


IN MEMORIAM

The Power of Critique: A Tribute to Paulin Hountondji

Uchenna Okeja 

Nelson Mandela University, South Africa
Email: Uchenna.Okeja@mandela.ac.za

Abstract

The emergence of African philosophy as a systematic field of inquiry can be traced to the trailblazing work of a few figures. Paulin Hountondji occupies a special place among these trailblazers. A true exemplar of the field, Hountondji's work is neither limited by the linguistically circumscribed mapping of African philosophy nor the dichotomies and quarrels arising from methodological and stylistic difference in doing philosophy. I reiterate the crucial challenge he poses to current and future generations of scholars by reflecting on his approach to philosophy and the critical insights he offers on fundamental questions about the nature, conditions and fate of freedom in Africa.

In the Foreword to *The Struggle for Meaning* written two decades ago, Kwame Anthony Appiah described Paulin J. Hountondji as “a philosopher of the very greatest importance” (Hountondji 2002, xv). Affirming this point in another book that appeared in the same year, Barry Hallen noted that Hountondji is a “major figure in contemporary African philosophy whose influence spans the franco-phone–Anglophone divide” (Hallen 2002, 50). There is no doubt that Hountondji was held in the highest esteem by critics and admirers.

An apt description of Hountondji's place in contemporary African philosophy would be to consider him both a source of inspiration and anxiety. He was the former because of his unwavering commitment to the project of reconstructing the foundations of knowledge in post-independence Africa; and he was the latter, due to his unyielding scepticism about grandiose narratives regarding the role of collective identities in theory and practice. Hountondji's practice of the intellectual life was permeated by what one might call critique—that is, a form of inquiry that is dedication to methodical acuity, conceptual clarity, and a programmatic outlook.

The power of critique that informed the oeuvre that Hountondji, the preeminent Beninese philosopher, bequeaths current and future generations of

scholars, lies in his cultivation of the virtues of responsible freedom. Indeed, the rigor and complexity Hountondji exhibited in his writings could easily lead one to imagine him as an ever serious and never smiling philosopher. But that would be a mistake. Although I only met him twice, my experience of his approach to people and scholarly engagements gave me the impression that he was just as committed to critical scholarship as he was to the sense of *joie de vivre* that is part of any genuine appreciation of the humanity of people. For instance, he refused to imprison himself in negativity due to his challenge with stuttering. References to his speech challenge abound in his lectures and publications. Here are a few instances. Describing initial engagement with Nkrumah's work at *Présence Africaine* in Paris, he said: "I was hardly twenty-two when, at the launching ceremony in Paris of Nkrumah's Consciencism, I happened to laboriously stammer a presentation that made headlines by portraying the Ghanaian leader's project as more progressive than negritude" (Hountondji 2002, 80). Recounting his experience during a plenary he delivered at the World Congress of Philosophy in Montreal under the chief patronage of the governor-general of Canada, he said: "as usual, I had not finished preparing my paper. I was counting on the muses to inspire me, once I started to speak, in what I anticipated was going to be one of the best improvisations in my life, never suspecting for a moment that it could, on the contrary, turn out to be the most catastrophic stammering I would ever have" (ibid., 197). Most dramatically, he concluded his story about a meeting in Ife with Robin Horton in 1978 as follows: "he understood French, and so I preferred to stammer in French than in English" (ibid., 218). Only the greatest of all in a field can make such comments about their struggles.

Hountondji's appreciation of conviviality was at play during an encounter he had with the eminent Senegalese mathematician and philosopher, Souleymane Bachir Diagne. This event was reported in Diagne's *The Ink of Scholars*. The book opens with the story of a plenary Diagne delivered at an international conference at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1996. Since the conference was organized to celebrate the revered French philosopher, Rene Descartes, Diagne titled his plenary lecture "Cartesian Spirit and Mathematics of the Spirit." At the end of the lecture, Diagne narrated that an African in the audience posed the following question to him from the balcony: "in your university, in Dakar, or anywhere else in Africa, would you have treated this same conference topic in the same way?" The philosopher who posed this question was of course Paulin Hountondji, the ardent critic of ethnophilosophy. The irony Hountondji deployed in framing his question to Diagne shows that he valued conviviality just as much as he cherished the virtues of the critical mind.

Hountondji belonged to the generation of scholars from Africa of whom the eminent late-lamented Ghanaian philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, said were both friends and persistent critics. About this generation of scholars, it makes sense to say, like Wiredu, that "goodwill being taken for granted on all sides, the genuine issues can be pursued wherever they lead in a spirit of give-and-take free from petty cavilling" (Wiredu 1996, 201). This was evident in Diagne's response to Hountondji's challenge. His answer went against the disapproving murmur by the audience in that hallowed hall at the Sorbonne where one of the princes of French philosophy was being celebrated. Given that goodwill was taken for

granted as the background of Hountondji's challenge to Diagne at that lecture, his question was understood as a demand to engage with the audible silence of knowledge from "elsewhere"—that is, the gnosis from the "zero point." Said differently, Diagne imagined Hountondji to be making a demand that he should reflect on the episteme of the excluded (Diagne 2016, 2). This request makes sense if one considers that extraversion of knowledge was a crucial issue for Hountondji.

Extraversion in relation to science and knowledge creation in Africa occupied a special place in Hountondji's work. He noted that his "articles on scientific extraversion, the first of which goes back to 1978," reflect the growth and development of his critique of ethnophilosophy (Hountondji 2002, xix). But why was Hountondji concerned with the critique of extraversion? He provides an answer. For him, the critique of extraversion, which was basically the core of his critique of ethnophilosophy and ethnoscience, is an attempt to contend with the rather pernicious scholarly investment in "freezing traditional systems of knowledge by emptying them of their dynamism, of their power to transcend their limitations, their autonomous capacity for enrichment and improvement" (Hountondji 2002, xix).

By making the inquiry into the understanding of the nature, modes of manifestation and general implausibility of extraversion one of his main philosophical projects, Hountondji demonstrated that knowledge must serve the purpose of freedom. And this knowledge cannot be attained if we fail to affirm the responsibility of individual thinkers to think for themselves using and transcending the conceptual resources available to them. It is in this sense that the critique of extraversion "presupposes the creation, in Africa, of an autonomous space for reflection and theoretical discussion that is indissolubly philosophical and scientific." The reason being that "only such a space can enhance an effective participation of African peoples—and not just some individuals of African origin—in the debates about them. That will be the condition for intellectual freedom" (ibid., 103).

This description of the condition of intellectual freedom should not be conflated with decolonization and all manners of epistemic equalization projects that are *en vogue* these days. The question for Hountondji was not what counts as exogenous knowledge that should be torn down and discarded. His focus was how people ought to approach the project of thinking to guarantee true freedom. This means that his definition of the conditions of freedom was oriented towards the subject of knowledge and not outward-looking, as decolonization theories tend to postulate, towards agents of epistemic domination. I consider Hountondji's perspective plausible not only because it embodies the prospects for emancipation, but most importantly because it assumes from the onset the agential capacity of every subject of knowledge. Decolonization theories, as mechanisms, sometimes by fiat, of epistemic equalization, would mean little if the conditions of extraversion persist. This is a crucial point to bear in mind because "decolonization did not put an end, as a matter of fact, to [the] international division of scientific labor that seemed to reserve theory and invention for the metropolis, and to condemn colonies to the status, first, of huge reservoirs of facts and raw data, and second, testing fields for the results of

metropolitan inventions” (ibid., 229). Hountondji’s critique of extraversion emphasizes the point that theorizing from an African space must do more than provide the resources for the making of “erudite informants” (ibid., 234).

Creating the conditions for intellectual freedom is hard work. It is a task that transcends complaints and performances of nativist erudition. It requires us to be alert always to the crucial question regarding the nature and purpose of knowledge. It is an indispensable task because it is the only way to create the conditions that conduce to the flourishing of the spirit of science. A society that is not committed to this task will remain a net consumer of theories created elsewhere and a net exporter of data and raw facts to be theorised elsewhere. Commitment to this project mattered so much to Hountondji that it determined the course of his career. The questions he posed and answered remain crucial for us today: “why research on Husserl as I had just done? Why lecture on Husserl endlessly, as I had just done for three years in Besançon, before my doctoral defense, and as I was probably going to continue doing, barring the unexpected, in Lovanium University in Kinshasa where I was expected after my defense?” (ibid., 73). To answer these questions, Hountondji chose to abandon his research and publication on Husserl. He decided “to work on the margins ... to establish the legitimacy and the outlines of an intellectual project that was at once authentically African and authentically philosophical” (ibid., 75). Although Hountondji left current and future generations of African scholars a formidable body of work to draw on in their research, he also left a huge question they must strive to answer sincerely as individuals. What should constitute for a scholar the foundation of the practice of the intellectual life?

Author Biography. Uchenna Okeja, research professor in philosophy and African futures, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa.

References

- Diagne, Souleymane Bachir. 2016. *The Ink of Scholars: Reflections on Philosophy in Africa*. Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Hallen, Barry. 2002. *A Short History of African Philosophy*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Hountondji, Paulin J. 2002. *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Wiredu, Kwasi. 1996. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.