THE RE-VISION OF WESTERN RATIONALITY AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Underlying much of the debate in philosophical discourse at the end of the twentieth century is an emphasis on a re-vision of philosophical discourse, namely, that from the modern to the postmodern. This debate has spurned little consensus and a great deal of confusion and animosity. The themes are, by now, well known: master narratives and traditions of knowledge grounded in first principles are spurned; philosophical principles of canonicity and the notion of the sacred have become suspect; epistemic certainty and the fixed boundaries of academic knowledge have been challenged by a 'war on totality' and a disavowal of all-encompassing, single world views; the rigid distinctions between high and low culture have been rejected by the insistence that the products of the so-called mass culture, popular, and folk art forms are proper objects of study; the Enlightenment correspondence between history and progress and the modernist faith in rationality, science, and freedom have incurred a deep-rooted scepticism; the fixed and unified identity of the humanist subject has been replaced by a call for narrative space that is pluralised and fluid; and, finally, though far from complete, history is spurned as a unilinear process that moves the West progressively toward a final realisation of freedom.

In this essay I explore some of the ramifications that this re-vision of Western philosophical discourse, may have on the notion of rationality in African philosophy.

In surveying the current scene in African philosophy, Oruka (1991:49) identifies four main types of philosophy being defended and practised in Africa today. He labels these: ethnophilosophy, philosophic sagacity, nationalist-ideological philosophy and professional philosophy.
Ethnophilosophy views philosophy as implicit in the collective and basically religious experience of everyone, rather than as the explicit thought or rational argument of anyone in particular; and it regards African philosophy as fundamentally different from Western philosophy in meaning, logic and content, because of their very different respective mental orientations. Philosophic sagacity or sage philosophy represents the thought of indigenous wise men who critically engage the established tradition and culture of their respective ethnic groups and/or societies. National-ideological philosophy is basically political philosophy and is found in manifestos, pamphlets and discourse related to the African anticolonial struggle for liberation. Professional philosophy is regarded as technical philosophy which utilises the techniques of Western philosophy that affirms the centrality of critical rationality in the activity of philosophy.

Mudimbe (1988:154) speaks of three main approaches in current African philosophical practice. First is the critique of ethnophilosophy which draws on the Western philosophical tradition’s view of what constitutes appropriate philosophical practice. The second is the foundation approach which questions the epistemological foundations of the human and social sciences. The third approach includes philological studies, critical anthropology and hermeneutics. Gyekye (1987:11-12) in turn, however, distinguishes between, traditional and modern African philosophy, or simply between professional and traditional African philosophy.

If one examines the discussion surrounding the various types of African philosophy mentioned so far, then one recurring issue which emerges is whether philosophy is to be construed primarily as professional philosophy, and thus ultimately along the lines of the institution of Western philosophy, or is it to be construed contextually as some form of cultural philosophy.

One important aspect of this debate concerns the role of rationality in African philosophy.

The appeal to an African rational discourse has been associated with the debate on the ontological status of African philosophy and its appropriate

Philosophy, according to African professional philosophers, must be explicit, methodical and rational. In this instance they see philosophy as the handmaiden of science and modernisation (Hountondji 1983). In short, philosophy according to this group, is a rational activity which thrives on criticism. According to Bodunrin (1991:173), criticism is rational, impartial and articulate appraisal whether positive or negative. Bodunrin believes a philosopher must state and argue for his case clearly. Wiredu (1991:32) also believes that philosophy thrives on criticism, and hence the rational aspect of the discipline. He claims that without argument and clarification there is strictly, no philosophy. Further, Wiredu (1991:47) posits that the philosopher argues for his thesis, clarifying his meaning and answering objections, known and anticipated. Together, both Bodunrin (1991) and Wiredu (1991) are of the opinion that philosophy in Africa should be analytical in its endeavour to clarify conceptual confusions in our world. They believe that what distinguishes philosophical activity is the critical method and that this is what makes it a rational discipline. In fact, Oruka (1987:66) states that reason is a universal trait, and that the greatest disservice to African philosophy is to deny it reason and dress it in magic and extra-rational traditionalism. Hountondji’s (1983:72) conception of philosophy is that it is fundamentally, a critical reflection. He claims that philosophy thrives on continuous debate. Philosophy is not a system because it never stops. According to him, its very existence lies in the to and fro of free discussion, hence it is not a closed system but a history, a debate that goes on from generation to generation. What emerges from Hountondji’s reflections on philosophy is that it is a critical activity and therefore a rational discourse. In his paper, Keita (1991:153) proposes a method for contemporary African philosophy which amounts to the same
position as that of Bodunrin, Wiredu, Oruka and Hountondji, when he states:

This paper attempts to promote the following conception of philosophy in the Africa context: a dynamic philosophy in the vanguard of each of the research disciplines, committed to the formulation of new or modified concepts and modes of knowing appropriate for sociological and technological development.

Keita believes that a useful approach for African philosophy to adopt is that of theoretical analysis of issues and ideas. He maintains that by the very nature of the enterprise philosophy engages in critical analysis and that philosophers in Africa should consider the importance of theoretical analysis of the foundations of empirical science, and this is according to him, with a view to aid the development of scientific research in Africa (Keita 1991:149).

What emerges from the pronouncements of Bodunrin, Wiredu, Oruka, Hountondji and Keita, is the argument that philosophy is a critical activity and, therefore, a rational discourse. In these pronouncements, however, these professional African philosophers identify themselves with the Enlightenment tradition, represented by thinkers such as Hobbes, Descartes, Rousseau, Locke and Kant, who all maintained that reason is a natural human endowment, which when directed properly can discover certain universal truths. These truths, it was argued, were embedded in our sense experiences and revealed in intersubjective agreement among like-thinking rational minds. In this tradition, rational thought was supposed to lead to enlightened action, to the development of rational citizens who would establish a perfect world. Reason was to bring light into darkness, to disabuse people of superstition and tradition, to liberate them from irrationality. It was argued that unless we have a true and reliable picture of how things are in the world around us - unless, that is, we have knowledge of the world - we are unlikely to have much success in acting. Knowledge is the means by which we direct our behaviour to achieve our ends most efficiently and successfully. Rationality of the kind which we
humans strive for, is epistemic rationality, or rationality which aims at the truth and is based on knowledge.

This Enlightenment project which represented the dominant philosophical tradition in the West, certainly since Descartes, generally regarded a particular type of rationality as the only method for investigation into truth. The procedure adopted by Cartesian rationality is based upon logical deduction, strict rules of evidence, and an avoidance of the distorting tendencies of affect, a method of investigation in which correct answers were thought to be rationally determined, that is, true. Cartesian rationality, therefore, regards itself as the only avenue toward reliable knowledge, and also sees itself as certain of success in yielding correct, final answers, if its methods are properly followed.

This faith in the inherent power of reason to determine truth has, however, been severely challenged, and can be regarded today only with scepticism. The work of Kuhn (1970) and other historians and philosophers of science such as, Popper (1968, 1972), Lakatos (1983), Feyerabend (1978), Lynch and Woolgar (1990) has deeply undermined the belief that even scientists proceed in a purely rational way. Rorty (1982) has also pointed out that this overemphasis on the epistemic functions of reason, and within that a privileging of a particular scientistic approach to inquiry devoid of personal will and affect, has led scientific enquiry away from moral and political considerations that are actually at the heart of decisions about what we believe and how we act.

In the light of this scepticism and criticism, postmodernism seeks to deconstruct the language of Cartesian rationality by abandoning the idea of rationality as a neutral arbiter of the rules of clear thinking; a disimpassioned means for reaching indubitable, final conclusions and, a universal guide to human thought and conduct.

There are, however, some voices (see, for example, Burbules 1995; Higgs 1995) that, instead of abandoning altogether the Cartesian method of rationality, adopt a more inclusive and flexible understanding of reason, which does not deny or reject the specific achievements of that method.
within certain areas of human thought and practice. In arguing this point, it is suggested that reason is neither necessary nor universal, but arises as a practice growing out of what I refer to as, plural conversations, in which human thought, feeling and motivation operate in practical everyday experiences. Such a position recognises the limits of our ability to arrive at final or absolute truth by rational means only, for truth is seen as being rooted in inter-subjective biographies that are constantly in the process of evolving. What this means, is that we will be critical of all forms of absolutism, universality and moral smugness in the sense that one has an unquestionable hold on what is really true and right. At the same time we will also, be much more modest in the claims we make and not necessarily regard these claims as binding on persons or groups who might have evolved different ways of answering questions and solving problems.

All this leads to a very different notion of reason, one modest about its claims to universality and sensitive to intellectual and cultural differences. A view of reason, located in plural conversations which have their origin in practical activities such as speaking, listening and reflecting, rather than in objective and dispassionate observation, logical deduction or a scientistic search for facts. Evidence and analysis are undoubtedly important to careful reasoning, but these methods must take their place in a larger context of choices directed at multiple sources of information, appreciating the merits of other perspectives, and in that light critically reflecting on the potential limits of one’s own methods and theoretical assumptions. Such critically reflective persons want to make sense of their existence, they want to understand and be fair to alternative perspectives, and are willing to admit when they have made a mistake in judgment. These qualities do not find their origin in certain formal rules of reasoning inherent in the human condition. They are far more complex than that, and find their origin in what Rorty (1982:40) refers to as, the set of moral virtues which distinguish reason, and which members of a civilised society must possess if the society is to endure. He identifies these virtues as, tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, a willingness to listen, and a reliance upon persuasion rather than force. These virtues are revealed in the enactment of plural conversations, that is, in practical everyday experiences that witness to the ways in which people speak with, and listen to, one
another. What is important in these instances, is not the exercise of an impersonal, disimpassioned dominating reason governed by the application of mechanical rules of inquiry, but rather, what is of the moment, is the emergence of what I call, a consensual or social rationality.

A postmodern re-vision of Cartesian rationality would similarly view reason as a social process, arguing that reason is a human invention and achievement. This means that reason is neither necessary nor universal, but nor is it arbitrary, for it emerges in plural conversations, in which people together inquire, disagree, explain, or argue their views in the pursuit of a consensual outcome. Such an outcome is one that the participants, after careful deliberation of different opinions and alternative perspectives, are satisfied with for that moment in time. In fact, Habermas (1992) emphasises that claims about truth or moral rightness can be supported only through actual conversational engagements among people with different points of view.

Recent literature in African philosophy has been slow to pursue this line of argument, and in those instances that it does focus on reason or critical thinking, the discussion inevitably, in varying degrees, begins with the premise that reasoning equates with rationality, which is dependent on the operation of formal epistemic rules and procedures (see, for example, Bodunrin 1991; Hountondji 1983; Oruka 1991; Wiredu 1991). This literature considers any attempt to discuss alternative and plural rationalities as tantamount to creeping relativism, and asserts that there is an urgent need to defend the value of rationality.

This is rather an unfortunate conclusion as it is not necessarily the case, that outcomes based on plural conversations will of necessity lapse into relativism. This is because, the process of reason in plural conversations is revealed in a movement towards an agreed upon consensus, arising from careful deliberation and the exercise of choice, in reaching a conclusion. If at a later stage, the conclusion is found to be incorrect, which it may well be, then it can be recognised as such and rectified through an extension of the same process. In arguing that plural conversations are necessary for the inter-subjective negotiation of knowledge, I would, therefore, assert that the
alternative to relativism is not a single uncompromising vision or standpoint. The alternative to relativism is a consensual or social rationality that reflects a sense of solidarity in the experience of shared plural conversations.

The exercise of reason in the postmodern moment, pauses, therefore, to reflect on the limits of our understanding, while at the same time respecting diversity and unassimilated otherness in the experience of finding the space to listen and converse. All this is manifested in an age that Lyotard (1984:278) claims can no longer talk about a totalising idea of reason, for: '... there is no reason, only reasons.' Such a discourse on rationality does not limit itself to the following of formal rules and procedures of thought in making sense of the world, but reveals itself in the inter-subjective engagement of what I call, a personal dis-position.

By 'the dis-position of the personal', I mean that fundamental re-orientation that we adopt in assuming a 'postmodern dis-position' in relation to our inter-subjective engagement with the world. Here we have to do with a deep personal transformation which impacts on the way we engage with others in our practical everyday experiences in thinking and acting.

In developing my argument, I propose that, such a personal transformation, which is taken up in a 'postmodern dis-position', is marked by certain moments which are manifestations of something much more fundamental about us as individual persons. Here I draw on a recent contribution by Burbules (1995), in identifying such moments as being constituted by a sense of plurality, falliblism, pragmatism and judiciousness.

A sense of plurality is fostered, partly by having been exposed to a range of different perspectives, but also by engaging them in a way that enables one to consider seriously the merits of each. This means that we reveal a capacity to regard alternative positions without a 'rush to judgment' in that we can withhold our own opinions in an engagement with other points of view. This capacity is fostered, not primarily by the exercise of certain intellectual skills, but by the exercise of a disposition and capacity for restraint. Such a capacity for restraint reveals that we are able to recognise
what our own prejudices might be, acknowledging the limits of our own capacity to appreciate fully the viewpoints of others, and caring enough about others to exert the effort necessary to hear and comprehend what they are saying. A sense of plurality, therefore, has to do with commitment, caring and feeling. It is clearly not a purely rational, in the sense of cognitive, endeavour.

Burbules (1995) maintains that such a sense of plurality is supported, not by a position of holding no view, but by the position of having regarded other views thoughtfully and sympathetically enough to realise that each has something to be said for it, so that one is distanced somewhat from the attitude that there is or can be one best way of all. We would, therefore, acknowledge the fact of difference, perhaps irreconcilable difference, as a condition of the social world and take our direction not from an ethnocentric presumption of superiority, or the erasure of difference in the name of presumed consensus around a unified truth, but in a thoughtful and sensitive engagement across differences, while even at times leaving some of those differences in place.

What this line of argument suggests is that our thoughts and actions will be richer, more balanced, and more fair in that we will be able to hear and consider a variety of alternatives. Being able to do so requires not only some intellectual capacities, but also aspects of character, personal relations, and social contexts that encourage and support the development of such a sense of plurality. Taking all this into account a sense of plurality is not a result of an uncaring neutrality or of ostensibly holding no position. Nor does a tolerance and appreciation for many alternative points of view imply a relativistic embrace of simply any view. Rather, it involves an awareness of, and reflection on, positions one does hold, and what their consequences are for other people.

One of the great insights of modern philosophy of science is Popper’s (1968) reminder not to be afraid of making mistakes, because it is only through the discovery of error, through some process of falsification, that we are driven to change. Indeed, Popper’s recommendation seems to extend far beyond the confines of scientific hypothesis testing (where it is typically
applied) to a broader vision and attitude to life. In a variety of contexts, both personal and professional, intellectual and emotional, we all have experienced failure, error, frustration, and disappointment. If we can live with this, as we must, it is usually with the understanding that these experiences have formed us, taught us something, and strengthened our capacity to endure change. In this broader sense, what Burbules (1995) refers to as a sense of fallibalism, is also distinctive of a postmodern disposition.

What is involved in a sense of fallibalism? First it requires certain commitments, or certain risks, that run the possibility of error. Purposely hiding behind obscurantism, withholding commitment, or playing it safe by only conforming to the conventional and obvious, are all ways of avoiding mistakes, and hence, ultimately of avoiding learning and change. Second it requires a capacity to recognise that one is wrong, which is fundamentally linked with the capacity to admit, to oneself and to others, that one was wrong. This includes our capacity to hear and respond thoughtfully to the criticisms of others. Thirdly it involves a capacity for reflection, as we ponder not only that we have made a mistake, but also why it happened and how we can change to avoid repeating it in the future.

A sense of fallibalism, therefore, speaks of a capacity for change, change prompted by one’s own recognition and acknowledgment of error, but also supported by a social environment in which the process is regarded with favour and not disdain. Fallibalism also implies, a particular view of learning, namely, that we gain new understandings not only by the accumulation of novel information, but by the active reconstruction of our frameworks of understanding. This sort of change requires that we encounter and interact with radically different points of view from our own. This, of course, means that we must exist in contexts that support and encourage difference, but also that we must have the capacity and willingness to engage others in plural conversations that makes the meaningful juxtaposition of different views possible.

Then there is what Burbules (1995) refers to as, a pragmatic sense, which I believe, also distinguishes a postmodern dis-position. Here reference is not
being made to a specific school of thought such as that found in Dewey, James or Pierce. Rather, what is being referred to is a deeper underlying attitude which underlies a general world view, namely, a belief in the importance of practical problems in driving the process of intellectual, moral, and political development. Such an outlook is sensitive to the particulars of given contexts and the variety of human needs and purposes.

Most important, a sense of pragmatism reflects a tolerance for uncertainty, imperfection, and incompleteness as the existential conditions of human thought and action. Yet it also recognises the need for persistence in confronting such difficulties with intelligence, care, and flexibility. The central lesson of fallibilism in philosophy, from Socrates to Popper, is that we proceed, not towards truth, but away from error. It is much easier to know when we are wrong than when we are right. The philosophical consequence of this insight is a distrust in obtaining sought after results. Certain approaches to inquiry are relied upon, including 'conversational' ones, not because they will yield a convergence around truth or agreement, but because experience has shown them to be reliable ways of avoiding certain egregious kinds of mistakes. There is no guarantee built into them to produce what we seek. We merely expect that whatever they yield is more likely to be dependable than what we might have received from other approaches. Such a commitment to a process of inquiry or negotiation, without certainty of results, is what describes a pragmatic sense, which is also a primary feature of a postmodern dis-position.

Supportive of such a pragmatic sense are social contexts in which an emphasis on success is not exaggerated, and in which failure or frustration are accepted as inevitable conditions of growth. In such a social context, the offering of co-operative assistance and constructive suggestions, or asking for them, are socially and personally acceptable options.

But we also, need to recognise our own limitations. This would mean that we know when not to try to work out certain things in a particular rational way, while at the same time regarding the skills of rationality and the assessment of reasons as simply heuristics in the much more complex process of trying to decide what to believe and what to do. In recognising
that it is not reasonable to try to apply the analysis of logic, or the strict rules of evidence, or the critique of informal fallacies, to each and every situation, we reveal what Burbules (1995) calls, *a sense of judiciousness*. A sense of judiciousness has to do with a capacity for prudence and moderation, even in the exercise of reason itself. We are not always reasonable. We occasionally fail to act upon our own best inclinations. We frequently fall short of our aspirations. Acknowledging and accepting this in ourselves and in those around us, and asking others to accept it in us, are related to the acceptance of a *sense of fallibalism* and the willingness to embrace imperfection and incompleteness that is a part of the *pragmatic sense* of reasonableness.

There is often more than one reasonable thing to believe, to say, or do; and it is part of the fallacy of Cartesian conceptions of rationality that they seek a determinative calculus that will converge on the one best or right answer. A sense of judiciousness will reveal that we are discerning about when and how to follow the dictates of argument in the strict sense of the term, and are receptive to the influence of other kinds of persuasion as well. In the actual practice of communicative interaction, strict and conclusive arguments are very rare. Alongside this form of argumentation is a vast range of interlocutory styles, including questions, allusions, unsubstantiated suggestions, metaphors and other tropes, as well as an even broader range of expressions, gestures, touches, tonal utterances, and other kinds of communication. To participate in plural conversations, therefore, entails a sense of judiciousness regarding the influences of other avenues of mutual exploration, negotiation, and the pursuit of understanding.

A sense of judiciousness, as is the case with a sense of plurality, fallibalism and pragmatism, speaks, therefore, of a certain disposition that governs the ways in which we engage with others in our practical everyday experiences in thought and action, and also, how we perceive the world in relation to ourselves. The nature of our inter-subjective engagements lie at the heart, therefore, of how we think and act, even in relation to our endeavours in philosophy at the end of the twentieth century.
Philosophy at the end of the twentieth century is characterised by a major epistemological revolution. Just as the nineteenth century theory of evolution was perceived in world-shaking terms as threatening the biblical view of creation and the uniqueness of human beings, so too in the twentieth century such ideas as scientific paradigm shifts, the social construction of reality, the deconstruction of texts, and non-foundational edification are seen as fundamental challenges to our basic beliefs about objectivity, knowledge and truth.

We have been made aware of the politics of knowledge in its forms of generation and transmission. We are forced to think about the commensurability of paradigms, the multiplicity of conceptual schemes, the role of ideology in social research. In social research we have also witnessed, debates among postpositivists, constructionists, critical theorists and qualitative researchers, and the influence of reconceptualists, postmodernists, and neo-Marxists, as well as, the inclusive efforts of those who struggle to avoid class, race and gender bias (see, for example, Benhabib 1992; Lloyd 1989; McNay 1992). In these and many other ways we have been struggling with the results of this twentieth century epistemic revolution without yet having a clear conception of what is going on and how much can be salvaged of our 'before' in our epistemic 'after'.

This present tension in epistemology, which is witnessed in the claims of those who describe the social construction of reality against those who seek objectivity in the positivist tradition, focuses on, among other things, the question of the legitimation of knowledge. This focus finds its expression in the ongoing debate between what has now become known as the modern and postmodern conditions.

In the introduction to *The postmodern condition*, Lyotard (1984) indicates that he uses the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse, making explicit appeal to some grand narrative, and that he defines *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. By legitimation Lyotard means the process by which it is judged whether something, for example, a statement, is science, or more generally knowledge. A metanarrative, in turn, is an account of some
fundamental values, or an account of some metaphysical entities or ideals that are the sources of fundamental values. It is by virtue of such values that a statement is legitimated as science, or knowledge. Examples of such legitimation by appealing to a grand narrative range from Plato's appeal to the immutable Forms, Hegel's appeal to Spirit, and the modernist appeal to the 'people' (the nation, or even humanity). Thus for Plato only the Forms are \textit{real} and only statements about those Forms can be \textit{true} and form part of knowledge. Statements about \textit{appearances} are excluded, and likewise statements made by poets. The \textit{real} and the \textit{true} are the fundamental values. For Hegel the only knowledge is the Spirit's self-knowledge, and something is knowledge only if it is perceived by the Spirit in the process of coming to know itself. Finally, it may be said that the advancement of 'humanity' is the only fundamental value, and something is knowledge only insofar as it contributes to this value, for example, if it enhances the freedom and autonomy of people.

According to Lyotard there are two general ways of legitimating knowledge: the philosophical way, which employs the 'speculative apparatus' (such as Plato's Forms, or Hegel's Spirit), and the political way, which employs the 'emancipation apparatus' (such as the Enlightenment's freedom and autonomy of the people or the nation). However, both ways, Lyotard argues, lead the process of legitimation into self-destruction. The self-destructive nature of the process of legitimation calls for a postmodernist response, namely, the abandonment of grand narratives and with it the delegitimation of knowledge. There is no longer any point in talking about God, Spirit, Form, humanity .... other than in an attempt to achieve some local effects, with values confined to a localised context (such as God in the context of worship or Spirit in the context of dialectics). Instead of grand narratives that can legitimate other discourses, we are faced with a series of local perspectives, of diverse language games, each with its own set of rules. Such is the postmodern condition as far as Lyotard is concerned.

In summary, Lyotard's argument is this: any attempt to legitimate science, or knowledge, by grounding it in a grand narrative will achieve the exact opposite effect, namely, delegitimation. What we have is a plurality of
branches of science, or fields of knowledge, functioning like language games, each with its own set of rules, and a statement has to be legitimated in the same way as a move is in a game, by the rules internal to the game. In other words, reality is marked by a multiplicity of voices in plural contexts, each with its own legitimate discourse.

This sense of plurality in the discourse of legitimation is the result of postmodernism's critique of Western rationality and the legacy of the Enlightenment which, whatever its original liberal intent, has now, it is argued, become stultifying, monolithic, and insensitive to intellectual and cultural diversity.

Alongside many indigenous cultures, there are also, many different cultures at present on the African continent which testifies to its fundamentally plural composition. For purposes of a broad consideration of African epistemology, it is possible to oversimplify this diversity, and look only at 'African traditional culture' and 'modern Western culture' as the two significant mainstreams. The existence of a peculiarly African epistemology in the context of a traditional African culture is fairly well attested to (Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998:205). The phrase 'African epistemology' is used in a generic sense, which does not deny that there are significant variations among the many cultures in Africa. What the twentieth century has, however, witnessed in Africa, is a concerted attempt to articulate a distinctively African formulation of knowledge, as opposed to that formulation of knowledge espoused by modern Western thought, where rationality is closely connected to knowledge. Such an African re-vision of Western rationality is fundamentally directed at the process by which African culture attempts '.... to become modern' within the framework of its own peculiar context (Appiah 1992:105).

In the light of this re-vision, I am proposing an orientation on African rationality which has cultural relevance insofar as it is mounted on materials and concepts peculiar to African thought. This means that we acknowledge the necessity of the need to understand other cultures and our own given cultures better by developing the ability to grasp the fundamentals of our culture and other cultures by way of living out a
personal dis-position which attests to a sense of plurality, a sense of pragmatism, a sense of fallibility and a sense of judiciousness. Such a position would perceive African philosophy as an intercultural philosophy of personal intent where rationality takes on the form of a social epistemology, that is an epistemology deliberately situated in a particular cultural context. In this instance, the individual has to develop and exercise the concept of rationality appropriate to his/her society, to have a critical awareness of the intellectual and cognitive traditions of both his/her society and of other societies. This is thought to be necessary so that the individual can construct a sound intellectual identity for his/her society, one that meets the particular demands of his/her unique cultural context. In other words, such a notion of rationality would perceive philosophy as a product of or a reflection on reality, a guide to life; and the experience out of which philosophy emerges would be determined by what people have lived and historical situations. If this is recognised by professional African philosophers then they would certainly be seen to address human beings in their historical circumstances, rather than only concerning themselves with matters academic which do not really impact on the human condition. In other words, what I am suggesting is that the philosophical endeavour of professional African philosophers should represent an appealing form of life that they can see themselves enacting. It should offer a conception of rationality that has room for passionate commitment as well as open mindedness, emotion and intellect, in addition to intellectual rupture as well as consensus.

I have attempted to show the possibilities of such a rational discourse for African philosophy in all its many guises, and particularly for so-called professional African philosophy, in my exposition of what I have referred to as the dis-position of the personal. The merits of such a discourse include, its acknowledgment of alternative forms of reasoning and their accompanying cultural expressions; its insistence that knowledge production is not independent of moral and political value; its grounding of rationality in social relations; and, its recognition of the role of commitment, caring and feeling in rationality.
References


THE INADEQUACY OF THE TURING TEST TO DETECT THOUGHT IN COMPUTERS

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THE TURING TEST

Why is the Turing Test which seemed so plausible originally, still inadequate as a touchstone for computer intelligence?

Any answer to the question 'Can computers think?' depends on one's views of thinking and on having the means to detect the presence or absence of thinking. Alan Turing (1995) published the idea for a simple test, which sidestepped much psychological and philosophical theorizing about thinking by accepting a behaviouristic solution. He proposed a version of the 'imitation game'. In the imitation game, a man A and a woman B, who are hidden from the view of an interrogator C, answer the questions C addresses to them. From their answers, C must determine which of A and B is the man and which is the woman. Turing proposed to substitute a computer for A, and if C then cannot decide whether A is a computer or not, we are to accept that A can think. In other words, the criterion for thinking lies purely in A's behaviour in this game.

Turing's proposed test has had a great influence during the almost 50 years that followed its first publication. But its influence has changed with time. According to Whitby (1996:35), the test was a source of inspiration to everyone concerned with Artificial Intelligence (AI) from 1950-1966; from 1966-1973 it formed a distraction from more promising avenues of AI research (by then, the ideas of what AI is, and can do, had also developed and changed); from 1973-1990 the test was more of a source of distraction to philosophers than to AI workers, and it has now, since the Turing Colloquium in 1990, been confined to history, says Whitby. However, philosophers have not yet finished with it, and the debates often shed an interesting light on the participants' philosophies of mind.
When Turing wrote his article, in 1950, the digital computer stood at the beginning of its rapid development, and the term 'Artificial Intelligence' had not yet been coined. (This was done in 1956 by John McCarthy.) Sloman (1978:103) writes that a computer is 'a mechanism which interacts with symbols'. Talking of AI, however, goes beyond what 'ordinary computers' - such as those we have become familiar with - can do. Sharples et al (1989:1) start their book by explaining that AI

is a cloth woven from three academic disciplines - psychology (cognitive modelling), philosophy (philosophy of mind), and computer science - with further strands from linguistics, mathematics, and logic. ... the aim of AI is broad: to get below the surface of human behaviour; to discover the processes, systems, and principles that make intelligent behaviour possible. Computers are needed as tools for modelling these mental states and processes.

Ford, Glymour and Hayes (1995:3) introduce the possibility of movement, visual perception, etc., when they declare

Contemporary artificial intelligence can be viewed as essays in the epistemology of androids, an exploration of the principles underlying the cognitive behavior of any possible kind of mechanical agents.

They go on to talk in the next sentence of AI as an attempt to create and understand minds. (An android is a robot that more or less resembles a human being - think of the crew member Data in Star Trek.) With their book's title, Android Epistemology, they automatically bring robots and human beings together into one context. And certainly many people would be more easily convinced that something that looks and moves more or less like a human being, has a mind, than they would be willing to attribute a mind to a stationary metal or plastic box with a computer programme. But we have a strong tendency to anthropomorphise in any case, and AI
workers are no exception. For example, Simon (1995:38) declares that computers 'have been thinking (in smaller or bigger ways) for 35 years.' Fodor (1975, cited in Button et al, 1995:98-99) is convinced that computers have two languages, one to communicate with us, and one (the machine language) in which 'they talk [sic] to themselves, i.e. in which they run their computations'.

Our mental concepts originated and are ordinarily used in everyday life-situations. We know, without elaborate scientific, medical or psychological tests, when someone is happy, sad, angry, cheerful, and so on. In order to teach children how to use such descriptions, and how to know when they themselves are in a particular frame of mind (and thus how this feels 'from the inside'), parents must be able to tell when others are feeling pain, joy, anger, or any other emotion. The criteria for mental states must therefore be public. But it would not help us to look inside a person's brain to determine what he, or she, is thinking or feeling; we can find out from the other's behaviour, movements, speech, facial expressions, and actions. It is this insight on which behaviourism rests, and which gives it, and thus the Turing Test, its plausibility. Mental states are in principle public, open to inspection. It is only secondarily that we learn to hide our thoughts and feelings from others, or to feign non-existent ones. Hence the behaviourist claim that if a machine reacts as if it is a thinking being, then it is actually thinking; which is also the basis of the Turing Test.

However, it has also been claimed that the Turing Test can not show whether machines think, for example, because it is entirely and only based on language, in the absence of any other form of behaviour. Another line of criticism frequently found is that computers (or even androids) do not have inner feelings, or consciousness, and that the test can not show such feelings in any case. And finally, one may claim that the entire test is beside the point.

**LANGUAGE**

The Turing Test is applied by having someone typing in (or asking) questions to be answered by a computer and a human being. On the basis
of their (true or false) answers it is to be decided whether there is thought in both cases. Bringsjord (1995) points out that one should limit the duration of the test and allow for errors on the part of the examining judge, for example, 'the judge must be fooled n% of the time, [and] must be fooled for m minutes'. This was already put forward in Turing's original article (1995:14): 'A number of interrogators could be used, and statistics compiled to show how often the right identification was given.' Bringsjord states further that this is not enough, since there exist quite sophisticated programmes that could conceivably pass the test, although their construction is so clear that nobody would claim that the computers could have consciousness. However, in addition to repeating the test with different interrogators, the introduction of direct references to the outside world and of questions based on cultural factors might strengthen the test. But the test would still be based solely on language, and unlike mathematics or chess programmes, language is not simply a matter of putting together or taking apart symbols that stand in uncomplicated relationships to signs. A computer actually processes signs, not symbols, while the human being sees the signs as symbols in his communications. And seeing signs as symbols means introducing a wide cultural background. Written numerals, for example, would be quite meaningless if we had not decided to use them in the context of counting and arithmetic, and therefore in the larger context of human life. This is even more so with a complete written language. The signs that we make into symbols conveniently summarize much of human experience, an experience gained in the total way we live.

There is more to language than being able to communicate by linguistic signs. We must already be able to communicate quite well before we can even begin to learn our first language (Bruner 1974-5). Ellis and Beattie (1986:131-150) further show that there is also a relationship, or interaction, between language and non-verbal behaviour in persons who do speak, and that in any conversation, background knowledge is very important as well (ibid:159-163). They give their own examples, as well as citing the ethnomethodologist Garfinkel (1967), who discusses cases in much detail. Ellis and Beattie's conclusion towards the end of their book, The psychology of language and communication (1986:277-279), is that
'language and communication are the products of many discrete and separable, but interacting, cognitive subsystems' (277); they state that 'from the psychological perspective, it is virtually impossible to draw any clear dividing line between linguistic and non-linguistic cognitive processes' (278). So whatever language we give, or teach, to a computer, this will still only represent a small and one-sided part of our total human linguistic behaviour. Moreover, writing is a very different situation - or occurs in very different contexts - from speaking or thinking in words. Writing filters out, sharpens, abbreviates, and is linear, one-dimensional. So if we try to administer the Turing Test only by written questions and answers, we have a very restricted situation, one may even claim it to be too restricted to enable us to decide whether a computer (or even an android under such conditions) can think.

**COMPUTERS HAVE NO INNER LIFE**

One of the objections to the Turing Test commonly met with is that computers cannot have minds in any case. How could man-made devices, constructed so much simpler than human beings, and fully open to inspection, have an 'inner life' as we know it? We could, as indicated already, extend the Turing Test to take in movement as well. If an android behaves in all ways like a human being, what then? Of course research and development in those directions (movement, seeing, hearing) have at this stage come nowhere near the impressive digital sign-handling achievements of computers, but it should be possible in principle to get machines that can 'see', 'sense', walk, handle objects, and so on in a way approximately like ours. But many people would still not be convinced. Rapoport (1995:41-49) calls this 'the vitalists' last stand'. Searle (1984:31) says 'There is more to having a mind than having formal or syntactical processes. Our internal mental states, by definition, have certain sorts of contents.' He is not the only one to think in terms of an 'inner mind' or 'internal mental states', and the common idea then is that these states are by definition invisible. Descartes' ideas are still very much alive today. Descartes (1965:92) claims that, although he says that he sees people in the street, for all he knows the passers-by may be cleverly disguised artificial machines. Searle and others usually have no Cartesian doubts about other people having internal states.
like they themselves have, they simply think that we may endow others with minds by analogy with our own case: we know from the inside as it were, what it is to think and to feel, although from the outside we cannot detect meaning and intentionality. Searle's (1984:32-33) Chinese Room Argument, for example, rests on the fact that we ourselves know what is going on in our minds. In this argument or thought-experiment, Searle replaces the computer with a locked room and the programme with a person S inside the room. The room has slots through which questions can be passed in and answers out; it also contains baskets of Chinese symbols and a rule book in English for manipulating the symbols. S matches incoming questions, which are formulated in Chinese, with the appropriate outgoing Chinese answers according to the rules in the book, but he himself does not understand Chinese at all. To outsiders, however, it seems as if S understands Chinese, just as it would seem that a computer understands the questions that it can answer. Searle argues that since S's simulated knowledge of Chinese is quite analogous to a computer's simulated understanding, clearly 'a computer has syntax, but no semantics', that is, it can manipulate signs, but does not know what they mean. But how does Searle know that minds have semantic contents, and computers (or programmes) have only syntactic contents? He says that brains cause minds, because they have the appropriate causal power (1984:40-41), and 'we cannot discover that we do not have minds, that they do not contain conscious, subjective, intentionalistic mental states' (1984:99). Searle does not claim that only human beings (beings with human bodies, that is) can have minds, but he does say that anything else than brains that caused minds would have to have powers at least equivalent to those of the brain (1984:40). Mysteriously, once we have something as complicated as a brain, it can cause (invisible) intentional processes. At what point would we have enough complication for that? And what test could we imagine to detect the difference? What are these powers to which Searle refers and how does one discover their presence?

The problem is that Searle, and many others, seek a causal explanation for mental abilities. But our knowledge of the mental does not depend on any knowledge of mechanical or chemical relations; we do not need to look inside persons' brains, or do blood tests, to know what they think and feel.
Our knowledge comes from meeting other people in social contexts. We say that someone is thinking when he or she acts correctly in a range of situations relating to the subject.

With this we come to Ryle and Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein (1971:98-99) argues that understanding is not an inner state or process that accompanies activities, but insists that understanding shows itself in doing things. While his insistence may sound like endorsing the idea behind the Turing Test, it is something quite different. (See e.g. Shanker 1998, Ch 2.) Similarly, Ryle's (1963:34, 41) arguing that 'clown's trippings and tumblings are the workings of his mind' and that a boy's knowledge of chess-playing is decided not by what he does in his head or with his tongue, but by what he does on the board, should not be interpreted as if Ryle is endorsing a Watson-Skinner form of behaviourism. Ryle writes that 'the chessboard, the platform, the scholar's desk ... the lorry-driver's seat ... and the football field' are among the places where people work and play stupidly or intelligently. "Mind" is not the name of another person, working or frolicking behind an impenetrable screen... (ibid:50), but his examples also remind us that there must be more than the mechanics of behaviour if we are to know the difference between a clown's stumbling and a similar but clumsy stumbling by someone who does not do it on purpose, between a parrot laughing at a joke and an understanding person laughing at the joke. Although we cannot pinpoint a ghostly mind, we do know the social circumstances, the cultural situations in which actions take place. And these circumstances, the situations, are open to the inspection of those who live in them. Wittgenstein (1971:157) says that having a private feeling, such as pain, is like having a beetle in a box, where nobody could ever see what exactly is in anyone else's box: we cannot know whether our beetles are the same, or even whether there are any beetles in others' boxes at all. So obviously, according to Wittgenstein, the beetles are not relevant to the language game of inner feelings, that is, private feelings cannot be the criterion we need to decide what is going on inside our heads. Again, Wittgenstein is not implying the conclusion that whether a machine actually has thoughts and feelings is irrelevant, as long as it is acting exactly as human beings would do. Ryle and Wittgenstein are not claiming, as the Turing Test requires, that thoughts and feelings, or minds, can be reduced
to public movement and manipulation of signs. They do convey that the specific way in which behaviour takes place, that which makes us call a set of movements 'behaviour', is the accompanying context.

Neither Ryle nor Wittgenstein is intending to deny that we can conceal our thoughts on occasion, or can mislead others as to what we think or feel, or that we ourselves are usually (although not always) the best judges of what we are thinking, or are intending to do. But we only learn to recognise our own, or others', thoughts after we have learnt to do so in public situations. As children learning to speak we were told by other people around us to name our feelings, and were taught by them to recognise feelings and emotions in people other than ourselves. We have to be told, by people who can see that we are in pain, that when we stub our toe, or when we have eaten something that disagrees with us, or when we have a bad ear infection, that all these feelings are 'pains'. Our inner feelings must all be open in principle, that is, have been detectable primarily by others before we can be taught to detect and to name them in ourselves, and later on, if we want to do so, we can learn to disguise them.

Thus the situations in which behaviour takes place are part of a total, human, culture, and we cannot fully describe culture, or life-world situations in all their richness of detail, in terms of explicit rules and data. People have an enormous amount of, mostly tacit, background information, just as they have common sense. And as Collins and Yearley (1992:322) remind us, 'The elusiveness of common sense was not noticed when artificial intelligence was a dream; it has been discovered by the builders of intelligent machines only with the failure of their project. Only now is it becoming clear to them that nonhuman actants have no common sense.' Such actants also have no tacit background information. They do not, at this stage of technology, live with us as fellow participants in our human life-world.

THE TURING TEST MISSES THE POINT

The Turing Test is not going to give us what we hoped to get from it: a criterion to decide whether a machine is intelligent. Saying this is not the
same as saying that it is not going to work because machines can have no intelligence, or that the test is not sensitive enough, or not complete enough. The Turing Test is the wrong kind of test, as a ruler is the wrong kind of instrument to measure time or weight.

In common with the Watson-Skinner type of behaviourism, the test treats behaviour as if it can be explained in isolation, as if it consists purely of patterns of physical movement. The same holds for Chomsky's linguistic theory, which explains language as patterns of words or phrases. In all these cases, the common factor that is overlooked or set aside as incidental, is the social aspect of communication. Similarly, mind is explained in solipsistic fashion as something inherent in, or arising from and operative in, the single person's brain. But there is an inescapable social aspect to mind, which is one of the reasons why a causal explanation (to which Searle, as we saw, is at least in part inclined) will not work.

Button *et al* (1995:148-149) argue that the Turing Test is unsatisfactory because it is designed to screen out precisely all the relevant information we would otherwise use to help us decide whether X's behaviour is intelligent or not. They say that one could think that a CD player was performing just as well as any orchestra, if one did not know the circumstances, and that with appropriate screening, a type-setter could be thought to be creating an original story just like the author who wrote the story, because both fill pages with letters that form the story's words.

Once again, what is screened out, or concealed, does not simply consist of objective facts from the environment, but also, and mainly, the social aspects. Awareness arises originally in communication with others, that is, in a shared world. Awareness of the individual 'I' is formed only as the result of communication, and not, as is often supposed, before any communication takes place. Some remarks in this connection are made by Ryle (1963:28), who states that 'much of our ordinary thinking is conducted in internal monologue', but he reminds us that it is a necessary condition of our being able to talk to ourselves that we should previously have learned to talk aloud to, and have been talked to by, other people: 'keeping our thoughts to ourselves is a sophisticated accomplishment'. He also says that
'the sorts of things that I can find out about myself are the same as the sorts of things that I can find out about other people' (ibid. 149), because we can only know what is in principle public. This is closely related to Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument (Wittgenstein 1971:144-154, or no. 256-284). We know about minds and consciousness because we recognise them in human communication situations. But exactly this factor is missing in our confrontation with computers, and in the Turing Test. Wittgenstein (1971:154) asks whether we can imagine that a stone can feel pain; he says that a machine cannot think because we only say that human beings and human being-like things can think (1971:178-179). As long as machines are not full partners in human society, we should not attribute thought and feelings to them, just as common sense tells us that plants do not feel pain but that animals do. We know this from their behaviour, which we can interpret as a coherent whole. But first there must be behaviour that we as human beings can interpret adequately.

If, at a later stage, machines were to be constructed in the form of androids, complete with sensor organs (sight, hearing, touch, etc.) and movements that could be coordinated, and these machines could be supplied with appropriate background knowledge, we might be able to communicate more fully with them. Children learn their background knowledge and common sense by growing up in a human society; they 'pick up' what is not explicitly formulated or taught. Should we then teach androids as we teach children? It is interesting that Turing himself (1995:31-35) mentions the possibility of this, although naturally he does not propose any details, since computer technology was in an early stage when he wrote his article. Since then, programmes that can 'learn' have been written, but these are still far removed from the total way in which children learn, especially in the early years. And so far, testing what a computer programme can do is not done in the same way as testing children or adults in order to find out what they can do or can understand.
CONCLUSION

Although the Turing Test is an interesting concept, and it has led to fruitful research and discussion, it is too restricted, given its aims and presuppositions, to be an adequate criterion for the detection of consciousness.

But the test teaches us that there is both less and more to human consciousness than we usually realise. Less, since consciousness and thought are so perfectly familiar to us in our daily life, so there is no great mystery about them because we all know them, recognise them and live with this knowledge every day. At the same time there is more, because once we are confronted with questions about the possibility of non-animal thought, we come to understand that these concepts form part of the way in which we live. The confrontation leads to a realisation of the enormous amount of tacit knowledge, of assumptions, rules, and cultural issues interwoven with our casual use of mental concepts. Just as we only discover our own culture when we are confronted with other cultures, other ways of life, so we only come to realise how our knowledge of human consciousness is embedded in our human way of life when we are confronted with the idea of artificial thought and feelings.

References