

## POST-MODERN THINKING AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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### Abstract

I want to do a couple of things in this essay. First, I want to articulate the central direction that postmodern thinking or philosophy (or postmodernism or postmodernity) takes. Second, I want to present a brief sketch of African philosophy, focusing mostly on some aspects of African ethics. Third, I want to gesture towards the view that while postmodern thinking seems to suggest that African philosophy is a legitimate narrative or “language game” it could be argued that given its central ideas and doctrines African philosophy may be open to some of the worries facing modern thinking (or modernism or modernity).

**KEYWORDS:** Post-modern, modern, modernity, African philosophy

### Introduction

I have in the abstract specified the aims of this work which include: First, to articulate the central direction that postmodern thinking or philosophy (or postmodernism or postmodernity) takes. Second, to present a brief sketch of African philosophy, focusing mostly on some aspects of African ethics. Third, to gesture towards the view that while postmodern thinking seems to suggest that African philosophy is a legitimate narrative or “language game” it could be argued that given its central ideas and doctrines African philosophy may be open to some of the worries facing modern thinking (or modernism or modernity). In carrying out these aims, I do not intend or pretend to defend the validity and plausibility of postmodernism. Rather, my motivation is first and foremost to examine some of the directions of postmodern thinking, and second, to make a case that if postmodern thinking is true or if its claims are plausible, then such thinking would, on the one hand, suggest that African philosophy is a competing narrative or language game, and on the other hand, raise certain worries for it — worries that are similar to those raised for modernity.

### Postmodern Thinking

There is the view, and quite rightly it seems to me, that postmodernism is at some level indefinable (AYLESWORTH 2013, Web. N.P). That is not to say that what postmodernism *is* or *isn't* is utterly beyond comprehension or our grasp. Postmodern thinking can be described as a philosophical direction or movement that is critical both of the foundational assumptions of Western thinking and its “totalitarian” and universalizing tendency. In particular, it can be seen as largely

a reaction against the philosophical assumptions, values, and intellectual worldview of the modern period of Western (specifically European) history—a period spanning the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries right up to the second half of the twentieth century. Central to postmodern thinking is its emphasis on the importance of power relationships, personalization and discourse in the way truth and worldviews are traded and constructed, and role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power and relationships. The last point is quite fundamental to postmodern thinking and its critique of modernity. For in the perpetuation of particular worldviews through particular ideology, modernity, according to postmodernism, serves to undermine and marginalize other worldviews. That is, the universalizing tendency of modern thinking is totalitarian since it effectively imposes conformity on other perspectives or discourses, thereby oppressing, marginalizing, or silencing them. For postmodernism, the universalizing theories of modernism are not only pernicious and harmful but misleading and false.

To this extent, postmodern thinking can be said to constitute a set of critical and strategic practices which aims to destabilize concepts such as historical progress, presence, the univocity of meaning, epistemic certainty, and identity (generally associated with modernity and particularly with the 18th-century Enlightenment) by employing other concepts like simulacrum, difference, hyperreality repetition, and the trace. If postmodern thinking is critical of certain concepts associated with modernity which were taken for granted during the 18th-century Enlightenment then clearly it is skeptical or nihilistic toward many of the values and assumptions of thinking that derive from modernity. Some of the core views and values that postmodern thinking questions and rejects include (a) that humanity has an essence that distinguishes humans from nonhuman animals; (b) that there is an objective natural reality whose existence and properties are logically independent of human beings—of their minds, societies, social practices, or human investigative techniques; (c) that one form of government or particular way of conduct and acting is better than another; (d) that humans can acquire knowledge about natural reality, which is ultimately justifiable on the basis of evidence, demonstration or principles that are, or can be, recognized directly, intuitively, or with certainty.

Postmodernism's rejection of modern thinking gives us a peek into the shape of some of its positive doctrines. Let me highlight two of such. First, the doctrine that the view of reality that modernity espouses is a kind of naive realism, for such reality that it espouses is simply a conceptual construct, an artefact of scientific practice and language. Second, the doctrine that knowledge and value are relative to discourse and that the established discourses of modernity or the Enlightenment are no more necessary or justified than alternative discourses. Simply put, there is a privileging of knowledge narrative

or metanarrative, or language game over other narratives or language games by modernity. However, these privileged narratives are necessarily valid and justified within different and particular discourses. One implication of the latter doctrine is that if reality, knowledge, and value are constructed by discourses then they necessarily vary with different context of discourses. If they thus so vary, then the discourses and perspectives of modern science, for example, considered separately from the evidential standards internal to it, has no greater claim to knowledge and truth than other alternative discourses and perspectives, including, for example, astrology and witchcraft.

Although it could be said that the idea of postmodernity has been around since the 1940s, as a philosophy it originated primarily in France during the second half of the twentieth century. Some of the most influential early postmodern philosophers are Jean Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. However, it was Lyotard who introduced into the literature the term “postmodernism” in 1979, with the publication of his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

An analysis of postmodern thinking would be incomplete without pointing out several philosophical antecedents that inform its concerns. Postmodernity was greatly influenced by the writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century and by some twentieth 20<sup>th</sup> thinkers including Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is important to also note that the philosophical modernism at issue in postmodernity or its concern begins with Immanuel Kant’s “Copernican revolution,” namely, his twin claim that we cannot know things in themselves and that objects of knowledge must conform to our faculties of representation.

Since Lyotard is credited with introducing the term modernism it will be important to examine some of his ideas. I now turn to some of these ideas as espoused primarily in [The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge].

Lyotard is largely concerned with the role of narrative in human culture. Particularly, he is concerned with how such role has changed as we moved away from the condition of modernity into a “postindustrial” or postmodern condition. The motivation of [The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge] and Lyotard’s analysis of the postmodern condition is Wittgenstein’s model of language games and concepts taken from speech act theory. In employing Wittgenstein’s model of language games and concepts Lyotard attempts to account for a transformation of the game rules for science, art, and literature since the end of the nineteenth century. He takes the book both as a kind of experiment in the combination of language games and as an objective “report.” Also, for Lyotard, it is an amalgamation of two very different language games; first, that of the philosopher or questioner and, secondly, that of the expert or

knower. Whereas the former knows what he knows and what he doesn't know, the latter knows neither, but rather poses questions (LYOTARD 1984, 7).

Lyotard defines "*postmodern* as incredulity toward meta-narratives" (LYOTARD 1984, xxiv), by which he means skepticism towards some unique and overriding narratives or simply put the idea that knowledge is not essentially narrative (LYOTARD 1984, 26). Here Lyotard makes use of narrative in the context of knowledge to suggest first and foremost that there is a problem with modernity or the perspective of the West with regards to knowledge via the strict linkages of various subjects, which constitutes the cultural perspective of the West. If, for example, "there is a strict interlinkage between the kind of language called science and the kind called ethics and politics" (LYOTARD 1984, 8) and if this interlinkage constitutes the cultural perspective of the West, then so worse for the universalizing tendency of meta-narratives since such interlinkage does not constitute a universal perspective.

The universalization of knowledge or even the idea of epistemic certainty as derived from modernity is clearly at work in the kind of legitimization that modern thinking provides for science and for its own truth-claims. So, on the one hand, science seeks to distinguish itself from narrative knowledge in the form of tribal wisdom communicated through myths and legends, and modern philosophy, on the other, seeks to provide some legitimating narratives for science and (for its own truth-claims) in the form of "the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth," (LYOTARD 1984, xxiii). According to Lyotard, such legitimization, particularly of the truth-claims of modern philosophy is not done on the basis of logical or empirical grounds, but rather on the grounds of accepted stories or some metanarratives about knowledge and the world. But as he is eager to point out, there is a problem with the legitimization—in our postmodern condition, these metanarratives no longer work to legitimize truth-claims. Indeed, he shares the view that part of the collapse of metanarratives in our postmodern condition seems to be brought about by science. For clearly science plays the language game of denotation to the exclusion of all others. By doing this science displaces narrative knowledge, including the metanarratives of philosophy, which partly arises because of the rapid development of technologies and techniques in the latter part of the twentieth century. This development heralded a shifted in the emphasis of knowledge from the ends of human action to its means (LYOTARD 1984, 37). The collapse of modern metanarratives can introduce into the human condition some form of nihilism. But Lyotard doesn't hold this view. Rather he says that people are developing a new "language game"—one that eschews the universalizing tendency of modernity and that does not make claims to epistemic certainty or absolute truth but rather celebrates

a world of ever-changing relationships, first among people, and then between people and the world.

As appealing as postmodernism may be to some I would like to conclude this section by bringing up some important reactions to postmodernism—that of Jürgen Habermas and Noam Chomsky. Habermas happens to be postmodernism’s most prominent and comprehensive critic and does seem to take the theory more seriously (than many other critics of postmodernism) given that postmodern thinkers openly respond to him. For Habermas, postmodernism commits a number of errors, not the least by contradicting itself through self-reference and presupposing concepts that it otherwise seeks to undermine, namely, freedom, creativity, and subjectivity. In [*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*] he takes on postmodernism at the level of society and “communicative action”, that is, postmodernism as it is realized in social practices and institutions rather than in the arena of theories of cognition or formal linguistics as autonomous domains (HABERMAS 1987, 1-22). Unlike Habermas, Chomsky (like many other critics of postmodernism) simply rejects it as mere nonsense. Postmodernism, he argues, is meaningless because it adds nothing to analytical or empirical knowledge and suggests that its theories should be committed to the flames: “Seriously, what are the principles of their theories, on what evidence are they based, what do they explain that wasn’t already obvious, etc.? These are fair requests for anyone to make. If they can’t be met, then I’d suggest recourse to Hume’s advice in similar circumstances: to the flames (1995)”. For some similar and related criticisms see Richard Dawkins (1998, 141-143) and Dick Hebdige (2006, ch.40).

### **African Philosophy**

African philosophy is used in different ways by different philosophers. Although African philosophers spend their time doing work in many different areas, such as metaphysics, epistemology, moral philosophy, and political philosophy, a great deal of the literature is taken up with a debate concerning the nature and existence of African philosophy itself. Although the brief history of African philosophy is marked by some progress, which is, as, Okafor notes “punctuated by fluctuations, oscillations, and occasional regressions” (1997, 251) it seems that the meta-philosophical questions (questions about the nature and existence of African philosophy) will continue. Consequently, it will be an understatement to say that the issue of an African philosophy is burdened with many difficulties and that it is enormously difficult to define. These difficulties do not arise only because African philosophy is used in different ways by different philosophers or because a great deal of the literature is spent debating about the meta-philosophical questions in African philosophy (notwithstanding the fact that African philosophers spend their time doing work in many different areas of

African metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and political philosophy), but also because at some level the notion of what philosophy is or what the subject means is notoriously difficult to articulate.

Within the context of the issues that arise from the meta-philosophical questions, discussions of the existence of African philosophy seem to primarily focus on the modern period, namely, the twentieth century, according to which its development is relatively recent. Although it could be said that African philosophy in the twentieth century is relatively contemporary and although this is traceable to some seminal texts, it is important to note also that it is equally locatable in the ancient period (or traditional African societies) in virtue of the fact that it draws on cultural forms that stretch back in time and space.

Because a universal definition of African philosophy is not within my reach I will simply follow Bruce Janz (4) and for my purpose take African philosophy to be “palatial”, that is, African philosophy as concerned with some phenomenological analysis, where phenomenological analysis refers to the explication of the meaning of an African life-world for Africans. On this view, African philosophy is not simply understood geographical (i.e. African philosophy as circumscribed by borders and territories) or racialized (African philosophy or the doing or doers of African philosophy as circumscribed by race or racial backgrounds). Rather, on the “palatial” understanding we will understand African philosophy as referring to the practice of raising, formulating and engaging with “a set of culturally original questions about the full range of philosophical issues” within an African life-world for Africans (JANZ Web, 4).

Since my concern in this chapter is to try to forge some sort of linkage between postmodern thinking and African philosophy within the context of the claims that I made at the outset I think it would be important for me to focus on one area of African philosophy. I have chosen to focus on African ethics or morality, partly because I take it as more accessible than other areas. My aim is to briefly discuss some of the issues around African ethics as a platform for my argument in the next section that if postmodern thinking is right then it would suggest that African philosophy is a competing narrative or language game and that it may be open to some of the worries facing modern thinking.

### *African Ethics*

African ethics is sometimes characterized as a character-based ethics and sometimes in humanistic terms, where the former is about the individual’s character or moral development and the latter is about circumscribing ones moral thoughts and actions by the interests, needs, and welfare of members of the community. Both characterizations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. There are descriptive and prescriptive or normative aspects to the character-based notion and the doctrine of humanism, which I will come to in a moment.

Although I will be discussing both I do want to focus mostly on the doctrine of humanism and how it generates a system of obligations rather than one of rights.

### *Humanistic morality*

A humanistic morality is human oriented, that is to say it is an ethic that is oriented towards the interests, needs, wellbeing—or in Aristotelian terms flourishing—of members of the human community. Later (in 2.1.3) I will show that human flourishing is essentially social flourishing or the flourishing of the community *qua* the common good. This thinking is generally captured by some of the ideas that *Ubuntu* (*qua* “humanity”, “humanness” or “humaneness”) expresses. *Ubuntu* means “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am” (MBITI 1970, 141) and with regards to its humanistic ethical principles of sharing, caring and compassion it is not surprising that it encourages an approach that says: “Your pain is my pain, my wealth is your wealth, and your salvation is my salvation,” or, according to the Uhrobo proverb, “A neighbor’s situation is our situation, and our situation is a neighbor’s situation”.

Humanism has both a descriptive and prescriptive aspect. In its descriptive aspect it asserts that human flourishing is the goal of human thought and actions. In its prescriptive aspect it asserts that an action’s moral rightness or wrongness is determined by how well it promotes human flourishing. This makes African ethics teleological in the sense that it derives duty or moral obligation from what is good or desirable as an end to be achieved, the end being human flourishing—similar in some ways to Aristotle’s idea of eudemonia (living well, or flourishing) as the highest good (§21; 1095a, 15–22). This is in contrast to deontological ethics (divine theory, Kantian ethics) which hold that the standards for the moral rightness of an action, on the one hand, depend on a set of rules or principles, and on the other hand, independent of the end to be achieved.

If a humanistic morality is focus on the individual in the capacity of the individual’s relatedness to other individuals or the community, then a humanistic morality is fundamentally a kind of social morality, which stems from the idea of humans as essentially social beings. If we take a humanistic morality as I am describing, then considering the sort of communitarian ethos that are present in many African societies, it seems safe to say that they are implicated in a humanistic morality.

Like Aristotle, the view that a human being is essentially social or by nature a social animal means that humans are born into existing human society. As a member of the human community by nature, the individual stands in a social relationship with others; he or she is related and connected to other persons, and must necessarily have relationships with them and consequently, have some obligations or duties by virtue of such relationships. That is to say, the social relationships of humans prescribe a social ethic which takes into

consideration the interests, needs, wellbeing of humans—this is essentially what it means to say a morality or ethic is humanistic. On this view, a humanistic or social ethic would be different from an individualistic ethic which focuses on the flourishing of the individual *qua* individual.

### *Character-based ethics*

As a character-based ethics African ethics is said to hold the view that the quality of the individual's character is the most fundamental in our moral life. That is, good character is the essence of the African moral system. There is much of this view that is similar to virtue-based ethics or Aristotle's view about character and virtue. Although, of course with Aristotle such character in connection with eudemonia consists in activities where one exercises the rational part of the psyche or soul in accordance with the virtues or excellency of reason (ARISTOTLE 1097b, 22–1098a, 20)

One has a good character when that person exhibits certain character traits like honesty, generosity, benevolence, loyalty—what virtue Ethicists generally call cardinal virtues—where these traits are congenial and conducive to human flourishing and the maintenance of social order. Character refers to habits, which stem from a person's deeds or actions. As with Aristotle, these habits and invariably the character traits are developed from repeated performance of particular actions. That is, in order for one to acquire a virtuous character or for certain morally acceptable actions to become part of one's character or for them to be habitual for an individual that individual must repeatedly perform them. One begins by recognizing those actions that are morally acceptable and then performs them on a regular basis. By performing the actions it leads to acquisition of a newly good habit and repeated performance strengthens the habit and leads to the acquisition of good character or virtue. So in order for one to act in accord with the moral values, principles, and rules of society one must have a good character. To this extent, moral education is very important in African societies. African societies see it as part of their duty to impart moral education to members of societies, making them aware of the moral values, principles, and rules of society, with the hope that members will imbibe them. Thus failure to follow these principles or develop a good charter trait is a moral failing on the part of the individual who must take responsibility, an idea that is well expressed by the Yoruba proverb “Good character is a person's guard” (see GBADEGESIN 1991, 79).

In African ethics moral or good character or acting well is related to the notion of moral personhood insofar as only a moral person or a person that lives in accordance with the moral values, principles, and rules of society can be truly considered a good or virtuous person. This perhaps is what Ifeanyi Menkiti means by the concept of personhood that is circumscribed by the context of an

individual's participations "in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by [his or her station]" (1984, 176). On this thinking, only moral persons are considered proper subject of ethics. This is because living in accordance with the moral values, principles, and rules of society and the development of good character, choosing and acting repeatedly on those actions that are believed to be morally acceptable require conscious decisions and such decisions stem from one that has the desire to maintain social order. Simply stated, virtuously moral actions must be *intentional*, where *intentionality* refers to some conscious choice to participate in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations that define one's station in life. Thus in African ethics careful attempt is made to distinguish between a person from a mere human being.

This view is eerily similar to Kant's view about rational beings being the subject of morality and the distinction he draws between rational beings and human beings. In African ethics, while a person is a human being and a member of the human community, a human being is not necessarily a person. One is a person if one exercises one's moral capacity and makes moral judgments consistent with the moral values, principles, and rules of society, that is one participates in communal life through the discharge of those obligations that delineate one's station. Therefore, an individual that fails to live in accordance with the moral values, principles, and rules of society is strictly speaking not a "person" but only a human being (see GBADAGESIN 1991, 27). Children are thus, on this view of African morality (as in Kant's moral account), considered only as human beings and not as yet (moral) persons insofar as they are yet to exercise the capacity to participate in communal life through the discharge of their obligations.

### *Human flourishing as communal flourishing*

Now I want to show how in African ethics human flourishing can be thought of as essentially social flourishing or the flourishing of the community and how this is tied to the idea of the common good. This idea has been expressed by various commentators who have separately described African morality as teleological, namely, as aiming towards some particular end, the end being the wellbeing of the community or the common good (WILSON 1971, 98; MCVEIGH 1974, 84). This idea is well illustrated in Bantu and Lovedu moralities (See MOLEMA 1920, 116; J. D KRIGE and E. J. KRIGE 1954, 78). In African ethics the end towards which morally good actions aim for is human flourishing, which is communal flourishing. This is because the individual is considered a social being whose existence and flourishing depends on and is determined by the flourishing of the community as a whole. This idea of flourishing and its connection to

interdependence and reciprocal relationship are well expressed by the following African proverbs:

- (1) The wellbeing of man depends on his fellow man (Akan proverb)
- (2) The right arm washes the left arm and the left arm washes the right arm (Akan proverb)
- (3) If you want to go fast go alone. If you want to get there go with others (Niger Delta proverb)
- (4) The iroko tree is strong but it is not complete; man too is not complete (Niger Delta proverb)

The first proverb highlights the limited nature of humans with regards to what they can possibly accomplish individually, the realization of their ends, their wellbeing. It highlights the importance of the kindness, assistance, sympathy, and compassion of others to an individual's goal of flourishing. To possess these traits or virtues would require the appropriate development of an individual's character. The second proverb underlies the importance of reciprocity and social cooperation. It shows that in order for you and I (both the left and right arms) to succeed in our endeavours and ends we must work together. The third proverb emphasizes that being individualistic will not get us very far or to our destination. We might be able to go very fast but we may not get there. In order to achieve our ends whatever these may be we must get others on-board. That is, their involvement is a necessary component of our success and flourishing. The fourth proverb shows that even the iroko tree with all its priceless strength is not complete (or self-sufficient). It is not self-sufficient because it needs a rich soil, constant stream of water, and sunlight to maintain its strength, its luxuriant leaves, and above all to blossom. In fact, this can be said of all or most trees. The point then is that if with all its strength the iroko tree is not self-sufficient how much more humans who are not as strong as the iroko tree.

I said above that the goal of individual's flourishing is tied to the flourishing of the community. This idea is somewhat similar to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's self-effacing thesis which takes the interests of the individual to be roughly identical to and with the interests of every member of the community or the common good. In Rousseau's [The Social Contract], the individuality of the individual is effaced when she identifies her particular private will with the General Will. Of the transformation and self-effacing nature of the individual's will, Rousseau notes:

As soon as this multitude is thus united in one body, one cannot injure one of the members without attacking the body, and still less can one injure the body without the members being affected. Thus duty and interest alike obligates the contracting parties to help one another, and the same men

must strive to combine in this two-fold relation all the advantages attendant on it. (Bk 1, ch. 7, § 4)

The point about the General Will for Rousseau is that the basic interests of all members of the community are identical as every member desire what we might call primary communal goods such as peace, justice, security, equality, freedom, and dignity. If we take the primary communal goods to be the common good because every member of the community desires them, then it could be said that the individual good is satisfied just in case the common good is achieved, and the individual good is diminished insofar as the common good is diminished.

This view underlies why brotherhood, namely the association of humans (men and women) with common aims and interests is essential in African worldview. For if the basic human interests are identical, and the satisfaction of an individual's interests follows from the satisfaction of common interests, then humanity is bound together in some common aims, and belongs to a common membership of one universal human family. And with regards to *Ubuntu* Desmond Tutu beautifully expresses this idea severally thus:

A person with Ubuntu is available and open to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able or good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed. (1988, 2)

When we want to give high praise to someone we say, “*Yu, u nobuntu*”; “Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*.” Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours. (1999, 31)

Because every human is a member of the one universal family he or she deserves moral concern notwithstanding his or her contextual backgrounds (racial, sexual, economic or social). When we respect individual members we respect their humanity or the fact that they are part of the one universal family and not simply because they are family members, friends, and close neighbours.

#### *Obligations in African Ethics*

Because African ethics is humanistic and emphasizes human welfare it places emphasis on duties rather than rights. A right-oriented ethic places emphasis on the interests and welfare of the individual and subscribes to rights in order to satisfy those interests. Conversely, a duty-oriented ethic emphasizes the interests

and welfare of the community with regards to the individual and subscribes to duties as a way to satisfy them. The individual *qua* human being is in a relational existence with others by virtue of his social nature, that is he or she is implicated in his or her community as a social being. Because of the natural sociality of humans the individual is implicated in some social and moral roles in the form of obligations, commitments to other members of his or her community which the individual must fulfil. Thus it could be said that African ethics takes our primary moral obligation to involve concern for the interests of others. Consequently, it emphasizes and encourages the development of a good character or those character traits that contribute to an individual's acting virtuously (namely, compassion, justice, loyalty, kindness, honesty etc.)—where acting virtuously enables humans to promote the common good. On this view of promoting the common good, right action and conduct are evaluated by how well they promote smooth relationships on the one hand, and uphold social structure and order, on the other. An action or conduct is good to the extent it promotes these ends and bad to the extent it detracts from the ends or runs counter to them.

The point is that particular obligations arise from one's particular station or situation in relation to others. Honesty, respect, justice compassion, reverence as moral values can only be shown to particular persons. We have a moral obligation to be honest and just to other members of the community because it benefits the community which in turn benefits us. We ought to treat our neighbour (others or "strangers") compassionately because he or she is a member of the universal human family. We have a duty to be respectful and show reverence to others. This means that the individual stands simultaneously in several different relationships with different members of the community, for example, as a junior in relations to seniors, parents and elders, as a senior in relation to younger siblings, as a leader or ruler in relation to those being led or the ruled, as a father or mother in relation to son or daughter, wife to husband, elder brother or sister to younger brother or sister, friend to friend, native to non-native. These bonds and relationships impose specific duties on us first and foremost as individuals in these relationships, and then general duties as members of the one universal human family. By discharging our obligations we help maintain social order and the flourishing of the common good and we discharge our obligations by playing our part well in the relationships that we find ourselves in.

### **African Philosophy in the Lens of Postmodern Thinking**

Postmodern thinking as I have articulated claims that value or morality (as are reality, knowledge and truth) are constructed by discourses, that is, they are narratives that are contextual, namely, relative to different discourses. If postmodernism is right, then African philosophy, and in the context of my

discussion African ethics would be one of many narratives. It is not *the* perspective on right conduct and actions; rather it is *a* perspective on morality among other perspectives. Since values are only valid and justified within certain discourses, African morality, as is Western morality, is only valid and justified within its own discourse or internal standards. As a competing narrative or language game the credibility of African ethics is not provided by Western ethics. Simply put, the plausibility of its claims cannot be externally imposed and examined, but rather are imposed and examined internally.

However, although postmodern thinking seems to suggest that African philosophy is a legitimate perspective on reality, knowledge and value or morality given that postmodern thinking eschews any universalizing tendency it may be said that it has a few things to say about the content and claims of African philosophy (or ethics). Specifically, some of the worries that postmodernism will raise for African ethics will be similar to some of those it raises for modern thinking. The idea of moral or good character or acting in African morality as it relates to the notion of moral personhood does suggest that humans are at some level distinctly different from non-humans, in particular non-human animals. In fact, like Kantian ethics, African ethics claim that only a subset of humans are moral persons or capable of moral standing and actions—children are thus excluded from the moral sphere. One can therefore say that African ethics is susceptible to the same sort of worries that postmodernity raises for modern thinking which holds, among other things, that humans have some essence that separates them from nonhuman animals.

Furthermore, African ethics is prescriptive. It is prescriptive in the sense that it prescribes some particular way of conduct or a certain way of *being* or *beingness* or *existing*. Mogobe Ramose claims that in affirming one's humanity with others through the recognition of the humanity of others *Ubuntu* enjoins or commands us to "actually become a human being" (2002, 52). Ramose's claim suggests the deep kind of normativity of African ethics that I am suggesting. One way to interpret the claim that *Ubuntu* enjoins or commands us to become a human being is that it requires that we should exist in certain ways, or that certain ways of *beingness* or existence is better or more appropriate than others. A way of *being human* is better and more appropriate than a way of *being non/un-human*. If this is right, then African ethics has some universalizing tendency. In exhibiting such tendency it is not clear to me if it can be reconciled with the idea of contextualized narratives or worldviews that are situated relative to particular discourses. African philosophy requires that individuals or moral persons ought to or need cultivate good character, to have certain virtues, to be just, honest, compassionate, to care and share and to act within the broader common good of human flourishing. Human flourishing which circumscribes African ethics imposes on individuals particular ways of acting such that there are good or

appropriate ways of acting and bad or inappropriate ways of acting. Appropriate moral actions are those that aid, abet and advance the totality of human flourishing and inappropriate moral actions are those that do the very opposite. If this moral prescriptive perspective cannot be reconciled with the idea of contextualized narratives or discourses, then it seems right to conclude that African philosophy, like modernism is grounded on some universalism that may be both misleading and erroneous.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has examined some directions of postmodern thinking and African philosophy through African ethics, where the former is about the meanings or explanations that people give to events that occur in the physical world, and the lack of objectivity or universalism to those meanings or explanations, and the latter is about the full range of philosophical issues that are implicated in the set of culturally original questions raised within an African context and life-world. I suggested that if postmodern thinking is true then it would suggest that African philosophy is a legitimate narrative or language game that is justified within a specific discourse and that going by some of the important ideas and doctrines of postmodern thinking African philosophy, like modern thinking, is faced with certain worries—worries that are related to its universalising tendency. Insofar as postmodernism is a movement characterized by broad skepticism, relativism or subjectivism, a general suspicion of reason and rationality, and a deep sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power, or simply insofar as postmodernity is a rejection of modern thinking it needs to be taken seriously. Although I have not defended in this paper the plausibility of the claims of postmodernity I do think that its claims are worth engaging with, for it seems misleading to hold as modernity does that reality, knowledge, truth and values are realizable outside particular social practices, institutions and discourses or that theories of cognition or formal linguistics are autonomous and objective domains. Having said that, it is important to point out that since postmodernism claims that it is never possible to evaluate a discourse according to whether it leads to objective Truth, it would have to tell some coherent story of how established discourses of modern thinking have become privileged discourses or the predominant worldview of the modern epoch. Or simply stated, it has to tell us (and convincingly so) why it is the case that perspectives or discourses of modernity were adopted or developed and not some other perspectives or discourses.

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