Philosophy in Africa, Africa in Philosophy

A series of academic research seminars hosted jointly by the Philosophy Department and the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, Tuesdays 1-2.30pm

Convenors: Prof. Lungisile Ntsebeza & Dr. George Hull

Third term, 2016

Tues 26th July, 1pm Prof. Brian McLaughlin, Philosophy, Rutgers
JAN SMUTS’ HOLISM
Centre for African Studies Seminar Room, Harry Oppenheimer Institute Building Level 3

Tues 2nd August, 1pm Prof. Robert Bernasconi, Philosophy, Penn State
WHY IS THE 18TH CENTURY DEBATE ABOUT THE SLAVE TRADE STILL ABSENT FROM ACCOUNTS OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY?
Philosophy Seminar Room, Neville Alexander Building Level 3

Tues 16th August, 1pm Prof. Bruce B. Janz, Philosophy, Central Florida
THE EDGES OF (AFRICAN) PHILOSOPHY
Centre for African Studies Seminar Room, Harry Oppenheimer Institute Building Level 3

Tues 23rd August, 1pm Prof. Bernhard Weiss, Philosophy, UCT
IS PHILOSOPHY RESTRICTED BY ITS LANGUAGE?
Philosophy Seminar Room, Neville Alexander Building Level 3

A full written paper will be circulated one week in advance of each seminar. Abstracts of the talks follow:
McLaughlin: JAN SMUTS’ HOLISM
The South African statesman and philosopher Jan Christiaan Smuts coined the term “holism” in his seminal 1926 book Holism and Evolution. He championed the thesis that a whole is more than the sum of its parts, and argued that evolution is creative in that it results in a progressive and ascending scale of wholes that bring with them new force fields. Smuts’ holism has close affinities with the doctrine of emergent evolution. I will compare and contrast his holism and with the emergentism of C. D. Broad, Samuel Alexander and Lloyd Morgan. I will also compare and contrast his holism with a version of holism defended today by Terence Horgan and a different version of holism defended by Jonathan Schaffer, a version that takes into account certain lessons of quantum mechanics. Smuts’ holism commits him to the view that there is downward causation. I will argue, contra Jaegwon Kim, that the kind of downward causation that Smuts’ holism entails is perfectly coherent. Further, I will argue that although, on the evidence, it looks as if Smuts was mistaken in maintaining that there are new fundamental forces exerted by wholes, he was nevertheless correct in maintaining that there is a kind of downward causation in nature. More generally, I’ll argue that important aspects of Smuts’ holism have been vindicated.

Bernasconi: WHY IS THE 18TH CENTURY DEBATE ABOUT THE SLAVE TRADE STILL ABSENT FROM ACCOUNTS OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY?
Africana philosophers have been at the forefront of recent challenges to the racism of such “canonical” modern philosophers as Locke, Hume, Kant and Hegel. To date those concerns have been largely dismissed on the grounds that their racist comments were marginal to the major philosophical issues of the day and that these thinkers were simply children of their time. To meet the first objection, I focus on what was arguably the major ethical issue of the eighteenth century: the slave trade. To meet the second objection, I broaden the perspective to include other less prominent philosophers such as Tyrell, Hutcheson and Paley, as well as such abolitionists as Equiano and Clarkson. I highlight a number of cases where I believe an examination of the record of philosophers on racial issues should impact our assessment of their philosophies and the way we teach them in ways that go beyond demands to expand the philosophical canon.

Janz: THE EDGES OF (AFRICAN) PHILOSOPHY
Philosophy instinctively explores its edges. Those edges may be the interrogation of its own beginning, source, or impetus; they may be its boundaries or demarcations from other human activities, rational or otherwise; or they may be its questions of applicability, practice or practicality – what does philosophy produce and how does it engage its world? Socrates’ daemon, Plato’s khora, Kant’s noumenal, Husserl’s lifeworld, Freud’s unconscious, Wittgenstein’s unspeakable, and Oruka’s sage – in different ways these and many more are the edges of what is thought and what is unthought. While we can identify different modes, practices, and traditions of philosophy, the investigation of edges seems to be a common feature of all.

My goal here is to describe an African philosophy that does not take its starting point, its terms of reference, or seek to gain its permission for being from other traditions of philosophy. Even putting it this way is inexact – I will be questioning the idea of a tradition of philosophy itself, and how it has come to be an organizing and ordering device that makes sense of the philosophical world for philosophers. We have this
longstanding and, I think, problematic distinction between analytic and continental philosophy, and then we add African philosophy to this as if it is another style, flavor, or type of philosophy. Clearly these are not different things of the same sort, different members of a set, but as soon as we say that, we inevitably move to the question of demarcation – which is “real” philosophy? And, from there, we find ourselves in a quandary. Either there is a real philosophy, and it is one of these or something else, or there is not, and we find ourselves in a kind of relativism concerning the nature of philosophy itself.

I regard this as a kind of blind alley of reasoning, although one that lies behind a great many attempts to do any of these forms of philosophy (again, language traps us – it seems as if we have members of a set again, just by calling them forms). We find ourselves forever faced with what I call “spatial philosophy”, that is, the task of defining and determining who is in and who is out, what the laws of the land are, and so forth. Philosophy becomes a country, and we become preoccupied with defining and protecting boundaries and at best establishing “international” relations.

I want to proceed differently, to avoid the blind alley. To do so, I will focus on two central aspects of philosophy: the formulation and critique of questions and the creation and activation of concepts. I will argue that African philosophy, far from being a latecomer trying to carve out space on the philosophical map, is in fact engaging in what all philosophy must do, but has often forgotten how to do – it returns to the front edge, the interrogation of the source of philosophy. This, I will argue, is not yet a clear agenda within African philosophy – it has been too often tied up with questions posed from elsewhere. It has often been Western philosophy’s other, its “problem”, and to some extent has internalized that neurosis. But it also shows the promise and the reality of asking questions anew, questions that arise from its own places but which are not place-bound. They are questions which both work with and create what I call “activated concepts”, or concepts that have currency in a place and which have led to or describe practices, institutions, or patterns of life. All philosophy, including that of the West, emerges from places and in particular from the conversations that happen across the edges of places, but much of that emplaced conceptual work has become elided.

Philosophy, I want to argue, always exists in places, but is not reducible to or determined by those places. It strives for the universal. I wish to reposition African philosophy, from being something that has to be accommodated to being the living memory of philosophy itself. And, in the process, I want to reimagine the ways in which African philosophy can interrogate Western and World philosophy while at the same time creating and activating concepts that are adequate to a place. This is philosophical edge-work, the encounter between philosophy and non-philosophy that is crucial. This has implications for curriculum redesign, pedagogy, as well as teaching of philosophical method.

Weiss: IS PHILOSOPHY RESTRICTED BY ITS LANGUAGE?
My question is general but I approach it through recent arguments in African Philosophy. The general question is whether differences in language entail that philosophy—its practice and its conclusions—is restricted in its application to particular linguistic and cultural milieux. Divergences between English and African languages provide a fertile ground for pursuing these questions, as is evidenced by the literature in African
Philosophy. I'll focus primarily on those works which attempt to construct arguments on the basis of observations of this sort. I discern, at least, the following kinds of argument:

1. Some hold that translation from one language to another cannot be objective. To export the conclusions drawn from practising philosophy in English to the context of an African language presupposes falsely that we can solve the problem of translation.

2. Philosophically relevant concepts need not be shared across linguistic communities; examples are amply provided in the literature in African Philosophy. Since philosophical analysis will analyse the concepts of the analyser’s language, it will itself be language-relative.

3. What is the core of a philosophical insight in one language may be trivial in another. So what forms a basis for philosophical theorising in one language is just vacuous truism in another. Theorising in philosophy is thus hemmed in by language.

In each case I find the arguments unpersuasive. I try then to show why philosophy, though it ought to be sensitive to nuances of language, is not bound by language.