FREDERICK OCHIENG'-ODHIAMBO, ROXANNE BURTON, AND ED BRANDON, EDS. CONVERSATIONS IN PHILOSOPHY: CROSSING THE BOUNDARIES

Reviewed by Clarence Johnson

Ochieng'-Odhiambo, Frederick, Roxanne Burton, and Ed Brandon, eds. Conversations in Philosophy: Crossing the Boundaries. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008. 340 pp.

Appropriately billed 'Conversations,' this book brings together diverse viewpoints on the nature of philosophy, differing conceptual schemes that give rise to and shape the distinctive philosophies of human beings in various regions of the globe, and even the kinds of questions/issues with which various practitioners of philosophy grapple. In so doing the volume coincidentally reflects and upholds the conference theme of the Caribbean Philosophical Association, a recently-formed regional organization, which is "Shifting the Geography of Reason." Of significance is the underlying idea in the book, namely, that the activity of philosophizing, in terms of its origination, is not the distinctive attribute of the western mind that then got diffused to the other regions of the world, as is often claimed.[1] To the contrary, in so far as human beings populate the various corners of the earth there have always been philosophies. This is because the human being, as a rational creature, is always trying to make sense of her/his environment, and as such s/he has always been grappling with "the big questions" in one form or another. This idea is central to the various issues covered in the four parts of the book, from the question "What is Philosophy?" in Part I to concerns in ethics and metaethics in Part IV. I will briefly expound and comment on representative samples of the essays in the book.

In the essay "On What Philosophy Is," Stephen J. Boulter elaborates what he considers the general aim of all philosophies, which is "to provide a general description and account of the nature of human beings and our place in the natural world." (8) Boulter then goes on to note that often in this endeavor we encounter problems, puzzlements or tension among the commonsense beliefs that we are inclined to accept about the world. (11) In Boulter's view, the role or, as he says, the raison d'être, of the philosopher, is to remove such tension or address such puzzlements by giving a coherent account of the set of beliefs s/he is examining. In this connection, Boulter highlights the fact that philosophy, as a world view of any people, is rooted in and thus reflects the cultural practices, beliefs and perspectives of any given group. Accordingly, he proceeds to search for what he terms a "family resemblance" that links together the various philosophic enterprises as their practitioners, regardless of geographic or cultural situatedness/location, grapple with their commonsense views of the world.

What Boulter is calling attention to is simply that the distinctive feature common to all philosophical practices, indeed the element that makes any given activity *philosophical,* is the methodology through which the activity/practice itself is undertaken. The methodology is the rigorous critical scrutiny and analysis of the beliefs, perspectives, practices and culture of a people. In this, Boulter echoes a sentiment most succinctly stated, at least in my view, by A. J . Ayer in The Problem of Knowledge. (London: Penguin Books, 1962) There, Ayer pronounces, rather magisterially but correctly, that "It is by its methods rather than its subject-matter that

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[1] See, for example, W. T. Stace, A Critical History of Greek Philosophy (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967) pp.12-13. And for a criticism of Stace, see my "Teaching the Canons of Western Philosophy in Historically Black Colleges and Universities: the Spelman College Experience," Metaphilosophy 26.4 (1995): 413-423.

philosophy is to be distinguished from other arts or sciences. Philosophers make statements which are intended to be true, and they commonly rely on argument both to support their own theories and to refute the theories of others."(Ayer, 7) What are the implications of Boulter's conception of philosophy and of the philosophical methodology for the Caribbean?

In a sense it is this issue that Roxanne Burton takes up in chapter 4, "The Philosophy and Literature Debate: Assessing its Salience in the Caribbean." Burton questions the general tendency in academia to demarcate disciplines in such a way as to imply that disciplinary aims and projects are mutually opposed to each other. Concerning the disciplines of Philosophy and Literature, in particular, Burton examines the generally-held belief that philosophic and literary concerns are mutually exclusive, that philosophy aims at unraveling the truth whereas literature aims at providing entertainment, and as such the two disciplines are to be kept separate. This position is traceable all the way to Plato, at least in the Republic. There, Plato speaks of expelling the poets from the republic because all they offer are weak representations of the truth, in the form of shadows and images, in contrast to philosophers. Burton quite rightly rejects this view by showing that philosophic concerns can be articulated through literature and that literary writing can espouse philosophic concerns. The significance of her position in respect of Caribbean philosophy is that one can glean Caribbean philosophy from some of the literary works of the region; in particular, from the religious and cultural practices of the Caribbean, as well as through myths, stories and other sources of Caribbean life. This is because, echoing the aforementioned underlying idea in the book, philosophy is the articulation of the world views of a people and these world views can be located in the people's myths, stories and similar sources. In advancing this view, therefore, Burton draws upon a position known in discussions of African philosophy as ethnophilosophy. This is the position that, in the African context, philosophy espouses the various belief systems of the distinctive ethnic groups.

Ben Mulvey picks up the thread of Burton's concern in Part Three of the volume by addressing the question, "Can there be a Regional (Caribbean) Philosophy?" (chapter 13.) And he gives an affirmative answer about the possibility of a Caribbean philosophy by drawing upon the social theories of Sartre, Foucault and Horkheimer as well as in hermeneutics both to reject an objectivist and positivistic account of reality and to make the case for an interpretation of reality that is historically situated and regional. It is on this basis of such interpretations of reality as philosophy offers that Mulvey posits the possibility of a Caribbean philosophy even as he says he cannot offer the details of such a philosophy.

Among the other essays that I find thought-provoking as they are edifying are F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo's "Origin of Philosophic Sagacity in the Discourse on African Philosophy" (ch.10), Ed Brandon's "The Anthropocentricity of Ethical Norms as an Argument for Subjectivism" (ch.19), and Lawrence O. Bamikole's "The Concept of Right(s) in Western (Anglo-American) and African (Yoruba) Philosophies: An Exercise in Comparative Ethics" (chapter 20). Ochieng'-Odhiambo's essay elaborates the history of a school of thought in African philosophy known as Philosophical Sagacity whose chief proponent was the late Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka. Philosophical sagacity is the view that African philosophy consists in the articulation of the African belief systems by African sages. These sages are "persons who are versed in the wisdoms and traditions of . . . [their] people." Moreover, these sages are concerned mainly with "ethical and empirical issues within their societies." (140) Odhiambo then goes on to provide an illuminating account of philosophic sagacity and to defend this variant of African philosophy.

But I have some concerns about philosophic sagacity as presented by Odhiambo. I say "as

presented" because this is not how I understand Oruka's account of the position.[2] To begin, in the hands of Odhiambo philosophic sagacity strikes me as reactionary and conservative in that it upholds the patriarchal nature and values of most traditional African societies. (Tradition is king and men are the "voices" of tradition!) Notice that Odhiambo conveniently avoided stating that African sages invariably are men. Also, because age is a premium in African traditions, with the consequence that African elders are immunized from criticism and thus cannot be challenged especially if they are the supposed custodians and defenders of African customs and traditions, all philosophic sagacity does is to promote what I would prefer to characterize as a dogma of gerontocratic wisdom. In this connection, I find rather troubling Odhiambo's implicit but undefended assertion about the purity of African belief systems and thus that African sages, and hence philosophical sagacity, serve as a bulwark against "foreign ideas and values" that are contaminating African traditional systems. Odhiambo invokes what he calls "technological morality" to argue that western technology is a contaminating influence on African traditional morality and aesthetics. Beginning with what he clearly considers an objectionable premise, namely, that whatever is technologically possible is deemed morally permissible and fitting (141), and that those societies which lag behind technological advancements are deemed (morally) bad, Odhiambo concludes that African societies, lagging behind technological advances, are allowing an invasion of potentially dangerous and aberrant western values via western technologies. And he illustrates this view about the deleterious consequences of technological morality on African societies citing the practice of abortion: "if abortion is medically possible and safe (a reflection of advanced technology), then it is treated as also morally right for a woman to abort." (141) And he applies the same argument to show that the use of skin care products, cosmetics and western dress fashion is contaminating African aesthetic and moral values:

> In Africa today, it is increasingly becoming acceptable that to be
> good or beautiful one must be in possession of the latest technological
> gadgets and be fashionable. In a manner of speaking, a beautiful lady, for
> example, is no longer she who relies on her natural build. She is one who
> dresses fashionably and decorates her body with cosmetic trappings: thanks
> to technology. (141)

The idea here is that western technological morality is changing African ethical and aesthetic values and as such is inimical to the African culture of morality "in the proper and desirable sense."(141) The question that arises, then, is in what does the proper and desirable sense of African values consist? Obviously, for Odhiambo the answer is the sense that is upheld by the sages, the custodians of tradition and culture. Accordingly, Odhiambo recommends that "African governments . . . employ the services of philosophic sages to unearth and formulate the basic fundamental principles underlying the cultural practices of their respective ethnic groups" (143).

I shall ignore for the time being Odhiambo's implicit but false claim that, ordinarily, African women do not dress fashionably or that they do not decorate their bodies with cosmetic trappings. If one accepts Odhiambo's representation and defense of philosophical sagacity, then one cannot but notice that the position is very backward looking, conservative and reactionary. First, it tacitly assumes that tradition is pure, good and thus sacrosanct, for which reason it must be safeguarded against "foreign ideas," the latter of which seem to be potentially (inherently?) contaminating. But isn't this the very kind of logic that drives fundamentalism of all stripes, the most extreme of which is exhibited by the Talibans in Afghanistan in their

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[2] See Henry Odera Oruka, "Sagacity in African Philosophy," African Philosophy: the Essential Readings, ed. Tsenay Serequeberhan (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 47-62.

oppression of women and girls? After all, the Talibans see themselves as the custodians of the religion, culture and tradition of the Afghani people and, *sui generis,* custom and tradition are pure and good! So Odhiambo would have to be careful in making the case for African sages as guardians and custodians of African traditions and cultures against "the raging invasions of potentially undesirable foreign ideas and values (141), else he would be making a case for the equivalent of African cultural Talibans!

Second, it is generally through an interchange of ideas that we enlarge our knowledge. Bearing this in mind, and since African sages now turn out to be custodians of culture and tradition which must be protected and preserved against outside forces, one is left to wonder about the critical reflection that is supposed to characterize the intellectual engagements of the sages and in virtue of which we should classify those engagements as *philosophical*. Added to this, we know that in African traditions and cultures age is given pride of place in society with the consequence that one would be impudent to challenge the view of an elder. As such, age insulates the elders from criticism. But that age is not synonymous with wisdom is evident from the fact that, if for the sake of argument we assume that some of the stories in the Bible are true, it was Solomon, not Methuselah, who was considered wise even though at the time in Biblical history Methuselah was the oldest recorded human being – at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Besides, we are already seeing the consequence of this undue deference to age in the sociopolitical life of much of Africa.

Finally, I believe that African men and women, scholars and non-scholars alike, would take umbrage at Odhiambo's claim that, prior to the advent of western technological invasion, African women were not fashionable and that they are now committing a crime against African values by being "fashionable." When we consider that Odhiambo seems to defend the patriarchal and paternalistic system of African societies by taking exception to the fact that African women, like women the world over, can now exercise control over their reproductive capacities by the use of reproductive technologies, it becomes even more evident that his own variant of philosophic sagacity is extremely reactionary and conservative.

This brings me to Lawrence Bamikole's piece on the concept of rights. I find Bamikole's essay very thoughtful as it is elegantly written. Bamikole contrasts western conception of rights that derives from an atomistic conception of the self with that of traditional African societies that gives primacy to groups and derivatively to the individual. In so doing, Bamikole highlights the different conceptual schemes that frame rights-claims between western societies and African societies. In the case of traditional African societies, in particular, he notes that a social group includes both human beings and "non human beings like plants, animals, the gods and the ancestors." (275); hence rights-claims extend to all of these entities. Added to this conception of rights and rights-claimants, says Bamikole, is a strong ethical dimension according to which no distinction is drawn between knowing that which is morally right and doing it. This is because persons are socialized into knowing that which is moral and as such there is "no gap between knowing and doing. Persons do what is right in accordance to the moral training that has been imbibed from childhood" (276).

From a theoretical viewpoint Bamikole's conceptualization of the nature of rights in the African (specifically Yoruba) context seems plausible. However; from a practical viewpoint I am left wondering how to reconcile his assertions about the putative moral rectitude of the members of traditional African societies, insofar as such moral rectitude is a function of moral socializing, with the pervasive moral degeneracy of individuals in public life in most African societies, and

the rapacious individualism that African public officials generally seem to exhibit. If the individual's sense of morality is primarily oriented to the social good, and given that there is no logical gap between knowing and doing, how then are we to account for the moral crimes of public officials against their communities of which the state is an extension? I see here a discrepancy between theory and praxis in Bamkole's conception of the nature of rights in African societies and the implications for morality that his account poses. It would behoove Bamikole to address this discrepancy to make his position coherent.

Finally, Ed Brandon's essay on an age-old topic, the possible origin of morality, is illuminating. Following the lead of J. L. Mackie, Brandon rejects an objectivist basis of morality that grounds morality in the nature of things. Brandon posits a hypothesis that objectivists can be radically mistaken in their belief in much the same way as people once were mistaken in thinking that colors were inherent properties of objects. The point of the hypothesis is to say that it is logically possible for morality to have a very different origin and nature from that posited by objectivists. And to motivate this view about the possibility of radical error on the part of ethical objectivists, Brandon invokes a Humean supposition about the possible origin of the universe by some infant or superannuated deity. Assuming that the deity's objective in creating the universe was to provide a pleasant environment for dolphins and similar animals rather than humans --indeed the deity might not even have humans in mind – Brandon contends that humans, finding themselves in such an environment not intended for them, would come up with ways of coping and flourishing. On this basis they would invent moral norms that address their specific needs and that thus apply to them only. Such norms as humans would invent therefore can only take a hypothetical form: "If (or since) we want to flourish, then we ought to do X". By this line of reasoning Brandon demonstrates, in essence, the possibility of morality having an anthropocentric basis grounded in *human* experiences and expressed in a series of hypothetical imperatives. And it is a short step from the anthropocentric basis of the possible origin of morality to its subjective (or relative) character given the contingency and situatedness of human beings and hence of human experiences.

One can agree with Brandon, Mackie and others about the possible anthropocentric origin of morality but insist that there is a sense of objectivity germane to morality. Following Hume, this is a sense that is grounded on human nature. It is a fact about humans that we have natural liabilities which we must overcome in order to thrive. One such liability is our inherent inability to provide for ourselves and as such we are absolutely dependent on each other. These limitations of our nature necessitate our having to devise strategies to enable us to cooperate with each other else we would perish. One such strategy is that we formulate prescriptions to guide us, and the prescriptions we thus formulate take on a hypothetical force along the lines Brandon has suggested. But these prescriptions have an objective basis in an inherent desire to satisfy our natural needs on pain of self-destruction. This sense of objectivity is clearly compatible, at least in my view, with Hume's empirical claims about human nature being "the capital or center" for philosophical disquisitions.[3] Of course, this is not the sense Brandon examines, but that does not really matter. I offer this account as an alternative to the subjectivism that Brandon advances especially with the relativistic implications of subjectivism.

I cannot comment on the other equally fine essays in the volume. But if my discussion is any indication, the remaining essays are just as engaging and thought-provoking as those I have

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[3] David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: OUP, 1978), xvi.

examined. One problem the reader is likely to encounter with the book, however, is that its pages seem to easily come off the spine – much to my surprise and bewilderment considering that the book is supposed to be well bound. And my copy is hard cover! But that is something the editors will need to bring to the attention of the publishers.

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