Tutorial letter 202/1/2018

Introduction to African Philosophy

PLS1502

Semesters 1

Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology

Discipline of Philosophy

IMPORTANT INFORMATION:

This tutorial letter contains important feedback information on your third Assignment and some useful information for the Examination.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Dear students of PLS1502: Introduction to African Philosophy,

This tutorial letter will serve as feedback on the third assignment, as well as to give you information regarding the forthcoming examinations.

Assignment 03 was due on the 26th of April 2018 and you were given the option to do one of two essays. Its unique number was 749098.

We hope that you are enjoying the course and welcome your constructive feedback via email at mkhwaesn@unisa.ac.za or khosim@unisa.ac.za or on the discussion forums on myUnisa.

Best of luck in the examinations!

2. COMMENTS ON ASSIGNMENT 03

In this assignment, you had the choice between the following two assignments.

OPTION A

*Discuss critically Oruka's four trends of African philosophy. In your view, which trend characterizes African philosophy properly and why?*

*Readings for the assignment:*

Prescribed Reading: See H. Odera Oruka’s essay and the corresponding readings in the study Guide. *NOTE: Your essay should neither be ONLY a summary of Oruka’s article, nor ONLY your own opinion on the matter. You should strive to provide an overview of Oruka’s article, whilst providing your own argument as you critically engage with the topic at hand.*
OR

**OPTION B:**

Gyekye's communitarianism is an attempt to strike a balance between an extreme individualism and communitarianism pertaining to human rights. Does he succeed in doing so? Discuss.

*Readings for the assignment:*

Prescribed Reading: See Kwame Gyekye’s essay and the corresponding readings in the study Guide.

We will firstly discuss option A.

**2.1 Assignment 2A**

What follows below is not a fully-fleshed answer to the assignment question but rather some pointers towards answering this question.

**Guidelines to the assignment**

This assignment question has three sub-divisions or sections, and may be analyzed as follows:

(i) A critical discussion of Oruka’s 4 trends of African philosophy  
(ii) Choosing trend/s that you think characterizes African philosophy better and  
(iii) State reasons why the trend/s of your choice characterizes African philosophy better.

Let us discuss the three points above in some details:

(i) A critical discussion of Oruka’s 4 trends of African philosophy
You are asked to discuss critically Oruka’s 4 trends. This implies that you are not simply going to name and explain what each trend is all about. I think Oruka has done a fantastic job in that regard. He has used simple language to describe the 4 trends. So, begin by restating (though in your own words) Oruka’s position.

But, as already stated, you have to do more than a description of the trends. This means that over and above giving a brief description of the 4 trends, you must also assess the merits of each trend. To do this effectively you have to ask yourself the following question: *Can this trend qualify to be a philosophy?* It is therefore required that you take each of the 4 trends and decide if you are happy to ascribe the tag ‘African philosophy’ to it.

Note, that the final outcome of what qualifies as philosophy to you will also depend on how you define ‘philosophy.’ For example, if philosophy for you is a critical and reflective enterprise, and not a worldview, then you have to show if all of the 4 trends has this aspect.

Summarily, under this subsection, you must do the following:

- Describe each trend in your own words
- Evaluate each trend to find out if in your view, it qualifies to be a philosophy.

(ii) **Choosing a trend that appeals or makes more sense to you**

It all depends on you about which trend appeals to you most. Thus, there is no right or wrong answer. It is also acceptable to select more than one trend.

(iii) **Stating reasons why the trend of your choice appeals to you.**

It is important to justify your choice. In other words, you have to give reasons and or arguments why you have chosen particular trend/s as favorable to you.

What follows below is an example of how one may go about answering this question. The answer below comes from one of the students who studied this module a couple of years ago.

**A Commentary on Oruka’s 4 Trends of African Philosophy**

**Table of Contents**

1. Introduction
2. Discussions
   a. Ethnophilosophy
   b. Philosophic Sagacity
      i. A note on the above
   c. Professional Philosophy
   d. Nationalist-ideological Philosophy
Introduction
In this essay I will be critically discussing Henry Odera Oruka’s 4 trends of African philosophy, as laid out in his essay, using both my notes on the essay and the study guide as a reference, followed by my thoughts on each trend (again supplemented by references from my own notes), and finally a discussion of which trend makes more sense to me, and why. To conclude, I will present an overview of the key points in the discussion.

Discussions
Ethnophilosophy
Ethnophilosophy involves the recording of the beliefs found in African cultures. Such an approach treats African philosophy as consisting in a set of shared beliefs, a shared world-view – an item of communal property rather than an activity for the individual. Ethnophilosophers attempt to show that African philosophy is distinctive by treading heavily on the ‘African’ and almost losing the ‘philosophy’, that is, by making clear the differentiation between African and European philosophy.

Philosophic Sagacity
Philosophic sagacity is a version of ethnophilosophy where the focus is more on individuals, in which one records the beliefs of certain special members of a community. The premise here is that, although most societies demand some degree of conformity of belief and behavior from their members, a certain few of those members reach a particularly high level of knowledge and understanding of their cultures’ world-view. Such people are regarded as sages. In some cases, the sage goes beyond mere knowledge and understanding to reflection and questioning – these become the targets of philosophic sagacity.

An immediate worry is that not all reflection and questioning is philosophical; besides, if African philosophy were to be defined purely in terms of philosophic sagacity, then the thoughts of the sages couldn’t be African philosophy, for they didn’t record them from other sages. Also, on this
view the only difference between non-African anthropology or ethnology and African philosophy seems to be the nationality of the researcher.

A Note on The Above

The problem with both ethnophilosophy and philosophical sagacity is that there is surely an important distinction between philosophy and the history of ideas. No matter how interesting the beliefs of a people may be to the philosopher, they remain beliefs, not philosophy. To call them philosophy is to use a secondary sense of that term.

Professional Philosophy

As I understand it, professional philosophy is the view that philosophy is a particular way of thinking, reflecting, and reasoning, that such a way is relatively new to (most of) Africa, and that African philosophy must grow in terms of the philosophical work carried out by Africans and applied to (perhaps not exclusively) African concerns. This sort of view would be the intuitive answer of most European philosophers (whether of continental or analytic persuasion) to the question ‘what is African philosophy?’ Thus, in contrast to ethnophilosophy, professional philosophers tread heavily on the ‘philosophy’, but risk losing the ‘African’.

Nationalist-ideological Philosophy

As I understand it, nationalist-ideological philosophy can be seen as a special case of philosophic sagacity, in which not sages, but ideologues are the subjects. Alternatively, we might see it as a case of professional political philosophy. In either case, the same sort of problem arises: we have to retain a distinction between ideology and philosophy, between sets of ideas and a special way of reasoning.

My Thoughts

Ethnophilosophy

I believe that this trend appeals to the sense of community that one sees in the majority of African cultures, something which in my experience is an integral part, if not the cornerstone, of African culture and belief. Be this as it may, I am inclined to disagree with the trend, because in my opinion, philosophy is something that relies heavily on the thoughts and musings of an individual; certainly, if the shared beliefs and world-view put forward by ethnophilosophy were as a result of the amalgamation of the viewpoints of many individuals, each of which played some significant part in the overall system, I would be more inclined to agree with this trend, as the identity of the individual is retained.
Philosophic Sagacity
Initially, I am inclined to agree with this trend, as it places more importance on those individuals considered to have more knowledge and understanding of the cultural world-view, something which while a logical step in preserving the knowledge and beliefs, could stifle growth and development (as less importance would be placed on the views and beliefs of the ‘younger’ generation, which are integral to growth and development). As mentioned in the discussion, some sages go beyond mere knowledge and understanding to reflection and questioning, so this does offset the danger somewhat, but nevertheless, I am still of the belief that a great deal of the growth and development (equal to, if not more than what is gained by the sages’ reflection and questioning) should come from younger minds.

Professional Philosophy
This is a more generalised view of philosophy, again, something I am initially inclined to agree with, in the sense that philosophy is a particular way of thinking, reflecting, and reasoning, but I disagree with the importance of the statement that this is something that is relatively new to Africa – while this may be the case, I believe the fact that African philosophy needs to grow is something which should distinguish it from European philosophy, as there is much potential for new ideas and new ways of thinking to stem from that growth, at the same time being able to apply these new ideas and growth to African concerns. The reason I say this is because throughout history, European influence on all things African (of which there has been a great deal), has been of a more totalitarian and dictatorial nature than one of symbiosis and mutual benefit, and I fear that this may become the case with philosophy if we are not careful.

Nationalist-ideological Philosophy
As mentioned in the discussion, this is very much similar to philosophic sagacity, except with a focus on ideologues instead of individuals. Due to this, similar problems to those that I mentioned in my thoughts on philosophic sagacity become prevalent here, with a few exceptions: due to an ideologue being something of a more communal nature, there is less risk of growth and development being stifled, as the younger generation might subscribe to a particular ideologue, but would then be able to influence growth and change from within it.

My Preference
After further consideration of my discussions and thoughts, the trend that would make the most sense to me would be that of professional philosophy; however, with some reservations. To follow from my conclusion in my thoughts on the trend, if we are careful to limit the influence of the way of thinking that is currently considered philosophy, on the development of African philosophy, and
ensure that while this new way of thinking is applied to African concerns, the feedback from these applications is also taken into consideration going forward, we no longer risk the loss of the ‘African’ in pursuit of the ‘philosophy’.

**Conclusion**

I believe that the trends presented by Oruka are an accurate reflection of the current state of African philosophy, and that I have gained a great deal of understanding regarding it, after the critical discussions above. I believe that there is some substance to my views on the trend of professional philosophy, and that I would do well to further deliberation and discussion of the points I have raised regarding this view, as well as the points raised in the discussion of the other views.

**List of Sources**

- PLS1502 Study Guide, pages 58-60

This is the end of the student assignment. Remember, this is just one example of an attempt to answer this assignment question. Caution! Please notice how the student neglected the use of in-text references. Further, the bibliography (List of sources) is not written out in an acceptable format.

**2.2 Assignment 2B**

Gyekye’s communitarianism is an attempt to strike a balance between an extreme individualism and communitarianism pertaining to human rights. Does he succeed in doing so? Discuss.

Readings for the assignment

*Prescribed Reading: See Kwame Gyekye’s essay and the corresponding readings in the study Guide.*

The assignment question was: **Gyekye's communitarianism is an attempt to strike a balance between the individual and community rights. Does he succeed in doing so? Discuss.**
Answer to the question:

The question asks whether Kwame Gyekye succeeds in his communitarianism theory to strike a balance between the rights of the individual and those of the community. The answer of course is not a simple “yes” or “no.” You have to argue your answer.

Thus, your answer must entail the following points:

1. A brief definition or description of communitarianism as understood by Gyekye.
2. Gyekye’s distinction between radical / unrestricted and moderate / restricted communitarianism.
3. Individual rights versus duties towards the community
4. Final decision of whether Gyekye succeeded in bridging the tension between individual rights and duties to the community or others.

A brief definition or description of communitarianism

Gyekye argues that a human person in African cultures is a communitarian being (2002: 24). He or she is born into a community and is shaped and influenced by it. But what is communitarianism? According to Gyekye (2002: 37), communitarianism can generally be described as an “ethical and political theory, which considers the community as a fundamental human good [and] advocates a life lived in harmony and cooperation with others, a life of mutual consideration and aid and of interdependence, a life in which one shares in the fate of the other…” But since any community comprises of individuals who may differ in their outlook and the actual living out of their lives, tensions are bound to arise in communities. How one resolves these tensions can lead one to be labeled a radical or moderate communitarian.

Distinction between radical and moderate communitarianism

It seems that there are many shades of communitarianism. However, Gyekye distinguishes between two, namely, radical and moderate communitarianism.

Radical communitarianism, which is also known as unrestricted or extreme communitarianism, overemphasizes the importance of community life at the expense of individual rights, argues Gyekye. He cites Menkiti as one of the proponents of this communitarianism. For Menkiti (in Gyekye 2002: 23):
- It is the community that defines the person as person. This is because the community has priority over the individual person.

- Personhood is something that must be acquired in community. In other words you become a person if you fulfil all the norms and values laid down by the community.

- This implies that personhood is achieved and not given simply because one is born of a man and a woman. Thus, one can fail in his or her attempt to become a person.

Menkiti, observes Gyekye, reasoned his idea of an acquisition of personhood from the usage of the pronoun “it” in many languages, including English. He asserts that children and new-borns in many human communities are referred to by the pronoun “it” (2002: 23). This implies that new-borns and children are not yet human persons. As they grow they are evolving towards personhood. Gyekye is critical of Menkiti’s idea in this regard. He disagrees that the many languages that Menkiti refers to, do not include African languages. He argues that Menkiti commits a category mistake because he applies an idea taken from a European language to African languages (2002: 27).

Restricted or moderate communitarianism as enunciated by Gyekye (ibid) can be summarized as follows:

- Human beings are naturally oriented toward other persons and because of that they must have relationships with them.
- As a result community life is a necessary part of being human. This means that human beings cannot and should not live in isolation from other humans.

However, having said the above, Gyekye (2002: 25) is also quick to point out that “the person is constituted, but only partly by social relationships in which he/she necessarily finds him/herself.” This implies that you are a person before you enter a community even though you may not be self-sufficient (2002: 25). Therefore, a person is constituted partly by social relationships in a community.

A person is by nature a social (communal) being, yes; but he/she is by nature other things as well (i.e. a person possesses other essential attributes) (Gyekye 2002: 26).
For Gyekye, (2002: 30) the community and the individual exist for each other. He further believes that the community shapes and forms the individual thus making the individual to thrive. But at the same time the community is constituted by individuals. This suggests that the individual is prior to the community. The individual is therefore both a communal and an autonomous being capable of self-determination.

**Individual rights versus duties towards the community**

According to Gyekye (2002: 34) rights and duties are not polar concepts in themselves. This means that individuals can exercise their rights while at the same time fulfilling their obligations or duties to the community. Further, rights are not absolute. There are situations that may necessitate the overriding of rights in order to safeguard the well-being of the community. For instance, in times of war soldiers may sacrifice their right to life in order to protect the community. Equally important is the realization that “allowing free reign for the exercise of individual rights … will enhance the cultural development and success of the community” (Gyekye 2002: 33). For Gyekye the two aspects go hand-in-hand. The community needs the individual and the individual the community. Even after arguing for a balance between the individual and community rights, Gyekye emphasizes the significance of the idea of the common good, which according to him everyone should strive for (2002: 34). It therefore appears as if for Gyekye, the common good is the goal of the community.

**Did Gyekye succeed in bridging the tension between individual and community rights / duties?**

Every student must decide for himself or herself whether Gyekye has successfully managed to strike a healthy balance between individual rights and duties to the community.

In my conversation with Dr Koenane, who is my colleague in the department, he remarks as follows, in so far as this issue is concerned:

“Although Gyekye advocated for a balance between individual rights and the community it becomes clear on close evaluation that his argument seriously focuses on the theory of the common good for which he believes must be what everyone is striving for and all sacrifices must be made in order to promote the common good. In this way, he makes it clear that the community is more important than the individual – thus failing to maintain the balance he so much wanted to establish. Gyekye criticized radical communitarianism for placing more emphasis on the importance of the community over that of the individual while he does the same. Therefore, Gyekye
fails to show how the individual can prosper outside the community and still ties the individual to the community in the same way radical communitarianism has done.”

Do you agree with Dr Koenane or not? However, some students may argue that Gyekye succeeded in his defence of his thesis of moderate communitarianism especially when taking into account Menkiti’s radical communitarianism which gives the community absolute dominance over the individual. As long as students take a position, which they support with sound arguments, they will be rewarded points for this.

**Conclusion**

Summarize your discussion here. Inform the reader what you have done in this essay.

**Bibliography**


**3. THE EXAMINATION**

**3.1 General Information**

In order to prepare yourself well for the final examination, please take note of the following general information relating to your **May / June 2018 Examinations:**

* a) Examination timetable*

A timetable will be posted (If not already) to you in which all the details pertaining to your final examinations (such as dates, times, location and the module to be written) will be given.

* b) Format of the exam paper*

Your examination question paper comprises of three sections.

- Section A: Multiple-choice question (which totals 20 marks)
- Section B: Short questions (which totals 30 marks)
- Section C: Essay type question (which totals 50 marks). Under this section three questions will be given of which you will be required to answer only one.

Please note that this is the first time we follow the format above. Therefore the previous question papers that are posted in MyUnisa do not resemble this structure. They comprise only of two sections, namely: Section A (short questions); Section B (Essay type questions).

**c) Duration of the Examination**

You will be writing a two hours examination paper. You need to give yourself adequate time to complete the paper. Please use your time wisely.

**d) Total marks for the exam**

You will be marked out of 100%. However, in the final analysis only 70% of your total exam marks will be added to your year mark in order to determine your passing or promotion status.

### 3.2 Study Units Prescribed for the final Examinations

The examination which you will sit for in May/June 2018 (the dates of which will be made available to you if they have not already been made available) covers the **entire content of the module**. As the entire syllabus of the module will be examined, it would certainly not be prudent to attempt to “spot” learn. We suggest that you study and understand all six essays which are prescribed, as well as the core debates discussed in the Study Guide.

### 3.3 Examples of essay-type questions

- Discuss critically the criteria for determining the ‘Africanity’ of African philosophy.
- What are the politics behind the question, *Is there such a thing as African philosophy*?
- What are the critical issues raised by Ramose in his essay, *The Struggle for reason in Africa*?
- Give a critical exposition of one of the ‘cross-cultural’ categories of cognition discussed by Biakolo.
- Would you say that Oruka’s *Four Trends in African Philosophy* cover sufficiently all the various dimensions or approaches to African philosophy? Discuss critically.
• Compare and contrast any of the two ‘trends’ discussed by Oruka in his essay, *Four Trends in African Philosophy*.
• Discuss critically Bewaji’s statement that “the basis of morality in Africa is human welfare.”

3.4 Other Information

Please ensure that you are seated in the examination venue 15 minutes prior to the commencement of the examination, and that you have your identity document(s) and student card with you. You will also need to have sufficient stationery in your possession to complete writing the examination.

In the earlier tutorial letters, some guidelines as to how you could write your essay questions in the examination were given: please employ this particular methodology in your writing of essays. Keep in mind that it is not necessary to reference in the exam.

*The use of MyUnisa ‘Exam forum’*

As the examination nears you are encouraged to make use of a particular forum within the Discussion Forum page, namely the “Exam” forum.

This forum was created with the specific intention of providing students the opportunity to post any problem you may have with the content of the module prior to your examination. It will proceed as follows:

• We will take note of new topics, but will not immediately respond. Rather, YOU should respond initially to assist your fellow students.
• Once we have seen activity related to a specific topic with which students are having difficulty, and with which there has been some grappling, we will intervene to assist you, if this is needed.

I believe that in following this interactive approach to learning and examination preparation, students will gain a great deal of knowledge by assisting one another.
If you have any further problems or difficulties with this module, or should you require clarification of anything contained in this tutorial letter, please do feel free to contact your lecturers or e-tutors.

4. CONCLUSION

If you have any further problems or difficulties with this module, or should you require clarification of anything contained in this tutorial letter, please do feel free to contact your lecturers. We look forward to receiving your second assignment. Best of luck in your examinations!

Sincerely,

Ms M. Khosi

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