

## **WHY HOUNTONDJI IN EUROPE?: METAPHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS**

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### **Abstract**

Taking its cue from Hountondji's remarks on finding sources of philosophical inspiration in culturally distant contexts, this paper considers the enduring relevance of Hountondji's project for the European philosopher. I argue that the metaphilosophical kernel of Hountondji's work contains important lessons applicable to present debates within European and, more generally, Euro-American philosophy regarding philosophical decolonisation and the expansion of the canon. Challenging the still dominant interpretation of Hountondji's understanding of philosophy as Eurocentric and overly narrow, I argue that Hountondji's work actually provides a route for broadening our understanding of what constitutes philosophy without succumbing to colonial bias. For Hountondji, this depends upon cultivating the right attitude to what has been deemed "extra-philosophical" – one that neither presupposes nor denies its philosophical significance. This self-critical attitude animates Hountondji's "early" as much as his "late" interventions; a subsidiary argument made in this paper is thus that there is a continuity traversing Hountondji's philosophical work. However, the central aim is to examine and reflect on the significance of Hountondji's view, demonstrating that his metaphilosophical vision continues to have profound ramifications not only for contemporary African philosophers but also for European philosophers like myself.

**Keywords:** Paulin Hountondji, Eurocentrism, Canon expansion, Global philosophy

## Introduction

In a 2023 paper entitled “Why Husserl in Africa? Autobiographical Reflections”, Hountondji offers a retrospective on his career and the role played by Husserl in his intellectual trajectory. Here, Hountondji focuses on the metaphilosophical vision put forward by the founder of phenomenology, which accounts for his interest in the project. As Hountondji writes, “my interest in Husserl was motivated first and foremost by his idea of philosophy, his ambition that philosophy should be a rigorous science” (HOUNTONDJI 2023, 66). For Hountondji, this was especially pertinent in the context of the metaphilosophical debates that took place in the African context during the 1960s and 1970s. As is well known, together with other ethnophilosophy critics like Marcien Towa (2012) and Fabien Eboussi Boulaga (2014), Hountondji decried the suggestion that philosophy on the African continent should be given a special meaning. For these thinkers, “ethnophilosophy” – essentially a repackaging of ethnological materials as philosophical – simply perpetuated the colonial presumption that philosophy in the rigorous sense of the word is exclusive to Europe, while what has been traditionally understood as extra-philosophical is the province of the non-Western world. Against this background, Hountondji saw promise in Husserl's definition of philosophy as a critical practice determined to transcend the peculiarity of worldviews. Although, as Hountondji duly notes, Husserl's aspiration to rigour was in the context of his own project undermined by a “form of Eurocentrism that is simply unacceptable” (HOUNTONDJI 2023, 75), elements of the Husserlian view were nevertheless taken to be relevant for the African philosopher.<sup>1</sup>

As indicated by the title of this paper, what follows is an exercise inspired by Hountondji's reflections on what it means to take up metaphilosophical ideas forged in a culturally distant context and apply them to one's own. Specifically, I pose an argument for the relevance of Hountondji's metaphilosophical vision – which, contrary to a popular misreading, is not simply identical to Husserl's – for

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<sup>1</sup>This underscores the fact that Hountondji's assumption of Husserlian phenomenology is, as he puts it, a “critical adoption” (2023, 64) and no simple uptake and application of Husserl's framework wholesale to the African continent. I discuss this important proviso about the Hountondji-Husserl relationship elsewhere (DE SCHRYVER 2023).

current debates within European and more generally Euro-American philosophy regarding philosophical decolonisation and the expansion of the canon. I seek to show that Hountondji's metaphilosophy challenges us to interrogate our presuppositions about what counts as philosophical without thereby sacrificing the unity of the philosophical endeavour. Although Hountondji (1996a) presents these arguments within the context of his work on African philosophy — specifically, his critique of ethnophilosophy and his later works on the reappropriation of “endogenous” knowledge (1997; 2002) — I argue that this is a challenge that solicits all of us. Agreeing with Sanya Osha that “Hountondji remains vital to modern African thought” (OSHA 2011, 46), I append that Hountondji's work remains relevant not only for contemporary African philosophers, but for European philosophers like myself.

### **A Euro-American Debate**

Concerns about the demographic and theoretical exclusions of academic philosophy are by no means new, and indeed have a longstanding in what is now termed the “Global South”. Within European and American academic spaces, however, there has been, in recent years, a notable upswing in efforts to render our curricula, conferences, and conversations more adequately representative of the diversity of philosophical voices and traditions. Under the various rubrics of “diversification”, “canon expansion”, and “decolonisation,” the last twenty years or so have seen a concerted effort to spotlight and overcome, among other vices, the discipline's historical and present Eurocentrism. Broadly speaking, this project has taken two directions. On the one hand, there has been a turn inward, a reckoning with the fact that major players in the history of European philosophy directly promoted its ethnocentric and racist excesses. Against a tradition of scholarship that has set aside the more unsavoury remarks made by individuals like Kant, Hegel, or indeed Husserl as inessential to their philosophical projects, there has been a push to methodically

interrogate the extent to which such comments are entangled with the central interventions made by these thinkers.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond this critical excavation of the history of European philosophy, what might be thought of as a more ameliorative strand of the project has involved an attempt to expand the philosophical “canon” beyond its European representatives. On the other hand, then, there has been something of a turn outward, an opening of Anglo-American and European philosophy to its excluded others. Here, it is a matter of undoing the awkward — to put it mildly — conjunction between philosophy’s self-presentation as a universal endeavour and its special association with a particular place and people. Propelling philosophy in a more inclusive direction has thus involved the belated insertion of non-European traditions of thought within the ambit of the philosophical, as regional versions of a global phenomenon. The crucial step is the recognition, now by philosophers of European provenance, that philosophy in the most “plain” sense of the word is practised everywhere (VAN NORDEN 2017, 82).

Such an undertaking seems simple enough. But once one begins the work of combing through the history of European philosophy with a critical gaze directed towards its Eurocentrism, it does not take long to find that there has been a concerted effort to represent the excluded “others” as, precisely, non-philosophical. To take an example that is both paradigmatic and relevant to the present paper, Husserl (1970) justifies his claim that classical Chinese and Indian philosophy are not *really* philosophy on the basis that these traditions are better thought of as mythical or religious. The delimitation of what philosophy is in a contentful sense — its opposition to *doxa*, to myth, to religion — has thus historically gone hand in hand with the delimitation of what philosophy is, in a *geographical* sense. No doubt, one important way to disarticulate this problematic conjunction is to insist that non-Western traditions simply *are* philosophical in content, that it is no more than a European prejudice that philosophy as it is traditionally understood is a “Greek miracle”. This is, and continues to be, a critical tool in overcoming

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<sup>2</sup> Prominent – if by no means exhaustive – examples of work of this kind include GORDON (1995); BUCK-MORSS (2009); BERNASCONI (2011); FLIKSCHUH & YPI (2014); ALLEN (2016); MONAHAN (2017); LU-ADLER (2023).

philosophical Eurocentrism. But the fact that the extra- or non-philosophical has, throughout philosophy's European history, been given a geographical determination elicits a further challenge still: a transformation in how we think about the very content and practice of philosophy. Seen this way, the ameliorative leg of the project would consist not merely in an additive approach that appends a few new perspectives, which uncontroversially conform to prevailing philosophical norms. More radically, it would consist of an attempt to destabilise our sense of what counts as philosophical in the first place.

I think of this as a more challenging dimension of current efforts because it is unclear how one might go about this work without conceding the Eurocentric bias that philosophy in the "traditional" sense *is* European, whereas what has been excluded from philosophy in a contentful sense *is* identical with what has been excluded from philosophy in a geographical sense. That is, if we argue that transgressing the geographical boundaries of the philosophical requires a revision of the definition of "philosophy", then it seems we rehearse the bias that philosophy proper is European, whereas the rest of the world remains, for the most part, outside of this domain. My claim in this paper is that Hountondji's work offers us a metaphilosophical model that enables a radical interrogation of what counts as philosophical without submitting to the undertow of this particularly vicious version of philosophical Eurocentrism.

### **Why Hountondji?**

How can Hountondji serve as a guide in this context? From a certain perspective, the suggestion that he might do so will appear injudicious. As noted, Hountondji made his name in a heated series of debates concerning the nature of philosophy in Africa. Inspired by Husserl's idea of philosophy as rigorous science, Hountondji's early philosophical work (1996b) critically unpacked the growing trend of "ethnophilosophy" among African philosophers. From the point of view of the ethnophilosophical camp itself, departing from Belgian missionary Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* (1946), the presumed extra-philosophical material within Africa's oral and written traditions is intrinsically philosophical. This material includes, but isn't limited to, dynastic poems, myths, proverbs, religious and cultural practices, and various forms of artistic expression. The

upshot, of course, is a generous expansion of the presumed boundaries of philosophy, both geographically and in content: there *is* such a thing as African philosophy, but this acknowledgement is contingent upon adopting a new definition of philosophy.

Given this, Hountondji's sometimes relentless criticism of ethnophilosophy earned him the reputation of the "enfant terrible" of the African philosophical scene (LAMOLA 2021). Charged with elitism and self-contempt, Hountondji was criticised for perpetuating a narrow view of philosophy as a peculiar practice unique to the European continent.<sup>3</sup> Hountondji's apparent reliance upon Husserl's metaphilosophy set the seal on a generalized understanding of Hountondji as a more or less regressive figure. From this point of view, Hountondji's eventual softening toward indigenous forms of knowledge in his later works (1997; 2002) was not only contradictory but also too little, too late. Why, then, mention Hountondji's name in the context of debates surrounding philosophical decolonisation and canon expansion for *European* audiences? What can Hountondji do other than vouchsafe, now from an African point of view, the very worst prejudices that have characterized the European tradition throughout its history?

Rather than tackle these questions by rehearsing the details of Hountondji's criticism of ethnophilosophy, I would like to take a step back and think through the aims that have guided Hountondji throughout his philosophical career. If these aims are made more explicit by the "late" Hountondji, they nonetheless animate his philosophical work from the first. My contention is that Hountondji's metaphilosophical aims are, in broad outline, ones which he shares with the ethnophilosophers: offering a concerted challenge to philosophical Eurocentrism by insisting on African philosophy. For both Hountondji and the ethnophilosophers, a critical component of this project would be to offer a metaphilosophical model capacious enough to incorporate what has typically been understood to be extra-philosophical material, like myth, religion, proverb, cultural practice, etc.

Hountondji's critique of ethnophilosophy is not, therefore, a defence of a narrow—indeed exclusionary—vision of philosophy. It

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Owomoyela (1987), and Koffi and Touré (1980).

is better understood as figuring the adventure of ethnophilosophy as a cautionary tale in how *not* to decolonise philosophy. That is, the critique of ethnophilosophy should be read as a warning about quick-fixes to canon expansion that fail to problematize the prejudices and presuppositions which cluster around the term “African philosophy”. As the reference to prejudices and presuppositions suggests, Hountondji’s use of Husserl is likewise no concession to philosophical Eurocentrism, but an attempt to genuinely enact the presuppositionless demanded by the founder of phenomenology.

How exactly does ethnophilosophy remain prejudicial, on Hountondji’s view? As noted, ethnophilosophy seems to challenge Eurocentrism by insisting upon an African philosophy. According to Hountondji, however, this is ultimately a condescending form of inclusion which depends upon colonial stereotypes about the African continent. Crucial for Hountondji is the suggestion that the term “philosophy” undergoes a change of meaning *only* when it is modified by the descriptor “African”. That is, on the ethnophilosophical view, the word “philosophy”, when applied to an African context, comes to mean the “laborious reconstruction of the collective worldview of a particular people” (HOUNTONDJI 2023, 87). *African* philosophy, then, far from offering life-altering views on the nature of the good, the beautiful, and the true, simply showcases local ways of being without the justificatory claims typically associated with philosophy.

But this is, of course, the central conceit of philosophical Eurocentrism: the view that *only* Europe is capable of the rigor of properly philosophical thinking, whereas the rest of the world produces only worldviews. So, what initially looks like a hospitable expansion of the bounds of philosophy doesn’t challenge the idea that Europe has a special association with philosophy. On the contrary, it perpetuates this idea by adopting a special meaning for “philosophy” insofar as it is African. The strategy of securing African philosophy by collapsing the distinction between philosophy and the extra-philosophical thought is ultimately the other side of the coin of the ideology whereby philosophy proper is just European. To paraphrase Césaire (2000, 33), ethnophilosophy retains intact the “fateful equations” Europe=rationality (*logos*) and Africa=myth (*mythos*).

## From the Critique of Ethnophilosophy to the Reappropriation of Endogenous Knowledge

If we understand Hountondji's criticism of ethnophilosophy as articulating a set of critical concerns not with the very project of expanding philosophy's borders but with the ethnophilosophical means of doing so, it comes as no surprise that the "late" Hountondji turned toward a critical appropriation of what he terms "endogenous" knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the critique of ethnophilosophy, Hountondji devoted his intellectual life to establishing not only that philosophy in the narrow sense of the word is practised in an African context, but also to giving a philosophical place to traditionally extra-philosophical material such as proverbs, myths, cultural practices, etc. It is in the details of Hountondji's strategies for doing so — and the care with which he dodges the problems associated with the ethnophilosophical approach — that the European philosopher might find inspiration.

An initial corrective that Hountondji proffers to the metaphilosophical model promoted by ethnophilosophy is straightforward enough. Against ethnophilosophy's suggestion that one must adopt a special meaning for the term philosophy in order to assert its existence in Africa, Hountondji highlights that philosophy in a "traditional and commonplace sense" is part of the heritage of the African continent (HOUNTONDJI 1996b, 77). This corpus, Hountondji argues, has been overlooked under the auspices of a metaphysics of difference whereby Africa is represented as the absolute other of Europe. Against this background, rehabilitating a tradition whose philosophical status is uncontentious becomes highly significant. As Hountondji writes, it is necessary to shed light upon "explicit philosophical discourses by Africans developed... through centuries, into a substantial corpus.... [which] records an authentic battle over ideas" (HOUNTONDJI 1996b, 84). Contrary, then, to a popular misreading of what is at stake in the debate between Hountondji and the ethnophilosophers, it is Hountondji who in fact answers affirmatively to the question as to whether philosophy exists

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<sup>4</sup> I thus agree with Ndoye (2022); Diagne (1997) and others that it is only a misinterpretation of Hountondji's early work which leads to the supposition that there is a dramatic fracture between the "early" and the "late" Hountondji.

in Africa, whereas the ethnophilosophers can only answer “no” unless the meaning of the term is doctored!<sup>5</sup>

There is thus a concerted challenge to the geographical delimitation of the term “philosophy” in Hountondji’s work, and this is one way in which Hountondji is resourceful in the current maelstrom. But what of the *contentful* restrictions that often undergird this geographical delimitation – the traditional opposition between philosophy and its various “others”, be it myth, proverb, practice, religion, storytelling, etc.? A first response to be found in Hountondji’s thinking maintains the distinction between philosophy and the extra-philosophical content contained in what he terms “endogenous knowledge”, but nevertheless insists on a lively exchange between the two. That is, on Hountondji’s view, it is necessary that philosophy engage with “moral tales, didactic legends, aphorisms and proverbs” (HOUNTONDJI 1996a, 106) as well as “knowledge of plants, animals, health and illness” (HOUNTONDJI 1992, 247) by treating these as live *resources* for philosophical thought.

When it comes to elements of the endogenous which do not constitute philosophy in the “traditional and commonplace” sense, then, these might constitute the background of philosophy. Importantly, for Hountondji, this would be as true in Europe as it is in Africa. Hountondji writes; “this pre-formed thought that ... informs responsible thought... does not only exist in lineage societies. It is also found, inevitably, in industrial societies, behind the turbulent history of doctrine and theories” (HOUNTONDJI 2002, 203). And while these elements cannot “under any pretext, be taken for philosophy”, they are nevertheless the “implicit horizon of all possible forms of discourse” (HOUNTONDJI 2002, 203-4). The possible *material* for philosophy is thus given a very expansive sense, and the presumptive “others” of philosophy, far from being excluded, are refigured as possible wellsprings of philosophical insight. Their admission into the

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<sup>5</sup> In his 1996 address to the APA, “Intellectual Responsibility”, Hountondji laments the fact that he has been caricatured as denying the existence of philosophical thought on the African continent while ethnophilosophy has been represented as the only possibility for an affirmative response to this question. As he writes, this “showed, if anything, how far the misinterpretation could go” (HOUNTONDJI 1996b, 83).

purview of philosophy is, however, subject to critical interrogation; unlike the ethnophilosophical approach, on the Hountondjean model, the philosophical status of this content is not presupposed, nor is its existence and resourcefulness for philosophy unique to Africa.

But Hountondji's insistence on a critical appropriation of extra-philosophical content does not yet capture the full extent of his metaphilosophical vision. For Hountondji, it is not enough that the philosopher engages in a critical manner with what has traditionally been excluded from philosophy. The philosopher must, moreover, adopt a *self*-critical stance in their approach to this supposedly extra-philosophical content. This speaks to a running concern in Hountondji's work with the ways that "ancestral knowledges are marginalized, devalued, and relegated to a subaltern place" (HOUNTONDJI 2002, 252). If the philosopher reserves their critical energy for the material with which they are dealing, their own attitude vis-à-vis this material will be sheltered from critical interrogation. Long-standing presuppositions about what counts as philosophically worthwhile will likewise remain unquestioned, and the division between philosophy and its traditional others will be reproduced.

What is therefore needed, according to Hountondji, is a form of self-criticism whereby the philosopher confronts their own presuppositions about what philosophical inquiry is and can be. It is, in other words, incumbent on the philosopher to suspend their commitment to specific modes of philosophizing, to not "take it for granted" (HOUNTONDJI 2000, 4). This, in turn, is to enable a receptive attitude not merely to whatever conforms to established philosophical norms, but to new philosophical modes, styles, methodologies and paradigms. Hountondji goes so far as to suggest "the construction of an expanded rationalism that would enable the incorporation of facts that had hitherto been excluded from the spectrum of possible facts" (HOUNTONDJI 2002, 255). To *really* take extra-philosophical material seriously means being open to the possibility that it might reconstitute one's very sense of rationality.

### **Hountondji's Abiding Relevance**

The metaphilosophical vision on offer in Hountondji's work thus turns out to be quite radical. For the ultimate horizon of the kind of engagement with the extra-philosophical that Hountondji promotes is

the eventual transformation of philosophy itself. What is aimed at is not, finally, the comfortable accommodation of marginalized forms of thought within a philosophical corpus whose definition remains undisturbed. Instead, a true encounter with the extra-philosophical is likely to cause epoch-making shifts to our very understanding of philosophy, not merely in terms of geographical extension but in terms of content. But doesn't this effectively return us to the terrain of ethnophilosophy? Doesn't Hountondji fall into the trap of sacrificing the integrity of philosophy in the interest of inclusivity? And isn't there thus a contradiction between his "early" and his "late" work?

The crucial thing to note is that Hountondji is not suggesting that one expand the definition of philosophy only when it comes to *African* philosophy. This is what ethnophilosophy suggests: philosophy in Africa is equated with a wide array of activities, whereas philosophy in Europe remains the specific theoretical endeavor it always was. For Hountondji, by contrast, the challenge posed by the extra-philosophical is on the order of a paradigm shift within the philosophical enterprise *as such*. If African endogenous knowledge demands that our very sense of rationality be modified, this has ramifications not just for African philosophy, but for all philosophical traditions: African, European, Asian, Latin American, and so on. When Hountondji writes of endogenous thought that it might cause within the existing body of knowledge "shifts and shake-ups of which we have no way of predicting either the scope or impact" (HOUNTONJJI 1997, 32), the reverberations of this are not confined to the African continent. Similarly, the eventual alteration of the meaning of the word "philosophy" would not be restricted to any singular geographical determination.

## Conclusion

Resistance to the increasingly loud calls to diversify philosophy is often couched in the view that the traditions petitioning for philosophical inclusion are not *really* philosophy. The exasperated response thus gets rehearsed: if those who made this kind of claim bothered to engage with non-European traditions of thought, they would soon find that they are, in fact, encountering philosophy.

From the point of view of a certain interpretation of Hountondji, the extent to which his work can contribute to ongoing

efforts at philosophical decolonisation and the related task of canon expansion is consistent with the foregoing strategy. That is, insofar as the critique of ethnophilosophy refused a special definition of “philosophy” for the African continent, the more positive leg of Hountondji’s project can be understood as insisting that philosophy, on the most restrictive definition of the term, exists, and has existed, in the African context.

While not disagreeing with this reading per se, this paper has suggested that Hountondji’s work contains further resources still. Specifically, I have argued that Hountondji offers us the possibility of challenging and ultimately broadening our definition of philosophy without succumbing to the Eurocentric bias that such a project is only of interest to the “non-Western” world.

If Hountondji’s metaphilosophical provocation thus has a global relevance, I nonetheless think that the tasks laid out in his work have a peculiar hold on the European philosopher: it is, after all, this heritage which has so insistently policed philosophy’s boundaries. In this context, Hountondji offers a thinking that not only explodes these boundaries, but is vigilant about the dangers of falling back on recalcitrant biases in efforts to do so. Ultimately, my call for Hountondji in Europe registers a gratitude for this program and for what he models in his philosophy: a form of thinking that is expansive, daring, and attempts to be genuinely presuppositionless. Its challenges – as well as its warnings – continue to solicit us all.

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