

# Academic Western Philosophy vs. Traditional Human Philosophy

## 2018

Thomas A. Burns PhD.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

This statement is a preliminary response to Barry Hallen's Short History of African Philosophy. Clearly Hallen is an expert in his area of interest and has provided a very useful and comprehensive overview of African philosophy for both academics and educated general readers. Congratulations!!

I do not claim to have any significant knowledge in African academic philosophy. I am what amounts to a cultural anthropologist with a focus on traditional art and religion. As such, I have had considerable exposure to the ethnographies of particular African tribal groups as generated mostly by British social anthropologists in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – under the umbrella of cultural relativism. Earlier anthropological work in and reflecting the prevailing view of the colonial period was heavily influenced by the cultural evolutionary perspective, which rested on the unfortunate bias of the savage/barbarian premise.

In what follows, I will comment on what I see as assumptions in the Hallen work which I regard as unnecessarily restrictive. I should start by stating that I emerged from Carleton College as a committed rationalist, positivist focused on the intellect as the pinnacle mode of mental operation and the written word as the device to best express the results of its use – virtually everywhere. However, from the time of my dissertation in 1970, most of my research has relied on detailed case histories, especially life histories, and this close proximity to real people and their experiences, in conjunction with a great deal of reading in a variety of disciplines, slowly forced me to broaden my understanding of the range and importance of human mental faculties. The fact that my research was focused on non-rationally grounded behavior in art and religion certainly played a major role in this expansion of my perspective.

I remain committed to the intellect and the written word as the primary means to present and discuss the results of my academic work. But I now appreciate that there are alternative mental modes – especially intuition – that operate and that play an important role in virtually all human behavior, including the speculation of humans on the nature of issues that are focal in philosophy. Moreover, it is my view that the intellect working in conjunction with intuition characterizes the nature of primary human mental operations from the very beginning of the modern human species some 250,000 years ago. The combined use of intellect and intuition [resting on a base of instinct and flavored by emotion] to know self, reality, and society is what I refer to in my work as dynamic humanism.

As a result of my research, I have come to realize that while the intellect and analysis are extremely valuable and while the written word is key in expressing the results of this operation, they are weak when it comes to achieving synthesis [seeing inter-connections and the big picture] where intuition emerges as most significant. In nearly all human mental activity both of these operations and inputs are active. We westerners, and especially academics, tend to be so devoted to the intellect that we lack awareness of what an appreciation of the intuitive and the development of its sophisticated use can mean in our attempt to understand ourselves, our societies, and the reality in which we exist. Importantly, the sophisticated use of the intuitive does not require wrapping it up in religious dogma and thereby limiting it – the mistake complex society in the civilized condition makes most of the time! It is this secondary, interpretive wrapping that causes the results of intuitive operations to invite suspicion/rejection, especially among academics focused on the exclusive use of the intellect.

For me, intellectual and intuitive mental operations are together fundamental, and seeking to rely exclusively on one or the other limits our ability as humans to understand who we are and what our place is in society and reality.

Now, how does this point of view play out when it comes to the issue of philosophy in general and African philosophy in particular? In my view, use of the intellect and intuition have always been equally active in the human pursuit of understanding the nature of self, reality, truth, etc. For 99% of human history these inputs were relatively balanced with reality understood both rationally/analytically/technically and intuitively/synthetically/spiritually. Reality was appreciated and pursued technically to serve biological survival, but with the awareness [emphasized at ritual times] of a “sacred” principle which pervaded and connected all things to the point of a singular, shared identity. Intuitive awareness put the brakes on excessive “technological” exploitation and allowed for humans to find balance in relation to their natural [and most often their social] environment. Anthropologically, this very long human period of bands and tribes includes the first stage of chiefdomship – the stage of social role specialization when a more or less full time shaman [intuitive and technological specialist/healer] arose.

In terms of human history, complex society is a relatively new phenomenon, and civilization is just an experiment at the tip of this history [beginning some 5,000 years ago]. Moreover, civilization has involved the majority of humans only in the last 2,000 years. Committing language to writing is part of this late development into the civilized condition. Oral communication and oral tradition prevailed for the very long human period prior to this time. Writing as a tool first arose to record historical and economic events and only later came to assist the analytical/planning functions of the intellect. In my view, restricting philosophy to

the period of intellectual pursuit expressed in writing is extraordinarily limiting, creates an unnecessary disjuncture with the vast human past, overlooks the fact that philosophy can be expressed symbolically in graphic and plastic arts as well as ritual – not just in oral and written language, and ignores the broader basis in human dynamic mental function from which the more or less exclusive intellectual pursuit of philosophical issues emerges.

Interestingly, the exclusively intellectual basis of modern academic philosophy emerges after complex society evolves, roles differentiate, and an ascetic tradition arises which is devoted in part to philosophical issues. For a very long period, the ascetic based tradition depends on oral communication and the refinement of intuitive competence in its practitioners [mostly through active and passive forms of meditation/prayer/ritual]. Only much later are the tenants of these ascetic traditions committed to writing. The advent of writing allowed for the intellect to ascend into prominence in the pursuit of philosophical goals and eventually for the “discipline” of philosophy to separate from philosophy's originating ascetic base in complex society. In the modern context, these orally based, intuitively focused traditions continue most prominently in Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist asceticism, and less prominently in Christian, Muslim, and Hebrew asceticism. Surely, we are not going to claim that modern traditions like ascetic, intuitively grounded Tibetan Buddhism are not important in philosophy!!

### Conclusion

Philosophy relying on both intellectual and intuitive inputs has been with humans from the start and achieves a sophisticated form within early, orally and intuitively based ascetic traditions in the formative period of complex society. Only subsequently is philosophy committed to writing in later complex society, and later still philosophy separates from asceticism to become an exclusively intellectual pursuit – especially in western culture.

African philosophy?? Africa is designated as a continent based on geological, not cultural criteria. We have to ask, would we suggest that there is a South American philosophy? Certainly there are African philosophies as these philosophies exist within the enormous variety of cultures in Africa. And admittedly, in the very modern period there may be more sharing of philosophical views across cultures. But only if we set up a requirement of a western intellectual philosophical tradition and ask to what extent, mostly since colonial times, Africans have come to participate in this “outside” tradition, can we talk about African philosophy. It is my view that African philosophical traditions are much richer than this if we adopt a broader and more historically respectful perspective. I believe that the last thing that Hallen really wants to do is to impose an artificial, western intellectual framework on the variety of philosophical traditions of Africa.