

Philosophy of Body: Practicing Logic, Managing Diversity and Telling about that Practice and Management: the African Contribution to the Practice of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT: While in predicating and designating, quantifying and generalizing, and in numbering, English speakers use one/many figuring, Yoruba speakers do the same in whole/part as they, like their English counterparts, do the little embodied rituals (with hands, eyes, gestures) that go with these acts. Numbers as used in English and Yoruba languages reveal two systems of abstraction constructed in two diverse systems of categorization. The disparity in the two strings of abstraction is the divergence between Yoruba and English, regarding the forms of actions that bodies do, actions that are in turn coded as the language users engage in predication and designation. As a part of grammar, natural number is a historical product; an attempt at giving meaning. It has been naturalized, and is no longer seen as a social product. Establishing how the truths numbers form come into existence, Verran explains quantifying as resulting from ritualized and routinized collective embodied acting. She renders an account of generalization in the explanatory frame of “emergent worlds.” She tells of the experience of doing quantification and managing diversity in a manner that allows a “going-on together” in Yoruba classrooms, markets, and civil administration. She tells of practicing diversity and telling about that practice, a responsible communication of diversity as practicable and amenable to matters of mutual concern. She also recounts an ‘irresponsible’ doing and telling of difference (conservativist universalism and liberalist relativism), a contriving that legislates a moral order, presenting difference as undoable and unmanageable. Contemplating worlds as outcomes of reciprocally rebelling and cooperating co-players, we find explanatory frames that not only celebrate difference and sameness, and appreciate the place of the inanimate in the animate (human), but also that do not radically sever the symbolic from the material.

KEYWORDS: Embodied philosophy, managing diversity, Systems of abstraction, systems of categorization, designation, prediction, responsible telling of diversity, irresponsible telling of difference, going-on together.

1.0. INTRODUCTION

Helen Verran proffers an African solution that is at the same time a middle course to the extremities of the relativist and universalist accounts of being human (and of language, knowing, logic), a contribution that is worth identifying with. One marvels at her application of a certain understanding of the actor-network theory, where, rather than a simplistic denial of distinctions, divisions are conceived of as “effects or outcomes” (Law, 1999, 3). This blends well with Addelson’s ‘collectivist’ interpretative matrix and notion of “responsible storytelling,” which she appropriates (cf. Verran, 1999, 144).

2.0. LINGUISTIC EXPERIMENTS AND INTERPRETATIVE FRAMES

In her linguistic experiments and interpretative frames Verran offers a description of Yoruba (Nigeria) quantifying, designating and generalizing that presents the ‘other’ not as the radically different but as the differently similar. Her ‘imaginary’ (working images and stories), namely, worlds as emergent outcomes of collective and relational going-on together, refuses the limited response of the existing bipolar moral orders (cf. Verran, 2001, 220). It denies neither difference by way of a universalist legislation that “they” all be like “us” nor a relativist resolution of “difference in sameness.” Each of the polarities, she objects, amounts to a politically driven optimistic or pessimistic denial of difference.

What is more, it refuses any a-priori category differential estrangement of that which is symbolic from that which is material. It insists that the material is already and invariably symbolic, in much the same way as the symbolic is already and invariably material (cf. Verran 2001, 44). It associates knowing with routines or repetitions and collective undertakings - which are of

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necessity embodied - that emerge in the existence of specific epochs and areas; knowing is contingently connected both within those epochs and areas and to other epochs and areas (cf. Verran, 2001, 38).

Attempting to render an account of generalization in the explanatory frame of emergent worlds, she performs an experiment with Yoruba and English speaking pupils. The children respond to various tasks aimed at accessing their capacity to quantify using water, coke and peanuts. English pupils, on the one hand, show a disposition to quantify along qualitative lines, speaking in terms of quality. They talk confidently of the extent of a given quality (thingness, volume) of a certain stuff, and concentrate on volume or thingness. She observes that talks about number in their 'world' consist of "spatiotemporal particulars." The numeral system of English pupils has the number ten as its base. English numerals show a "linear passing along the finger until the end," done again and again, giving a sense of a boundless linear extension (Verran, 2001, 202).

Yoruba pupils, on the other hand, reveal an inclination to quantify along modal lines, speaking in terms of modes of manifestation and presentation. They talk confidently of the number of units of a given stuff, focusing their attention on the extent of apportionment or amount of units.

Her investigation reveals the logic of numbering in their 'world' to consist of "sortal particulars" in diverse modes of manifestation. They have a multi-base numeral sequence. Numeral generation in Yoruba gives the impression of "numbers nested within each other: digits nested in persons, fingers and toes in hands and feet" (cf. Verran, 2001, 202). It paints a picture of wholes with manifold partitions.

While in predicating and designating, quantifying and generalizing, and in numbering, English speakers use one/many figuring, Yoruba speakers figure the same in whole/part as they, like their English counterparts, do the little embodied rituals (with hands, eyes, gestures) that go with these acts.

Thus, Verran begins with relativist studies intended to counteract universalist claims and expose the "foundationist contriving" in both camps of the moral divide, a contriving she attributes to "literalization" - a literal translation that ratifies a certain world order by mummifying and waiting on the literal word.

She investigates number as used in English and Yoruba languages, and reveals them as systems of abstraction constructed in two diverse systems of categorization. She opines that the disparity in the two strings of abstraction is the divergence between Yoruba and English, regarding the forms of actions that bodies do, actions which are in turn coded as the language users are engaged in predication and designation. In any given language, the kind of construct which natural number is known to be has been regulated by antecedent and time-honored judgments about coding in the world of matter. Yoruba and English natural numbers are made up of linguistic as well as non-linguistic concepts. As a part of grammar, natural number is a historical product; an attempt at giving meaning. It has been naturalized, and no longer seen as a social product.

Synthesizing, Verran remarks that as constructs the English and Yoruba systems of abstraction vary, giving rise to divergent worlds of symbolizing logic. Yet, she insists that modes are as much abstract notions as are qualities. The one has as much cognitive legitimacy as the other. In both, acting is unified; and speaking, talking, words are as bodily as any other form of acting. She alludes to Wittgenstein who admits that a baby's utterance is its pre-linguistic response to embodiment in an embodied collective setting. Speaking recreates a "ritual" that features in specific ways, she argues. The objects that numbering and generalizing involve are spawned in ritualized and routinized patterns of acting, as people trudge ahead organizing or living in their organized small worlds. This shows that "logics are embodied in collective going-on" in particular epochs and areas (Verran, 2001, 220).

Most importantly, she maintains that the one/many-whole/part distinction is relational and merely borders on the take-off points of reasoning. For outcomes are implicated in all others and emerge in wholes. Proprioception and "long-term body image" are also emergent effects of collective acting (Verran, 2001, 226).

3.0. MANAGING COMPLEXITY AND DIFFERENCE

Verran has witnessed Yoruba classrooms and Yoruba teenage-tomatoes-hawkers "manage" complexity and "difference in generalizing logics by contingently making connections and separations" as they daily stay true to the outcomes of their embodied collective acting and allow a going-on together, in a creative response to the challenges of foreign and local attempts at constructing meaning. She knows that difference could be done and managed in fruitful and useful ways, without resorting to any divisive "ontological politics."

Establishing how the truths numbers form come into existence, Verran explains quantifying as resulting from ritualized and routinized collective (embodied) acting. She renders an account of generalization in the explanatory frame of "emergent worlds." She tells of the experience of doing quantification and managing diversity in a manner that allows a "going-on together" in Yoruba classrooms, markets and civil administration. She talks of a practicing diversity and a responsible communication of diversity as practicable and tractable (i.e., as amenable to matters of mutual concern) (cf. Verran, 2001, 171). She also recounts an irresponsible doing and telling of difference (conservativist universalism and liberalist relativism), a contriving that legislates a moral order, presenting difference as undoable and unmanageable.

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Lecturing during a teacher training program in a Nigerian university, Verran arranges with the student-teachers in the laboratory for a lesson, 'length in our bodies.' Using strings to stand for height, they measure one another: overall height, hands and feet lengths. They stretch out the string on the floor, and record the length with a chalk. Using a meter ruler, they measure out the stretch between the chalk marks, recording the results in a chart. They decide to guide the pupils through using strings to measure one another in this way.

Mrs. Taiwo, an orderly student, remarkable for preserving the prescribed procedures, gives a concise lesson. Using twenty meter rulers, graduated in 20cm and 1cm partitions, she draws decent charts for her pupils to record their measurements. Speaking in 'the Queen's English,' she explains the procedure. Despite hard work and the apparent investment of huge resources in the lesson preparation, her methodologically correct presentation misses the mark. The children hardly respond to filling in her perfectly drawn charts. The few who do leave the impression they do not know what the lesson is all about. She fails to connect with them and they do not go along with her. Mrs. Taiwo blames the failure on her pupils' weaknesses.

Verran admits Mrs. Taiwo is an intelligent and qualified teacher, but repudiates the fact that she passed the blame to the children. She knows the children. She sees them deal with number in their mother tongue, conducting mental arithmetic in trade related stories.

Mr. Ojo is the down-to-earth type. He conducts the 'length in our bodies' task a little differently. The procedure agreed upon in the lab presents length as a quality, showing a certain feature of infinity. But Mr. Ojo uses a card plus a string turned into strands of strings by tying it around the card. As Verran observes, this presents multiplicity as co-essential for length. It makes the idea of extension, the abstract factor in length, dependent on multiplicity and as if it were nonessential.

Compared to Mrs. Taiwo, Mr. Ojo is hardly organized. He knows, though, how to connect with the children with a disarming ease. His 'arsenal' does not reflect any elaborate lesson preparation. It consists simply of improvised twenty 10cm-long cards, graduated in 1cm along the length, and twenty strings - each 2 meters in length. Hanging a chart on the blackboard, he groups the children in twos or threes. To each curious group, he hands out one of his 10cm cards and a 2 meter long string. He invites a boy to the front, places the end of the string under his heel and holds the point on the string corresponding to the boy's head. He loosely ties a knot at the point he is holding, and lifts the end under the boy's heel. He holds this at an end of the card, and before all the protruding eyes, he ceremoniously begins to wind the string around the card, stopping abruptly at the point with the knot. He then instructs the children to work out the entire length by counting the number of times the string goes around the 10cm cards and multiplying this by ten. They do so. He then instructs them to add the remaining bit of string. They do so and announce enthusiastically the sum of their calculations: 96cm.

Straightaway, the children begin work in their groups of twos and threes, measuring one another and correctly filling up Mr. Ojo's chart with names and corresponding heights. The children are demonstrating that using extension units in expressing value is going down well with them.

Verran faces a dilemma: sameness and difference all at once! A feeling of simultaneous cheer and distrust, deficiency and accomplishment, approval and rejection overwhelms her. Mr. Ojo's procedure transforms her lesson and compromises the established order of illustrating linear extension. Yet Mr. Ojo and other student-teachers adopting his procedure see it as the same as Verran's initial lesson, and celebrate a collective success. The children learn to measure by applying metric units. They also come to experience learning as gratifying and delightful, discovering and sharing the sense of fulfillment and certainty that learning brings about.

Verran likens her experience to the expression of bewilderment, "disconcertment," one has witnessing a certitude being upset to yield a disparate kind. It is an experience - being at once "like" and "Other" - that leads her into a novel explanation of number, an account that at once augments and displays the orthodox, approved account.

4.0. A CONSTRUCTIVE AND TRUTHFUL ACCOUNT

Verran now faces the challenge of evolving a constructive account of the incidents in Mr. Ojo's Yoruba classroom that remains true to her felt sense - disconcertment, laughter - without simply explaining away these concrete experiences. She feels that tracing this connecting event or encounter could yield a hold on the missing link one finds in orthodox accounts.

Verran believes that she is conducting a symmetrical anthropology, in the sense of Bruno Latour's thesis that an anthropology capable of an adequate description of our world must be one that is able to study the sciences by going beyond the limits of current sociological and epistemological tenets (cf. Latour, 1994, 91-92). This follows from the fact that the Yorubas she is investigating, in doing number use either English or Yoruba, a practice that has been there for a couple of centuries. She admits, however, the asymmetry that her work implies. Her work/book, she notes, is on two day-to-day African logics - the use of English and Yoruba languages, as well as the use of number - and their relation to science. Her story/book, since it is in English connects the narrative somewhat automatically to the logic of the English language. The result is that the logic of the first language will translate into the terms of the second language. Preventing the reconstitution of the interpretative matrix of the first language in the second is at issue. The link, the "disconcertment," that Verran is cautious to retain, connects the telling with the doing, the

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theoretical with the practical, the intellectual, speculative work with the embodied encounter generating it, the material with the symbolic.

An orthodox interpretative frame, she says, one that tells of “institutional power relations,” would readily rationalize away her encounter with Mr. Ojo and the Yoruba classrooms (and her disconcertment) as one of a failure and a lack. She has the duty and the institutional mandate to teach the proper credo, the modern and civilized, tested and trusted quantifying procedures to the primitive, uncivilized and ignorant Africans tinkering around with the dogma of quantifying. Incapable of conceptualizing attributes, properties or qualities, and so still grappling with the essential problem of the quantitative aspect of quantifying, how dare Verran let them bring their ‘primitive’ measurement to bear on the business of quantifying. Verran remarks that this manner of telling of the phenomenon merely legislates an exclusivist answer to the moral question of how we should live. It judges and legislates that the (non-modern) Yoruba frames of constructing a world cannot be part of what is considered a necessary condition for being “full knowing subjects” (Verran, 1999, 141).

In the same way, a similarly orthodox telling of a robust Yoruba invulnerability and Western weakness could also rationalize away Verran’s embodied encounter and the resulting disconcertment. This presents Mr. Ojo and the other student-teachers as evidence of effective exemplary defiance of Western intrusion and inundation, enabling the teaching of a genuinely Nigerian, indigenous, version of quantifying. This telling sees the European teacher as representing a Western system chronically at variance with the Yoruba thought structure. It replaces the ‘Western’ with the indigenous. This explanatory frame too legislates an exclusive moral frontier. It too does violence.

These contrasting explanatory frames, argues Verran, represent the two poles of the African thought polemics. Both constitute exclusivist foundationist frames, bringing along with them exclusivist moral prescriptions and legislation to the question of life. Such is the case, regardless of what is assumed as the foundation: social practices or physical entities. On the one camp are the realists, rationalists, universalists, conservativists, as it were. These swear allegiance to the foundationist cast of physical entities. For them, the natives are primitive and need emancipation through schooling and change. On the other camp are the relativists, liberals, so to say. These pledge their unqualified loyalty to the foundationist outline of assorted social practices. The modernization in the countries of the north Atlantic is accused of having but a morally worrisome reductionism to its credit. The traditionalists (traditionalists), in contrast to the moderns, claim they have a wholesome integrity to hold on to.

Verran cannot side with either of these disconnecting and disembodied extremes. To do so would constitute a betrayal of the participants in the embodied events in ways that are untenable and objectionable. These cause and effect narratives, she protests, rationalize away her disconcertment, in their judging and legislating. Yoruba classrooms, characterized by the complexness of day-to-day classroom procedures (Alltäglichkeit), evolving novel ways of getting-on (getting ahead) and reinventing old ways of getting-on together, are outside their exclusivist frames.

Contrary to the aforementioned ‘foundationist’ rationalizations, Verran commits herself to preserving the bewilderment of “sameness and difference” one finds in the Yoruba classrooms, a telling that gives expression to her bodily experience of “disconcertment” (Verran, 1999, 142). She feels this manner of ‘telling’ has the potential of making explicit how the truths stories tell come into existence, and of discerning how to ‘tell’ conscientiously. She associates her idea of intellectual responsibility with Kathryn Pyne Addelson (Addelson, 1994, 18) who insists that professionals have a duty to make explicit the collective activity of social groups and the ensuing weighty outcomes of their actions.

5.0. CONCLUSION

Verran theorizes her encounter with the Yoruba classrooms, applying frames in contradistinction to foundationist interpretative frames, with all their dichotomy and dualism. Here the worlds we have are effects; and the nonliving constitutes an integral part of the normal run of things. This understanding insists that the material is hitherto and invariably symbolic, in much the same way as the symbolic is hitherto and invariably material (Verran, 2001, 44). Contemplating worlds as outcomes of reciprocally rebelling and cooperating co-players, with participation (collaboration, interaction) going farther than the human to embody the inanimate (regarded as effectively involved in the routines and new actions making up our world), we find explanatory frames that not only celebrate difference and sameness, and appreciate the place of the inanimate in the animate (human), but also that do not radically sever the symbolic from the material (cf. Verran, 1999, 143).

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