Philosophers have recently become interested in cultural philosophies, such as African philosophy, Asian philosophy, American Indian philosophy, and Latin American philosophy. This is especially relevant to the quest for pluralism, diversity, and multiculturalism in higher education. This interest may also be associated with the fact that Western philosophers have realized that there is something they can learn from how people in other cultures view and interpret reality. This trend has been engendered in part by postmodernism in philosophy, which is an attempt to question and break with the supposed ideology of universal and absolute truth claims embedded in reason that every inquiry or any meaningful discourse is supposed to unravel. In the past three decades, philosophers—especially African-born ones who are trained in Western philosophy—have engaged in a meta-philosophical debate over whether there exists an African philosophy, and if so, what its nature is. This debate has explored the nature of philosophy as a universal discipline and whether this universal notion of philosophy can be applied to the African situation to come up with a subject matter and conception of African philosophy. Philosophers have sought to identify some essential features of philosophy, which they argue, any candidate for the subdiscipline of African philosophy must display in order to be legitimately characterized as a philosophy.

Philosophers who are engaged in this debate recognize that there is no general agreement on the meaning of philosophy or a set of criteria for delimiting philosophy; the meaning of philosophy is somehow vague and ambiguous. To the extent that the question of what is itself a philosophical question, some think that one plausible way to resolve the question of whether there is an African philosophy is to do a conceptual analysis of “philosophy” in terms of its essential features and provide arguments for why it is so conceived, and use the features to identify the subject matter or methodology of African philosophy and provide justifications for such identification. This debate regarding the nature and existence of African philoso-
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...phy has culminated in two broad camps, which may be characterized as the universalists and the particularists. The particularists are also sometimes characterized as anti-universalists or nationalists. The universalist camp, which is represented by the works of P. O. Bodunrin, Kwasi Wiredu, Kwane Anthony Appiah, and Paulin J. Hountondji, among others, argue that the concept of philosophy, in terms of the methodology and subject matter of the discipline, should be the same in the Western and African senses.

The particularist camp, which is seen in the works of John A. A. Ayoade, Kwane Gyekye, J. O. Sodipo, and Richard Onwuanibe, among others, argue that different cultures have different ways of explaining reality, and because philosophy involves ways of explaining reality, Africans must have a philosophy that it is essentially different from other philosophies. In trying to articulate the essential nature of African philosophy, some particularists have argued that the meta-philosophical, critical, and analytical approach of the Western analytic tradition is not African, and as such, it is not and should not be a legitimate approach to African philosophy. They argue that a subdiscipline of African philosophy should engage in more substantive and pragmatic issues about the African situation: instead of being embroiled in the abstract issue of whether there is an African philosophy, people should actually engage in the enterprise of making African philosophy relevant to Africa. Thus some of the people in this camp have questioned the use of the standards of Western philosophy as a comparative basis for determining the nature and existence of African philosophy.

The universalists distinguish between two different senses of philosophy, formal philosophy and informal folk philosophy—the two senses being logically or conceptually distinct. The first represents a technical sense of the discipline and subject matter of Western philosophy that is studied in the curricula of most Western universities. The second represents the “prescientific” concepts, beliefs, values, and theories that ordinary people talk about in the evenings under trees and in pubs. These ideas represent a stock of unwritten proverbs, folklore, folk wisdoms, maxims, myths, world views, and concepts that are simply the “organized” cultural ways of how the people understand and explain their experiences. They sometimes consist of traditions and what elders said or are said to have said, which were passed down through successive generations by oral tradition. And because they have not been documented, they are not systematic, and have not been subjected to critical analysis; they are for the most part accepted dogmatically. Since philosophy is a logical and rational discipline, its subject matter and methodol-
ogy should not be dogmatic; philosophy is characterized by systematic and critical analysis. It is argued therefore that because the subject matter and method of philosophy involve a rigorous process of critical analysis of concepts, issues, and problems, these dogmatic cultural beliefs and worldviews cannot be considered philosophical in the technical sense. To say that a people or culture has a philosophy in the folk sense, which is a necessary feature of a culture, does not imply that it has a philosophy in the formal or technical sense. This would suggest that one sense cannot imply or draw from the other.

The universalists also argue that, compared to their paradigm view of the nature of formal or technical philosophy in the tradition of Western philosophy, African philosophy does not have the requisite features, such as having renowned philosophers of the caliber of Plato, Descartes, Hegel, and Russell, a writing tradition, and the use of a rigorous and critical analytical approach to discussions about universal conceptual and abstract issues that reflect the ideas of individuals and not groups. The particularists deny this view of philosophy and argue that what is considered formal or technical philosophy is a reflection of the cultural ideas of a group. In other words, the conceptual distinction between cultural worldviews and beliefs (folk philosophy) and formal or technical philosophy is implausible. To show this, they have tried to analyze the thought systems of certain groups of people and cultures in Africa (Akan, Igbo, Yoruba) on such philosophical issues as the nature and concepts of “person,” “community,” “immortality,” “self,” “time,” and “causation,” and belief in witchcraft, gods or God, pantheism, spirits, predestination, reincarnation, and fatalism. Thus, the particularists argue, either the methodology is basically African or the subject matter is, in that these works, as a representation of an African thought system, are distinguishable from other thought systems.

However, some have argued for a hybrid view by insisting that there are both universalist and particularist elements in the nature of Western philosophy and that both elements are also to be found in African philosophy. In other words, although there are culturally determined philosophical and rational ways of making meaning and explaining reality, these different ways are not incommensurable. It is possible to analyze and then translate one cultural view and perspective into another. We can use the known philosophical concepts and methods of one culture, say the West, to analyze and make understandable the philosophical beliefs and world views of another culture, say African, which on the face of it may appear arcane to a Westerner. They claim that this is what some of the particularists have tried to do with African world-
views, beliefs, and concepts. That is, they have tried to use the analytical tools of Western philosophy to analyze and make understandable the cultural views and beliefs of Africans. This approach involves African philosophers’ analyzing some of the beliefs, myths, and values in African cultures by examining their philosophical and conceptual underpinnings and implications. This does not imply that the beliefs and worldviews of one culture (Western) are comparatively superior to another philosophically, to the extent of denigrating one (African) as unphilosophical or denying its existence as a formal philosophical system.

This debate and the quest to establish a subdiscipline of African philosophy have led to the questioning of the Western nature of the supposed Western philosophy. Some have argued that Western philosophy has some African traditional basis or pedigree or roots, and that some of the ideas currently considered Western philosophy have been influenced by some African cultural beliefs and views, especially those of ancient Egypt. Some of these stances about African philosophy have been viewed as nationalistic, in terms of an attempt to show that Africa has a philosophy comparable to the ideas of the West. This is partly because Africans have been denigrated as uncivilized, backward, and irrational in their beliefs and thinking. The belief in witchcraft is usually cited as an example of such irrational beliefs. It is also claimed that Africans have not contributed anything to intellectual history, knowledge, and civilization, and as such, do not deserve to be studied. Instead they should be civilized. Moreover, philosophy has an honorific connotation and is considered a fundamental basis for civilization. So, to argue that there is an African philosophy and identify something that can be called the subject matter or method of African philosophy is to indicate that Africans are not uncivilized or irrational. This effort, some have argued, has led people to romanticize African past and cultures and present everything about African cultures as good, and have not bothered to take a critical, analytical, and systematic look at issues and ideas in the cultures.

From this debate and discussions, four categories of what is characterized as African philosophy have emerged. These are ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist-ideological philosophy, and professional philosophy. Many of the topics that are currently read, discussed, and taught as constituent parts or contents of African philosophy include all these categories. The first represents the worldviews, folklore, folk wisdoms, myths, and beliefs of certain African groups of people, which were unearthed by anthropologists, sociologists, ethnographers, and philosophers. This repre-
resents what many universalists, on the one hand, have criticized as pseudo-
philosophy, folk philosophy, or a debased form of philosophy. On the other
hand, many particularists argue that a legitimate subdiscipline of African
philosophy can be derived from ethnosophical materials, by subjecting
them to systematic and critical analysis. The second category represents the
identification of individuals in traditional African societies, uninfluenced by
the West, who are comparable to individual thinkers in the Western tradition.
These people, considered philosophical sages, are regarded in their commu-
nities as people of wisdom. These sages, it is argued, must have arrived at
such wisdom on the basis of rational, logical, and critical reasoning, except
that the reasoning, which has to be reconstructed, is lost for lack of docu-
mentation. However, people have questioned the rigor and adequacy of this
unique method used by professional philosophers to develop philosophical
ideas from their interviews with these sages, and have asked whether the
product is truly philosophical.

The third category represents the ideologies of nationalist leaders who
mobilized their peoples along certain political ideologies in order to defeat
colonialism and gain independence. During this period, political leaders
such as Kwame Nkrumah, Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere, and Leopold
Senghor, among others, developed different political theories about how the
state should be governed in order to meet the needs of African peoples.
These ideas were said to have originated from the African conceptions of
family, humanity, and community. Because all these leaders were exposed
to, and perhaps trained in, the Western system of thought, questions have
been raised as to whether their ideas are truly African or if they amount to
mere adaptations of Western political, social, and moral principles, ideals,
and concepts to the African situation. The fourth category represents
Africans who are trained in the traditions of Western philosophy and are
practicing the profession in universities by teaching and doing research. It is
generally agreed that the work of these professional philosophers and their
study may constitute African philosophy. No individual African philosopher
or group of philosophers has such a quantity of writings profound enough on
any philosophical topic, to warrant serious study as African philosophy.
Hence, some people argue that Africans and Westerners dealing with African
issues are only now creating materials that can be called African philosophy,
but they are at this time rather rudimentary.

The materials being created as African philosophy have become sub-
stantial in the last decade with the publication of a number of books and arti-
cles. Many of the materials created in African philosophy have raised and addressed the following sort of questions: What is the nature of philosophy and African philosophy? Does African philosophy have a recognizable unique identity? What is the subject matter of African philosophy? Are there written philosophical traditions in the history of Africa that are comparable to historical traditions in Western philosophy? Do these historical written traditions in Africa indicate the existence of African philosophy? What is the nature of the debate between particularism and universalism regarding the nature and existence of African philosophy? Has philosophy any unique methodology? What is the nature of rationality? Is rationality culturally relative? Does the relativity of rationality, value, and meaning in cultures imply incommensurability among them? What is the nature of a person? What is the nature of community? How is the nature of community related to the nature of a person? Do witches exist? Is it rational to believe in the existence of a witch? What does it mean to call someone a witch? Is a person spiritual or material in nature? What is the nature of time? Is time absolute or relative? What are the different measures of time? What is the nature of causation? What is the nature of event?

**SUGGESTED FURTHER READING**


