

African Philosophy and Problems of Demarcation

Introduction

Is it possible to strictly demarcate African philosophy? If so, what are the philosophical implications of this demarcation? If not, what are the points of continuity and discontinuity? In this paper, I approach these questions by reading the work of V. Y. Mudimbe, Paulin Hountondji, and Fabien Eboussi Boulaga. I frame their approaches by making use of a distinction drawn by Paget Henry between philosophy as a “primary instrument of the absolute subject” and “an intertextually embedded discursive practice.”¹ This distinction further allows me to clarify what is at stake in the authors’ various framings of African philosophy: namely, questions of purity, power relations, and the nature of philosophy. These are central questions for philosophy *tout court*.

Paget Henry

In his seminal work on Afro-Caribbean philosophy, *Caliban’s Reason*, Paget Henry begins by making a general distinction between “idealist” and “intertextual” views of philosophy. He writes:

There are idealist views of philosophy that see it as an affirmation of the autonomy of a thinking subject. As the primary instrument of this absolute subject, philosophy shares in its autonomy and therefore is a discipline that rises above the determinations of history and everyday life. ... [In Afro-Caribbean philosophy] we find a tradition ... so indelibly marked by the forces of an imperial history, and by its intertextual relations with neighboring discourses, that it is necessary to begin with a general characterization of philosophy that is more appropriate to its pattern of development.²

¹ Paget Henry, *Caliban’s Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1–2.

² *Ibid.*, 1.

Henry begins his work by addressing a classically philosophical question: what *is* philosophy? He finds the answer associated with idealism inadequate for philosophy in the Caribbean. This is because of (1) power relations (“the forces of an imperial history”) and (2) intertextuality, i.e. the porosity of philosophical texts. This prompts Henry to propose his own alternative characterization:

Philosophy is an intertextually embedded discursive practice, and not an isolated or absolutely autonomous one. ... It is a distinct intellectual practice that raises certain kinds of questions and attempts to answer them by a variety of styles of argument that draw on formal logic, paradox, coherence, the meaningful logic of lived experiences, and the synthetic powers of totalizing systems. From this intertextual perspective, philosophy appears as an open but diverse discursive field in which ontological, epistemological, logical, ethical, transcendental, historical, and other formations flow into one another.³

For Henry, philosophy is a *practice of discourse* that is embedded in texts and between texts. The forms of organization, the kinds of questions raised, and the styles of argument used in these texts all vary significantly.⁴ Philosophy is not a project of the absolute spirit; it draws on lived experiences and formal logic and is as concerned with historical formations as it is with transcendence. As Henry writes, “in spite of its preoccupation with the absolute, philosophy is neither an absolute nor a pure discourse.”⁵

Henry’s *definition* of philosophy, a philosophical proposition in its own right, also implies a mode of writing *about* philosophy. For instance, Henry strongly admonishes against “draw[ing] lines in the sand around the use of particular styles or around particular subfields such as ontology, formal logic, or ethics.”⁶ Instead, for Henry, when writing about philosophy we must recognize that

there is a consistently significant philosophical substratum to be found in the works of physicists, sociologists, biologists, creative writers, and other knowledge producers. Conversely, there are quite significant literary, religious, sociological, and other discursive substrata in the works of philosophers. ... Like all other discourses, philosophy comes into

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Indeed, this is true of any set of texts we might take to typify philosophy, not just African or Afro-diasporic traditions; think, for a moment, of the great divergence in all these respects among, for instance, Nietzsche, Hermann Cohen, Husserl, and Frege, all contemporaneous German-language philosophers.

⁵ Henry, *Caliban’s Reason*, 3.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

being as a necessary part of a larger and more diversified discursive field that is a foundation of all human cultural production.⁷

Philosophy is not reserved for philosophers. Human beings all philosophize; equally, all human beings, including philosophers, do things other than philosophize. What are the implications of situating philosophy in the discursive field of human cultural production? Paget Henry says that we must locate philosophy (in this case, Afro-Caribbean) in the “colonial problematics and contours of our cultural history.”⁸ This is because philosophy emerged and emerges in unequal discursive relations, but nonetheless as practices found *in* those relations — that is, in the “very asymmetrical processes of interculturalization and creolization that were produced by the colonial cultural system.”⁹ These processes leave their traces in a diverse set of texts — for instance, religious and literary works — that must be considered in a philosophical light alongside those that primarily claim to be philosophical.

Paget Henry argues that philosophy is an porous discursive field, both in terms of genre and in terms of historical and geographic influence. This troubles projects of strict demarcation. Clearly defining, for instance, African philosophy must bear in mind what it excludes and what that has to do with power relations. Hountondji, Mudimbe, and Ebooussi Boulaga each take up this task. For each in turn, I first lay out their position on the demarcation of African philosophy. I then assess the points of convergence and divergence with Paget Henry’s suggestion. I end by noting points of mutual illumination and enrichment.

Paulin Hountondji

Paulin Hountondji is most famous for advancing a rigorous, precisely demarcated “African philosophy.” This polemical assertion is announced in the (in)famous first sentence of his 1977 work *African Philosophy*:

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 5.

By “African philosophy” I mean a set of texts, specifically the set of texts written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors themselves.¹⁰

Even Hountondji himself later acknowledged that this strict definition was too narrow.¹¹ Yet Hountondji’s original impulse was a significant corrective to the then-dominant tradition of ethnophilosophy. This field had developed from the 1945 work *Bantu Philosophy* by the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels. He and his African students took philosophy to be present in the language and culture of African peoples. It is against this tradition that Hountondji set up his polemic criticism. In broad strokes, this critique was articulated by many beyond just Hountondji, who come together in refuting the search for an “authentic African traditional system of thought” that could supposedly be retrieved from traditional practices and the structure of languages.

But Hountondji’s particular refutation of ethnophilosophy is distinctive, for it sets up a strict demarcation of philosophy that explicitly refuses to consider philosophy as some kind of intertextual discourse. Hountondji writes that

African philosophical literature rests, it hardly needs saying, on a confusion: the confusion between the popular (ideological) use and the strict (theoretical) use of the word “philosophy.” According to the first meaning, philosophy is any kind of wisdom, individual or collective, any set of principles presenting some degree of coherence and intended to govern the daily practice of a man or a people. ... But in the stricter sense of the word, one is no more spontaneously a philosopher than one is spontaneously a chemist, a physicist or a mathematician, since philosophy, like chemistry, physics or mathematics, is a specific theoretical discipline with its own exigencies and methodological rules.¹²

For Hountondji, philosophy is a science. Speaking of science as a collective enterprise is absurd (also for Hountondji). What is meant by Bantu “philosophy” is more like a collection of folk wisdom. While on a first assessment this statement is convincing, perhaps even

¹⁰ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, ed. Abiola Irele, trans. Henri Evans, second edition (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 33.

¹¹ For instance, Hountondji wrote in 2018: “My formulation may have been awkward to some extent since it seemed to overvalue the act of writing.” Paulin J. Hountondji, “How African Is Philosophy in Africa?,” *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 7, no. 3 (2018): 12, <https://doi.org/10.4314/ft.v7i3.2>.

¹² Hountondji, *African Philosophy*, 47.

obvious (a company's "philosophy" is clearly a different beast than that of, say, Spinoza), it has troubling implications.

Hountondji's view is diametrically opposed to Paget Henry's. Henry sees philosophy as a discourse best placed alongside other literary and historical texts. Hountondji insists that philosophy is a science distinguished by its method and rigor.¹³ From Henry's perspective, Hountondji's insistence on purity is methodologically untenable and historically and sociologically blind. Henry would say that because African philosophy from its beginning was so marked by power asymmetry, we must look for it in the interstices of genre and geography, lest we lend strength to the racist belief that "Africans have no philosophy."

V. Y. Mudimbe

Of all these authors, it is Mudimbe writing in *The Invention of Africa* who most explicitly engages with the project Henry advances. Mudimbe, like Henry, seeks to make a broad philosophical intervention by retracing the history of a specific tradition. Mudimbe writes that he

embraces the question of what is and what is not African philosophy and also orients the debate in another direction by focusing on the conditions of possibility of philosophy as part of the larger body of knowledge on Africa called "Africanism."¹⁴

Mudimbe pursues this project by discussing in turn the history of anthropology, missionary Christianity, and ethnophilosophy. His own concern is the development of a *philosophical* discourse on and from Africa, within the context of other discourses. This means asking about how "Africa" is constituted as an object of European discourses *on* Africa — thus turning the gaze back to Europe. Up to this point, we might note many family resemblance with the work of Paget Henry. For instance, both were influenced by Foucault in their work of outlining the

¹³ Writing twenty years after the initial publication of *African Philosophy*, Hountondji avows his debt to Plato, Husserl, and Descartes, and "to all doctrines that value intellectual responsibility and demand that each affirmation be sustained by a proof or a rational justification." *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁴ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), ix.

“conditions of possibility” of discourses, which (in Mudimbe’s words) “have not only sociohistorical origins but also epistemological contexts.”¹⁵ Henry and Mudimbe thus coincide in making discourses the primary objects of investigation.

Mudimbe’s move is to ask what it means for a discourse to be *philosophical*. Mudimbe asks this question in order to be able to move beyond a view that “ethnophilosophy” or anthropologists’ “primitive philosophy” constitutes true African philosophy. In these traditions, philosophy is reduced to a worldview, merely an aspect of culture like dress or food or greeting customs.¹⁶ For Mudimbe, philosophy is distinguished as something practiced by individuals, something characterized by creative input and critical reflection.

I understand and am sympathetic to this impulse to locate philosophy in something deeper and more essential than something like what ethnophilosophy proposes. Yet I worry about the exclusionary repercussions when extending a more rigorous definition of philosophy. As with Hountondji, proposing a narrower definition of African philosophy so as to refute ethnophilosophy throws out the baby with the bathwater. Too much of the intellectual tradition is retroactively excluded — for instance, the work of Africans in diaspora, including exceptional philosophers like Anton Wilhelm Amo. It seems that the immediate impulse to reject ethnophilosophy leads to hasty assertions about the nature of African philosophy that exclude too much of the past.

Fabien Eboussi Boulaga

Like Hountondji and (to a lesser extent) Mudimbe, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga set as his first target ethnophilosophy.¹⁷ It is a masquerade, a “global approach” that “enable[s] anyone

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Ibid., 152–55.

¹⁷ In fact, Eboussi Boulaga was the first to roundly critique ethnophilosophy in his 1968 article “Le Bantu problématique,” published nine years before Hountondji’s 1977 book *Sur la philosophie africaine: Critique de*

wishing to do so to produce at will and without toil ethnophilosophical dissertations tapped from ‘African culture.’”¹⁸ But Eboussi Boulaga cautions us that “the end of our predicament does not lie in the uncritical embrace of philosophy as it is taught at schools in the West.”¹⁹ Is Eboussi Boulaga then also advocating for a view of philosophy as an intertextual discursive field? No, not quite. Eboussi Boulaga places the accent on philosophy as a *practice*. To open the possibility of a rigorous African philosophy, Eboussi Boulaga elaborates in striking and provocative terms his own approach to philosophy.

For Eboussi Boulaga, philosophy as traditionally understood is “an attribute of power” whose “proprietor and distributor” is the West.²⁰ Henry’s response to this fact was to identify philosophy in the interstices of texts, between genres and locations. Eboussi Boulaga advocates something different: “one must do/practice the only philosophy that there is: renounce oneself and die to oneself in order to be born again to truth.”²¹ On the one hand, Eboussi Boulaga agrees with Henry that philosophy is basically a *practice*, one that must take into account “that which philosophy is supposed to reject into the outer dark, namely location, body, color, history, and accident.”²² Philosophy is *not* just the activity of absolute spirit supposedly untethered to a named, colored, located body. However, Eboussi Boulaga diverges from Henry because he refuses to equate philosophy with just another form of discourse, a component of human cultural production. For Eboussi Boulaga, philosophy is ultimately still about seeking truth and freedom. He criticizes those for whom “criticism is transposed into method.” Instead, for Eboussi Boulaga, this first step of critique, which challenges philosophy to “account for its exclusions,” should make it “permissible to discuss

l’ethnophilosophie (although the first essay in what became the first chapter of that book was published in 1969; see the preface to the revised edition of Hountondji, *African Philosophy*).

¹⁸ Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis: African Authenticity and Philosophy* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2014), 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* My intuition is that this statement may be implicitly directed towards Hountondji, who takes as his model philosophy as a rigorous Western science.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

how to creatively benefit from tradition, while avoiding the pitfalls of ethnology, by projecting it [tradition] as a form of critical utopia capable of mobilizing minds in the present.”²³ Eboussi Boulaga would fault Henry for too quickly giving up the emancipatory possibilities of philosophy as a *practice* by insisting so strongly on its *discursive* constitution. For Eboussi Boulaga, philosophy as a practice must not be abandoned.

I do not have the space here to elaborate on the depth of the proposals Eboussi Boulaga offers, although I would tend to agree with Kasereka Kavwahirehi’s assessment that *Muntu in Crisis* is “without doubt the most original work of African philosophy.”²⁴ In terms of a forward-looking agenda for African philosophy, I think Eboussi Boulaga’s work is essential. Retrospectively, it is helpful to see philosophy as a more intertextual discursive practice, as Henry suggests. The two views are not at all incompatible; to the contrary, locating philosophy in a greater variety of texts written by a greater variety of people could be useful to Eboussi Boulaga’s project of outlining the becoming of the human being in Africa and thereby making philosophy a true “emancipatory praxis one applies to oneself and to one’s society.”²⁵

Conclusion

I began this essay by introducing a definition of philosophy by Paget Henry, somebody whose work is adjacent to African philosophy proper. Doing so threw into relief the strengths and weaknesses of Hountondji, Mudimbe, and Eboussi Boulaga, each of whom also made central to their work the question of demarcating African philosophy. As we saw, all the authors push back against ethnophilosophy. They want to reserve “African philosophy” for something different. The question in this paper is how narrow this alternative

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., x.

²⁵ Ibid., 253.

is. Hountondji would take African philosophy to be a rigorous science practiced solely by Africans. Henry, looking historically and sociologically, identifies philosophical substrata in a variety of texts written by people who may not have been “philosophers” in a strict sense — giving a much broader definition than Hountondji. Looking retroactively, I think the latter is a more just and accurate demarcation. But Henry, I think, leaves open the question of what African philosophy (or Afro-Caribbean philosophy) looks like going forwards. To this latter question, I believe Mudimbe and especially Eboussi Boulaga have valuable contributions to make. Eboussi Boulaga, in particular, refuses to adopt wholesale a Western model of philosophy as a rigorous science; at the same time, he does not accept that philosophy is just a “worldview,” the same as any other kind of cultural production. For Eboussi Boulaga, philosophy, African or otherwise, is about the basic human search for truth and freedom. We would do well to adopt this sort of practice, while projecting tradition “as a form of critical utopia,” something Henry can help us do by better identifying African philosophy in the past. As Eboussi Boulaga hopes, this might make it “possible to use and reuse philosophy with a view to emancipating the needy and the alienated.”²⁶

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²⁶ Ibid., 3.

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