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The Problem of Method in African Philosophy

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Edwin Etieyibo's recent collection of papers raises the question of the nature and use of method in African philosophy. Method is difficult to thematize as a concept in this context; the four chapters in the section on method in this book address different aspects of the concept. They come to no unified conclusion (nor would we expect that), but they do open the door to several aspects of this complex concept.

Why is it complex? Method, in the context of philosophy, is often difficult to pin down. Classically in the West, of course, it referred to the tools of reasoning, usually logic. But using the term "method" suggests a means to an end. The point of method is not at all clear. Is it to reach truth? Is it to properly represent experience, or thought, or worldviews? Is it to create concepts? Is it to ground theory?

What Is Method and What Is It For?

In most other disciplines, method is separable from theory – one can have a theory about childhood development in psychology, or the nature of crime in sociology, and use a range of methods to support that theory. Similar method can be used in different theoretical contexts – specific methods in a discipline such as sociology (e.g., surveys, database research, interviews) or more general methodological approaches (e.g., quantitative, qualitative) are theory-agnostic, although they might be tailored by theory. In philosophy, thought, theory and method are generally not so easily separated. If our method centers on clear reasoning, this seems universal.

Of course, there are philosophical approaches that have a more clear application of reason. Phenomenology, for instance, especially that of Husserl, employs a method of reduction and bracketing in order to isolate metaphysical assumptions and allow for a focus on experience. Descartes wrote his *Discourse on Method* which modelled philosophy on scientific inquiry, while Gadamer's *Truth and Method* seeks to place philosophy a step beyond method. And, Socrates' dialectical method used dialogue to approach a true vision of the forms.

These versions of method, and others we could include, assume that reason is capable but for one reason or another obscured. All these versions of method aim to clear away that which stands in the way of reason operating properly. Not all versions of philosophy start from this assumption (for instance, some Christian philosophy starts from the assumption that reason is at its core systematically corrupted, and so no amount of clearing will allow it to operate properly; hence, method focusses on the transcendental underpinnings for thought), but most do.

This is relevant to African philosophy because when method comes up, it has often been against the backdrop of reason's inability to exercise itself due to external barriers. Some discussions of method have started from the assumption that African philosophy has to demonstrate that it is truly African and truly philosophical, and that that means finding a unique method. So, sage philosophy attempts to do just that, for example. Method has also

been a process of clearing colonial structures, “decolonizing the mind” as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o put it, so that a truly African philosophy can commence.

Decolonization: Forward! to Return!

There is another sense of method, and we see this in Simon Mathias Makwinja’s contribution (Makwinja 2018). He surveys some prominent anthologies and introductory readers in African philosophy, and finds most of them wanting. The issue of method here has less to do with the proper use of reason and more to do with how questions are chosen. African philosophy must “give direction to specific substantive problems” (99), something which he thinks has rarely been done.

Makwinja is concerned that focusing on establishing African philosophy’s place within the larger world of philosophy “continues to eat so much into meager resources that could have been used for examining substantive issues” (107). He is right about this, but it is worth asking why this nevertheless continues.

Philosophy in general has a tendency to return to its roots, however it conceives of those, and the justification of African philosophy’s place just seems like a mis-directed version of that. So, the question would be, what would it mean to do substantive philosophy while following this impulse of returning to roots?

What are those roots – are they excavated in a quasi-anthropological manner by attending to the patterns of culture, or do they exist elsewhere? And, is there a distinction between formal roots such as Aristotle’s first principles or Husserl’s experience and substantive roots such as African culture, or do these in the end amount to the same thing?

Thinking With Harmonious Monism

Lucky Uchenna Ogbonnaya, in his contribution, addresses his questions about method to Jonathan Chimakonam and the “logic criterion” of African philosophy. The question is, does logic come before ontology or not? Ogbonnaya’s central question (114) concerns whether a discourse or text is African philosophy or not. Note that this is a demarcation issue first – the decision about order is to answer the question of the nature of philosophy.

Method, for Ogbonnaya, is the determination of what counts as African philosophy, not the way of doing African philosophy. Also, he generalizes about Western and African philosophy – “African philosophy is not like Western philosophy, which is built on a reductionist or absolutist ontology. It is a philosophy that is built on African ontology, which Ijomah christens “harmonious monism.”” (125)

Leaving to the side the question of whether this is an accurate portrayal of either tradition, it suggests how method is meant to work for Ogbonnaya. It is both a process of demarcation, and a way of establishing identity. “Method”, here, is probably best understood as the order of priority for thinking in African philosophy. Ogbonnaya argues against Chimakonam’s idea

that logic must come first, and in so doing, maintains that there is a cultural basis for thought. Ontology, for him, is held at a cultural level rather than an individual one, and is in fact seen as a cultural artifact outside of Africa as well (he also refers to Eastern philosophies as engaging with their ontology as well).

The assumption that ontology grounds cultural philosophies means that these ontologies stand beyond the reach of method. It does not mean that one cannot work from some other ontology; presumably one can work from other ontologies (“a text/work is African philosophy if it is done from the purview of African ontology”, 127), but the ontologies, in this view, seem to be beyond philosophical reflection. This view would be similar to some religious philosophies as mentioned earlier, in which philosophy is subordinated to something else such as theology or religious belief.

Having to Look European

Jonathan Chimakonam’s contribution to the section on method takes on philosophical universalism by advocating conversational philosophy. This is a collective project that he and others at the University of Calabar in Nigeria and elsewhere have been advocating for some time, which has its roots in, among other places, phenomenological and hermeneutical method. Philosophical universalism has, in his account, held African philosophy back by always implicitly requiring that it look to European models of thought.

The alternative is not particularism, which has its own set of problems, but conversational philosophy. He conceives conversation as a quasi-dialectical process which includes both critique and creation as part of its movement. The thinking that this affords is rooted in revisions of questions and answers, as each is exposed to new conditions and new information.

The entire structure is schematized, although it is unclear whether the schematization is descriptive or prescriptive, in other words, whether it is a representation of how successful philosophy happens or whether it is a map for how African philosophy might successfully avoid universalism and particularism to create something new. In either case, there would likely be a host of exceptions or variations within the schema.

More interesting than the schema are the themes he identifies as ways of moving forward. They all bear traces of the method already described.

There are five:

- 1) *re-tracement* (a move away from attempting to represent collective African thought and toward asking new questions that can open up new vistas of thought);
- 2) *re-engagement* (finding new forms of encounter with otherness);
- 3) *re-leasement* (allowing reason to find its many voices);
- 4) *unfoldment* (the result of the previous three, a move towards the new rather than simply re-affirming what we already believe); and

- 5) *coverance* (attending to areas that have not received sufficient attention in African philosophy).

Like the more generalized method, these grow out of the conviction that there are untapped intellectual resources in Africa which, with new questions and new habits of engagement can yield more complex and more applicable models of thought.

No Dogma Is Innocuous, Leave Them All

The final contribution to the method section is by Oritsegbubemi Anthony Oyowe. He focusses on a specific methodological claim, which he calls “Hume’s Law” – there should be no ought from is (“NOFI”), or more directly, we should not infer prescriptive claims from solely descriptive ones. Thaddeus Metz argues that Kwame Gyekye commits this error when he tries to derive a political theory from the metaphysics of selfhood in Africa. Oyowe’s methodological argument is that there are often bridging premises which are unstated, but which legitimate the move from is to ought.

Oyowe’s argument is closely reasoned, although given the scope of Metz’s work it does not do justice to his full ethical theory (and, one would not of course expect it to). But what is interesting here is the question of what implications there would be for method if Oyowe’s reclamation of NOFI is successful. While his specific target is Metz’s position, the general goal of Oyowe’s argument is clearly to be able to deploy descriptions of African culture and society in making a case for how Africans ought to live.

In other words, Oyowe is resisting Metz’s NOFI dictum, in part because of flaws he sees in Metz’s defense of this principle, but more importantly because having this principle available means that theorists who have used it, such as Wiredu and Gyekye among others could continue to use it. Why might this manner? Because a great deal of communitarian thought in African political philosophy and African ethics is founded on what are essentially sociological observations about African past and present.

And this raises the question relevant to method – while Oyowe is not arguing against NOFI only on behalf of Africa (he does, after all, marshal resources from other non-African writers in analytic philosophy), would the ability to reject “no ought from is” enable African philosophers to establish politics or ethics in a manner that they would otherwise not be able to do? Or, is this a kind of particularism, a way of differentiating African thought from other thought by grounding it in the specific nature of African societies?

And, if NOFI is rejected, that is, if it is possible to derive normative statements from existing or historical cultural practice, does this not simply move the question back one step, to asking about whether the descriptions of African societies themselves have been made with a philosophical agenda in mind, and whether exceptions to the rule have been overlooked or ignored in order to establish something that looks like a unified African description of social reality (the “is” part) which can then be used to produce the “ought” part, which would be specific ethical or normative principles?

An Almost-Imperialist Method

What is interesting about this group of chapters is the different approaches they have to method in African philosophy. Since there is no agreed outcome in philosophy akin to what we might find in other disciplines (something like producing theories about the processes of life in biology, or explanations of social formations and processes in sociology, and so forth), there is no agreement on the nature of method. There is, therefore, also no way of assessing the success or failure of method. What is also evident is that method in African philosophy looks over its shoulder to the alienating methods imposed upon it by colonial philosophy in the past.

Method as we see it here is a way of clearing impediments to understanding, and those impediments are largely understood in terms of past regimes of knowledge and earlier practices within African philosophy. It is also, despite the now commonly expressed sentiment that we must move past the project of defining African philosophy and start doing it, still a project of demarcation, that is, showing who's in and who's out, or what is in and what is out. Of course, some, notably Makwinja and Chimakonam, clearly try to distance themselves from that project of demarcation.

There is also a thread connecting these papers related to creativity. While there is an element of demarcation, which reflexively looks back on existing candidates for African philosophy, there is also a sense in all the authors of what might be possible if the foundational components of African philosophy are clarified and the barriers to the uses of reason in Africa are removed. The specifics of the results of creativity in African philosophy is, understandably, unclear in all the authors.

And yet, the fact that it is unclear is evidence that the term “method” as used in African philosophy (and perhaps elsewhere in philosophy) is not about reaching any particular goal. One can imagine philosophical method which is tied to a goal – some versions of Christian philosophy, for instance, or philosophies which have specific forms of emancipation as their goal.

This is not to say, of course, that a particular view of the world, or an outcome of emancipation, are not significant projects for philosophy, but that there exists a tension in philosophical method between having a sense of the kind of creation desired and constructing a method which follows reason where it leads. History is littered with philosophical statements on what the good life might look like, or what utopia might be, and in retrospect such visions turn out to have their own forms of domination, their own blind spots, which have no adequate response in the terms their philosophical method and assumptions have set out.

If these papers were all part of a conference panel, and I was asked to provide a response, I would be interested to see how each writer would respond to what I think is one of the best books on method written in African philosophy. Emmanuel Eze's final book, *On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* (Eze 2008), suggests a structure for reason

which does not root it directly in culture, but rather recognizes a range of different forms of reason which are assembled into rationality differently in different places (see Janz 2008 for a fuller account of this). His focus is less on finding a method of philosophizing in Africa and more on finding a method of thinking able to account for both its universality and particularity.

Contributions to Philosophy

It would be interesting to see each of the contributors here interact with Eze's argument. Eze seems less concerned about the problem of demarcation in African philosophy than he is about describing the ways in which people in particular places leverage universal aspects of human reason for localized effects. Like the contributors in the book, he is interested in a version of African philosophy which is creative, but I suspect his description of creativity would be different. And, his version of reason is less about clearing the impediments to the true functioning of reason, and more about how different forms of reason might work.

Eze does not explicitly say that he is writing a treatise on method in African philosophy, and in fact he avoids thinking about method at all in terms of looking for something unique in Africa. For him, the goal of method in the context of Africa is not to find a unique approach to Africa, or even to find a new way of clearing the impediments to reason. Nor is it to find something analogous to method in other disciplines, that is, a set of disciplined steps designed to support theories or explanations of phenomena in a particular domain. To that extent, he would agree with the contributors to this book – method in philosophy does not easily lend itself to definition in any rigid sense.

But he would likely have some questions for these contributors. For Makwinja, he might ask whether the question of method really is just a distraction from producing philosophy that is relevant to Africa? Is method only about clearing away the barriers to reasoning in Africa and establishing Africa's place within the world of philosophy, or does it have a further relevance once those tasks are either completed or not worth engaging anymore?

For Ogbonnaya, he might ask whether the contrast between ontology and logic is really the only one that faces us. Are there not other forms of reasoning available, and the question of which comes first in the ontology/logic binary is overly simplified? For Chimakonam, he might ask how other disciplines and their traditions of reason might fit into the picture he is drawing about conversational philosophy. As Eze indicates, there are a range of forms of reason which assemble into rationality.

Is the conversational method a centrifugal one, expanding the range of reason in the context of Africa, or a centripetal one, tightening and honing rational discourse within the context of philosophy, to the exclusion of discourses in other disciplines? In other words, does conversation as a method broaden the scope of philosophy or narrow it? And for Oyowe, he might ask whether, given his rejection of the "no ought from is" dictum, if it is still possible to, as Eze puts it, "protect what I regard as the relative independence of philosophical reflection from contextual morality and political settlements." (Eze 2008: 235).

In other words, the arrow on this dictum might go both ways – if “is” constitutes a sufficient basis for “ought”, is it possible that “ought” will influence or even produce what we think of as “is”, which would lead to a kind of relativism at best, or a capture of philosophy for political ends at worst?

Of course, we cannot truly know what Eze would ask, and I am not trying to speak on his behalf. What I am doing is taking the lead he gives us in *On Reason* to think about the nature of method beyond the contributions to Etieyibo’s volume. These chapters, along with Eze and other writings, are defining a disciplined and extended discussion about the difficult question of method in African philosophy, and I look forward to future conversations around these questions.

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