itself, though it may be necessary for mastering the art of thriving in the modern world and highly desirable in many ways. Actually, as things are now, it cannot be pretended that philosophy in the West is uniformly enough impregnated with the scientific spirit.

The crucial point, however, is that philosophical insight is not exclusive to any one race, culture, or creed. A corollary of this is that such insights can be shared across cultures. Of course, the same applies to philosophical errors. Given these, it almost goes without saying that what is wrong with parochialistic universalism is not the universalism but the parochialism. Thus, the antidote to parochialistic universalism is not any sort of anti-universalism but rather judicious universalism. Philosophical universalism means at



least three things. First, philosophical theses are, as a matter of semantic fact, of a universal significance. Second, irrespective of their place of enunciation, they can, in principle, be understood and assessed by people in any part of the world provided, that they have the interest and the requisite abstract abilities. Third, philosophical dialogue is possible among the inhabitants of all cultures, and can be fruitful both intellectually and practically.

Take the first proposition first. What I mean when I say that philosophical assertions are of a universal significance is, in fact, not peculiar to philosophical assertions. Any assertion has such a significance. Not only is it the case that if it is true, it is true for all times, places, and peoples, but also in terms of content it is illuminating to interpret an assertion, any assertion, as attributing something or other to the universe. Thus we might say that the statement "There is a drum in the palace of the king of Ashanti" claims that the idea of *there being a drum in the palace of the King of Ashanti* is instantiated by the universe. And this is true or false independently of its place and time of conception, inception, or reception.<sup>5</sup>

Besides, many philosophical statements are universal as opposed to particular, that is, they are of the form "All A are B" or "The unique A is B" rather than "Some A are B." Consider statements like "Reality is spiritual" or "Truth is warranted assertibility," both well-known in Western philosophy. They are no selectors of time or culture. Nor, similarly, is a statement like "The creator created death and death killed him" (a cosmological statement found among the Akans of Ghana) restricted in its message to anything having to do with any one culture. It is not, however, being suggested that this kind of universality has any special logical or epistemic importance. In fact, some particular (i.e., non-universal) statements are more difficult to establish than some universal ones. To take an unphilosophical illustration, a statement like "Some philosophers are divine" would be infinitely more difficult to defend than one like "All philosophers are mortal." Or more philosophically, the proposition "Some values do not fall within the province of morals" is more difficult to explain or justify than, say, the universal statement that one cannot know something false. Thus, to advance a philosophical thesis of a universal form is not necessarily to betray a taste for adventure.

Nevertheless, calling attention to certain kinds of universal claims can have a certain *ad hominem* utility. In the spirit of what might be called a defensive particularism some non-Western philosophers seem tempted to argue that philosophical theses emanating from Western sources are, and can only be, about Western topics and concerns while non-Western philosophical discourse, similarly, can and must only be about matters of non-Western concern. A corresponding distribution and circumscribing of competency is then assumed by which a Western thinker is to be debarred from probing the validity of, say, an African doctrine of the afterlife or, in the converse, an African philosopher discouraged from investigating, say, Russell's paradox of the class of all classes that are not members of themselves. But consider a statement like the following: "A human being is an interactive composite of a material frame and an immaterial mind (or soul)." This roughly represents an idea of Descartes, one of historic significance in Western philosophy. But its intent is unrestricted. It does not say that French people, and human beings of only that nationality, are of the alleged composition. Africans, Chinese – all and sundry – are included under that metaphysical description. Then, why may it not be an intelligible and legitimate object of African or Chinese inquiry?

By parity of reasoning the Yoruba traditional doctrine that a human being consists, among other things, of the *ara*, the *emi*, and the *ori inu* or the Akan traditional version of this analysis according to which human personality comprises the *nipadua*, the *okra*, and the *sunsum* are not claims about the metaphysical constitution of Yoruba or Akan persons alone. They are about all human beings and are therefore a legitimate object of universal curiosity. To repeat, even if the doctrines were restricted, in their applicability, to the African groups mentioned, still non-Africans of a broad interest might legitimately concern themselves with the given issues.

There is, however, a complication that needs to be discussed. Suppose we ask "What are the *ara*, the *emi*, and the *ori inu* in the Yoruba inventory of the elements of human personality or the *nipadua*, *okra*, and *sunsum* of the Akan inventory?" The question, to be sure, has a lexicographical urgency. The non-Yoruba or non-Akan needs to be informed of the verbal meanings of these words. This need is, however, not easy to satisfy and is, perhaps, in some

cases, impossible to satisfy by way of translation. The Yoruba *ara* and the Akan *nipadua* are both easy enough to translate; they both mean the body, at least, approximately. But difficulties start with the Yoruba *emi* and the Akan *okra*. Both seem to refer to something like the life force, the animating principle of the human person; but they also seem to be intended to mean some kind of entity that, in some sense, embodies the life principle. The same duality of meaning seems to be at work with the Yoruba *ori inu* and the Akan *sunsum*, as both seem to refer to an aspect of human personality as well as to an entity lodged somehow in the human person that is responsible for the personality dimension in question. One's *ori inu* appears to be regarded by the traditional Yoruba as being responsible for the pattern of character, action, and circumstance that define one's destiny, while by *sunsum* the traditional Akans seem to understand something that is responsible for a person's degree of personal presence, matters of destiny being associated not with this personality element but rather with the *okra*.

Even so cursory an indication of meanings shows that there are problems of intelligibility in the Yoruba and Akan analyses of personhood that are, so to speak, home-based. It shows also that there is not an exact correspondence between the Yoruba and the Akan conceptions in spite of obvious analogies. But the degree of disparity encountered here pales into insignificance when these African notions are compared with such Western doctrines about the nature of human personality as Descartes's dualism. It is, of course, not to be assumed that Cartesian dualism represents *the* Western view of a person. In terms of diversity of doctrine, the Western philosophical tradition is characterized by an embarrassment of riches, and this is as evident in regard to the conception of a person as anything else. But Cartesian or neo-Cartesian views of human personality are widely received in Western philosophical and religious thought. So widely received are such notions in Missionary Christianity that African converts – let us take Akan Christians, for example – have in many instances tended to think of persons as being made up of a material frame and a spiritual soul. Nor is this all. They have also tended to put a Cartesian construction upon indigenous analyses of personhood. Thus it is not uncommon for the Akan word *okra* to be translated into English as

the *soul* with cheerful commentary on the spiritual, i.e., immaterial, character of the common referent of both terms. Yet such a translation is not just a translation but also the transposition of a metaphysical incongruity across a cultural boundary. The notion of the mind or the soul as an *immaterial* substance (whether or not the words "mind" and "soul" are used interchangeably, as they often are, in Western philosophy) is deeply incongruous with Akan ways of thinking about the human person. In fact, the idea of an immaterial entity is, in general, unintelligible within the semantic framework of the Akan language. In consequence, the word "soul" is not translatable into Akan nor, conversely, is *okra* translatable into English.

It is of the greatest importance, in this last connection, to note that untranslatability is not equivalent to unintelligibility. Of course, any case of untranslatability in the comparative study of intellectual traditions is a situation calling for serious and deliberative attention. But it need not, and in practice does not, ever seem to stop the explanation and even elucidation of the concepts involved. This is because the untranslatability of a word means only that there is no single word or simple periphrasis for it in the language into which the hope of a translation was initially entertained. A frequent and effective strategy for rectifying such a situation is to adopt the recalcitrant word as a transliteration and link it to a substantial chunk of discourse in the metalanguage that serves to lay bare the interrelation of translatable and closely related concepts in the object language. If confirmation were needed of the inequality of untranslatability and unintelligibility one might point to the fact that this kind of expedient can only be implemented by someone who, having considerable mastery of the languages concerned, is able to understand what she cannot translate.

Untranslatability, then, is a factor that can complicate intercultural philosophical discourse quite apart from what we have called home-based problems of intelligibility. The particular example of untranslatability that I have cited arises from the comparison of Yoruba and Akan analyses of personhood, on the one hand, and Western ones, on the other. That example is disputed among contemporary African philosophers, since there are some who believe that the philosophies of mind embedded in the indigenous thought

of their culture are, in fact, basically Cartesian,<sup>6</sup> and for whom therefore the translation in question is logical and legitimate. The controversy need not be reopened here, though its very existence is another index of the unavoidably intercultural character of African philosophy in our time.

At all events, untranslatability, together with its usual remedy of transliteration with an explanation, can be expected to loom large in intercultural discourse in philosophy. Thus it is not just for literary variety that a good number of transliterations, such as *Brahman*, *Karma*, *Nirvana*, etc., regularly feature in, say, English-language expositions of Indian philosophy. Actually, a like device is not unknown even within one and the same cultural tradition of thought. Thus, to take an example in the Western tradition, some concepts of Heidegger may resist translation into the language of an analytic philosopher without necessarily defying understanding. But in the intercultural setting such situations have the potential for relatively more global conceptual reverberations. In fact, this is a principal rationale for intercultural dialogue in philosophy. It is because different cultures tend, as a matter of historical and even current fact, to have fundamental conceptual disparities that being seriously informed of the philosophical thought of another culture can be highly educative, not only in enlarging one's sense of conceptual options, but also, on occasion, in reshaping one's own conceptual framework. It is obvious, on this showing, that an interest in intercultural philosophy must go along with a preparedness, in the ideal, to learn the languages of relevant cultures or otherwise to familiarize oneself with the broad semantics of sensitive concepts and their cognates in those languages. Allied to such an attitude must be that of eschewing *precipitous* applications of the categories of thought operative in one's own culture to the thought materials of other cultures on the basis of superficial affinities. With the best intentions in the world it might still not be possible to exonerate the generality of European writers on African thought in the colonial period of transgressions of this last principle. In African philosophy today we are still experiencing the effects of such errors.

More important, the foregoing reflections necessitate a rider on the significance of saying of a philosophical thesis that it is uni-

versal. True, such a proposition may be universal in intent in either of the two senses previously discriminated. But, conceptually, it may not be directly accessible to speakers of foreign languages. This does not, however, open the floodgates of relativism, because, as we have explained, conceptual remedies are known for this complication, and they make it clear that untranslatability is no bar to intercultural dialogue. Moreover, even when a proposition, apparently meaningful in one language, seems to lose all intelligibility upon being rendered, with all due circumspection, into the conceptual framework of another language, it is always, in principle, possible to explain the fate of that proposition on independent grounds, that is, on grounds that are not peculiar to any one of the languages involved. This should not be surprising, since any language can have incoherencies well hidden under the folds of its idioms. It should therefore be noted that to say of a given philosophical thesis that it is universal does not imply that it is true or necessarily coherent. What it means is that it is semantically or logically of unrestricted generality in intent, and in principle, open to universal appraisal. Accordingly, we may still say that if a philosophical proposition is true, it is true irrespective of the cultural identity of its author or auditor, but now in full awareness of the provisos recently discussed.

These explanations, together with our previous suggestion that philosophical wisdom and philosophical stupidity are probably evenly distributed among the peoples and cultures of the world, enable us to furthermore enunciate an important principle of intercultural dialogue. Suppose a human being, reputed to be philosophically articulate but of whose culture we are ignorant, is about to make a philosophical offering. The above discussion enjoins us to be prepared to give it a serious hearing and to be open to the possibility of learning something from it, unless the individual's stupidity is already conclusively established. This may be called a principle of charity and respect. It introduces a normative element into philosophical interculturalism. The concern now is not just with the *fact* that intercultural discourse is possible and actually has gone on after a fashion in human history but rather that it should go on in a manner that merits the designation "dialogue." Dialogue is, in fact, impossible, unless the principals have a basic

epistemic respect for each other. This means that none of them considers himself infallible or so cognitively superior that the possibility of gaining any insight from the discussion is nil. Of course, such a situation might conceivably materialize. For instance, nitwits and insane individuals do unfortunately exist, and dialogue with them may be impossible without special expertise. Nevertheless, the purpose of the requirement of charity is to encourage caution in drawing such a conclusion, especially in cases where apparent peculiarities are not extreme or when "the other" is from an unfamiliar culture. The combined effect of charity and respect, which are, actually, two sides of one coin, is obviously ethical. They jointly counsel the recognition of the humanness of "the other."

The above principle may sound minimal and unremarkable. But, historically, its observance has not been uniform among peoples and cultures. For instance, historical Western attitudes toward Africa in the matter of philosophy and other affairs of the intellect have been such that to say that they have not been markedly respectful would be to specialize in understatement. Until about fifty years or so ago it was thanks mainly to anthropologists, philosophers-turned-anthropologists, and missionaries rather than outright philosophers that reports of anything like philosophy or intellectual reflection in Africa surfaced in the West. This great service to Africa, however, had various limits, the most serious of which, from a philosophical standpoint, was that the ideas reported seemed to be seen simply as ideational instruments for surviving and thriving in given environments rather than as intellectual choices born of considerations of truth and validity, considerations of the type that are regularly ascribed to the Western mind. Perhaps, this was in the nature of the disciplines themselves. Anthropology and the study of religions, as disciplines, are, of course, philosophical. Anthropology is such insofar as it seeks to understand the *fundamental* (as well, sometimes, as the not so fundamental) ideas by which various peoples live their lives and, in fact, does sometimes obtain brilliant insights into men, women, and their ideas and mentalities. Religion also is philosophical in its didactic interest in the world view and world outlook that all and sundry should have in virtue of some authoritative tidings. But neither of these disciplines has as its objective the speculative

investigation of the truth or falsity of the ideas in question. One effect, incidentally, of the precedence and prevalence of this unspeculative spirit in what some appropriated as African philosophy is probably responsible for a certain narrative proclivity easily perceptible in some writings in African philosophy.

But let us return to the question of philosophical dialogue among cultures. On the African/Western front it is clear that the learning has been overwhelmingly from the African side. So much has this been the case that I think that we need a corrective in Africa that I have called elsewhere *conceptual decolonization*.<sup>7</sup> Simply put, this is the suggestion that we should not accept Western ideas in preference to indigenous ones unless we have good reasons to do so. This links up with the remarks of our first two pages or so. But notice also that it brings us back to the principle of *independent* considerations. According to this principle we should, in our intellectual choices, be determined only by considerations that do not depend on the peculiarities of any language or, one might add, culture. This can actually be a very difficult principle to apply, since if one is not aware of fundamental disparities of conceptualization as they occur in other cultures one is naturally apt to think that one's culturally ingrained modes of conceptualization are humanly inevitable. Perhaps a more easily practiced precept is that in any intellectual choice that involves cross-cultural comparisons one should, as much as possible, make sure that one's decision is not inspired by home-grown linguistic or, more generally, cultural peculiarities. One way of verifying whether the sought-after "independence" is at hand is to test whether the considerations of a proposition emanating from one's indigenous conceptual scheme as opposed to that of another culture are intelligible in the language of that culture.

The requirement of independent considerations obviously applies to all cultures; that of conceptual decolonization, however, is not universal, for decolonization presupposes a previous history of colonization. Thus, as far as the relation between Africa and Europe is concerned, it is clear that while Africa needs conceptual decolonization relative to Europe, the converse is not true. Of course, the conquering colonialists could themselves come to be intellectually dominated by the colonized, as happened in the



historical relation between Greece and the conquering Romans. Then, the remedy would bear some analogy to conceptual decolonization, though, it would certainly demand a different characterization. For good or for ill, the relationship between Africa and colonialist Europe was not of that kind.

Still, the relation between conceptual decolonization and the notion of independent considerations is worthy of further consideration. The first implies the second but not vice versa, since the principle of independent considerations is intellectually obligatory upon, say, Europeans, while the imperative of conceptual decolonization does to apply to them relative to Africa. What independent considerations demand from Africans in any efforts at conceptual decolonization is the same for all. It is not only that Africans should not adopt European ideas without good reasons, but also that they should not adhere to African ideas of what is true or valid simply because they are African. Humanly, this suggests that the rational approach to philosophizing is to seek a synthesis of insights from one's own culture as well as any other accessible culture. Many African philosophers accept this explicitly or in practice or both. But what of the West vis-à-vis Africa?

First, as already noted, Western philosophers do not need the advice not to copy Africans indiscriminately, for most (though not all) of them probably don't even think that there is anything to be learned from that group. But second, an apparent cultural sense of philosophical self-sufficiency, earlier noted in this discussion, seems to keep the requirement of independent considerations at a considerable distance from the thoughts of many Western philosophers. Until that distance can be closed, all hopes of interculturalism in philosophy from that angle must be suspended.

By way of a quick illustration of how a philosopher might be trapped by the opposite of independent considerations, I beg permission to refer to an example I have discussed elsewhere. A British philosopher called David Mitchell, discussing the fundamental and essential principles underlying logic, has occasion to assert that "The *necessary* truth that if A acts on B, then B is acted on by A, seems to reflect a categorial distinction between active and passive and not merely a linguistic convention ..."<sup>8</sup> It turns out, however, that in Akan (Ghana) and Acholi (Uganda) the pas-

sive voice does not exist. Accordingly, the practice of formulating things, now in the active, now in the passive, does not exist. The avoidance of this language game obviously causes no loss in expressive power, the surest sign that the practice is a convention. It is obvious also that the "necessary" truth in question can only be formulated conditionally in some such manner as, "In any language in which the active and passive distinction exists, the active implies the passive." Notice that this discussion does not show that Mitchell's claim is pointless. We have merely made it more culturally sensitive. Notice also, that although the active/passive distinction does not exist in Akan, an Akan need have no problem in understanding it and appreciating the "necessary" truths generated by it. Thus, the study of this example provides us with a pocket-sized illustration of intercultural discourse. That the condition of independent considerations, which is a necessary condition of intercultural discourse, has been met is verifiable in the fact that the remarks are as intelligible in Akan as in English.

From all the above I think that a certain conclusion follows that might well be thought to be highly controversial. I believe that if intercultural dialogue in philosophy becomes a serious, widespread, and sustained practice among the various peoples of the world, then the time will come when the cultural origins of a philosopher will not predict the content of his or her philosophy. I cannot but think that such a new intellectual world order would be to the infinite advantage of any reasonable world order in the economic and political sphere.

I am not, however, predisposed to any wishful thinking regarding the prospects of interculturalism in philosophy. Although there are heart-warming signs of mounting interest in intercultural discourse in philosophy today – witness the October 1997 issue of the journal *Metaphilosophy*, which is entirely devoted to "Internationalism in Philosophy"<sup>9</sup> – the enormity of the factors that hinder genuine intercultural dialogue is impossible to ignore or diminish. Even if we set aside moralistic considerations, such as the apparent tardiness of the West to accord dialogic charity and respect to Africa, there are conceptual confusions deriving from the imposition of Western categories of thought on African thought materials that will take a long time to sort out. That would be but one step

towards securing a level playing field for dialogue. There is furthermore the huge imbalance in the resources for education, research, and publication, which itself is the epiphenomenon of comparably egregious economic and political disparities, with Africa as the invariable underdog. This, to say the least, does not promote equality of opportunity in dialogue. Still, much is going to depend on how persuasive we, African philosophers, are going to be in presenting the African philosophic case for the edification of our own people as well as others. Such an enterprise cannot consist of just disseminating narratives of how various African peoples think but also developing arguments for the soundness or profundity of appropriate elements of the thought of our ancestors. That is the first part of the African philosophic task. The second part must consist of a synthesis of insights from all accessible cultural sources. That is an eminently intercultural project.

### ARTICLE SYNOPSIS IN AKAN

Anyansasem ho Adwendwen nye Amansen nyinaa Asem ana? Nea mepese mekyere wo saa nkyerew yi mu ne se anyansasem ho nsem ye ade a aman nyinaa mu nipa tumi de won adwen ba mu. Eye: ka bi ma menka bi. Se wo ka asem no a obiara betumi de nadwen aba; enfaho baabi a ofiri. Yen abibifo de yei nye asem a akyingye biara wo ho ma yen, efise yen sukkuu mu adesua a edefa anyansasem ho no, esiane se Abrofo bedii yen so mre bi no nti, Abrofo kasa na yede ka ho asem. Saa nti yen abibirim adwen ne abrofo adwen atu afra mu. Mmom eye ade bi a esese ye whehwemu yie, efise senea neama no afrafra no nye ne kwan soa, nanso enkyere se abibifo ne Abrofo rentumi nka won ti mmo mu nhwehwe neama neama a etesaa mu.

Ehia paa se aman aman nyinaa mu nipa tumi ka won ti bomu dwen anyansasem mu nsem ho, efise saa na ebema yenyinaa anya

yenho ntease na yatumi atra ho dwoo dwoo. Ade baako a ema yetumi ka se nipapa nyinaa betumi aka won ti abo mu adwen eneama a etesaa ho ne see saa nsem no ye nsem bi a efa obiara ho. Anyansasem ho adwendwen ye ade bi a efa senea ewiase nyinaa te ene senea onipa dasani te wo baabiara. Saa nti worentumi nka se asem a woreka bi ye abibifo nkoara anase Aborofo nkoara asem. Se wo hwe neama no nyinaa mu yie a, wobehu se, se nnipa nyinaa de wonti bomu dwendwen anyasasem ho na wokoso ye saa ma ekye a, ende ebere bi beba a, se obi ka nadwen na se yenkankyee wo a, worentumi nhu se oye oburoni anaase oye obibini anase oye Indiani. Madwen ne se ebekye ansa na aba saa, efise yen abibifo ye nipa bi a neama pii haw yen ama nti yentumi ne Aborofo nyina ho pepeepe mfa yen adwen nto ho mma ewiase nyinaa enhu. Nanso nea mepese mekyere wo saa nkyew yi mu ne se, nkakra nkakra, se abibifo a wo de aye won adwuma se wobehwehwe nyansasem ho nsem mu no bo moden koso de won adwen to dwa edefa ye nanonom nyansa ene yen aksa nso yede a, ende amansan nyinaa nkomo no worenni nya yen.

## Notes

1. I hope the reader will not assume that this asserts any sort of verificationism, for one might know what it means for a proposition to be true without knowing how to reach the circumstances in which they are seen to be true, or, in conceptual matters, to rehearse them. This last disjunct, by the way, shows the enormity of the distance between our remark and logical positivism, for logical positivism construes the relevant verification in an exclusively empirical sense.
2. I have argued that human beings by nature share some basic common canons of reasoning in *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* and also in my "Canons of Conceptualization," *Monist* 76, 4 (October 1993) and "Knowledge, Truth and Fallibility" in I. Kucuradi and R. S., Cohen (eds.), *The Concept of Knowledge* (Boston, 1995).
3. E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London, 1962), chapter 3: "In the Beginning."
4. Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, Second Edition (Philadelphia, 1995), p. 70.

5. For the purposes of a certain kind of logical formalization, one might subtract the time factor from statements and relativize their truth value to time. However, this is only a technical maneuver compatible with the point just made.
6. See, for example, Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, chapter 6 "The Concept of a Person"; Kwasi Wiredu, "The Concept of Mind with Particular Reference to the Language and Thought of the Akans" in G. Floistad, *Contemporary Philosophy*, Vol. 5: African Philosophy (Boston, 1987).
7. See Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, chapter 10: "The Need for Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy."
8. David Mitchell, *Introduction to Logic* (London, 1962), p. 146.
9. *Metaphilosophy* 28, 4 (October 1997); Special Issue: Internationalism in Philosophy, Guest Editor: Richard Shusterman.