Teaching Philosophy at Ethiopian Universities

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In this essay, I recount my intellectual journey in teaching philosophy at three Ethiopian universities. I focus on my assignment at the Department of Philosophy at Addis Ababa University through a quota system as an undergraduate student, to teaching philosophy at Wollega University, Addis Ababa Science and Technology University and Addis Ababa University.I demonstrate how philosophy plays an active role in the emancipation of the individual. I also argue that a philosophy rooted on the analysis of societal predicaments can serve as a foundation of an Ethiopian critical theory that is developed as a critical engagement with the question of modernity.

Keywords: philosophy; universities; Ethiopia; emancipation; modernity

1 Introduction

Before joining the Department of Philosophy at Addis Ababa University, my desire was to become an archaeologist, partly inspired by my love for Harrison Ford's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Once I finished preparatory school and passed the entrance exam, I was assigned to Addis Ababa University through the Ministry of Education. Upon filling out forms as part of the process of selecting departments at Addis Ababa University, I discovered that there is no undergraduate program in archaeology. I then decided that I was going to join the Department of Political Science and International Relations since senior students at the time said that it promised greater career prospects after graduation. Soon, I discovered that I was assigned to the Department of Philosophy through a quota system. I remember looking at students crying in disbelief when they found out which department they had been allotted to. To my utter dismay, I had been assigned to the philosophy department. Other students told me that philosophy undergraduates were concerned about their job prospects after graduation. Everyone I talked to, advised me not to pursue a degree in philosophy.

Just like the other philosophy students assigned to the department, I was looking for ways to move to other departments like Sociology, or Political Science and International Relations that promised better prospects and job opportunities. After being told by the Chairperson of the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology that I should at least complete one year and earn a CGPA of 3.33 to transfer to another department, I decided that I was going to get good grades to be able to transfer departments. During the first semester, I took some common courses and philosophy major courses such the pre-Socratics and Plato and began to develop some interest in ideas related to Plato's idea of the forms. It was in the second semester that I decided to pursue a degree in philosophy and drop the idea of transferring into another

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department. This decision was motivated by one of my philosophy instructors, Daniel Smith. As an US-American philosopher who taught philosophy in different countries, Smith showed us that philosophy was not some abstract discipline, but that it can be applied to our daily lives. I also understood that philosophy holds the key to the transformation of society and the emancipation of the individual.

Throughout my undergraduate studies at the Addis Ababa University, I was introduced to philosophy through continental philosophy. However, it was the department's comparative approach to philosophy and courses such as African philosophy, intercultural philosophy, eastern, and Ethiopian philosophy that most excited me. Instructors from abroad and Ethiopian professors demonstrated philosophy's power to emancipate the individual and modernize nations. From that point on, I was determined to develop a theory that could contribute to the making of Ethiopian modernity as well as an Ethiopian critical social theory. In the sixth semester, I wrote a senior essay titled 'The Role of Art in Alienation, Distortion of Reality, Mental Colonization and Decolonization: Deconstructive and Reconstructive Efforts towards a Revolutionary and Realist Art.'

Herein, I explored the emancipatory role of art, both in terms of diagnosing societal predicaments and contributing to the emergence of emancipatory ideals that could lead to the development of a better society.

2 Teaching Philosophy

After graduating with great distinction, I was emboldened to serve as an instructor in Ethiopian public universities. In 2008; I was assigned to Wollega University in the Western Oromia region as a graduate assistant. I found myself in a new environment there, as I was born and raised in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. This was the first time that I was going to live outside of the capital city. Once I became a staff member at Wollega University, I was tasked with teaching the common introductory course to logic for freshmen. After becoming a faculty member in the Department of Civic and Ethical Education, I was also tasked with teaching political philosophy, moral philosophy, applied ethics and professional ethics to students that were majoring in civic and ethical education. This was the first time that I was faced with the difficulty of teaching philosophy in a nation like Ethiopia that has a history of independence, a rich history of literacy, and a political culture but is largely devoid of a philosophical culture of criticism and societal dialogue.

As undergraduates, our professors always told us that we should connect the concepts that discussed in class with the real-life situations that we faced as individuals. In courses on Ethiopian and African Philosophy, some attempts were made to apply these concepts to real-life situations. But once I become an instructor at Wollega University myself, I saw how difficult it actually is to relate the philosophy lessons to the living conditions and the different voices that were being articulated within the classroom. I realized that philosophy in Ethiopia did not fulfil the task of emancipating the individual and contributing to the modernization of the Ethiopian state. On the contrary, it was part of a Eurocentric discourse that caused societal alienation. The concepts I taught in class were far removed from the living conditions that Ethiopians were situated in. Students and other instructors suggested that philosophy is too abstract and that

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talking about the lives of philosophers such as Plato and Socrates are useless to Ethiopian society.

I tried overcoming such a gap between philosophical concepts and the daily lives of students by using Ethiopian examples and cases. For instance, since all the examples found in *A Concise Introduction to Logic* (2000)[1], the textbook I used for the Introduction to Logic course, were rooted in Europe and North America, I showed how the arguments posited by the philosophers surveyed in the textbook cannot be easily applied to an Ethiopian context. In other courses I taught such as political philosophy, moral philosophy, applied ethics and professional ethics, I also tried to use unique Ethiopian examples as a way of applying the lessons to the Ethiopian context. However, this was inhibited by the fact that there was yet no established culture of philosophical criticism within the Ethiopian academic context. Students saw philosophy as an anti-religious and anti-societal discourse, which they believed aimed to destroy the moral foundations of the Ethiopian community. As a result, they had no interest in carrying out philosophical discussions.

After teaching different philosophy courses, I was sponsored by Wollega University to pursue an MA Degree in Philosophy at the Addis Ababa University. At the Master's level, I attended different courses on metaphysics, theories of knowledge, moral philosophy, social and political philosophy, African philosophy, philosophy of science and technology, intercultural philosophy and critical social theory. There, I also developed an interest in German and French philosophy, and I became especially immersed in the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Jürgen Habermas. I finished my MA with a thesis on Habermas and his discourse of modernity. In my thesis titled "Habermas and the Discourse of Modernity," I analyzed the western discourse on modernity, showing its limitations and exploring the ways within which an inclusive discourse on modernity could be developed within. I tried to realize this by identifying the limitations of the Habermasian discourse on modernity.

After obtaining an MA in Philosophy, I returned to Wollega University and spent a year teaching philosophy at the city of Ghimbi and another year at the city of Nekemt. I taught the introduction to logic as a common course and other courses including political philosophy to students majoring in civics and ethical education. Despite now having an MA degree in Philosophy, I faced the same problems that I earlier encountered as a graduate assistant. Contextualizing the lessons within the Ethiopian context was a huge task that required a greater understanding of Ethiopian history, culture, literature and politics. Moreover, there was little room within the curriculum to introduce new concepts and ideas. Thus, most of my teaching was limited to transferring western philosophical wisdom onto the Ethiopian soil.

After serving for two years at Wollega University, in 2015, I transferred to Addis Ababa Science and Technology University based in the capital city of Addis Ababa. There, only two courses could be offered by philosophy instructors, introduction to logic and civics and ethical education. Most of the students who majored in engineering fields, did not show an interest in philosophy and in the issues I discussed in the classroom. They were primarily concerned with earning better grades. I tried to illustrate the value of philosophy for their student life, despite it being an introductory course. Both at the Wollega University and Addis Ababa Science and Technology University, there were no philosophy departments. As a result, there was no institutional basis to carry out philosophical studies and investigations. Rather, philosophy was being offered as a general course and at Wollega University, as a secondary course to students coming from the department of civics and ethical education. Thus, after serving for two years at

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Addis Ababa Science and Technology University, I transferred to Addis Ababa University where I had earlier earned my BA and MA degrees in philosophy.

After joining the department of philosophy at Addis Ababa University as a lecturer, I believed that I could finally realize my goal of developing an intellectual edifice that could serve as a foundation of an emancipatory practice. I was now presented with the opportunity of teaching philosophy to philosophy major students. I taught introductory courses on logic and philosophy for undergraduates. But there were still many challenges in teaching philosophy at a philosophy department. To start, most of the undergraduates were assigned through a quota system and since philosophy was not the first discipline of their choice, they looked for ways of transferring to other departments. Furthermore, the number of students assigned to the department of philosophy was small. Still, there were plenty of opportunities to discuss philosophical ideas with colleagues and to present papers at conferences.

As part of my attempt to develop an emancipatory theory and understanding of philosophy situated within the Ethiopian experience, I endeavoured to develop a critique of what was previously taken as Ethiopian philosophy. Such an intellectual exercise developed in three main ways. First, I aimed to show the limitations of the three-fold conception of Ethiopian philosophy that was developed by Claude Sumner (1919–2012). Sumner was a Canadian philosopher who served in the Department of Philosophy at Addis Ababa University for decades. His publications aimed to show that Ethiopian philosophy consisted of the treatises of Zera Yaeqob and Welda Heywat (Sumner 1976),[2] foreign philosophical wisdom that is situated in the Ethiopian context (Sumner 1974)[3] and oral wisdom that is passed on from one generation into the other (Sumner 1995)[4].In the eyes of Sumner, Zera Yaeqob and Welda Heywat are Ethiopian philosophers who produced original philosophies in response to the religious conflict and controversy that occurred in Ethiopia after the introduction of Catholicism during the time of emperor Susenyos in the seventeenth century. In my critical engagement with the works of Sumner, I sided with the debate which questions the originality of the philosophical treatise of Zera Yaeqob and Welda Heywat (Wion and Aissatou 2013).[5] I do not believe that those who defend the originality of the texts are able to demonstrate that that they are not written by the Italian missionary Giusto D'Urbino, who lived in Ethiopia in the nineteenth century (Rossini 1920: Kibret 2019).[6] They are not able to explain why there are striking similarities between the life and the writing of D'Urbino and that of Zera Yaeqob and Welda Heywat. I also questioned the value of foreign-adapted wisdom which constitutes philosophical ideals from different parts of the world that are creatively appropriated into the Ethiopian soil and oral wisdom in being used to prove the existence of philosophy. I argued that there is a need to conceive of Ethiopian philosophy as a discourse that is still looking for an identity.

Secondly, I began to develop the idea that Ethiopian philosophy needs to be developed in relationship to the questions of modernity, utopia and emancipation so that it can serve as a foundation of societal transformation. Later on, this served as a foundation of my conception of an Ethiopian philosophy that is made up of the hermeneutic, intercultural, critical theory and indigenous trends.[7] As part of such a quest, in 2020, I obtained a PhD degree in philosophy from the Addis Ababa University where I completed my dissertation titled "The Crisis of the Modern Metaphysics of the Subject and the Prospects of a Critical Social Theory in a Post-Metaphysical World." I aimed to develop a theory that could serve as a foundation for an emancipatory practice in a world where grand and metaphysical conceptions of truth were being undermined. As part of this process, I tried to explore the Ethiopian discourse on modernity as developed by its major protagonists like Messay Kebede, Maimire Mennasemay, Andreas Eshete, and Bahru

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Zewde, with the aim to develop a reflexive discourse on modernity, utopia and emancipation that can serve as a foundation of societal modernization.

Thirdly, I worked to develop an analysis that has the aim of explaining the trajectory of modern Ethiopian philosophy. As part of this process, I argued that modern Ethiopian philosophy is still in the making and that the discourse that has emerged so far is made up of four main trends and two main periods. I argued that this philosophy is made up of a hermeneutic trend, an intercultural trend (Gutema 2015),[8] an emancipatory trend (Eshete 2013)[9] and an indigenous Ethiopian philosophy trend (Kelbessa 2005),[10] and that it is made up of two main periods. The first period covers the time from the 1950s to 2002 and is represented by Claude Sumner and a second period from 2002 into the present moment that is mainly represented by the works of Messay Kebede (Kebede 2004).[11] I believe that Ethiopian philosophy is still in search of an identity and that the different trends within it are still trapped within a Eurocentric discourse. I think that Ethiopian philosophers have yet to succeed in developing a discourse that diagnoses societal predicaments and proposes a vision of a better future.

I think that there are different limitations that need to be overcome. First, there is a need to change the perception of philosophy in the eyes of the public. Despite the efforts of Ethiopian philosophers like Dagnachew Assefa to show how philosophical ideas can be useful to the public (Assefa 2020),[12] philosophy is still seen in Ethiopia as an abstract discipline that does not play an actual role in the lives of the people. This is partly inspired by popular works that are being sold to the public in the name of philosophy. The focus is on taking some obscure ideas from well-known thinkers like Nietzsche and without adding a context showing how they can be used to criticize the foundations of religion and the community. As a result of this, the public views philosophy in a negative manner.

Secondly, even what is being taken as Ethiopian philosophy within academia is a highly politicized discourse that is mostly founded on nationalistic sentiments, rather than on the development of a philosophical culture of rational criticism. Taking the ideas of Sumner as a foundation, attempts have been made in different works to show that Ethiopia is the cradle and the origin of philosophy. This is not founded in a critical engagement with the texts. There is a need to carry out historical and philological analysis to explore the authenticity of the texts and to develop an analysis that determines whether philosophical ideas are developed in them. I ultimately think that Ethiopian philosophy should not be founded on an exaggeration of the past.

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3 Conclusion

I believe that what is needed in the Ethiopian context is the making of a broader intellectual foundation for philosophical dialogue and criticism. There is a need to show the public that philosophy is not an abstract discipline far removed from our day-to-day reality and that it can make a significant contribution in the transformation and the modernization of societies. To make this possible, there is a need to extract the value that is found in the past without elevating it into a perfect foundation that can never be questioned. At the same time, there is also a need to resist reducing philosophy to merely cultural and anthropological studies and the mere elevation of each societal teaching into the status of philosophy. What is needed is a philosophy that can help Ethiopians who are going through a legitimating crisis to have a genuine dialogue with each other. To make this possible, there is a need to grapple with the questions of modernity and emancipation. This is why I suggest that a critical theory of modern societies plays an important role in the development of contemporary Ethiopian philosophy.

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