

Critical universalism

Franziska Dubgen and Stefan Skupien, *Paulin Hountondji: African Philosophy as Critical Universalism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). 192pp., €67,62 hb., 978 3 03001 994 5

During the extraordinarily intense debates on the future trajectory of modern African philosophy at the dawn of African independence, Paulin J. Hountondji, along with the likes of Kwasi Wiredu in Ghana, Henry O. Orya in Kenya and Peter O. Bodunrin in Nigeria, played a pivotal role. This group of professional philosophers, all of whom were obviously greatly influenced by their Western educations, was called the universalists. Hountondji was born in the Republic of Benin (then known as Dahomey) in 1942 and after his secondary school education, he traveled to France where he studied philosophy at the *École normale supérieure* under the supervision of professors such as Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser, Paul Ricoeur and Georges Canguilhem.

Franziska Dubgen's and Stefan Skupien's new book on Hountondji has many strengths, the most obvious of which is the coherent classification of Hountondji's diverse writings into easily identifiable conceptual categories. In France, during his decade of postgraduate studies, he familiarised himself with deconstruction, post-structuralist thought, epistemology and phenomenology whose founder, Edmund Husserl, was the subject of his doctoral dissertation. Hountondji had wanted to continue his studies in phenomenology but decided to venture into then contested terrain of modern African thought with the boost of a UNESCO-funded fellowship to conduct research on the work of Anton-Wilhelm Amo, a Ghanaian philosopher who lectured at a number of German universities in the eighteenth century. Studying Amo undoubtedly forced Hountondji to reconsider his philosophical path and steered him permanently towards researching the discipline from an African perspective.

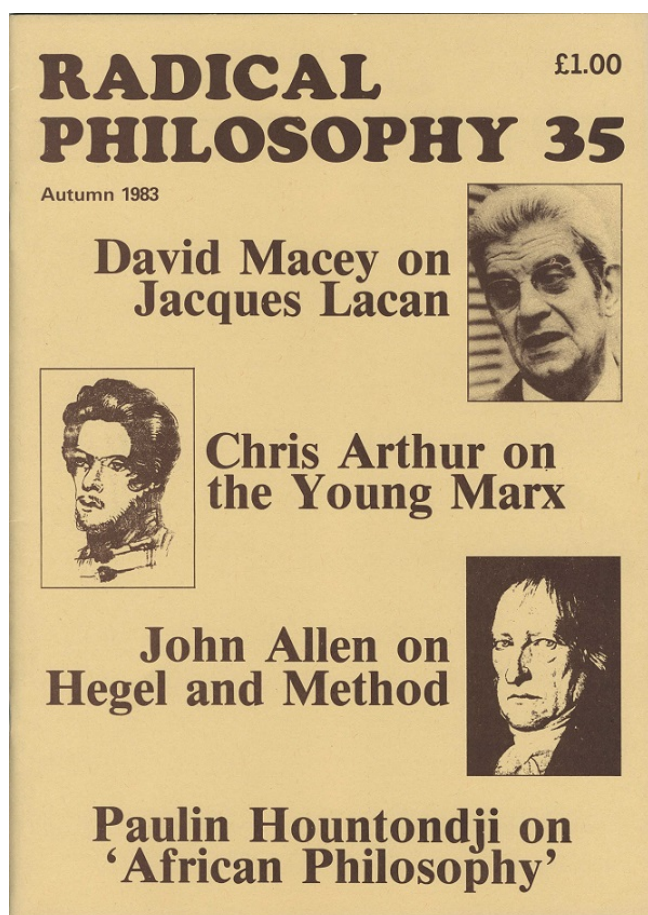
Hountondji conceives of philosophy more or less as a science. In this regard, he wanted to elevate the discipline above the fuzziness he believed tainted the work of those who were termed 'philosopher-kings', notably, Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Julius Nyerere. These so-called philosopher-kings were all embroiled in the hurly-burly of decolonisation processes that gripped Africa beginning in the 1940s. Soon

after independence in the 1960s, they embarked on the arduous task of nation-building as the heads of state of their respective countries. By contrast, Hountondji sought to return philosophy to a purer, less frenetic and less politicised state and this entailed observing stricter benchmarks of professionalisation.

First, he turned to the discipline itself and found it wanting in terms of the levels of rigour he preferred. Ethnophilosophy, a discourse within the field that Hountondji all but demolished, provided him with his decisive entry into the world of established philosophical luminaries. Ethnophilosophy was pioneered by a Belgian cleric called Placide Frans Tempels (1906-1977) and a Rwandan priest, Alexis Kagame (1902-1981). In his famous book, *Bantu Philosophy* (1945), Tempels attempted to identify 'a coherent philosophical system among Bantu-speaking Africans, based on a distinct ontology which conceives of being as dynamic. This sets it apart from a Western ontology, which considers being as static'. Originally, Tempels had sought to free the African subject from the racist gaze of Eurocentric anthropology, but his exertions had, in Hountondji's view, ended up creating another mythology of the African. He faulted ethnophilosophy for harbouring 'the myth of unanimity' which denied Africans ontological mobility, agency and alterity. This supposedly polarising myth implies an essentialising homogeneity that does much to discredit Africa's incredible diversity. In addition, ideologies of authenticity are usually narrow or knee-jerk instances of nativism that are instrumentalised solely for the benefit of parochial political interests.

Kagame, for his part, just like his European counterpart, had been guilty of formulating yet another mythology by employing Aristotelian ontological categories in relation to the African subject. Hountondji believed that 'the ontological order created by Tempels' diminishes the Africans, rather than affirming them as equals, and, in the end, justifies the colonial project, as well as the missionary project'. He also criticised the scientific credentials of the discourse as unworthy of being termed philosophy. He found suspect the claim by ethnophilosophers that they

were presenting African systems of thought when in fact they were offering their own fictions of Africa. In addition, he accused ethnophilosophy of imposing a 'double standard: whereas Western philosophy is conscious and well-reasoned, African philosophy is unconscious and implicit'. More damagingly, Hountondji argued that the claims of ethnophilosophy can neither be validated nor disproved according to established academic criteria.



Hountondji also had unsparing words for the work of Negritudists such as Senghor and Aimé Césaire. Hountondji's antagonism towards Negritude (like the conceptual thought of Nkrumah) stemmed from his anti-essentialist outlook. Hountondji's over-riding aim was to return philosophy to standards that were unimpeachable. In this regard, the technology of writing is a vital requirement for philosophy while orality is frowned upon. Even Derrida's concept of logocentrism is not spared here as, according to Hountondji, philosophy is written by identifiable individual philosophers as opposed to being derived from the largely anonymous offerings of folk wisdom or precolonial collective thought. This stance elicited a great deal of criticism, most notably from scholars

such as Olabiyi Yai and Oyekan Owomoyela. During that era, Marxist thought was the official doctrine in Benin which had rejected the capitalist mode of development after Major Mathieu Kerekou seized power in a military putsch in 1972. Hountondji, in the view of his critics, did not seem entirely convinced of the desirability of Marxism-Leninism and was thus vilified.

More specifically, Hountondji was charged with elitism; the argument was advanced that his thought had very little or no relevance to the realities of Africans. But a closer inspection of Hountondji's career demonstrates that he had always wanted to make his thought relevant and engaging. Beginning from the sixties as he pursued his studies, his central preoccupation was to discover an avenue through which an Africa-centred philosophy could be pursued as a valid and globally accepted discipline. His first teaching position in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) gave him his initial taste of neocolonial malaise whereby public discourse and social engineering could be effectively muddled and mangled by convenient and readily available pseudo-ideologies of authenticity, as when the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko was in power.

Later, when he returned to Benin, Hountondji consistently warned against the dangers of philosophies of authenticity which tended to stifle the possibilities of free thought, unrestrained public discourse, constructive dissent and social innovation. His particular interventions during the national efforts of returning Benin to democratic rule in 1990s are noteworthy. Hountondji sought to open up the public realm for active citizens' participation, which he pointed out was of utmost necessity for the well-being of the polity. He also warned against the ills of the over-centralisation of power. Perhaps this was a way of debunking his critics' claims that he was elitist.

Another way in which he can be considered to have countered charges of elitism is through the formulation of the concept of endogenous knowledge. The concept came about through a students' seminar he organised in 1987. As usual, Hountondji had sought to provide the much-devalued and derided notion of indigenous knowledge with a scientific rationale. Although Hountondji did not publish a paper from this collective venture, the research efforts culminated in a large volume he edited for the Council for the Development of Social Science Re-

search in Africa (CODESRIA) released in a French edition in 1994. The papers in the volume addressed traditional medicine, indigenous pharmacology and archaeology. The entire approach might be regarded as addressing the lapses of ethnophilosophy and infusing philosophy itself with greater cultural inclusivity. In theoretical terms, this late effort may also be considered Hountondji's last major contribution to the development of contemporary African philosophy.

As well as his highly influential book, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1976) that included his compelling insights on ethnophilosophy, Nkrumah's philosophy of consciencism, Amo's philosophical dilemmas and metaphilosophical questions, Hountondji also published his semi-autobiographical, *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture and Democracy in Africa* (2002), which chronicles his exciting intellectual journey. In parts much less academic than his earlier book, this work is unusual in African philosophy for marrying memoir and philosophical musings in a somewhat irreverent manner. Here, he is able to respond to his numerous critics without always suppressing what is revealed to be his considerable ego. Oftentimes, he situates himself in an almost messianic crusade to save African philosophy from an ever-menacing demise or the onslaughts of pretenders who never have its best interests at heart.

Between 1990 and 1993, he served as both Minister for Education and Minister for Culture and Communication during the new democratic dispensation to which he had helped give birth. During his stint as a minister, Hountondji had planned to implement radical reforms in the education sector and also establish philosophy in a more central role in driving national development. When he sensed he was only being kept in government to furnish it with a veneer of intellectual legitimacy, he promptly returned to academia where he has continued to publish research papers and spread the gospel of African philosophy around the globe.

Dubgen and Skupien make strong arguments for receiving Hountondji as a global thinker. Hountondji refutes the condescension of racism while attempting to propel African philosophical practices towards universal

goals. By reflecting on Kwasi Wiredu's formulation of conceptual decolonisation, he also supports efforts at discovering common values, concepts and orientations in different African languages in order to arrive at universal human precepts. Thus, a powerful current of transculturality becomes evident. One of the more obvious ways to acknowledge the notion of transculturality is to examine how the concept of human rights became enshrined long before its general acceptance as a global declaration. Human rights, Hountondji avers, were already in existence as rudimentary precepts and it only took the disasters of the World Wars to formalise, institutionalise and universalise them. Undoubtedly, interventions such as this lend credence to his standing as a global intellectual.

Dubgen and Skupien are granted an extensive interview by Hountondji where he is able to clarify his positions on a wide range of issues beginning with his famous critique of ethnophilosophy. The authors ask if endogenous knowledge isn't in fact 'a rehabilitation' of ethnophilosophy to which Hountondji replies: 'Not really. Rather another aspect of the same struggle against marginalization: a critique of ethno-science as a necessary complement to the critique of ethno-philosophy'. He goes on to point out that 'philosophy is first and foremost an individual exercise and by no means a collective system of thought'. For the development of a viable philosophical practice in Africa, Hountondji mentions logic, epistemology, philosophy of science, history and sociology of science, and the anthropology of knowledge in orature as key branches of the discipline including the history of Western philosophy. During the interview, he also dwells on his role in the widespread democratic agitations that dominated Benin in the early 1990s.

Through quite remarkable scholarship Dubgen and Skupien manage to piece together engraved patterns of logic, coherence and conceptual intrigue across Hountondji's eventful life and career which have been marked by bouts of furious activity. At the same time, the book's other major, related strength is that it provides a sequential context that is not always evident in the Hegelian pace and texture of Hountondji's own often inspirational and faintly apocalyptic writings.

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