

The Analytic appeal of African philosophy

Jason van Niekerk

University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Jason.vanNiekerk@up.ac.za

Contemporary African philosophy ranges over a number of debates, positions, and theoretical traditions. It can, however, be read as its own critical tradition of hard-won methodological refinements and substantive philosophical debates common to a body of philosophical work concerned with African philosophical resources elided by coloniality and postcoloniality. In this paper I argue for an account of Analytic philosophy as a style of philosophy, and trace a congruous approach in history of African philosophy, suggesting that these should not be characterised as antagonistic. I conclude by contrasting this style of philosophy with positions drawn from the work of Mogobe Ramose, arguing that the Analytic approach captures a set of questions worth pursuing in engagements with Ramose's work.

What I do not mean by 'Analytic'

'Analytic philosophy' has been the target of three objections pertinent to African philosophy. These objections conceived of the Analytic as: necessarily logical positivist; necessarily committed to what Emmanuel Eze calls the 'Ultra-Faithful' position; or as a category which does not successfully pick out a distinct set of positions.

In the first instance, African philosophers including Hountondji, Bodunrin, and Oruka have been accused of hewing too closely to logical positivism (Oruka 1998). Olusegun Oladipo, in particular, has claimed that these philosophers effectively disregard work which does not adhere to the requirements of logical positivism (Oladipo 2000: pp. 17–21), an overreach of what he calls 'the analytic challenge' (Oladipo 2000: p. 51), committing African philosophers to an even stricter standard than is currently demanded by most Anglo-American philosophers.

The second objection is exemplified by Emmanuel Eze in his 'African Philosophy and the Analytic Tradition', which identifies Analytic philosophy with a commitment to what he calls the 'Ultra-Faithful' (Eze 2001) position. The Ultra-Faithful, on Eze's account, argue that philosophy is necessarily universal in scope, excluding and eliding a range of culturally situated, historicised conceptions and investigations which come to prominence in the context of African philosophy.

Where the foregoing objections ascribed some specific project to Analytic philosophy, the final objection, offered by David Spurrett in his 'Why I am not an analytic philosopher' (2008) asserts that 'Analytic' philosophy has been defined by commitment to a shifting set of methodological projects, none of which are consistently present across the majority of work labelled as 'Analytic', such that there is no productive purpose to using the label.¹

My response to all of these objections is not here to defend any of the positions objected to, but to point to a sense of 'Analytic' philosophy familiar to most philosophers who identify as such, which need not entail committing to the positions objected to. What I offer is therefore a deflationary account of Analytic philosophy, which seems appropriate in the face of these objections. In the first place, Analytic philosophy is no longer taken to be identical with, as Timothy Williamson puts it, 'the Vienna Circle, with its austere verificationist principle of significance and its exclusion of metaphysics as cognitively meaningless' (Williamson 2014: p. 7). As Williamson notes, while the commitments of verificationism and ordinary language philosophy once excluded metaphysics on

1 In rejecting 'Analytic' as a term effectively without content, Spurrett's reasoning would likely be approved of by logical positivists.

principle, ‘recent decades have seen the growth and flourishing of a boldly speculative metaphysics within the analytic tradition’ (Ibid.; see also Spurrett 2008: pp. 157–158). As to Eze’s Ultra-Faithful, there are two immediate reasons not to treat it as equivalent to Analytic philosophy. The first of these, as articulated by Ward Jones in his response to Eze (Jones 2001), is that it may be that the Ultra-Faithful commitment to a fundamentally universal scope to philosophy is compatible with acknowledging the historicised and particular concerns Eze raises.

Even if we are unconvinced by Jones however, Analytic philosophy as a procedural approach or style need not entail that philosophy proper is universal in scope. Rather, we can understand it as accommodating both philosophical projects whose scope is universal, and those whose scope is more specific. This is brought out by Bernard Matolino’s articulation of Eze’s concern as claiming ‘that philosophy, like a catalyst, can analyse without becoming one of those things that can be analysed’ (Matolino 2014: p. viii). Philosophy, of course, can and should be subject to analysis, both at the general level, and in that specific philosopher’s specific analyses should themselves be subject to further analysis. To an Analytic philosopher, however, it seems stylistically preferable to treat these analyses as distinct undertakings such that, for example, testing the coherence of a concept or validity of a proposition is a distinct project from questioning the epistemic conditions or power relations which constitute certain descriptive terms as viable in specific contexts. To extend the simile, it is possible to take the function of a catalyst as a given when describing a specific catalytic reaction, and also to analyse the function of the catalyst as such. Which form of analysis is appropriate will vary depending on the purposes of the undertaking, but to focus on one form of analysis in any particular work is not to deny the viability of the other.

In my response to Eze, I have just referred to Analytic philosophy as a procedural approach or a ‘style’ of philosophy, and indeed this strikes me as the appropriate characterisation. This is Brian Leiter’s characterisation as well (Leiter 2011), and Leiter joins Spurrett in seeing this reduction to a mere philosophical style as an indication that the term serves little purpose beyond a sociological or institutional marker. I take the ‘style’ in question, however, to be defined by a characteristic procedural focus, recognisable in the work of those who identify as Analytic philosophers. A procedural focus can be understood as prioritising some objects of analysis over others and, in so doing, of picking out certain kinds of question as particularly valuable. Seeing a procedural style of philosophy as prioritising certain pursuits or questions rather than others seems to me to be a useful way of capturing how philosophers use the term Analytic, and those other terms contrasted with it, and this is the sense in which I intend to use the term. This is, as I noted, a deflationary account, in that it does not seek to delineate or police the borders of a canon, or to insist that an Analytic style is a priori best suited to all philosophical investigations. This deflated account, I argue, picks out what I take the vast majority of contemporary philosophers to mean by the term Analytic, as when Leiter states that ‘Analytic philosophy today names a *style* of doing philosophy, not a philosophical program or a set of substantive views’ (Leiter 2011). I do not think that this deflation constitutes a reduction, however, since articulating Analytic philosophy as a procedural prioritising of some questions over others allows us to meaningfully distinguish it from other such styles, and to point to specific questions or objects of enquiry taken by such views as particularly valuable.

What I do mean by ‘Analytic’

My intention, then, is to use the term ‘Analytic’ to pick out a style of philosophy, understood as a procedural focus, a preference for prioritising certain types of questions or objects of analysis. Specifically, I use the term to pick out a preference for: testing propositional claims; doing so in ordinary language; and pursuing parsimonious explanations. These preferences are undoubtedly inherited from logical positivism, ordinary language philosophy, and other academic philosophical responses to what Carl Schorske has called ‘The New Rigorism in the Human Sciences, 1940–1960’ (1997), but their appeal outlives the currency of those movements. Similarly, while Leiter may quip that ‘it is fair to say that “clarity” is, regrettably, becoming less and less a distinguishing feature of “analytic” philosophy’ (Leiter 2011), it is still meaningful to understand the style as aiming toward (and thus valuing) such clarity. I turn now to discussing these preferences, and what they value, in a little more detail.

In the first place, I understand the Analytic style to focus on testing the coherence, validity, and truth or truth-aptness of specific propositional claims. To distinguish this from other styles, it is useful to contrast it with a focus on the epistemic conditions, power relations, or genealogical narratives which condition certain terms as viable in certain contexts. Naturally it is possible for both approaches to feature in a specific work (and, in arguing for Analytic philosophy as a style or preference, I am not committed to stronger claims for the boundary conditions of discrete categories), but I suspect that philosophers will recognise works (or, indeed, whole careers) focusing on one or another approach as familiar. Furthermore, I suspect that the reader will similarly recognise works which focus on testing propositions as Analytic; and those focused on the epistemic conditions, power relations, or genealogical narratives which condition the contextual viability of terms as hermeneutic or genealogical. An effect of the stylistic focus on propositional claims is an emphasis on explicitly articulating such propositions, their justifications, and entailments. As such, debates frequently turn on proper definitions, and interlocutors are under specific pressure to make the terms of debate clear to one another.

Related to the pressure to make the terms of philosophical debates apparent to interlocutors, the next procedural preference of Analytic philosophy is for formulating and reformulating propositions in ‘ordinary language’, such that meaning turns as little as possible on obscure terms of art. Beyond the specific programmatic commitments to language of late Wittgenstein, Ryle, Grice, Austin et al., the inherited preference for ordinary language articulation can be understood as the desideratum outlined by Bernard Williams: ‘As an alternative to plain speech, it distinguishes sharply between obscurity and technicality. It always rejects the first, but the second it sometimes finds a necessity’ (Williams 1985: p. viii). This is not to say that Analytic philosophers necessarily succeed in avoiding obscurantism² or that philosophers under other stylistic descriptions³ are necessarily unclear. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to recognise the writing of, say Bernard Williams, Thomas Hurka, or Kwame Anthony Appiah as shaped by a shared pressure to use plain speech even when articulating complex concepts. Antagonistic descriptions of alternate styles, such as Searle’s denunciation of Derrida’s ‘obscurantism’ (Gutting 2012) can be understood as the latter’s adherence to stylistic conventions far more comfortable with evocative language, terminological idiosyncrasies and specifically situated terms of art than one would arrive at pursuing Williams’ desiderata. It is possible that Gutting is overstating the case (and doing so from a particularly idiosyncratic context) when he claims that ‘[b]ecause of its commitment to clarity, analytic philosophy functions as an effective lingua franca for any philosophical ideas’ (Gutting 2012). He is more convincing, though, in noting that ‘there is a continuing demand for analytic expositions of major continental figures’ but ‘there is no corresponding market for say, expositions of Quine, Rawls, or Kripke in the idioms of Heidegger, Derrida or Deleuze’ (Gutting 2012).

The final procedural preference of an Analytic style is for parsimonious explanations. By this, I mean that questions of value, metaphysics, and epistemology should be treated as distinct, if related, issues, to avoid multiplying explanatory entities unnecessarily. Importantly, ‘treated as distinct’ may mean set aside in a given work, but this should be understood as a qualified response, rather than a programmatic elision: ethicists and meta-ethicists concern themselves with distinct concerns, as do metaphysicians and epistemologists. The principle of parsimony did not originate with Analytic philosophers of course, nor is it their exclusive preserve. Nonetheless, it came to a particular prominence in the context of logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy’s mid-century embargo on concepts outside the bounds of verificationism, and the influence of Occam’s Razor persists.

In tracing these procedural preferences through the Analytic style, I do not aim to suggest that they are grounded in some more fundamental value. Nor do I seek to argue that these values in

2 Leiter finds Dummet particularly problematic in this regard.

3 As may be apparent, I am taking pains not to define Analytic philosophy only in terms of a strict opposition to ‘Continental’ philosophy. The reasons for doing so are overdetermined, but at the very least they include the inherent inaccuracy of conflating Existential Phenomenology, Post-Structuralism, and Nietzsche’s positive projects as a single ‘Continental’ approach; and the fact that various religious philosophical approaches, Hermeneutic, and Marxian positions, and other inflections after the linguistic and spatial turns could each be read as stylistically distinct from the Analytic philosophy I am outlining.

particular are necessarily most apt for all philosophical investigations, or a priori preferable to others. But a procedural preference for making the justifications and entailments of concepts as clear as possible, making it a goal to be accessible to interlocutors, and favouring parsimonious explanations, seems to me to capture what I find appealing in Analytic philosophy. Inasmuch as other philosophers find these preferences in this combination compelling, I take it that they are compelled by the appeal of Analytic philosophy as a style of philosophy.

Endogenous African philosophical responses to ethnophilosophy

Having pointed to the features of an Analytic style of philosophy, I turn now to a strand of argument drawn from the history of African philosophy, which I take to be congruous with this Analytic style. I choose the term ‘congruous’ carefully. I want to point to those features which I, as a philosopher trained in the Analytic tradition, first (and enduringly) found appealing in the history of African philosophy, and to suggest that philosophers who consider the description of an Analytic style appealing have reason to recognise this strand as appealing for the same reasons. It is likely not a coincidence that the strand I pick out has congruities with Analytic philosophy, given that many of the African philosophers I will point to were trained in the Analytic tradition (and, as Oladipo has noted, that at least some commit to a far stronger understanding of that Analytic commitment than the stylistic account I have outlined here). Having said as much, I read the positions taken in these debates to be endogenous to African philosophy, emerging in response to the claims they were dialectically responding to, rather than imposed from without by an alien philosophical programme. In this section therefore, I am pointing to a strand of methodological refinements and positions on the nature of African philosophy which suggest that what is appealing in Analytic philosophy is familiar to and pursued in the methodology of African philosophy.

The strand I have in mind consists of three positions⁴ developed in response (at least initially) to ethnophilosophy⁵. These positions are most strongly associated with proponents of ‘Professional Philosophy’, including Paulin Hountondji, Kwasi Wiredu, Peter Bodunrin, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Dismas Masolo,⁶ but have an impact which can be traced through to dialectical responses to professional philosophy as well. These positions in response to ethnophilosophy are: the denial of unanimism; the characterisation of philosophy as feature of individuals’ work rather than collective belief; and opposition to African philosophy as necessarily supernaturalist or ‘spiritistic’.

Unanimism as false

The term ‘Unanimism’ is defined by Paulin Hountondji as ‘the illusion that all men and women in [African] societies speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues’ (Hountondji 1996: p. xviii). The term captures the tendency of ethnophilosophers to infer that their analysis of a specific African culture’s beliefs captured beliefs essential to all African cultures.⁷ This can be seen in Placide Tempels’ induction from a study of the Luba specifically to conclusions about the Bantu generally (Tempels 1969); in Alexis Kagame’s similar move from claims in Kinyarwanda to all languages in the Bantu group (Kagame 1956); and in John Mbiti’s unqualified claims about African perspectives on the grounds of the Kamba and Kikuyu cultures (Mbiti 1990). A key objection to unanimism is simply that it is unable to account for outliers within the diversity of beliefs present in African cultures, as when Mbiti claimed that African communities have no word for, and thus no concept of the future (Mbiti 1971: p. 28), and Kwame Gyekye responded by pointing to African languages which do account for the future, and subsequently arguing that the presence or absence of a word does not definitively exclude the existence of a parallel concept in a given culture (Gyekye 2002). Professional philosophers, and other schools of thought responding to Ethnophilosophy, thus shifted their analyses to specific cultural traditions, and particular conceptions of the claims

4 In this section I am adapting work previously developed in my doctoral thesis, *Ubuntu and Moral Value*.

5 Although most often associated with Paulin Hountondji, the term was coined by Kwame Nkrumah in the early 1940s in an uncompleted formulation of his doctoral thesis at the University of Pennsylvania.

6 Key texts here include Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (1980), Bodunrin (1981), Appiah (1992), Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (1994) and Hountondji (1996).

7 Discussed at greater length in Hountondji (1996: pp. 170–183).

inferred from them. This is not to say that it is impossible to demonstrate that certain propositions or concepts are characteristically held by many Africans across linguistic and cultural differences, but if the unanimist assumption is to be avoided, criticisms like Gyekye's suggest the burden of proof shifts, such that commonalities should be demonstrated, perhaps instance by instance, rather than asserted as a default expectation.

In dismissing sweeping claims about views essential to all Africans and attending instead to culture-specific traditions or concepts, I suggest, professional philosophers focused on propositional claims specific enough to be *testable* (or at least *contestable* on clear grounds). Importantly, where early ethnophilosophers had sought simply to articulate a view and have the presence of such an articulation suffice for philosophy, contestations such as Gyekye's challenge of Mbiti insisted that philosophy depended on demonstrating the justice of some specific propositions over others.

Philosophy as a feature of individuals' work

A further feature of ethnophilosophy is that it took the existence of traditional ontological, metaphysical, or axiological claims in a culture's folk-psychological tradition as sufficient for the existence of philosophy. By taking the collective body of claims about these subjects to be philosophy, the ethnophilosophers treated philosophy as simply a collection of claims. But this is not how the term philosophy should be understood. Rather, so Hountondji argued, philosophy is an activity whose aim is substantiating, contesting, and refining such claims. While it is undoubtedly the case that the views glossed by the ethnophilosophers were originally taken up in their respective cultures after some process of critical enquiry and debate, their account leaves this aspect of African philosophising invisible, and suggests that critical engagement in refining philosophical conceptions is not functionally a part of African philosophy. But if critically developing and refining ideas were alien to African philosophy, then the African philosophy so conceived would be a poor competitor with philosophy *simpliciter*. In fact, Hountondji argued, such an account of philosophy would be mere anthropology (Hountondji 1996: pp. 52–60). To avoid this, so Hountondji and the professional philosophers argue, we must not conflate folk-beliefs with critical philosophy, and ought to treat African philosophy as a critical undertaking to develop concepts, rather than the cultural excavation and restoration of pristine truths.

Hountondji's positive prescription famously defines African philosophy as 'a set of texts... written by Africans and described as philosophical by their authors' (Hountondji 1996: p. 33), insisting that philosophy be produced by professional academics, through the medium of published works and responses to them. Pertinently, this is intended explicitly to counteract the 'inherently conservative' nature of oral culture and establish the conditions for rigorous and engaged debate, as he makes clear in the following call to arms:

Admit, then, that our philosophy is yet to come. Take the word 'philosophy' in the active, not the passive sense. We do not need a closed system to which all of us can adhere and which we can exhibit to the outside world. No, we want the restless questioning, the untiring dialectic that accidentally produces systems and then projects them toward the horizon of fresh truths. African philosophy, like any other philosophy, cannot possibly be a collective world-view. It can exist as a philosophy only in the form of a confrontation between individual thoughts, a discussion, a debate (Hountondji 1996: p. 53).

Hountondji is here explicitly emphasising philosophy as concerned with developing and refining ideas, as distinct from the merely ethnographic project of recording or reporting them. As such, the emphasis on written work is justified by its capacity to encourage critical, dialectical engagement with claims. So, while African philosophers may draw on traditional claims as source material, what makes such claims philosophical is the activity of refining them through a dialectical engagement between philosophers. Whereas traditions may be discussed in broad terms, as the inherited views of ancestors, dialectical critique functions at its best between discrete individuals invested in specific claims. And while Hountondji's position is no longer as insistent on writing as the only possible medium for philosophy, much of this is due to sage philosophers explicitly making the case that some significant dialectical engagement with traditional material is possible even in the absence of writing.

Much is generally made of Hountondji's concession that 'we Africans can probably today recover philosophical fragments from our oral literature' (Hountondji 1996: p. 106), but Peter Bodunrin suggests that the compromise still turns on the question of enabling a dialectic when he says:

Surely, writing is not a prerequisite for philosophy but I do doubt whether philosophy can progress adequately without writing. Had others not written down the sayings of Socrates, the pre-Socratics, and Buddha, we would not regard them as philosophers for their thoughts would have been lost in the mythological world of proverbs and pithy sayings (Bodunrin 1981: p. 177).

I read Hountondji's positive prescriptions here as congruous with the appeal of the Analytic style I noted earlier, with a procedural focus on specific claims with clear justifications and specific provenance, and a stylistic pressure toward making work accessible to interlocutors, aiming toward the 'untiring dialectic'.

Against the necessity of 'Spiritistic' accounts

I use the term Spiritism, or the 'spiritistic assumption' (Wiredu 1984: p. 149) as Wiredu labels it,⁸ to pick out a third fallacy. This fallacy is present in, though certainly not exclusive to, ethnophilosophy. It is the assumption that an authentically African philosophical perspective necessarily involves reference to spirits, gods, ancestors—'the living dead', after Mbiti—or other metaphysical entities classed as 'supernatural' in Western thought. The appeal of using Wiredu's term, rather than 'supernaturalism' here, is twofold. First, there are arguments that many African metaphysical claims invoke something like the supernatural (metaphysically speaking) while denying a strict Cartesian dualism between the natural and the supernatural (Setiloane 1986; Shutte 1993: pp. 89–96; Battle 1997).⁹ Secondly, while 'supernaturalism' picks out theories which invoke the supernatural (rather than simply the natural), this does not quite capture the claim that African theories *must* be grounded in the supernatural, so an additional term is helpful.¹⁰ Suffice it to say that all of the ethnophilosophers discussed present ontological/metaphysical accounts in which God and spirit were central features, and asserted through their essentialising that all African thought must do the same. Wiredu argues that this hobbles African philosophy by insisting that, while Western philosophy has the freedom to engage in purely naturalistic or metaphysically agnostic theorising, African philosophy cannot do so authentically (Wiredu 1984). This fails to account for African cultures which do not believe in 'supernatural' entities, or for the number of African philosophers who do not believe that theories invoking these best explain the claims they examine. To the contrary, Wiredu notes that 'traditional thinking about the foundations of morality is refreshingly non-supernaturalistic' (Wiredu 1980: p. 6) and that 'a number of contemporary studies of traditional African philosophies of morals converge on this point' (Wiredu 2004: p. 18).¹¹ Thus, not only does the spiritistic assumption fail to account for outlier African views, it asserts that what an African philosophy can be, propose, and examine, is arbitrarily circumscribed relative to philosophy as practised in the West.

For my current purposes it is salient that the 'contemporary studies' Wiredu cites do not, and need not necessarily concern themselves with societies which traditionally accord no place to the 'supernatural'. Rather, these works simply do not assign the supernatural *explanatory* value in their moral theorising and, putatively at least, neither do the traditions they draw upon. What

8 Wiredu in fact lists 'three complaints which can afflict a society. They are anachronism, authoritarianism, and supernaturalism' (Wiredu 1980: p. 1). I include only the last of these as a fallacy of ethnophilosophy because the first two are essentially afflictions of *society*, while the last is also relevant to philosophical methodology, and continues to be treated as such in Wiredu's later work (see Wiredu 2004: p. 18).

9 The plausibility of this claim is its own debate, but at present I am neither committed to pursuing that argument nor interested in begging the question by translating that debate into the terms it contests.

10 These reasons are mine, not Wiredu's. He uses both 'spiritism' (How not to compare African thought with Western thought, 1984) and 'supernaturalism' (*Philosophy and an African Culture*, 1980), but it is not clear that he changes to spiritism. The reasonably widely available 1984 third edition of Richard A. Wright's anthology *African Philosophy: An Anthology*, in which the former essay appears, uses 'spiritism', but this may be a holdover from the (rare) 1977 first edition. In the interim, the essay was developed into a chapter of Wiredu's 1980 book, using 'supernaturalism'. For my current purpose, 'spiritism' is a useful term of art.

11 The contemporary studies he cites as converging on this point are Gbadegesin (1991: pp. 67–68), Gyekye (1987: Ch. 8), Kudadjie (1976), Bewaji (2004) and Wiredu (1991).

is ‘refreshing’ in this is that it demonstrates the principle of parsimony. This is rare in any cases which draw on folk belief, as Wiredu notes when discussing ‘the ubiquity of references to gods and all sorts of spirits’ (Wiredu 1980: p. 38) in folk belief both in Europe and Africa. It is still more appealing to consider the possibility that at least some of this parsimony might itself be rooted in traditional humanistic morality. This is not to say that such parsimonious accounts are ubiquitous among African philosophers, but Wiredu’s point in citing the number of philosophers converging on this position is that they represent at least a significant contingent. And it is here, again, that I find a significant congruence with Analytic philosophy as I have articulated it. If the Analytic is appealing as a style of philosophy which aims at explicitly articulating and testing specific claims, enabling dialectical engagement, and applying the principle of parsimony, then the strand of African philosophy I have traced, and dialectical branches from it, are appealing for the same reasons. And this sense of African philosophy as Analytic seems to me to better accord with what ‘Analytic’ is taken to mean than accusations of logical positivism.

Ramose’s commitments as contrasted with the Analytic approach

A significant part of the purpose behind my deflation of Analytic philosophy to a style of philosophy is that I think this best accounts for the sense in which the term is actually used. Another part of the purpose, however, is that I agree with Barry Hallen, who argues that shared concerns in the African context ought to promote greater communication between Analytic and hermeneutic philosophers than in the Western academy (Hallen 2002: p. 71); and also with David Spurrett, who finds it odd that rapprochement between Analytic and Continental philosophers ‘is offered as a reason for us all to be pleased with ourselves, as though we’d collectively managed to execute some difficult trick like enjoying both baseball and cricket’ (Spurrett 2008: p. 153). My deflationary account, in fact, presupposes not simply the existence of alternate approaches, but the possibility of robust engagement with them, the better to promote Hountondji’s dialectic.

Having said as much, there are still strong contrasts with other approaches and, having outlined what I take to be the Analytic appeal of a key strand in the history of African philosophy, it is worth pointing to such a contrasting position. This contrasting position is that outlined in the work of Mogobe Ramose, most prominently in his *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Ramose 1999) and associated responses to interlocutors.¹² In this work, Ramose both offers up provocative arguments drawn from very different strands of the history of African philosophy than those I have traced, and sketches the beginnings of a programme for further investigations. My concern here is not to engage substantively with Ramose’s claims, however. Rather, I want to note how some of the specific claims he commits to demonstrate an African philosophy strongly contrasted with the style of philosophy I have described. Recall that I found the Analytic style I outlined appealing for its prioritising an explicit analysis of propositional claims, articulation in terms readily accessible to interlocutors, and parsimonious explanations. For the same reasons, I found appealing a strand in African philosophy which eschewed unanimism for the discussion of discrete claims, attributed these to specific authors and enjoined them to aim toward dialectical engagement and reciprocal accessibility, and provided parsimonious theoretical accounts by eschewing obligate supernaturalism.

By contrast, Ramose’s work engages with precisely those claims least suited to these priorities. He appeals to a ‘family atmosphere’ between African cultures with a common linguistic structure to assert specific claims as fundamental to an extant African philosophy; he grounds his account in a ‘rheomodic’ logical language, which effectively constitutes a distinct *episteme* from European natural languages; and he asserts a supernaturalist ‘onto-triadic’ relationship as necessary to his account of moral value.

Ramose claims that there is a ‘family atmosphere’, ‘a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa’ (Ramose 1999: p. 35) by virtue of¹³ a common linguistic structure shared across the Bantu language group. He thus inherits from Alexis Kagame an emphasis on the linguistic contexts which condition certain claims as meaningful. Ramose’s

¹² Ramose (2007) and Bewaji & Ramose (2003).

¹³ In fact Ramose claims that a ‘persuasive philosophical argument can be made’ for this claim independent of the linguistic one, though he does not explicitly formulate this argument.

innovation is to read this structure through David Bohm's concept of a 'rheomode' (Bohm 1980: pp. 30–31; Ramose 1999: pp. 40–42), to capture the logical structure of gerundive languages. This rheomodic structure, he asserts, allows a more accurate accounting of the world than the 'fragmented' description offered by subject-verb-object languages. This may be the case for a range of claims about, or approaches to describing, the world. But it is not clearly the case, and cannot be assumed to be so, for all claims. Ramose argues that strong distinctions between the self as subject and aspects of the world as disconnected objects are learned, and not the phenomenal experience of an embodied self. This perspective, learned through inculcation in subject-verb-object natural languages, then contaminates perspectives on all other scales.

Positing the noun as the source of all activity in relation to be-ing also involves the idea that the noun (subject)—in this case the human being—is the center of the universe. This idea is, however, questionable, because in all probability the universe has got no center at all (Ramose 1999: p. 39).

One might suspect that perceiving the self as discrete and immediate in contrast to the world known only through the mediation of the senses is a perception prior to language, or doubt that the phenomenal experience of the self necessarily impinges at the scale of universal contemplation, even in subject-verb-object languages. Indeed, one may accept Ramose's 'whole-istic'¹⁴ account as a stable phenomenology from which one might perceive the world not as a self fragmented from the world, but as 'be-ing becoming' (Ramose 1991: p. 40), yet fail to see why the latter is more accurate than the former in any specific cases, much less in all cases. But Ramose's stipulation must be accepted to engage with all that follows, as when he insists that 'our idea of truth must be reviewed from the standpoint of rheomodic thought' (Ramose 1999: p. 44), according to which 'truth may be defined as the contemporaneous convergence of perception and action' (Bohm 1994). This account thus seems to invoke an *episteme* of its own, such that the capacity not merely to articulate a proposition, but to evaluate its truth or truth conditions, can only be accomplished within a rheomodic natural or logical language. With a very significant portion of the argumentative heavy lifting accomplished through terms whose meaning is stipulated as particular to a specific linguistic context, Ramose's approach seems firmly at odds with the accessibility of ordinary language philosophers, or the discrete, testable propositional claims pursued as an alternative to ethnophilosophy.

Finally, Ramose claims that an 'onto-triadic conception of be-ing' (Ramose 1999: p. 46) as a relationship between the living-dead (ancestors), the living, and the not yet born is necessary to the whole-istic account of values, such that excluding this element would fail to properly describe the value claims of his account of ubuntu. In this sense, Ramose inherits some of Mbiti's deep commitment to the metaphysical. The result is not simply a position starkly contrasted with the approaches I have found appealing, but indeed one which seems to embody a confluence of the various strands opposed to it. Ramose's position has significant appeal of course, particularly if one takes seriously the claim that many philosophically important propositional claims arising in Bantu languages simply cannot be expressed in European natural or logical languages. But it also seems to presuppose the ubiquity of such claims, requiring that the only grounds for substantive discussion or analysis take place once the necessary superiority of descriptions in a rheomodic language is conceded, along with whatever substantive claims—including the onto-triadic conception of be-ing—can be asserted to be entailed from such a perspective. And if interlocutors remain skeptical of any particulars, it may be that they are simply too committed to subject-verb-object logics.

On the face of it, the prospects for dialectical engagement between Ramose's position and the Analytic African philosophy I have sketched are not particularly promising, but this need not be the case. In the first place, appealing to linguistic similarity across all of sub-Saharan Africa leaves Ramose peculiarly vulnerable to deviations from putatively common linguistic structures. This is not a matter of some outlier cases existing, but of whether each claim he asserts as derived directly from the basic structure of languages does, in fact, follow from their use, or from more specific

14 Ramose prefers not to identify his position with the distinct school 'holism', and was not particularly taken with Bewaji's description of his position, in Bohmian terms, as 'holonism' (Bewaji & Ramose 2003: p. 411). He has allowed, in conversation, that it may be 'whole-ist'.

propositional content expressed within them. Even claims with a much narrower scope than Ramose's have been subject to dispute as to their proper interpretation, as when Gyekye and Appiah each disputed Ben Oguah's claim that the Fanti are effectively Cartesian Dualists (Gyekye 1977; Oguah 1979; Appiah 1992: pp. 96–100), or Gyekye's response to Mbiti on the concept of the future. And each of these, as well as the range of articles common to African philosophy articulating specific cultural concepts, demonstrate that a very wide array of African linguistic concepts are accessible to analysis, rather than their meaning being stipulated as a function of language structure. Similarly, when Bewaji states that 'the basis of reality and continuity of existence that Ramose propounds can survive without the problematic and apparently self-contradictory terminology of "the living dead"' (Bewaji & Ramose 2003: p. 393), he is appealing to parsimony. I take these responses to suggest that the Analytic strand I have traced has proponents precisely because the pressure to examine claims on their own merits, to clarify whenever possible, and to prefer parsimonious explanations, has utility for African philosophers, even in conversation with very different approaches. This, it seems, can only be beneficial to the quality of those conversations.

In this article I have attempted to sketch what I, from an Analytic background, find most methodologically appealing in African philosophy. I have argued, then, that much antagonism toward Analytic philosophy aims at a figure few self-described Analytic philosophers understand themselves as committed to. That a deflationary account of Analytic philosophy better captures what is understood, and that what is attractive in this approach is equally attractive in a strand of arguments running through the history of African philosophy. And that this approach captures a set of questions worth pursuing in engagements with a very different approach to African philosophy, exemplified by the work of Mogobe Ramose.

References

- Appiah, K.A. 1992. *In My Father's House: Africa in the philosophy of culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Battle, M. 1997. *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
- Bewaji, J.A.I. 2004. Ethics and morality in Yoruba culture. In: Wiredu, K., Abraham, W.E., Irele, A., Menkiti, I.A. (eds), *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell. pp. 396–403.
- Bewaji, J.A.I., Ramose, M. 2003. The Bewaji, Van Binsbergen and Ramose debate on Ubuntu. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 22(4): 378–415.
- Bodunrin, P. 1981. The Question of African Philosophy. *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 56(216): 167–179.
- Bohm, D. 1980. *Wholeness and the implicate order*. London: Routledge.
- Bohm, D. 1994. *Thought as a System*. London: Routledge.
- Eze, E.C. 2001. African Philosophy and the Analytic Tradition. *Philosophical Papers* 30(3): 386–399.
- Gbadegesin, S. 1991. *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Gutting, G. 2012. *Bridging the Analytic-Continental Divide*. Available at: http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/bridging-the-analytic-continental-divide/?_r=1 [Accessed 20 April 2015].
- Gyekye, K. 1977. Akan Language and the Materialism Thesis. *Studies in Language* 1(1): 237–244.
- Gyekye, K. 1987. *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (2nd revised edition). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gyekye, K. 1997. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Gyekye, K. 2002. Person and Community in African Thought. In: Coetzee, P., Roux, A. (eds), *Philosophy from Africa: a text with readings*. Johannesburg: Thomson Publishing. pp. 297–312.
- Hallen, B. 2002. *A Short History of African Philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hountondji, P. 1996. *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. 2nd edn. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

- Jones, W.E. 2001. Belonging to the Ultra-Faithful: a response to Eze. *Philosophical Papers*, 30(3): 215–222.
- Kagame, A. 1956. *La Philosophie bantoue-rwandaise de l'être*. Brussels: Academie Royale des Sciences Coloniales.
- Kudadjie, J.N. 1976. Does Religion Determine Morality in African Societies?. In: Pobee, J.S. (ed.), *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*. Leiden: E.J. Brill. pp. 60–77.
- Leiter, B. 2011. 'Analytic' and 'Continental' Philosophy. Available at: <http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/analytic.asp> [Accessed 25 April 2015].
- Masolo, D.A. 1994. *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Masolo, D.A. 2010. *Self and Community in a Changing World*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Matolino, B. 2014. *Personhood in African Philosophy*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.
- Mbiti, J. 1970. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.
- Mbiti, J. 1971. *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Mbiti, J. 1990. *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd edn. London: Heinemann.
- Oguah, B. 1979. African and Western Philosophy: a comparative study. In: Wright, R. (ed.), *African Philosophy: An Introduction*. Washington D.C.: University Press of America. pp. 195–214.
- Oladipo, O. 2000. *The Idea of African Philosophy: A Critical Study of the Major Orientations in Contemporary African Philosophy*. Ibadan: Hope Publications.
- Orika, H.O. 1998. Sage Philosophy. In: Coetzee, P., Roux, A. (eds), *Philosophy from Africa: a text with Readings*. New York: International Thomson Publishing. pp. 99–108.
- Ramose, M. 1999. *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*. Harare: Mond Books.
- Ramose, M. 2007. But Hans Kelsen was not born in Africa: a reply to Thaddeus Metz. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 26(4): 347–355.
- Schorske, C.E. 1997. The New Rigorism in the Human Sciences, 1940–1960. *Daedalus*, 126(Winter): 289–310.
- Setiloane, G. 1986. *African Theology*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- Shutte, A. 1993. *Philosophy for Africa*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press.
- Spurrett, D. 2008. Why I am not an analytic philosopher. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27(2): 153–163.
- Tempels, P. 1969. *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris: Presence Africaine.
- van Niekerk, J. 2013. *Ubuntu and Moral Value*. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand. (Doctoral Dissertation).
- Williams, B. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London: Fontana.
- Williamson, T. 2014. How did we get here from there? The transformation of analytic philosophy. *Belgrade Philosophical Annual*, Volume 27: 7–37.
- Wiredu, K. 1980. *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiredu, K. 1984. How not to compare African thought with Western thought. In: Wright, R.A. (ed.), *African Philosophy: an introduction* (3rd edn). New York: University Press of America. pp. 149–162.
- Wiredu, K. 1991. Morality and Religion in Akan Thought. In: Allen, N. (ed.), *African American Humanism: An Anthology*. New York: Prometheus Books. pp. 210–225.
- Wiredu, K. 2004. *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.