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Bado Ndoye, *Paulin Hountondji. Leçons de philosophie africaine*. Publisher: Riveneuve, Paris, 2022. 200 pages. ISBN: 978-2-36013-651-3. Language: French.

Reviewed by: Mamadou Diallo, Columbia University.

Introductions to the history of philosophy in Africa rightfully attribute a place of choice to Paulin Hountondji's 1976 intervention, *Sur la Philosophie Africaine*, which was soon followed by its English translation *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. The work and its author are mainly remembered as fierce critiques of ethnophilosophy; the endeavor started in 1945 by Placide Tempels to retrieve from ethnographical data a subjacent, collective, and coherent African philosophy. Having disqualified African cultures as the sites of already-there African philosophies, Hountondji, so his critiques went, merely reasserted a Eurocentric and positivist concept of philosophy borrowed from Louis Althusser. Bado Ndoye, a philosopher at the University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar, shows in his latest book how such a reading is narrowly focused on the critical side of Hountondji's work, is inattentive to its ground, and ultimately, obscures the path it charted towards a multidisciplinary research project in philosophy and the social sciences in Africa.

It is precisely in order to clear that path towards the development of an African philosophy where Africa retains a presence and philosophy its specificity that Ndoye returns to the work of Hountondji and, interestingly, to that of Husserl. What Hountondji's philosophical oeuvre points to, Ndoye argues, is an African philosophy that remains a mode of critical inquiry arising from, but pushing beyond, the particular and towards the universal.

Ndoye relates the works of Hountondji to that of Husserl in the first chapter, not only because the former wrote his dissertation on the latter, but also because their trajectories are somewhat analogous. Husserl went from reaffirmations of the transcendental ego's centrality to the formulation of truths on the world to meditations on the modalities whereby the world is already given to subjects by the

milieus of original self-evidence they inhabit, or, to use his own terminology, by their lifeworlds.

Like Hountondji, Husserl's early efforts were directed at preserving a space for the cogito in a philosophical climate of complacency in the particular and devaluation of the transcendental subject. Husserl opposed the historicist conception of philosophy as *Weltanschauung* championed by Wilhelm Dilthey and called for a philosophy that would be a "Rigorous Science." Hountondji critiqued Tempels and his epigones, and he kept his distances from structuralist theses on the illusory nature of the subject so as to maintain the conceivability of that which, in a felicitous phrase, "Mamoussé Diagne called the African cogito."

Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* was almost unanimously celebrated at its publication in 1945. Prominent French intellectual figures such as epistemologist Gaston Bachelard took an interest in the dynamic ontology it attributed to the Bantu. Members of the then-rising black Parisian intelligentsia gravitating around Alioune Diop's *Présence Africaine* — except for Aimé Césaire who had reservations that anticipated the later critiques of Hountondji and Fabien Eboussi Boulaga — saw it as a forceful vindication of African civilization's dignity.

Hountondji's first book was received as if only the work's subtitle mattered, which directly referred to the negative dimension of its philosophical project. Unlike most commentators, though, Ndoye takes the book's title seriously. He does so by clarifying the concept of philosophy Hountondji's critique is predicated on, as well as the project for African philosophy as an ongoing task rather than a given to retrieve that derives from that concept.

After a first chapter that outlines Husserl's philosophical trajectory, Bado Ndoye shows why Hountondji's critique of mistaken for a disqualification of African cultures the literature took as its objects. Ndoye convincingly demonstrates that it is precisely the concept of philosophy as a *Philosophia Perennis* with which ethnophilosophy operated that Hountondji rejected, as well as the pernicious way in which Tempels' book implicitly reiterated the distinction between historical European societies and ahistorical African societies. Whereas, according to the ethnophilosophical perspective, European philosophy was to be understood as a thread of ruptures brought forth by individual thinkers; African Philosophy, although

it existed, did so quite differently as it created implicit, consensual, and perennial insights on the nature of being and the cosmos.

In order to reassess Hountondji's intellectual trajectory as one that went beyond the closing of the ethnophilosophical dead-end and cleared a promising path for the development of an African philosophical tradition, Ndoye starts by showing the theoretical and politico-ethical commitments in the name of which the critique of ethnophilosophy was deployed. He then turns to the question of the status of African cultures in Hountondji's philosophical project.

For Hountondji, the critique of ethnophilosophy was an effort against the adoption by African thinkers of an ethnologizing conception of philosophy in Africa. It was a necessary condition for philosophy proper to develop out of the continent. A necessary although not sufficient condition, since—and to that extent, he was Althusserian—he believed that for a history of philosophy to unfold, it ought to coexist in its cultural milieu with a history of science. In that, Ndoye, drawing from the work of Alexandre Koyre, concurs and contends that the history of philosophy is unintelligible if unrelated to that of science. Hountondji's relationship African cultures or heritage and his understanding of the presence they ought to have in African philosophy derives from those assumptions.

Assumptions on the specificity of philosophy as a critical tradition of thought which is anchored but also breaks with tradition; that is tethered to science inasmuch as it reflects on the mind-constructed and reconstructed worlds which are the products of the historical unfolding of science. For Hountondji, Bado Ndoye tells us, the knowledge systems of African cultures must be “rethought within the epistemological framework of modern scientific practice, the challenge being to root it in the ‘soil’ of the African context” (p.150).

There is, for Hountondji as well as for Husserl, philosophy ought to find its objects in the world enunciated by science, “overdetermined and shaped by scientific revolutions” (p.94). For Hountondji, “science,” which the other eminent critique of Ethnophilosophy Eboussi Boulaga insisted, “is not the other of the Muntu,” is a necessary condition for philosophy. (p.150).

The varieties of African indigenous knowledge are not, for that matter, to be discarded, but for them to be legitimate and legible philosophical materials, they must undergo a “rethinking in the epistemological framework of modern scientific practice.” (p.150) At this stage of Ndoye's argument, given the varieties of practices

that go under the name of science, one is tempted to ask for clarifications on what precisely that epistemological framework of modern scientific practice refers to. What ultimately is at stake for Bado Ndoye, beyond a proper reading of Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy and his understanding of the relationship between philosophy, science, and African cultures, is the "re-institution of the Universal." A universal that would be ethically and politically acceptable, which is to say that would proceed from the assumption of the equal dignity of all cultural formations.

Une Leçon de Philosophie Africaine is an erudite and sharp argument on how philosophy can remain committed to the universal, understood as that which can only be aimed at from the particular, that is never fully actualized but remains a perennial and fertile tension and ideally convergence towards unity. The universal, as "reinstated" in the book's final chapter, appears "not as a given, but as a possibility inscribed at the heart of each way of expressing the world's infinity, which raises the necessity of having to reconstitute it philosophically. To reconstitute the universal implies constructing a global public space circumscribed and mediatized by the action of all since we cannot think of a common world that is not already poly-centered, that is to say, open to the plurality of perspectives" (p. 118). The universal, Bado Ndoye indicates, is at the liminal spaces instantiated by dialogues between cultures that took on the task of philosophizing.

Here we obviously see a community of thought with the author of the book's foreword, Souleymane Bachir Diagne. A continuation of Diagne's reflections on *lateral universalism*, which he opposed to the *overarching universal* the modern West has long understood as the product of its own special spiritual itinerary. For Ndoye, the philosophical commitment to such a concept of the Universal is today as crucial as was for Husserl the philosophical opposition to relativism in the context of the rise of Nazism. Furthermore, Ndoye, a specialist in phenomenology and the history of sciences, provides clear indications of how these ethical and theoretical commitments could be turned into praxis through a multi-disciplinary research project and cosmopolitics.

Notes:

All translations are mine. Cited in Ndoye, Bado. *Paulin Hountondji: Leçons de Philosophie Africaine*. Riveneuve, 2022.p.24

Diagne, Souleymane Bachir. "On the Postcolonial and the Universal ?" *Rue Descartes*, vol. 78, no. 2, 2013, pp. 7–18. Cairn.info,

<https://doi.org/10.3917/rdes.078.0007>.

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