

The Absence of Philosophy: Incidental or Structural

There is a quiet violence in omission. It is not loud like censorship, nor obvious like distortion. Instead, it operates through silence, through the gaps in reading lists, through the casual acceptance that the philosophy canon begins with the Greeks and then moves westward. This omission is so seamless that most students of philosophy barely notice what is missing. For years, I did not either. Until I realized that the absence of African and Indian philosophies in mainstream academic discourse was not incidental but structural—a product of colonial erasures, academic gatekeeping, and the stubborn refusal to acknowledge that non-Western traditions have as much to offer as their European counterparts.

Colonialism's Hold on Thought

Hegel once claimed that Africa had no history, and Western academia seemed to take him at his word. For centuries, African intellectual traditions were dismissed as folklore, as anthropological curiosities rather than serious philosophical systems. Indian philosophy, while acknowledged, was largely reduced to mysticism, its rigorous epistemological and logical traditions sidelined in favor of an exoticized spirituality. The colonial project did not just exploit bodies and lands; it also controlled narratives, deciding what counted as “rational thought” and what was mere superstition.

However, this exclusion was never about merit. The Nyaya school of logic in India, for example, developed an intricate system of inference centuries before Aristotle formalized syllogism. The Akan philosophy from West Africa, similarly, offers a sophisticated theory of personhood that challenges Cartesian dualism. These traditions are not just “alternatives” to Western philosophy; they are robust, self-contained systems of thought that have long engaged with the deepest questions of existence, morality, and knowledge. Their exclusion from the mainstream canon has nothing to do with intellectual quality and everything to do with intellectual imperialism.

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Rethinking Knowledge and Being

The central problem with the Western philosophical tradition is its obsession with the individual as the fundamental unit of existence. Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am,” reducing being to a solitary act of cognition. But what if being is relational? What if existence is not just about self-awareness but about interconnectedness? African and Indian philosophies challenge this foundational assumption.

In African thought, the concept of Ubuntu—“I am because we are”—rejects the idea of the isolated self. It insists that personhood is something cultivated through relationships, through community, through a shared humanity. Indian Advaita Vedanta, in a different yet parallel manner, dissolves the boundaries of individual identity altogether, arguing that the self is not separate but part of a larger, undivided reality. These are not marginal perspectives. They are radical reimaginings of what it means to be human.

Epistemology provides another compelling example. Western philosophy privileges written tradition, treating the printed word as the ultimate repository of knowledge. African philosophy, particularly Sage Philosophy, recognizes orality as a legitimate mode of intellectual transmission. Similarly, the Indian philosophical tradition, with its deep engagement in the śruti (that which is heard) and smṛti (that which is remembered), disrupts the rigid hierarchy that places written texts above spoken wisdom. These perspectives are not just academically interesting; they are necessary correctives to a discipline that assumes its own methods are universal.

Bantu philosophy, introduced by Placide Tempels, presents a strikingly different view of existence—one where life is understood as a force, constantly shifting and interacting with other energies, rather than a fixed state of being. Meanwhile, the Dogon people of Mali have developed intricate cosmological and metaphysical systems that blend empirical observation with symbolic knowledge, creating a philosophy that is both deeply rational and profoundly spiritual. These traditions are not just interesting alternatives to Western thought—they are rich, self-sustaining systems of knowledge that have been unfairly marginalized. Engaging with them is not just about inclusion; it is about undoing centuries of epistemic erasure and

acknowledging that philosophy has always been a global endeavor.

Why These Traditions Remain Sidelined

Despite their richness, African and Indian philosophies remain largely peripheral in global academia. Why? The simplest answer is that Western philosophy continues to set the terms of intellectual legitimacy. In most philosophy departments outside Africa and India, the core curriculum consists of Greek, Roman, and European thinkers. When non-Western traditions appear, they do so as electives, as “world philosophy” or “comparative thought,” never as philosophy in its own right. The implicit message is clear: non-Western thought is valuable only in relation to Western frameworks.

Language is another barrier. Much of African philosophy is oral, making it susceptible to dismissal in a world that equates literacy with legitimacy. Indian philosophical texts, often written in Sanskrit or classical Tamil, have suffered from selective translation, where only those works that align with Western philosophical concerns are deemed worthy of study. The result is a fractured, incomplete representation of these traditions—one that reinforces their perceived inferiority.

Philosophical imperialism is another obstacle. When non-Western ideas do gain recognition, they are often absorbed without attribution. Schopenhauer borrowed heavily from Indian Vedantic thought without acknowledging its origins. Contemporary moral philosophers frequently invoke Ubuntu ethics without engaging with the African scholars who have long articulated its nuances. This selective appropriation reinforces the power imbalance, allowing Western academia to extract what it finds useful while continuing to ignore the broader traditions from which these ideas emerge.

Decolonizing Philosophy

The solution is not simply inclusion. It is not enough to add a token African or Indian philosopher to reading lists and call it progress. What is needed is a fundamental restructuring of how philosophy is taught and conceptualized.

First, the UGC should take responsibility for decolonizing academic curricula by integrating African and Indian philosophies not as optional extras but as central components of philosophical education. This means teaching Nyaya logic alongside Aristotelian logic, placing Ubuntu ethics on equal footing with Kantian ethics, and recognizing that oral traditions have as much philosophical depth as written texts.

Second, the philosophical canon itself must be rewritten. The current division between “Western philosophy” and “world philosophy” is artificial and deeply political. Philosophy is not the exclusive property of Europe. It is a global endeavor, shaped by diverse traditions that have all contributed to our understanding of existence, morality, and knowledge. A truly inclusive philosophy department would teach Wiredu and Ramanuja alongside Hume and Heidegger, allowing students to engage with a multiplicity of perspectives rather than a narrowly defined Western lineage.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, there must be a deliberate effort to build intellectual bridges between African and Indian scholars. The marginalization of these traditions is not just a Western issue; even within the Global South, academic structures often reinforce colonial hierarchies, privileging Western validation over local intellectual traditions. A serious South-South dialogue—one that explores shared philosophical concerns, from caste and race to decoloniality and indigenous knowledge—could help break the cycle of marginalization from within.

The Urgency of Inclusion

Philosophy is not an abstract exercise. It shapes the way we see the world, the way we govern societies, the way we understand ourselves. To ignore African and Indian thought is not just an academic oversight—it is an epistemic injustice, one that impoverishes our collective intellectual heritage. At a time when the world is grappling with crises that demand new ways of thinking—climate change, global inequality, the resurgence of authoritarianism—it is reckless to keep looking for solutions in the same places that created these problems.

African and Indian philosophies offer alternative models of thought, ones that prioritize interdependence over individualism, oral wisdom over textual dominance, and ethical living over abstract theorization. Their inclusion in mainstream philosophy is not an act of generosity; it is an intellectual necessity. The time to dismantle the philosophical hierarchy is now. The question is whether academia has the courage to do so.

Views are personal*

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