

SYMPOSIUM
PROBLEMS AND METHODS IN GLOBAL THINKING



LOST IN ORIENTATION

BY
ABRAHAM OLIVIER

[THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK]

Lost in Orientation

Abraham Olivier

In her recent book, *What is Orientation in Global Thinking?* Katrin Flikschuh offers “an inquiry into what it may mean to engage in global practical reasoning” (Flikschuh 2017, ix¹). Her main objective is to “get clearer about what it is we are doing when we take ourselves to be reasoning globally (*WOT* 226). Her reference to “what we are doing” points at a central problem of who is included or excluded when we take ourselves to be reasoning globally. Notably, it is not that there is no “global reasoning” going on. The last three decades have in fact witnessed global reasoning in the form of a debate on global justice, which dominated political philosophy and political theory. In this debate it is widely accepted that the world is a deeply unjust place, and with sustained intellectual engagement global theorists have made attempts to address problems of global poverty and deprivation. Even though little has changed practically, one must concede that for philosophy as a discipline an unusual lot of theoretical and even practical effort has been made (*WOT* 227). The problem is not that there was no global reasoning, but that the reasoning was not very global. It was not very global because of the persistent failure of the debate to theoretically “advance beyond familiar domestic concepts and principles” entertained mainly by Western political liberalism. This debate has effectively

¹ Henceforth, I refer to Flikschuh 2017 as *WOT*.

excluded “those distant and foreign others whom our global theorizing nominally seeks to address.” (*WOT* 226) In short, the domestically developed concepts of global reasoning seem to have lost their grip on a globalised world.

Flikschuh calls this predicament after Jonathan Lear one of conceptual loss (*WOT* x). A lot is offered in terms of concepts that claim to give global orientation. But we appear to be lost in what is offered. Thus my title, lost in orientation. Consequently, we are confronted with the need for conceptual reorientation (*ibid.*). We need to break the circles of exclusivity by seeking “intellectual engagement with others, whose experiences and views are often radically different from ours, but rarely ever unintelligibly so” (*WOT*, 233).

Flikschuh makes it clear that her question is not in the first place a practical question as to what we should do about global poverty. She does not tackle practical issues such as the inequities of the global market, excessive state violence and failure (*WOT* 7). Instead, she addresses the methodological question as to “how we would have to learn to think in order to think more globally” (*ibid.*).

The attempt to work out whether we can and how we might reorient our global thinking calls for an analysis of the problem of conceptual loss and the challenge of orientation through concept formation. My aim is to respond to Flikschuh’s analysis, specifically by elaborating on her flexible reading of Kant’s notion of concept formation. My response will be informed by Wiredu’s and Hountondji’s views of conceptual universals.

Section 1 gives a brief discussion of the problem of conceptual loss. Sections 2 and 3 focus on Flikschuh’s flexible reading of Kant’s view of conceptual formation and orientation. Sections 4 and 5 expand on Flikschuh’s reading by the use of Wiredu’s and Hountondji’s notions of conceptually sharable universals.

I

Conceptual Loss

To resume, Flikschuh argues that our domestically developed concepts of global reasoning seem to have lost their grip on a globalised world. Drawing from Jonathan Lear's book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Lear 2006), she calls this predicament "conceptual loss." Flikschuh introduces this concept with reference to Lear's analysis of the disorienting experience of Crow Indians after their negotiated settlement to move to designated reservation lands (*WOT* 16). Their central concept of a nomadic way of living lost its grip in the reservation lands where new practices were made possible. Conceptually these new practices presented a logical impossibility. Their centring concept of nomadic life lost its grip on the new reality. The effect was "decentering." This was not "a removal of just any old concept," but rather that of a central ordering concept (*ibid.*). The Crow experience a cognitive breakdown that Lear calls conceptual loss.

Conceptual loss thus pertains to failure of specific, "central ordering concepts" in contrast to "supporting concepts" in any theoretical or social framework (*WOT* 24ff). Political liberalism faces conceptual loss as far as its centring concepts have lost their grip on a globalised world. Flikschuh refers specifically to the concepts of justice and the state. Political liberalism conceives justice to be logically dependent on its performance by coercive state institutions. The justice-creating state is thus a central ordering concept of political liberalism. If justice is necessarily state-dependent, then political liberalism fails to offer a concept of justice that adequately extends beyond national states to the international or global community. A global concept of justice becomes a logical impossibility within the framework of political liberalism. This means ultimately, that one cannot "coherently

theorize liberal obligations of global justice” (*ibid.*). In this sense, the liberal concept of justice has no grip on the global reality. Such a conceptual failure expresses what Lear would call conceptual loss. On the rebound, it demands conceptual reorientation.

Flikschuh notably points out that conceptual loss and the need for conceptual reorientation also dominate philosophical thinking in many post-colonial contexts (*WOT* 23). This is exemplified in the work of Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, “for whom the distinctive predicament of African philosophical thinkers lies in the fact that ‘the very conceptual frameworks of [African thinkers] locumbrations are embedded in the foreign languages in which [they] have been trained’, creating a permanent tension between the concepts of Western philosophy as academic discipline and African thinkers’ everyday exposure to their indigenous conceptual heritage” (*ibid.*). Paulin Hountondji, so she correctly says, speaks of the same tension. On the one hand, there is the colonial imposition of Western concepts, which has caused a loss of central ordering indigenous African concepts. On the other hand, there is “the struggle for meaning,” as Hountondji’s book title expresses, that is, a struggle for new concept formation. New concept formation is what should account for both indigenous experience and cross-cultural communication globally. I come back to their notions in Section 4.

Ultimately, Lear’s idea of conceptual loss is not confined to any specific context, but rather it pertains to a permanent personal human possibility (*WOT* 23). It can principally “befall any people or culture at any time” (*ibid.*). Even though one might be conceptually settled, there is always the possibility to lose one’s conceptual grip on the world. This permanent possibility makes the question of concept formation a constant challenge. What must concepts be like to account for both the particularity of our

personal, sociocultural experiences as well as global developments?
How universal can concepts be?

II

Concept formation

Conceptual loss calls for orientation in thinking. The challenge that arises is to form a new conceptual grip on the world. The challenge thus is one of concept formation. To address the problem of conceptual loss and the challenge of orientation through concept formation Flikschuh takes as venture-point Kant's essay, "What Is Orientation in Thinking?." More specifically, she gives a detailed discussion of Kant's analysis of concept formation in his *Critique of Pure Reason* to which "What is Orientation in Thinking" is directly related.

Flikschuh goes into the theoretical basics of concept formation. It starts with the tension between the two equally necessary roots of knowledge: the intuitions of sensibility through which we have empirical experience of objects and the concepts of understanding that provide the objective grasp of thought on experience (*WOT* 30). As Kant famously claims: "Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought" (B75).² The basic point is that, by forming the necessary kind of concepts, we will find a grasp on things that offers orientation in thinking. Kant's claim is famously that such concepts must be ideally necessary and universally valid. What is necessary true is that which cannot be otherwise and what is universally true is what goes for all possible cases (B2). Certainly, concepts, which are necessary and universally valid, will help to orientate one's otherwise arbitrary

² Henceforth I refer to *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* in terms of the A or B editions of the text.

and contingent empirical experience of the world – not only in an epistemic sense but also normatively and politically.

But how are such concepts formed? My focus is on the theoretical basics of concept formation, which Flikschuh discusses especially in the first chapter of her book. Concepts are formed on the basis of judgments or propositions. A judgment expresses a relation between a subject (A) and a predicate (B), such that we state A is or has or does B. For instance, bodies (subject) are heavy (predicate) (B10-11). In a judgment an object becomes the subject of a predicate. This means, an object is conceptualised in terms of a judgement. We judge, for instance, that a body is heavy. In this way, we form a concept of an object such as a body, and this concept is characterised in terms of other concepts such as “is” and “heavy.” In short, through judgements we form concepts of objects that characterise them in relation to other concepts.

As Flikschuh points out, Kant distinguishes between analytic and synthetic judgements (OT 32). In analytic judgments the predicate belongs to or is identical with the subject (A7/B10). The predicate explains the subject; it is “explicative”. In synthetic judgments the predicate adds something that does not already belong to the subject (A7/B11). The judgment thus synthesises or unifies a subject and predicate in a way that is “ampliative” rather than explicative. Notably, for Kant, “Judgements of experience, as such, are one and all synthetic” (A7/B11). Given its receptive nature, our experience always offers more information than a concept already holds. Therefore, such concepts form synthetic judgements.

This brings us to Kant’s decisive distinction between empirical and pure judgments (A8/B12). Empirical judgments follow from experience; they are a posteriori. Pure judgments are a priori; they precede experience. A priori judgments claim to be necessary and universally valid. Such judgements can be analytic and valid per

definition. Otherwise, they can be synthetic as well as apriori (A8/B13). Synthetic apriori judgments have predicates that enhance their subjects while preceding experience and being necessarily and universally valid for all possible experience. Such judgments have ideal objective validity.

Kant's quest is to identify synthetic judgments that have this kind of objective validity. He demonstrates that there are a priori concepts, which can function as rules that warrant the formation of objectively valid judgments (A89/B122). He calls them categories. In his metaphysical and transcendental deductions, Kant demonstrates how to identify categories of understanding that make possible objectively valid judgments.

Flikschuh does not discuss the deductions. However, for the sake of my response to her view of Kant's notion of the categories in Section 3, I give a very rough outline of the two deductions to be followed up by discussions in Sections 3, 4 and 5.³

In his metaphysical deduction, Kant demonstrates that the categories are derived from logical judgement (A66-83, B91-115). Logically, objective judgment includes a number of forms, divided into groups of quantity, quality, relation and modality and their subdivisions. Kant claims that by considering these forms of objective judgment, one can logically infer categories that match with these forms. Thus, the categories are derived from the logic of judgment (A80/B106). For instance, there is a logical difference between the categories of "causality and dependence" (if/then) used in a hypothetical judgment "if p then q" and the categories of

³ I am thereby well aware of the fact that this outline is simplifying, and that I cannot do any justice to the complexity of the deductions as done by scholars such as Longuenesse 1998, Ameriks 2003 or Guyer 2010. For a helpful introduction, see also Gardner 1999.

“reciprocity and exclusivity” (either/or) employed in the disjunctive judgment “either p or q.”

Kant’s choice for the particular categories is controversial.⁴ He adopted them from Aristotle and accepted them to follow logically from the mentioned forms of judgments. Nevertheless, some scholars do not see any such logical link between the table of judgments and the categories.

In his transcendental deduction, Kant demonstrates why the categories that are derived from logical judgment have a priori necessity for all understanding of experience (A84-130/B116-169). Kant shows that all judgment goes along with an implicit self-consciousness of the need to judge objectively by employing the categories as rules. Kant calls this self-consciousness the capacity to think or “I think” or “apperception” (B131–132). This capacity makes it possible to be aware of and use the categories to synthesise concepts in terms of objectively valid judgments. These are synthetic judgments, which precede but remain accountable for all possible experience. As a result, Kant shows how synthetic judgments a priori are possible, and consequently, how objectively valid concepts of possible experience can be formed.

Let me now return to Flikschuh and her suggestion of a flexible reading of Kant’s categories.

III

The flexibility of universals

Flikschuh confirms that there is considerable debate over the details of Kant’s account of the categories, into which she herself

⁴ See, for instance, Ameriks’ 2003 and Guyer’s 2010 discussions of the critics.

does not go.⁵ Notably she says, “the sole point that I want to make is that, for Kant, knowledge of objects depends on sensible intuition as much as its depends on a priori categories” (*WOT* 31) Following from this, she states:

My next thought is very basic, perhaps naïve: even if, for Kant, no human knower can arrive at judgements of objects without engaging a priori categories of quantity, quality and relation, it does not follow, given contextual variation in sensible intuition, that all human knowers arrive at identical judgements of objects. Necessary appeal to a priori categories notwithstanding, given the equal contribution of contextually variable sensible intuition, we should expect contextual differences in judgements about objects (*ibid.*).

Flikschuh concedes to read Kant against “the grain” (*WOT* 37). She claims that one can walk the tightrope between the universalism of the categories and the contextualism of empirical experience within the Kantian philosophical perspective (*ibid.*). Her point is to both avoid conceptual relativism and resist a form of universalism that is context insensitive. She takes the categories to function as fixed rules of understanding, but apart from the categories, there is nothing fixed or antecedently determined about the process of empirical concept formation (*WOT* 33). As she says, at the level of empirical concept formation, “sensible intuition constantly delivers new and variable ‘input,’ and, so she concludes, this demands conceptual flexibility (*WOT* 34-35).

Flikschuh takes the concept of the state as central example for her view of concept formation. She says: “although there is a priori necessity about our employing categories of quality, quantity, and

⁵ Guyer 2010, for instance, does not think that Kant gives convincing arguments for his two deductions, but neither does he think that they completely fail.

relation, there is no a priori necessity about our forming the concept of the state - whether or not we do depends on context” (*ibid.*). Consider what one can take to be the constitutive marks of the concept of the state. Again, one such constitutive mark is, according to political liberalism, that the concept of the state is as such a central ordering concept in political life (*WOT* 36). In fact, as Flikschuh points out, the territorial state is currently viewed as default concept of political life internationally (*WOT* 221). As such the concept of the state might be seen to be central to all possible political contexts. However, against the background of the incapability of states to cope with the demands of global justice, the question Flikschuh wants to ask is to what extent Kant affirms the moral necessity of state entrance (*WOT* 40). More specifically, she says: “I want to ask how much room there may be within the Kantian framework for reorienting our conception of the centrality of statehood in our political thinking” (*ibid.*).

Let me reconstruct Flikschuh’s argument as follows – if I get it right. If the territorial state is internationally accepted as the default concept of political life, then one might like to claim that it is politically valid for all possible cases. In this sense, one can apply the category of unity and claim that that the concept of the state is universally valid for all political life. Now, even if one would grant such universality to be the case, this does not mean that the acceptance of statehood is necessarily applicable in all contexts and that it cannot be otherwise. Kant granted, for instance, that one cannot expect from nomads the duty of state entrance (*WOT* 50ff.). The state might be a central ordering concept in all possible countries, however, it does not necessarily apply to the political life of nomads on the territory of the state at a given time. There might be necessity about our use of the category of unity to judge our concept of the state to be universally valid, but the empirical formation of this concept has no a priori necessity.

Another important example is that of people who find themselves in the territory of the state but do not feel home there. This refers particularly to the context of colonisation. Flikschuh argues that where a given people with an evolved history of state formation feels at home in that form, one can perhaps legitimately expect other peoples to respect its commitment to that form (*WOT* 221). However, “we can also ask this: where a given people with a history of colonial state imposition does not feel at home in that form, can the first expect that people to adopt that form nonetheless?” Flikschuh answers: “Everything else equal, I don’t see how it can” (*ibid.*). She consequently argues that even if one would grant territorial statehood as “the historically engendered ‘default position’ internationally, those who do feel at home in that form cannot legitimately expect those who do not feel at home to make it their home nonetheless” (*ibid.*). So even while states might order the political lives of all countries, it does not mean that it cannot be otherwise in other contexts. For instance, colonially imposed concepts of the state can be replaced by other central ordering concepts despite their purported universal validity. They might be universally applicable without being necessarily valid. Again, while there might be necessity about our use of the category of unity to judge our concept of the state to be universally valid as a central ordering concept of political life, “there is no a priori necessity about our forming the concept of the state – whether or not we do depends on context” (*WOT* 33).

The concept of the state thus demonstrates how, by the employment of the categories, a concept can be formed for all possible cases universally but without necessary validity for every empirical context. In this way, one can align Kant’s universalism to contextualism. This confirms Flikschuh’s conclusion: “Thus, although all finite rational knowers are epistemically bound by pure categories of the understanding as condition of judgements of

empirical objects in general, there is room for contextual variation at the level of empirical concept formation” (*ibid.*).

Flikschuh makes an important argument for what she calls a “Kantian route to a possible form of global normative thinking that can accommodate contextual variation in substantive beliefs, values and principles” (*WOT* 36). Given the problem of conceptual loss – or one should add, conceptual imposition - there is a need to be “more open-minded about others’ different ways of doing things and much more modest about liberal morality’s capacity for context transcendence” (*ibid.*). Flikschuh stresses the importance of this point by saying that “much of the rest of this book is an exploration of this possibility of a more context-sensitive, non-relativistic form of Kantian global normative thinking” (*ibid.*).

The way Flikschuh reads Kant against the grain is plausible and laudable. It proposes a “flexibility within Kantian universalism”, and as such suggests an open-minded way to deal with Kant’s contribution to addressing the questions as to what is orientation in global thinking. Something like flexible universalism seems to be a useful way to approach the question. Notably, Flikschuh states: “It is this flexibility within Kantian universalism that is of ultimate interest to me in this book” (*WOT* 41).

IV

Cultural universals

Much as I appreciate her view, I want to push Flikschuh a bit on the idea of flexibility within Kantian universalism. My aim in the next two sections is to elaborate on her flexible reading of Kant by the use of Wiredu’s and Hountondji’s notions of conceptually sharable universals. This section will offer a brief discussion of

Wiredu's *Cultural Universals* and Hountondji's *The Struggle for Meaning*.⁶

Let me start with Hountondji's critique of universals, specifically, of Alexis Kagame's attempt to translate Aristotle's metaphysical categories into his own language, Kinyarwanda (*SM* 200).⁷ Hountondji argues that Aristotle's mistake was to take categories owed to the Greek language to be universally valid. This is an "entrapment in the particular" (*ibid.*). He concludes that, "Aristotle fell into this trap unwittingly. Kagame, in his turn, fell into it, knowingly and freely" (*SM* 200).

Notably, Hountondji points out that "What was in question here, in fact, were the shortsighted language policies of our neocolonial states" (*ibid.*). Against the neocolonial trend to sustain colonial languages, Kagame's motive was actually to introduce indigenous concepts of thinking (*SM* 201). Kagame's attempt could be considered a strategy to decolonize language. However, his failure was to sneak in neo-colonial concepts through the backdoor.

Hountondji takes recourse to Wiredu, specifically to his notion of linguistic and cultural particularity and universality, to address the problem of what Wiredu calls "spurious universals."⁸ This calls for a closer comparison of their views of conceptual and cultural universals.

⁶ Henceforth I refer to *Cultural Universals* as *CU* and to *The Struggle for Meaning* as *SM*. The discussion of Wiredu and Hountondji relies on my forthcoming paper (Olivier 2019).

⁷ Kagame's four categories pertain to categories of Ntu (Being) and include, Mu-ntu (Being with Intelligence), Ki-ntu (Being without Intelligence or Thing), Ha-ntu (the Being of Space and Time), and Ku-ntu (the Modality of Being). See Kagabo (2004, 235) for an introductory discussion.

⁸ *CU* 5, *SM* 200.

Let me start with a decisive linguistic distinction that Wiredu draws between signs, signifiers, the act of signification and the referent. Wiredu distinguishes between the signifier (a word or symbol like a flag), signification (the thought or concept of a king's presence) and the referent (the king) (*CU* 15). The signifier, the flag, does not refer to the king but to the signification (thought, concept or meaning) of the king's presence. The signifier can only refer to the king because it conveys the concept of a king.⁹ This shows striking similarity with Hountondji's distinction between a signifier (word, symbol), signification (meaning, concept, thought) and actual referent (entity) (*SM* 53ff) Wiredu takes a sign as such to signify nothing – Hountondji would say, it is just an indication. Only if a sign expresses meaning does it signify something. A sign signifies in terms of signifiers such as words or symbols. To use Wiredu's example: the word house is a signifier, however, it can only signify an actual entity such as a house, if it expresses meaning, a thought, or a concept of a house (*ibid*). A signifier needs a concept or meaning to be capable of signification.

In terms of judgments or propositions, a signifier refers to a subject, which needs a predicate to signify meaning. A predicate refers to the meaning of a referent, an actual object. If the referent is absent, a predicate can still signify meaning. For instance, a unicorn has no referent but carries meaning, for it is a concept of fiction (*ibid*).

It is striking that Wiredu's focus is not on the signifiers of language but on the act of signification. This included capacities such as reflective perception, abstraction and deductive or inductive inference (*CU* 23) For instance, induction pertains to the capacity to draw from the reflective perception of particulars abstract concepts and to envisage hypothetical situations such as

⁹ See also Wiredu 2011, 26.

the consequences of one's actions (*ibid.*). This again presupposes the deductive capacity, for instance, not to take our perception of X for a non-X, by application of the principle of non-contradiction (*ibid.*).

Importantly, Wiredu holds that acts of signification manifest socially through communication. The capacity to conceptualize is in fact learned and developed through communication. It is through communication with others that we learn to signify, to express our experiences in sharable thoughts (CU 19). Thus, the capacity to signify, to conceptualise, "...unfolds in communication and communication is learned" (*ibid.*). All humans share this social capacity to learn to express and communicate their experiences conceptually. This is what Wiredu refers to as conceptual universals.

Wiredu's view thus is that the universal capacity to conceptualise and communicate experience is socially learned and shaped.¹⁰ This seems to relate fairly well to what Hountondji calls the phenomenology of language. Hountondji's view is that conceptualization (signification) is a sense-giving act that anticipates an intersubjective genesis of meaning.¹¹ His view is compatible with Wiredu's idea that we develop socially through communication the capacity to conceptualize experience. Both hold that the capacity to conceptualize - to perceive reflectively, to abstract and infer – Is what all humans share regardless of their cultural context.

As humans have this as a defining capacity, they can ideally communicate across cultures. But are some concepts not

¹⁰ Note, this goes against the objection that Wiredu presupposes as metaphysical category *a priori* conceptual or cultural universals. See, for instance, Eze 1998 and Janz 2009, 133ff.

¹¹ See Olivier 2019.

untranslatable? Both Wiredu and Hountondji are certainly aware of the obstacles of cross-cultural communication. As Hountondji notes in agreement with Wiredu, one can distinguish between culture in its narrow sense of contingent customary forms, beliefs and practices in the context of a specific type of physical environment and in its broader sense of conceptualization by means of language. In its narrow sense "...what defines culture, or to be exact, a culture, is the humanly contingent, not the humanly necessary." (SM 28) The humanly necessary is culture in its broader sense, thus the possibility to conceptualize by means of language, in short the possession of language. Thus, Wiredu says,

...the fact of language itself, i.e., the possession of one language or another by all human societies, is the cultural universal par excellence (*ibid.*)

Wiredu argues that all human societies, irrespective of their cultural particularity, possess language. This means, on the one hand, language is what all societies have, it is an intracultural universal. In other words, within all cultures people have the universal linguistic capacity to conceptualise - to perceive abstractly, to abstract and infer. On the other hand, language makes it possible to communicate cross-culturally and is in this sense an intercultural universal. Therefore, conceptual universals are the foundation of intra- and intercultural universals.

Both Wiredu and Hountondji advocate the notion of interculturally shared concepts as universally shareable expressions of lived experience. In the closing section, I make strong the idea of the shareability of universals in response to Flikschuh's idea of the flexibility of Kant's categories.

V

The shareability of universals

I argued in Section 4 that both Wiredu and Hountondji reject the metaphysical notion of static or colonially imposed universal concepts and instead advocate the development of concepts shared across all possible cultural contexts. Their emphasis is not as much on universal concepts as such as on the shared capacity to form concepts. The main point is to seek what we are capable of sharing, what concepts we can form, by critically rethinking our use of concepts, especially those imposed with a false claim of universality. This questions categories of concepts such as Aristotle's and their translation into the African context.

Where does this leave us with Kant's categories? After all Kant did adopt Aristotle's categories for his own use.

Recall, Flikschuh reads Kant against the grain. In Flikschuh's understanding, "all finite rational knowers are epistemically bound by pure categories of the understanding as condition of judgements of empirical objects in general", but "there is room for contextual variation at the level of empirical concept formation" (*ibid.*). There is a priori necessity about the pure concepts or categories, but no a priori necessity about our forming of empirical concepts. Flikschuh takes the formation of the concept of the state as an example of the empirical formation of concepts. Again, as she puts it, there is a priori necessity about our employing categories of quality, quantity, and relation, but there is no a priori necessity about forming the concept of the state – whether or not we do depends on context (*WOT* 33). While the concept of the state might appear to be universally applicable to all possible cases as a central concept of political life, there is no a priori necessity about its formation. The concept of the state demonstrates how a concept can principally be formed according to the categories to

apply to all possible cases universally without necessarily holding for every empirical context. Flikschuh thus reads Kant's universalism in a flexible way that makes its application compatible with contextual differences.

Now consider the fact that Wiredu and Hountondji both emphasise not concepts but the capacity of concept formation. The emphasis is, once again, on the capacity to form concepts, which can be shared across all cultural contexts, and the quest to search for such concepts intra- and interculturally. In their view, this goes for all concepts, also for categories such as those of Aristotle, which they take to be in fact culturally particular. The only universal they seem to take to come with a priori necessity, is our shared rational capacity to form universals. Viewed in Kantian terms, this capacity concerns the formation not only of empirical concepts but also of pure concepts that we take to be a priori categories. Accordingly, also the a priori categories are subject to the capacity of concept formation. This allows one to conclude that although the categories of understanding are the condition of forming empirical concepts, they are themselves conditioned by the search for shared universals within and across empirical contexts.

One might object that this is not exactly Kant but rather Wiredu's and Hountondji's views rendered in Kantian terms. Granted. However, let me explore – and defend - this rendition of Kant in more detail.

Notably, one of Flikschuh's central claims is that “on Kant's account, human knowers are not just concept dependent knowers; they are also concept producing knowers” (*WOT* 105). She further says that human knowers have the capacity to satisfy the cognitive needs that arise for them from their concept dependence by creating context-independent concepts (*ibid.*). Flikschuh does not mean to include into these concepts the Kantian categories. She

treats the categories as rules of judgement and not as substantive concepts.¹²

On this point, however, I think one could go a step further. If we concede that human knowers are not just concept dependent knowers but also concept producing knowers, then it seems only consistent if we include into this capacity the ability to create and revise all possible concepts, even a priori categories. Even as rules of judgment the categories still remain concepts, which knowers produce to rule in order to judge validly.

One may object that I confuse empirical concept producing knowers with the pure capacity of understanding to produce concepts irrespective of any personified knowers. My focus, however, is exactly on the capacity to know rather than the empirical knower. My emphasis is on the very Kantian premise that all judgments and concepts are based on the capacity of understanding to judge by forming concepts. This capacity is not about an empirical, personal knower that has the ability to understand. It is rather about the impersonal activity of understanding that all humans share, irrespective of their empirical manifestation.

If one advances this emphasis on the judging capacity of understanding one can perhaps argue as follows – with the admission that this might be naïve and too bold to please Kant-scholars. My argument consists of three steps:

¹² Flikschuh notes that there is considerable debate on the precise relationship, in Kant, between the categories as a priori formal concepts and empirical concept formation. Compare for instance Amerik's discussion of the deduction and his critique of the views of Peter Strawson, Jonathan Bennett, and Robert Paul Wolff (Ameriks 2006, 55ff.). I have no space to discuss any of that but rather attempt to read Kant here through the perspective of Wiredu's and Hountondj's views of concept formation, making strong the idea of shared universals.

1. The act of judgment employs the categories as rules to judge validly by forming empirical concepts that account for all possible experience. However, the categories are derived from the logical capacity to judge. This makes the capacity of judgment their source. But if the capacity of judgement is the source of the categories, then it must also be capable of producing them. Then the act of judgment must go along with a self-consciousness not only of its own need to use but also of its capacity to produce the categories as rules to judge validly. It follows that Kant's notion of the capacity of understanding to form empirical concepts must include the formation of categories that rule the validity of our judgments. It seems not against the grain but rather in line with Kant's view to say that as spontaneous capacity understanding is the source of all concepts, including the a priori categories. As such, the categories cannot be fixed concepts, but rather they must themselves be subject to the spontaneous capacity of understanding to revise all concepts, and eventually to produce others according to its cognitive needs. The conceptual capacity of understanding, so one can conclude, must then include both empirical and pure concept formation.

2. If we take the judgment of understanding to be capable to produce concepts that account for all possible cases of experience, then they must be universally sharable across all empirical contexts. Conversely, categories that we think rule empirical judgments across contexts must account for these very contexts and are subject to their sharing. Such accountability and sharing itself must shape the way self-conscious understanding forms not only empirical but also pure concepts. Hence, while understanding is the condition of the validity of experience across all contexts, it must itself be shaped, and in this sense conditioned, by the contexts it crosses.

3. Consequently, one can say, no concepts of understanding are absolutely context independent. All rational knowers have the capacity to produce them from within a particular context and share them across contexts as universal. Nevertheless, such concepts might be rejected in some contexts, for instance, in postcolonial African contexts, where they will be deemed imposed products of the Enlightenment. There is in fact a contextual demand to critically appraise the possible accountability, shareability, and eventually, revocability, of all concepts, regardless whether empirical or pure.

Finally, I grant that it is hard to accept that some categories of judgments such as hypothetical or disjunctive syllogisms, might not necessarily apply to all contexts. As heir of the Enlightenment, one cannot imagine the laws of non-contradiction (not both A and not A) or of excluded middle (either A or not A) as used in deductive arguments such as disjunctive syllogisms, not to have a priori necessity across all contexts. After all both Wiredu and Hountondji adhere to such principles of deductive logic. However, they accept these principles on the basis of the capacity of knowers to share them instead to presuppose them across all contexts. Consider, for instance, W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Double-consciousness manifests as the split experienced by black people in the United States of America to be part of a society that would not recognise them as equal participants. To be black becomes a problem, the problem of being a contradiction, a split Black-American, a doubled consciousness. The principle of non-contradiction does not necessarily apply to double-consciousness. If you are a black American, it is possible to be an American and not an American at the same time.

To summarise, my argument is that the conceptual capacity of understanding includes both empirical and pure concept formation. Even what we take to be a priori rules of understanding

remain concepts made by understanding. Understanding remains rooted in and accountable to particular contexts of experience. Ultimately, pure concepts of understanding can cross contexts only because they are shaped and shared by these very contexts.

My reading might stretch Flikschuh's flexibility thesis too far, but I still take it in line with her advocacy to read Kant in a more open-minded way.

Conclusion

Flikschuh argues that political liberalism fails to give orientation in global thinking on a seminal issue such as justice despite the abundance of concepts it offers. In this sense, we are conceptually lost in orientation. This calls for a reconsideration of the formation of concepts that offer orientation in thinking. Flikschuh importantly, if not ironically, challenges liberals to be open to what others, particularly African others, have to say. This includes being open to reconsider concepts that we take to be central to political life and indeed universally valid. With Kant, she argues that except for the categories, these concepts are subject to empirical concept formation and revision.

My focus was on the theoretical issue of concept formation. I pushed Flikschuh's point further by arguing that the conceptual capacity of understanding must include both empirical and pure concept formation. My argument is informed by Wiredu's and Hountondji's views of universals. They argue that Aristotle's categories as adopted by Kagame, or for that matter by Kant, are not necessarily shared as universals. The trend among African philosophers is to view them sceptically as colonial impositions. Using their perspective, I argued that it is consistent with Kant to take all concepts, including a priori categories of quality, quantity, relation or modality, to be based on our capacity to judge and to

form and share what is held to be universally and necessarily valid from within and across specific contexts. What we take to be a priori rules of understanding remain concepts made by shared understanding and accountable to different contexts of experience. Ultimately, even what we take to be pure concepts of understanding can cross different contexts only because they are shared and thus shaped by these very contexts. Concepts can only claim universality if they are genuinely shared within and across all contexts. Only such concepts will have the chance to give us global orientation in thinking about seminal issues such as justice. Otherwise, we will remain conceptually lost in orientation.

University of Fort Hare

References

- Ameriks, Karl. 2003. *Interpreting Kant's Critiques*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. 1969. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Signet Classic/New American Library.
- Eze, Emmanuel. 1998. "What are Cultural Universals?," in *Cultural Universals and Particulars* by Kwasi Wiredu, in *African Philosophy* 11 (1), 73-82.

Flikschuh, Katrin. 2017. *What is Orientation in Global Thinking? A Kantian Inquiry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gardner, Sebastian. 1999. *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason*, London and New York: Routledge.

Guyer, Paul. 2010. “The Deduction of the Categories: The Metaphysical and Transcendental Deductions.” In P. Guyer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 118-151.

Gyekye, Kwame. 2002. “Person and community in African thought,” in P. H. Coetzee, and A.P.J. Roux (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader*, 2nd edition. New York: Routledge, 348-366.

Hountondji, Paulin J. 2002. *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa*. Ohio: Ohio University Press.

Janz, Bruce B. 2009. *Philosophy in an African Place*. Lanham MD, Lexington: Rowman & Littlefield.

Kagabo, Loboire. 2004. “Alexis Kagame (1912-1981): Life and Thought,” in Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*, Malden (MA): Blackwell, 231-242.

Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *The Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. by P. Guyer, A. W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lear, Jonathan. 2006. *Radical Hope. Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge (MA)–London: Harvard University Press

Longuenesse, Béatrice. 1998. *Kant and the Capacity to Judge. Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique Of Pure Reason*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Olivier, Abraham. 2019. “African Phenomenology: introductory perspectives,” in E. Imafidon (ed.), *Handbook of African Philosophy*, Springer: London (forthcoming).

Wiredu, Kwasi. 1996. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

_____. 2011. “Empiricalism,” in H. Lauer, N. A. Appiah, A.J.A. Anderson (eds.), *Identity Meets Nationality: Voices from the Humanities*. Legon–Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 18-34.