Discourses on Africa

Post-colonial philosophy, then, emphasises the necessity of Africans exercising their right to speak for themselves and construct their own identities, as opposed to being defined by the often distorted or unreal images portrayed without their consent by non-Africans. In expressing knowledge and proclaiming the truth about Africa, Africans question similar claims and proclamations. African thinkers test the truthfulness of knowledge claims and imagined truths about Africa presented by non-Africans. In some cases they actually show such claims and truths to be false.

This means then that the two essays (of Biakolo and Ramose) discussed in this chapter must be understood as a dialogue between Africans and non-Africans. The dialogue takes one of the following forms. It may be a direct focus on the thinking of a particular philosopher on a specific subject. Alternatively, it may be a direct focus on a specific philosophical trend. So the dialogue is specifically between African and Western philosophies. This is not accidental. Although the Arab conquest of Africa is a recognised fact, it is also true that the colonisation of Africa by the West replaced and perfected the Arab conquest. Though the colonisation of Africa by the West did not completely eliminate the Arab presence and influence on Africa, it certainly was and continues to be relatively dominant.

The ensuing dialogue between African and Western philosophies is not limited to Africa’s historical experience since colonisation. This dialogue extends to the pre-colonial period as well. This extension need not always be immediate and direct. The pre-colonial period can be understood in two ways. Firstly, it serves as the background against which statements of Africa were made. Secondly, it is also the resource that we may use for the verification or falsification of claims to knowledge and truth by non-Africans. In this sense, then, the pre-colonial and post-colonial historical experience of Africa is the context in which “discourses on Africa” unfolds. Philosophy forms an integral part of this discourse in the sense that participation in the knowledge and truth debate is distinctively philosophical.

One could question why it is important to think philosophically about the discourses in Africa. There are three main reasons. Firstly, it is important to review ideas. Secondly, one has to
critique these views. Finally, one has to reconstruct ideas. These three reasons will now be discussed in more depth.

Review

When one reviews an idea, it means that one examines it anew, or appraises at it from a different angle. Those authors that deal discourses in Africa, reconsiders the anthropological arguments about and judgments concerning Africa and her people. Furthermore, in this process, these thinkers analyse and examine the ideologies of colonialism in order to lay bare the fallacies and misconceptions that exist on Africa.

If we read Biakolo’s essay, “Categories of cross-cultural cognition and the African condition” (2002), then we can see how he examines the misjudgements made by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. Lévy-Bruhl claim that Africans can be characterised as savage, pre-logical, perceptual, oral and religious beings. Lévy-Bruhl contrasts these ideas with the perception of the European people as civilised, logical, conceptual, textual and scientific people.

As philosophers, we have to do more than simply review ideas. In the second instance, we need to critique ideas.

Critique

Once we have reviewed ideas, we need to be critical of these ideas. For instance, the theorists that you are reading in this course did not simply examine ideas, but they evaluated and raised criticisms against these ideas. Take, for instance, Ramose’s essay “The struggle for reason in Africa” (2002). In this essay, he questions the commonly held view by the colonisers that only rationality is the distinguishing factor of humans. The colonisers used this Aristotelian definition of “man” to discount African, Amerindians and Australasians as “human”, as these people were seen as devoid of reason.

In the first instance, we can thus see that the African thinkers critique restrictive and narrow definitions of “man”. In the second instance, they critique Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism is the idea that Western or European understandings and interpretations of the world are the most important or dominant ways of engaging with the world. It means that European and Americans ways of being and doing are the “yardsticks” by which all other people in the world are measured. The
experience of non-Europeans or non-Westerners becomes automatically discounted, overlooked and ignored as a result.

Finally, the African thinkers critique the division of the world that places at the centre the European and Western civilisation, and the rest of the world at the periphery. This idea is represented in the diagram below. It shows that the African, Latin American and Asian people are placed around the centre.

Once we are critical of ideas and of concepts, we need to move further along yet. We need to reconstruct ideas.

Reconstruct

Once we have reviewed and critiqued the ideas about Africa and Africans, we can move forward to reconstruction. The thinkers that you are encountering in this course argue for a new worldview, in which a plurality of cultures is affirmed and promoted and a quest for a new and true humanity is advanced.

Having thus established that the essays discussed under the rubric “Discourses on Africa’s focus on post-colonial African philosophy”, we can now consider them one after another. In the examination of these essays, we shall take the following method, as shown in the diagram below. This is a good way for you to engage with philosophical essays too.
Step 1
- Identify the **statement of the question** contained in the essay

Step 2
- Identify the **thesis or theses** that the particular author defends

Step 3
- Show the **approach and method** used to answer the statement of the question and to defend the thesis or theses

Step 4
- Show how the author arrives at a **conclusion**