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Should African Thinkers Engage in the Global Justice Debate?[1]

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This article asks under what conditions and on what terms current African thinkers can and should engage in the global justice debate. Following summary overviews of the Western-led global justice debate and post-independence African philosophy as two essentially separate, non-intersecting philosophical discourses, I go on to argue that the current generation of African thinkers can fruitfully intervene in the global justice debate if it succeeds in building on philosophical insights of the first-generation of African thinkers. In particular, current African thinkers might fruitfully engage the notion of 'false universals' developed by first generation African thinkers to challenge Western philosophical conceptions in general in order to re-invigorate recently neglected critical inquiry into the status of many of this more particular debate's unreflective universality claims. Re-invigorating these more distinctively philosophical aspects of the global justice debate is particularly important, albeit also challenging, against the background of an international research climate that increasingly favours 'impact-oriented' approaches to philosophy and to the humanities more generally.

I. Global Justice – A Dead Debate?

At first glance, the answer to the title question may seem obvious: *of course* African thinkers should engage in the global justice debate. When it first became topical in Western political and philosophical theorizing, the debate focused on the perceived moral urgency of extending John Rawls' domestically conceived theory of distributive justice to the global context.[2] Catalyst to those arguments were the non-delivery of post-independence development theories, the mal-investment of an excess of petrodollars in the early 1970s, the ensuing debt crisis of the 1980s, and the subsequent structural adjustment programmes of the 1990s. The latter saw the termination of state-funded education and welfare

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[2] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1971). The most influential extensions of Rawls' conception of social justice form the domestic to the global domain are Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1979) and Thomas Pogge, *Realizing Rawls* (Ithaca: Cornel University Press 1989).

provisions in debtor countries and triggered the social and institutional near-collapse of many already fragile post-colonial states. This occasioned a belated drawing back from the brink in the form of an official write-off of accumulated debt burdens at the turn of the millenium.[3] It is hard to believe that the combined global justice debate in the West – academic as well as more popular forms of protest – contributed nothing, in terms of raising moral awareness, to this eventual policy U-turn (if U-turn it was). By the same token, it is reasonable to assume that the spokespersons of global justice are on the side of the global poor, including Africa's poor. From this, it would seem to follow that African academics should be on the side of the global justice debate. But should they?

The travails and fortunes of the Western global justice debate over the past 30 years are ripe for retrospective appraisal.[4] For younger generations of political theorists and philosophers it may be difficult to appreciate the mix of moral urgency and theoretical excitement that characterised the beginnings of the debate. Theorising global justice promised a distinctive kind of practically engaged intellectual activism: as trained philosophers with certified universalizing credentials, global theorists saw themselves uniquely placed to help tackle a moral and political problem of global proportions.[5] But the issue was seen as paradigm changing also at the purely theoretical or conceptual level. The words of an enthusiastically hopeful Thomas Pogge are representative: 'The human future suddenly seems open. This is an inspiration; we can step back and think more freely.'[6] In issuing these remarks, Pogge's direct reference point was the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989; however, in the article from which the remark is taken Pogge took that historical occasion to mark a much more general shift from statist to cosmopolitan thinking. The fall of the Berlin wall and demise of the Cold War represented for Pogge and many fellow cosmopolitans the falling away of *conceptual* as well as political borders within traditions of Western political thought: we seemed finally to have overcome the Hobbesian statist paradigm.

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[3] For a good retrospective overview of the political developments that formed the basis of the global justice debate, see Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009).

[4] See Samuel Scheffler, 'The Idea of Global Justice – A Progress Report', *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* XX (2014), 17-35.

[5] In this, global theorists followed Rawls in what they presumed to be his belief that Kantian practical reasoning in particular affords the derivation of substantively determinate yet nonetheless universally enactable principles.

[6] Thomas Pogge, 'Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty', *Ethics* 103 (1992), 48-75.

As the debate developed, it became progressively less optimistic. The recalcitrant complexity of the economic and political causes of global poverty together with acknowledgement of the indispensability of *some* form of political institutionalization on the one hand and the seeming uncontrollability of rapid market developments on the other hand meant that intellectual horizons closed in again. Practically efficacious moral thinking required one to 'get real' politically and economically. This meant working *within* the constraints of what was economically and politically feasible.[7] Philosophical disquisitions about global justice came to be peppered with references to bleak global statistics borrowed from the social sciences. These both served a motivational purpose and demonstrated a sense of political realism – indeed, the philosophically most widely cited global statistic has got to be the proportion of persons living on an income of less than $1 as opposed to $2 a day. As the magnitude of the practical task became ever clearer, so intellectual sights were progressively lowered: from the relatively egalitarian spirit of the Rawlsian difference principle to the minimal requirements of so-called sufficientarianism.[8]

Reality checks regarding the extent, depth, and complexity of global poverty were not the only factors that played a role in lowering cosmopolitan aspirations. Although rarely thematised within the debate itself, the re-affirmation at the turn of the millennium of specifically *liberal* statehood, and the growth in the literature on liberal interventionism, is probably not unrelated to the events of '9/11' and their wider political repercussions.[9] The

[7] Aside from Pogge, whose philosophical work became increasingly policy-targeted, other practice-focused global theorists include Gillian Brock, *Global Justice. A Cosmopolitan Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005); Aaron James, *Fairness in Practice. A Social Contract for a Global Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012); Leif Wenar, *Blood Oil: Tyrants, Violence, and the Rules that Run the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016). Policy-focused global normative theorising continued the interpretation of Rawlsian practical reasoning as aspiring to intervene philosophically in matters of political concern – the idea is that practical reasoning is a reasoning that discovers solutions to practical problems we confront. This conception of practical reasoning as a form of problem solving reasoning combines deontological or Kantian conceptions of practical reasoning with outcome-focused consequentialist thinking.

[8] In his review of Thomas Scanlon's *What We Owe to each Other*, Thomas Nagel infamously raised the possibility that the global rich may not owe the global poor very much at all (*London Review of Book*s 21, no.3 (1999), 3-6. He reiterates this position in the influential if contested Thomas Nagel, 'The Problem of Global Justice', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 33 (2005), 113-47.

[9] This is not to say that there were no sceptical, anti-cosmopolitan voices before that date: see especially James Fishkin, *The Limits of Obligation* (New Haven: Yale University Press,

timing of John Rawls' publication of *The Law of Peoples* with its independent insistence on the value of bounded political community was perhaps unfortunate in this respect.[10] Either way, political circumstances on the one hand and Rawls' philosophical authority on the other hand conspired to yield a general re-affirmation of specifically *liberal* statehood.[11] Concomitantly – and here Rawls is more directly responsible – human rights rather than the difference principle became the new global *lingua franca*: there was a turn away from distributive concerns and towards international legal procedure; concomitantly, there was a return to the initially contested view that domestic policy and governance factors play at least as decisive a role in determining a people's fortunes as does the global economy. Accordingly, the view that the global poor would benefit from a strengthened international mandate to reform internally unjust states replaced previous arguments in favour of an unconditional North / South flow of material resources. While the arguments in favour of a global difference principle had placed the moral and material burden on resource rich Northern states, human rights language sought to empower the weak to help themselves and to do so, somewhat incredibly, by way of legal mandate in international law.[12]

A third factor in the displacement of global justice talk was the emergence of a new global challenge: climate change. The intellectual fortunes of that debate closely parallel those of its predecessor. Both established themselves as dominant paradigms from unprepossessing beginnings. As late as 1990, the global justice debate was still seen by many as the somewhat maverick offshoot of a then dominant state-internal Rawls debate – less than ten years later practically every PhD student in the field was writing a thesis on global justice. At that time, so called 'deep ecology' theory was widely viewed as off-piste:

1982) and David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007). Both Fishkin and Miller argued against an extension of liberal justice to the global context, however: they did not argue for a refortification of liberal boundaries in the face of 'the global threat'. The latter tone seems to me to have become much more prevalent post 9/11. See, for example, Arthur Isak Applbaum, 'Forcing a People to be Free', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 35 (2007), 359-400.

[10] *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press) was published in 2002, barely a years after 9/11 – however, it was clearly not a response to those events.

[11] See, for example, Allen Buchanan, 'Recognitional Legitimacy and the State System'. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 28 (1999), 46-78; Anna Stilz 'Nations, States, and Territory', *Ethics* 121 (2011), 572-601; Applbaum, 'Forcing a People' op. cit.

[12] As Samuel Moyn points out in his *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2010), the re-emergence of widespread human rights discussion coincided with the rise of neo-liberal economics in global policy making.

currently, there is no stopping the rise and rise of the climate change debate. One noticeable feature of this development is the migration of a number of erstwhile global justice theorists into the climate change forum: while during the 1990s socioeconomic poverty was seen as a border-transcending problem for normative political thinking, climate change currently plays that role.

In sum, within Western academic circles, there is a growing sense of the global justice debate as somewhat passé. This is not due to the fulfilment of the debate's erstwhile practical aspirations – the condition of the global poor has remained substantially unchanged. Rather, there appears to have been a loss in theoretical momentum. Some believe that everything that can be said about global justice has been said, and probably more than just once or twice: there is a feeling of repetitiveness – the onus now is for political practitioners to act on the deliverances of moral theorists. If in the face of growing Western disaffection we ask again whether African thinkers should get involved in what looks like a dying debate, we may hesitate: not least given the continent's albeit prejudicial reputation as historical laggard, is it wise for African thinkers to get involved just at the point at which others seem to be moving on to greener pastures?

Of course, one may contest the above diagnosis. In his recent 'progress report' on the topic, Samuel Scheffler concludes to the contrary that 'the idea of global justice is here to stay' even if it is 'too soon to know what form the most compelling conception of global justice is likely to take'.[13] Given his narrow conception of what the term 'global justice' covers, Scheffler's conclusion is surprising: he seems to take it to comprise no more than the disagreements between liberal cosmopolitans and liberal statists regarding the extendibility of Rawlsian distributive principles to the global domain. *That* debate surely *is* over. However, if we take the term to accommodate post-*Law of Peoples* discussions about human rights, international state legitimacy, and liberal interventionism, then Scheffler may be right in saying that global normative theorising is here to stay. Certainly the idea of international politics as one that is accessible to moral analysis appears to have re-established itself after centuries of statist thinking that replaced the former and now largely forgotten internationalism of natural law theory.[14] Yet at the same time, there has been a

[13] Scheffler, 'Global Justice: A Progress Report', op. cit., 34.
[14] Contrary to the historically somewhat myopic view among many global theorists that liberal cosmopolitanism is a unique phenomenon of the late twentieth century,

retrenchment from hopeful, border-transcending cosmopolitan theorising to an intellectually often quite strident re-affirmation of liberal statehood as articulated in recent calls for a specifically *liberal* internationalism.[15] The move from global difference principle to liberal interventionism is surely more than a theoretical refinement of an erstwhile liberal cosmopolitanism. It remains crucial for anyone joining the debate to be mindful of, and to reflect upon, the debate's radically changed terms – a change that grew out of a deepened understanding of the complexity of the global domain but that was also, simultaneously if largely unreflectingly, a response to extraneous political developments that were seen as threatening the liberal 'way of life'.[16]

II. Entering the Debate: Incentives and Agendas

If we say that the global justice debate is not over so much as substantially changed from the days of its inception, there may be good reason yet for African thinkers to join in. Indeed, to the extent to which the debate *is* ongoing, African thinkers may not be able to avoid being implicated in it. Given the debate's claim to *global* status, Africans' non-engagement could itself be taken as a form of silent assent in others' disputations about global socio-political processes, including those on the African continent. The question then becomes: what would be appropriate terms of African engagement?

One of the defining features of post-independence African philosophy is its critical reflection on the contextual adequacy of historically dominant terms of specifically Western philosophical inquiry. Modern African philosophical thinking has been consumed by the quest to appropriate terms of philosophical inquiry for the distinctively African context of

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cosmopolitan aspirations have repeatedly been articulated throughout the history of political thought from Cicero to Grotius, Pufendorff, and Kant. Some of these intellectual legacies found perverted expression, especially when mixed with European nationalism, in the civilising missions of nineteenth century colonialism. In a sense, the period of social contract thinking is the exception rather than the rule; though its legacy has perhaps also been the most powerful politically.

[15] See, for example, the astutely argued Andrew Altman and Christopher Wellman, *A Liberal Theory of International Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009).

[16] Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister of the UK repeatedly invoked that phrase in the run-up to the controversial 2003 invasion of Iraq. The characterisation of liberalism as 'a way of life' is noteworthy for its apparent rejection of the idea of liberalism as a form of moral and political universalism.

human experience.[17] As a newcomer to the sub-discipline, and as a cultural outsider, I speak from a position of relative ignorance. It nonetheless strikes me that the fortunes of modern African philosophy may themselves reflect the ebb and flow of international politics at least to some extent. Anyone progressing through the energised and often highly original writings of the sizable and intellectually diverse first generation of African philosophers will be struck, sooner or later, by the relative absence of a similarly numerous and energetic successor generation. Often, moreover, the philosophical ambitions of the successor generation appear muted, content to go over the ground established by philosophical forbearers rather than building upon it. Given the intellectual wealth of the first generation, this is not all that surprising: after all, in Western philosophical circles, too, the impact of John Rawls has been in one sense quite inhibiting. The question nonetheless arises as to whether the absence of a similarly vibrant second generation of African philosophers is itself an outcome of the economic restructuring programmes of the 1980s and 1990s, and especially of the contraction of African educational sectors. If so, a certain *philosophical* momentum gained during the 1960s and 1970s may have been halted during those later decades. The adverse impact of an absent generation would be keenly felt within a tradition as young as modern African philosophy.[18] More recently, there appears to have been some rejuvenation.[19] An emergent younger generation of philosophical thinkers re-engages African philosophy in an often more outward-oriented manner, seeking to re-establish connections with Western traditions.

In general, this is surely to be welcomed – or would be if Western thinkers were in turn to begin to engage with African philosophy. It is nonetheless worth reflecting on what may drive this new outward orientation. From my limited exposure to the current African

[17] For foundational methodological debate see, for example, Barry Hallen, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft. Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1997); Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1996); H.O. Oruka (ed.), *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and the Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill Publishers 1990); Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1980).

[18] Among the members of the middle generation, I would include thinkers such as Anthony Kwame Appiah, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze and Segun Gbadegesin. All of them clearly do (or did) make notably original contributions; however, all three also represent the 'brain-drain' from Africa to Western academia, most notably to the US.

[19] South African may be taking the lead here, given its economic base but also the need for post-Apartheid institutional and intellectual transformation.

institutional academic context my impression is that the research and publication pressures experienced by UK academics since the 1990s are increasingly experienced also by colleagues in Africa. The quest for an international research reputation seems particularly strong among the younger generation. This mirrors the UK experience (and that of many European university systems whose researchers are increasingly under pressure to publish in English). Some African universities apparently incentivize individual researchers by offering bonus payments per successfully published unit of research output.[20] Add to these continental trends the emerging perception among Western research funding bodies about the benefits of research partnerships with 'the developing world'.[21] The worry is that the pressures of ensuring an international research reputation on the one hand and the demand for research with clear policy 'impact' on the other hand may have the effect of *depressing* intellectual diversity more than encouraging it. No doubt this is not the intention of these incentivising strategies; still, the application to the humanities of what looks like a natural science inspired research model may be fateful. While the natural sciences may advance through the collective building of shared research paradigms, the humanities have traditionally flourished under a climate of diversity and the free exchange of hotly contested ideas whose impact on wider social and political developments is typically protracted, unpredictable, and indirect. The incentivization towards publication in a small pool of what are deemed internationally leading research journals may create tremendous pressures for moving towards the centre ground intellectually. Likewise, the favouring of research funding for projects that demonstrates a clear developmental dimension may have the effect of channelling the otherwise free flow of intercultural exchange towards certain extraneously determined 'research outcomes'.

The global justice debate may be especially vulnerable to succumbing to pressures of this kind. Perhaps ironically, the reasons for this special vulnerability have to do with the morally charged nature of the global justice debate. Recall my opening remarks on the debate's origins: the sense of practical urgency that stemmed from acknowledging the extent of the debt burden and its socio-economic costs. Practical urgency combined with theorists' perception of special moral expertise can encourage an unreflective style of

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[20] I was told about this policy this by a South African colleague.

[21] Certainly among UK funding bodies, calls for 'impact oriented' research projects within the humanities are on the increase.

reasoning. Early on in the debate this sometimes took the form of theorists' accusing Western governments of mere weakness of moral will in relation to presumptively self-evident global policy solutions. More recently, the moral enthusiasm about human rights has both turned international law into a solvent of complex moral and economic problems and made intellectual dissent from human rights morality positively hazardous.[22] Voices even only moderately critical of human rights discourse can find it difficult to get a hearing – despite the well-known fact that human rights are themselves political tools around which a lucrative lobbying industry has developed. In sum, excessive moralism can encourage loss of critical perspective and this in turn can risk compromising academic independence.

While these last remarks apply to the peculiar vulnerabilities of the global justice debate in general, aspiring young African scholars confront the added and distinctive risk of entering the debate in part as a means to enhancing their personal international research visibility. The pressures regarding international research visibility are clearly considerable. But there appears to be a degree of social and intellectual restlessness also – a certain impatience with continental political failings, and a feeling that these wider failings negatively impact the legitimate hope for personal advancement. A somewhat naïve way of putting it is to say that the currently emerging generation of African thinkers often displays understandable impatience with the economic and political failings of the continent and a compensating desire for greater openness towards and engagement with the rest of the world. This contrasts with first generation African philosophers, who generally conceived their task as lying in the provision of intellectual assistance towards a still hopeful political future. Generally speaking, first generation post-colonial African thinkers were concerned to establish a distinctly *African* philosophical tradition – to retrieve from their oral heritages concepts, proverbs and social practises that were to be rethought in the light of modern African societies' requirements and self-understandings. This resulted in necessary if protracted debates over the nature of African philosophy, over who was equipped to do it where and how, and over the intended audience(s). Recall the words of Paulin Hountondji, erstwhile Husserl scholar, who responded to what he called the problem of intellectual extraversion with a regretful turning away from the Western tradition:

[22] Cf. Onora O'Neill, 'The Dark Side of Human Rights', *International Affairs* 81 (2005), 427-39; Mutua Makau, *Human Rights. A Political and Cultural Critique* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

> One thing [became] certain for me, a political decision of sorts: the locus on my philosophical work should in no way exclude Africa. On the contrary, African must constitute its center, its point of departure, and, where possible, its primary beneficiary. Reluctantly, I had to abandon my research on Husserl. The time was not right. Too many conditions still had to be met for Africa to be able to listen, without feeling of self-repudiation or distraction, to a discourse on Husserl, or on any other such author or doctrine anointed by the Western philosophical tradition.[23]

Hountondji and many other African thinkers did not reject Western thought *tout court*.[24] To the contrary, many deliberately helped themselves to the methods of that tradition in order to build up a body of African philosophical work. If we assume that a sizable portion of first generation African philosophers devoted themselves to building up a body of work in African philosophy that was intended *in time* to contribute to the discipline in general, we can posit continuity in general philosophical intention between first generation African philosophers, who looked inward in order to strengthen the field, and third generation African philosophers, who look outward in order to counteract continental isolation. And yet, background research conditions have changed. Here the relative absence of the second generation as 'missing link' may make itself felt. While Hountondji and others took a *political* decision to look inward, and whilst taking that decision was possible in the optimistic days of immediate post-independence politics, young African scholars today are encouraged to take an *individual* decision when they are incentivised to seek publication in internationally renowned journals. While the first generation may have thought of itself as thinking individually yet in behalf of a collective endeavour, members of the current generation are encouraged to separate themselves out from the rest so as to distinguish themselves individually. Add to this the failures of post-independent African politics, the resulting restructuring programmes, and the missing second generation which might have

[23] Paulin Hountondji, *The Struggle for Meaning. Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa* (Athens: Ohio State University Press 2002), 73/4.
[24] Although some did – often writer associated with Negritude or, perhaps, with the more radical interpretations of Ubuntu.

acted as a link between first and third generations, and the gulf that circumstantially separates the latter two becomes quite large.

To illustrate the general phenomenon on the basis of a specific example, consider first generation African philosophical thinking on personhood in the context of the recently revived international human rights debate. The qualified consensus among first generation African thinkers was that traditional African conceptions of personhood generally emphasize the moral and even, for some, the ontological importance of community.[25] By contrast, the current international human rights debate champions the moral supremacy of individual personhood. Although the moral significance of community is not necessarily denied, it tends to enter as an afterthought – there is little serious engagement, within the human rights literature, with the philosophically interesting global fact of highly divergent views on personhood. And indeed, conceptually, accounts of personhood that regard community as part-constitutive of it are difficult to integrate into dominant human rights morality – as numerous African scholars have pointed out.[26] In principle, this sharp contrast could provide space for fascinating cross-cultural philosophical exchange on personhood and its global political implications. Yet many younger generation African thinkers seem to associate continental political failure with the communal social outlook. They also often associate lack of personal opportunities and advancement with the fetters of the communal outlook as much as with adverse economic conditions. The theoretical promises of the fabled Western autonomous chooser often add to the feeling of being held back, as individuals, by traditional values as much as by socio-economic circumstances.[27] What is an ambitious African scholar to do, who is keen to make international impact for himself but finds himself lumbered with a communal tradition that is going to be a hard sale in the current international intellectual climate? The pressures – and promises – of aligning oneself with the latter are going to be felt quite strongly. This may further weaken intellectual continuity between first and third generation African thinkers.

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[25] Perhaps most importantly, Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu, *Person and Community* (Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philopshy, 1992); John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1968; Ifeyani Menkiti ‘On the Normative Conception of a Person’ in K. Wiredu (ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 2006).
[26] Cf. Makau Mutua, *Human Rights* (op. cit.).
[27] The coincidence of human rights revival with the revival of neo-liberal economics in noted by Samuel Moyn in *The Last Utopia*, op. cit.

As noted above, academic research cannot and should not hold itself wholly aloof from its social and political contexts; recognition of the humanities' role in contributing to 'human advancement' (whatever that may mean) is surely to be welcomed. By the same token, it is as well to be aware that research incentives and opportunities for funding generally do come attached with expectations of certain returns. Equally it is important to be mindful of the fact that entrance into a philosophical debate whose terms are skewed towards a *particular* contextually derived moral and political outlook is going to be hazardous. For the aspiring young African philosopher or political theorist who wishes to enter a debate that claims global reach the challenge may lie in finding an entry point that allows him or her to contribute globally without in so doing inadvertently squandering the resources of an as yet nascent local philosophical tradition into which first-generation thinkers invested so much intellectual effort.

III. Global Justice as a Philosophical Debate

How *should* one engage the (presumptively) global perspective with the local one, in this case, the African one? Recall my claim in behalf of first generation African philosophers: their withdrawal to the home context with a view towards eventual re-engagement. Western thinkers sometimes express impatience with what strikes them as an interminable methodological wrangle about what African philosophy is, whether there even is or should be such a thing, and who, if anyone, should do it where and how. Some exclaim in exasperation, 'just do some philosophy!'[28] Such high-minded outbursts take it for granted that it is clear what it is to do philosophy. Yet the African methodological debate queries precisely that presumption. The oddity is that Western philosophy in general seems not to regard itself as challenged by the African query. This is odd given the universalizing aspirations of the discipline so that the question 'what is African philosophy' should simultaneously raise the broader question 'what is philosophy?' To the extent to which African thinkers have felt themselves and their social contexts excluded from the purview of 'mainstream' philosophy, the latter's claims to universal validity are surely equally put into

[28] This is the assessment of Peter J. King in his review of Tsenay Serequeberhan, African Philosophy: The Essential Readings in *Philosophical Books* 33 (1992), 83-86.

question. Otherwise put: if one finds oneself asking, ‘what is African philosophy? one invariably ends up also asking ‘what is philosophy?’[29]

Analogously, it seems to me plausible to treat the question, ‘what is thinking about global justice?’ or ‘what is global thinking?’ as a more specific version of the general question, ‘what is philosophical thinking?’ Say that the question ‘what is African philosophy’ reopens questions about the status of philosophical thinking in general. Can we not also say that African thinkers asking themselves, ‘on what terms can or should I join the global justice debate?’ similarly re-opens the more general question ‘what is global thinking?’ Insofar as the question regarding adequate terms arises for any prospective participant in the debate, the implication is that current terms are inadequate. In that case, the contribution of African (and other local) thinkers to the global justice debate may in fact be indispensable to it. If its very status as a global debate depends on its intellectual inclusiveness, it has thus far clearly fallen short of its own aspirations.

I do not think that the Western-led global justice debate is blameworthy on account of its intellectual parochialism. I do think it can be faulted for lack of reflective awareness, over time, of its parochialism. Given its beginnings – Western moral shock over the extent and depth of global poverty – the initial terms of debate were always going to reflect that particular perspective onto the problem, and not improperly so: no human thinker has a God’s eye perspective on morality. The oversight lies in mistaking unavoidable perspectivalism for an assuredly universal viewpoint.[30] Again, this may be a predilection within philosophical thinking in general. As indicated above, the very idea of philosophy implies a movement – for some, an ascent – from the local to the universal. Whether or not universals are indeed to be had should perhaps remain an open question or at least one to be perpetually revisited; nonetheless, the aspiration towards universal insight seems to me to be constitutive of the activity. The challenge then lies in maintaining a critical grasp of the difference between one’s unavoidably local perspective and one’s aspiration towards universal insight.

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[29] This was in fact recognized by Jonathan Lear at a philosophy conference at the University of Ghana in March 2015; Lear there raised the question as to what it would mean for philosophy to be adequate to the African context (and not the historically more common question as what it would mean for the African context to be adequate to philosophy).
[30] I expand on this thought in, Katrin Flikschuh, *What is Orientation in Global Thinking? A Kantian Inquiry* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

When first generation African thinkers turned inwards in order to retrieve and work up what they regarded as distinctly *African* conceptions of being human and of moral value they did so in response to what they perceived as the 'false universals' of Western philosophical thinking.[31] In this respect, theirs was a negative project – i.e. to query the presumed universalism with the Western philosophical tradition. I want to suggest that in turning once more outward, the challenge for third generation African thinkers lies in maintaining sight of this critical perspective – i.e. maintaining sight of the problem of 'false universals' even whilst endeavouring to give local philosophical conceptions universal point or insight. More specifically, the challenge lies in neither simply reiterating legitimate first generation insistence upon the distinctiveness of African perspectives nor in abandoning that endeavour in favour of a superficial universalism that conflates the local with the universal. What sort of insights would such a locally derived universalism deliver? I am not sure; however, my sense is that it is likely to be a good deal thinner, in one sense, than claims in behalf of the universal validity of particular substantive moral values and principles, let alone one-size-fits-all policy proposals. Perhaps more importantly, it seems to me that for a particular moral outlook or a particular conception of personhood or of community to lay claim to universal insight it need not be endorsed or adopted by everyone. A given conception of personhood, say, can yield universally valid insights even if it is not shared by everyone, nor aspires to do so.[32] The human condition is after all complex and multi-facetted – it would be highly surprising to discover that every society shares the same stock of concepts, values and practices. This hardly means that these differences cannot intelligibly be explored, compared, and discussed.

Among second generation African philosophers there is one thinker who I believe attempted to glean universal insight from first generation African philosophical thinking, without in so doing claiming universal truth or validity in behalf of particular propositions or theories. I am thinking of Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, whose premature death constitutes a notable loss to the discipline. Eze was an extraordinarily wide-ranging thinker whose interests went well beyond continental African philosophy to include the African diaspora,

[31] See footnote 16 for relevant sources.
[32] I pursue this line of inquiry in Katrin Flikschuh, 'The Arc of Personhood: Menkiti and Kant on becoming and being a person', *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2 (2016), 437-55.

as well as African-American thought. In part because of the latter, Eze's substantive philosophical starting point tended to be race and racism. But the underlying ambition seems to me to have been more general: although it grew out of his inquiry into the role of race in Western philosophical thinking,[33] Eze's thinking developed into the search for a form of philosophical reflection that would abandon traditional Western reliance on culture-transcendent philosophical thought in favour of what Eze calls 'vernacular rationalities' (he also sometimes refers to it as 'ordinary reason' or 'reason in experience').[34] I do not believe that Eze was after a *theory* of post-racial rationality; his approach was more Socratic and therefore open-ended, drawing on cultural and literary theory as well as on the continental tradition within Western philosophy. There is no space here to go into the details of Eze's often rather dense inquiries – the point I want to emphasise is that while Eze's idea of a 'vernacular rationality' has clear affinities with first generation African thinkers' focus on the philosophical analysis of local African languages, Eze seems to want to suggest that, to be adequate as philosophical thinking, this local approach must aspire to show that our understanding of human reason *in general* articulates itself in diverse local forms. It is in this sense, I believe, that Eze wants to claim general philosophical insight for first generation African thinkers' local methods of analysis and reconstruction. Moreover, I believe that Eze holds that until 'mainstream' philosophical thinking includes and absorbs contributions of this kind from African philosophical traditions it, too, fails in its task as philosophical thinking – it is then perhaps dogmatic more than Socratic. On Eze's account, therefore, philosophical thinking from either side is not yet what it aspires to be: while the African tradition remains intent on emphasizing local difference, failing to ask what this implies for philosophical thinking in general, the Western tradition largely continues in its tradition of locally transcendent universality claims. This, then, is one aspect in which Eze's work stands out for me – i.e. in its attempt to discern a universal dimension *within* the exploration of local

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[33] Eze, 'The Color of Reason: The Idea of Race in Kant's Anthropology' in Eze (ed.) *Postcolonial African Philosophy. A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1997).

[34] Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *On Reason. Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2008); 11, 18. Interestingly, in the final chapter of *Achieving our Humanity*, Eze critiques Wiredu's own form of contextualist universalism, suggesting that Wiredu's underlying reliance on biologism begs the question against his simultaneous emphasis on linguistic and related conceptual diversity. Cf. Eze, *Achieving our Humanity. The Idea of the Post-Racial Future* (London: Routledge Publishers 2001), 199-211.

thought rather than either restricting himself to the local or falling back on culture-transcendent forms of thought.[35] I want to say that something like this should be the endeavour also of third generation African thinkers' engagement in the global justice debate as they build on the insights of the first generation: they should neither merely regurgitate the views of first generation thinkers, nor should they abandon the latter in favour of the often all-too-unreflective universality claims of the Western-led global justice debate.

There is a second aspect of Eze's work that seems to me to be of relevance in the present context. This is his insistence that 'in order to do philosophy well, a distinction, which is not the same as a separation, between philosophy and politics needs to be maintained'.[36] Eze makes this remark in the context of his discussion of post-Apartheid South Africa. His immediate concern is with the political use of the intended philosophical meaning of concept of 'ubuntu' as expressive of a uniquely African attitude of communal solidarity and forgiveness. Again, I do not want to engage in the details of Eze's discussion. But he is clearly troubled by the use of what purports to be a philosophical hence aspirationally universal concept to justify a highly particular and arguably aberrant political situation, namely the use of truth and reconciliation committees in lieu of courts of criminal justice.[37] If ubuntu does lay claim to universal validity, appeal to it as exemplifying a supposedly uniquely African virtue of forgiveness for the purpose of justifying suspension of ordinary procedures of criminal justice is suspect. Eze's wider point is that philosophy has its own concerns, and that while these often do have political salience one cannot resolve

[35] To be clear, in calling for recognition of the local context of all philosophical thinking, I am not endorsing a form of philosophical relativism. To the contrary, local forms of philosophical thought carry insight beyond their local context, so are intelligible to non-local recipient. This is not the same as to say that, to be intelligible to outsides, local thought must somehow transcend its origins. To the contrary, it must seek to convey universal insight through engagement with the local.
[36] Eze, *On Reason*, op. cit., 235.
[37] Ibid., at 244: 'I do not consider the TRC's substance or procedures deficient as political settlements. I merely think there is room to raise questions about some of its epistemological assumptions, especially the assumption behind the putatively philosophical and moral concept, Ubuntu. It is precisely the conceptual conditions of the legitimacy of a distinction that should exist, between the political questions of Ubuntu and its merely philosophical justification, that I wish to trace. Are the TRC's settlements not driven by unitary, aesthetic, and transcendental visions of community? Visions that – in their exuberance, we should not overlook – "override" the language or ordinary reason and this reason's understanding of, for example, the requirements of justice and law?'

philosophy's concerns by resorting to politics, or vice versa. Again, this is a point that also figures in his discussion of race:

> There is no doubt that African philosophy and black philosophy, like the music, is born of struggle – in the discomforts of racial slavery, colonial and (post)colonial crises, and in the history of existential anguish that comes with the experience of common racism. But these are materials for philosophical reflection if philosophy, in general, originates and develops out of contexts in which serious questions arise about the adequacy of one's most cherished sense of self, one's beliefs about oneself and about the world – including beliefs about race and racial experience. Race and the historical structures of racism are not simply about incidental facts of one's life; they are significant features of our modern moral identities and involve issues that touch on personal relationships, the manner in which we regard ourselves and treat others, and the happiness and unhappiness that from the emotional contours of our practical lives.[38]

Race is political, and philosophical reflection on race grows out the politics of race. But Eze seems to suggest that philosophical reflection on race goes deeper and must at some point go beyond the particular political context if it is to avoid becoming a political discussion by other (i.e. philosophical) means. The *philosophy* of race touches on *everyone's* beliefs about self and world, emotional well-being etc.. It cannot amount to expressions of political correctness or to a handbook advising on better races relation, but goes to the heart of who any one of us take ourselves to be. Again, therefore, the philosophical race debate makes certain claims to universal salience that address even those who have not had to go through the historical and political struggles from which that debate initially arose.

There may same to be a contradiction or at least an internal tension between the two points attributed to Eze here: on the one hand, an emphasize on philosophical thinking as growing out of the local, i.e. out of 'vernacular' rationalities, and on the other hand a claim to the effect that, to claim proper philosophical insight, any vernacular concept, such

[38] Eze, *Achieving our Humanity*, 186.

as the concept of ubuntu, must seek in some sense to reach beyond the local context from which it derived towards a wider audience. There is a certain tension between these two claims, but it is not one born out of contradiction so much as the necessity to negotiate between the local and the global or the particular and the universal.

We can ask: what are the *philosophical* concerns of the global justice debate as distinct from its more immediately visible moral and political concerns? *Is* the debate even philosophical? If it is, what are its distinctly philosophical concerns? Hard as it may sound, its philosophical concern cannot be to move the global poor from $1 to $2 income a day: that is a particular, substantive and political concern. Arguably, the debate's philosophical concern is reflection on the possibility of some kind of moral or political universalism. And yet so much of the debate is conducted as though *that* possibility were settled, and as though it were merely a matter of working out the policy implications of that already settled question. If the global justice debate is a philosophical debate, if, that is, it is a concern of philosophy with regard to itself, it must examine much more self-critically the very notion of universality so ubiquitously employed within it. This, too, is an insight which African thinkers could bring to the debate: just as questions about the status of African philosophy are in the end questions about the status of philosophy in general, so the basic philosophical issue raised by the global justice debate concerns the status of the universality claims it presupposes.

IV. Global Justice: Philosophical, not Political?

One might say that, considered philosophically, African thinkers are not in fact latecomers to the global justice debate. In raising the problem of 'false universals', first generation African philosophers put the presumed universalism of Western philosophical thinking into question. If what makes the global justice debate a philosophical debate is its concern with the possibility of some kind of moral and political universalism, then African thinkers, in problematizing received conceptions about what qualifies as universal, may even be said to have been among the first to raise the problem of global justice as a philosophical problem. But then we can ask: do *Western* thinkers have reason to join the *philosophical* global justice debate?

One may object that this is going too far. African philosophy and the global justice debate are non-identical. The latter discusses problems of poverty, power, world-political

organization. There may be some overlaps but conflating the two serves no purpose other than confusion. That is correct. Moreover, the objection now continues, the global justice debate is not about thinking about philosophical thinking: while Eze may be right to point out that philosophy 'has its own concerns', these concerns can typically be addressed only in an indirect manner, i.e. by way of discussing other, more substantive concerns: thinking about thinking only gets one so far. This, too, is largely correct, though obviously not wholly so. Now the objection will gain momentum: while it may to some extent be 'Western-led', the global justice debate has never been intentionally exclusivist. Perhaps it articulates one particular view of what a moral or political universalism may look like – but at least it articulates one at all. In so doing, the debate has exerted critical pressure, politically and conceptually, on liberalism's self-conception: it has queried the extent to which liberal publics and governments are in fact prepared to live up to their assumed moral universalism – their assumed commitment to equality and freedom for all, say. Indeed, it is in the course of the inquiry that more specifically *philosophical* progress has been on what liberals – or anyone else – may mean by familiar concepts such a freedom, equality, justice. Problems of global poverty and unequal power relations have challenged received conceptions of the latter, and the global justice debate has risen to that essentially philosophical challenge. Finally, liberal thinkers can speak for others as little as they can jump out of their own skins – liberal theorists can only reflect on and speak to how things look from where *they* stand: as the importance of local context here emphasized must evidently concede.

The above are conjectural objections, but I think they are of a type likely that are to be made, and not unreasonably so. It is true that one should not *equate* African philosophical thinking with global normative theorizing; it is also true that much thinking about philosophical thinking occurs in the context of thinking about something else. But even then, there is a difference between shifts in philosophical thinking that occur in the process of thinking about something else and reflecting on the nature or adequacy of that thinking as philosophical thinking. There may have been much rethinking and reshaping of initial liberal assumptions and beliefs over the course of the global justice debate – indeed, I surveyed some of these shifts in the opening section of this paper. The question is: what typically occasioned these shifts? My general impression is that these shifts were not the result of self-aware doubts about the adequacy of received terms of philosophical engagement. To the contrary, the shifts seem largely to have been responsive to more

practical or pragmatic questions about the feasibility of instituting this or that global policy or institutional framework. On this point, Eze is surely right: to the extent to which philosophy can effect change it cannot do so by political means. But what sort of change can philosophy effect? It can effect change in one's way of thinking, but only when that is itself in some sense the aim of philosophical inquiry. One might legitimately object that this is once more far too vague a statement about what philosophy can or ought to do, as philosophical rather than political thinking, in relation to the global justice debate. Again, I largely concede the relative vagueness of my point. Still, it does seem to me to be a legitimate criticism of the philosophical global justice debate that in their eagerness to effect political change, global theorists have generally neglected the philosophical dimension of their concerns. One way in which to render a bit more precise what this may amount to is to say that global theorists have generally neglected more self-critical reflection on the claimed universal status of the terms of the debate. To the extent to which modern African philosophy has made it among its chief concerns to identify and to contest the proclivity towards 'false universals' in Western philosophical thinking, it may in fact be in quite a unique position to be able to thematise neglect of more critical reflection on notions of universality employed in the global justice debate.

V. Conclusion

Let me try to draw together the somewhat disparate strands of the train of thought developed above. If I am ambivalent about African thinkers' engagement with the global justice debate, this is partly because I have become increasingly ambivalent about that debate itself. My ambivalence stems from a growing impression over the years that the global justice debate has on the one hand tended to work rather unquestioningly with quite a peculiar general conception of what it may mean for philosophical thinking to be 'practically relevant', and that it has on the other hand never quite managed to advance, philosophically, beyond its unavoidable parochial beginnings. These two shortcomings are related: the tendency to conflate practical reasoning with applied philosophy – a tendency encouraged, I think, by Rawls' marriage of Kantianism and consequentialism – invites the belief that relevant theoretical and moral terms ae settled, that we all know, and agree, what constitutes the relevant conception of the person in this debate, or that of the state, of community, of rights and the rule of law and so on. The question of global justice then

reduces to aligning disparate practical realities with these presumptively universal moral and political conceptions. But this is to ignore variability of local contexts, concepts and practises, so is to ignore that I have come to believe must be the guiding imperative of practical reasoning, which is to start with the beliefs and practices various persons in various contexts have.[39] In taking relevant moral and political concepts as settled from the start, the global justice debate has in many ways often simply elevated a particular local philosophical perspective – broadly, the Rawlsian liberal egalitarian perspective, to the status of global if not universal validity. And yet many of these concepts seem to fit disparate local contexts neither descriptively nor normatively.

In many ways, and although it has never actively solicited it, the global justice debate invites contributions from those outside the purview of liberal moral and political thinking; it does so merely in virtue of its own stated aspirations. As I noted towards the beginning of this paper, the approach towards practical reasoning generally favoured by the global justice debate – i.e. a kind of applied philosophy – chimes in well with recent developments, certainly in the UK academic context, that encourage and indeed favour more 'impact' directed research in the humanities, i.e., research that can be shown to make a palpable contribution to social and economic policies. In consequence, research funds are increasingly directed towards impact directed or applied theoretical thinking and this is likely to effect, in turn, the nature of academic outputs. If we add to these developments the institutional pressures faced by an emergent third generation of African thinkers to gain international research standing, the temptation may be very considerable to 'buy into' a ready-made global justice debate by way of accepting and working within established conceptual parameters. I believe this would in fact be fatal to the global justice debate itself – though it may well prove beneficial, at least in certain institutional respects, to ambitious individual African thinkers. The reason why I believe it would be fatal to the global justice debate is precisely because of that debate's neglect of a more critically reflective attitude towards its own claims to universality. At the same time, it seems to me that much of the work of the first generation of African thinkers, though not of course directly global justice related, did raise general questions about the validity of established universality claims in the Western tradition – and usually did so not in a spirit designed to foreclose mutual

[39] Cf. David Velleman, *Foundations for Moral Relativism* (Open Books, 2013).

engagement but rather to encourage it. If third generation African thinkers, in responding to the pressure for international research reputation, were to abandon attempts by the first generation to rethink or reorient the idea of philosophical thinking towards greater cultural inclusiveness, that would be a grave loss both to the global justice debate and to the discipline in general. Of course, I have here not said much at all about how precisely the insights of the first generation could be developed and adapted in the context of the global justice debate – I have instead pointed to Eze's work and his attempt, within a rather different thematic context, to explore the wider implications for philosophical thinking in general of African and African-American thinkers' diagnosis of so-called false universals within the Western tradition. Despite the often frustratingly dense and difficult nature of Eze's work, it seems to me in certain ways to have been path-breaking, such that it may serve as a possible model for seeking to thematise the universal insights of the local African philosophical debate, be this in the context of reasoning about global justice or elsewhere.