

### WIREDU'S HUMANISM

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In this paper, I set out to achieve two things. First, I attempt to show that, although Prof. Wiredu's 'influential and important' book, **Philosophy and an African Culture**, is a collection of papers some of which, as one reviewer puts it, 'were intended for conferences and journals of disparate themes'<sup>1</sup>, it is not, as the reviewer suggests, 'just a cluster of opinions put together'.<sup>2</sup> I suggest that a central concern runs through the whole collection and that the divergence in the preoccupations of each of the papers is more apparent than real. Second, I endeavour to show that, in discussing the different aspects of his preoccupation in **Philosophy and an African Culture**, Prof. Wiredu does not advocate 'logical positivism as a model of philosophical thinking to help solve the problems of contemporary African Culture'.<sup>3</sup> All he does, I argue, is to underscore the role of Critical Philosophy in the solution of the African problem of self - identification and the achievement in Africa of 'true' development, i.e. development in all facets of life. In so doing he emphasizes the relevance of philosophical inquiries, however abstract, to practical issues in human life. It is precisely because of this emphasis on the connection between theoretical concerns in philosophy and practical issues that I see **Philosophy and an African Culture** as a good exemplification of that model of philosophy - the Socratic model - that puts philosophical inquiry in the service of human needs; hence the title of this paper.

In arguing these claims, let us begin with the three complaints which Wiredu, in the opening chapter of his book, says can afflict a society. 'They are', to quote him, 'anachronism, authoritarianism and supernaturalism'.<sup>4</sup> What does Wiredu mean by each of these terms? Anachronism, he says, is 'the failure to perceive anachronistic things for what they are and to discard or modify them as the case may require'.<sup>5</sup> To suggest that a thing or practice is anachronistic, then, is to suggest that it has outlasted its

suitability, and that it is no more adequate for the goals it, originally, was designed to serve. Authoritarianism, on the other hand, is defined as the 'unjustified overriding of an individual's will'.<sup>6</sup> To say of any human arrangement that it is authoritarian, therefore, is to say that it does not allow individuals the freedom to make 'deliberate, rational choices' among alternatives, whether in relation to theoretical positions on any issue or in relation to practical choices in the realm of action. Finally, supernaturalism is the point of view which sees 'rules, policies and action' as emanations from 'some supernatural source' - God, for example.

However, it is Wiredu's criticism of authoritarianism which holds together the various strands of thought in his book. In his critique of Marxism, or even his conception of philosophy and what it can do for Africa, Wiredu emphasizes the need to guard against authoritarianism in human social relations. His is a sustained attack on a dogmatic (unscientific) attitude which, at the purely theoretical level, can only generate intellectual errors that befuddle, rather than clarify, thought and, at the practical (political) level, leads to political intolerance. My suggestion in this paper is that this sustained attack on authoritarian tendencies, apart from serving as the 'common thread' which runs through most of the articles, also serves to underpin Wiredu's ardent belief that philosophical issues, however abstract, are relevant to practical issues affecting human life. It is this unyielding commitment to an intellectual orientation which puts knowledge in the service of human development that qualifies the essays in **Philosophy and an African Culture** as a good example of a humanistic philosophy.

Let us begin to give flesh to our exposition by clarifying how Wiredu tackles his fight against intolerance and the 'persecution and suppression of dissent' in the various issues that are discussed in his book. These issues, as I have just hinted in the preceding paragraph, include the following: (i) his conception of philosophy and what it can do for Africa; (ii) his critique of Marxism; and (iii) his position on truth and knowledge.

In his attack on authoritarianism we see Wiredu emphasizing the importance of reason to human survival. 'Reason', he writes, 'is what ought to decide between alternatives, and the disinclination to entertain questions about the reasons behind an established practice or institution is the sure mark of the authoritarian mentality'.<sup>7</sup> This

disinclination to reason may be attributed to a number of reasons. It may, in some cases, be attributed to tradition. This is usually the case in those societies, particularly traditional societies, in which conformity to social norms is stressed at the expense of individual initiatives, and in which certain institutions and people command unquestioning obedience, because they are seen as being versed in the wisdom of the age. The disinclination to reason may, at other times, be due to commitment to a set of beliefs which are thought to provide the only authentic path to the realisation of certain societal ideals. It may even be a practical manifestation of certain positions on such theoretical issues as the nature of Philosophy and the nature of truth. Wiredu, in his essays, not only gives us interesting insights into the nature of some of these sources of authoritarian tendencies and their effects on human development, he also offers suggestions as to how this authoritarian mentality can be fought, both in practical and theoretical terms.

In demonstrating how he goes about this task in his book, we may allow charity to begin at home by considering the specific case of Africa where the authoritarian mentality is easily noticeable. In traditional African societies, for example, this authoritarian trait was manifested in the unquestioning obedience to the authority of elders who were thought to be repositories of knowledge and wisdom. In these societies, little 'premium was placed on curiosity in those of tender age, or independence of thought in those of more considerable years'.<sup>8</sup> The tendency of some contemporary African leaders to see themselves as having the right answers to all societal problems may, given the fact that traditional beliefs still have some influence on beliefs and attitudes in contemporary African societies, justifiably be regarded as an unhappy left-over of the authoritarian streak in traditional culture. When we add to this the fact that ideology, in many African States, is understood in the 'degenerate sense' - i.e. the sense in which it is taken to mean 'a set of dogmas to be imposed by governments as the **exclusive** basis for political organisation of society'<sup>9</sup> - then it should not be difficult to understand the reason why, in Africa, it has been very difficult to secure 'such conditions as shall permit the self-realisation of men as rational beings'.<sup>10</sup>

But what could have encouraged the interpretation of ideology in this degenerate sense? The cause, Wiredu

suggests, should be located in the failure to realise that conceptions of truth, beauty and goodness are personal, and consequently,

If I punish another for not adhering to the true, the good, the beautiful, the penalty he pays is as a result of not adopting my opinions, attitudes and preferences.<sup>11</sup>

This failure to acknowledge personal preferences for what they are maybe, according to Wiredu, one of the reasons 'why Marxism has tended to lead to authoritarianism'.<sup>12</sup> However, he contends, there is a more fundamental explanation for this tendency of Marxism to lead to authoritarianism. This explanation is given in terms of the 'authoritarian trait' in the Marxist doctrine itself, a trait which, he suggests, can 'be traced to the conception of philosophy to be found in Marx and English'<sup>13</sup> - i.e., the ideological conception of philosophy. In his critique of Marxism, Wiredu is at pains to show the dangers to philosophy, and the practical consequences of this conception of philosophy. For him, the ideological class conception of philosophy, apart from harbouring certain theoretical confusions which Marxists cannot see because of their partisanship, also leads to intolerance of the worst kind.

Yet it is not only a misconception of the nature of ideology or of philosophy that can generate authoritarian tendencies in a society; our interpretation of the nature of a fundamental concept such as truth can also promote worsening interaction within the society. If an individual considers the truth which he happens to espouse on a given issue to be 'ineluctable and final', then such an individual may want, quite naturally, to use any means at his disposal to make those who hold antithetic points of view to conform. Thus, apart from the fine logical and epistemological arguments he advances to show that the humanistic theory of truth is to be preferred to the objectivist theory, which radically separates truth from opinion and, consequently, makes truth an eternal verity, Wiredu also provides a humanistic argument which is supposed to reinforce his logical and epistemological arguments. He contends:

Recognition that truth necessarily involves a point of view should lead one to reflect

that the 'truths' which one happens to espouse are not ineluctable and final, and that opposite points of view celebrating opposite 'truths' are in themselves neither evidence of insincerity nor proof of stupidity ...<sup>15</sup>

This far, Wiredu's philosophy can be seen to be diagnostic and therapeutic. It is diagnostic to the extent that it attempts in a very painstaking manner to expose the sources of the authoritarian mentality which is a hinderance to the development of satisfactory human relations; and therapeutic because he advocates a kind of intellectual attitude that can eliminate this hinderance. In all this, Wiredu stresses the importance of reason to human survival. In this connection, he 'passionately argues for a conception of philosophy that is pluralistic, self-critical and open-minded, i.e. one which is the very opposite of dogmatism and authoritarianism or unjustified belief and opinion'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, he advocates a scientific outlook in philosophy. This conception of philosophy is particularly relevant to Africa because:

The habits of exactness and rigour in thinking, the pursuit of systematic coherence and the experimental approach so characteristic of science are attributes of mind which we in Africa urgently need to cultivate not just because they are themselves intellectual virtues but also because they are necessary conditions of rapid modernization ...<sup>17</sup>

The case for a scientific outlook in African philosophical activity, then, is based on the understanding that the largely unscientific and authoritarian attitude prevalent in African traditional societies are no more adequate for the needs of contemporary African societies. The argument here is that: Since the needs of contemporary African societies are given expression in the search for development, the key to which 'is science and technology', any philosophy, to be in 'touch with the context of contemporary Africa', has to be 'thoroughly impregnated' by the scientific spirit.<sup>18</sup> And the scientific attitude is defined by such features as 'freedom of inquiry, openness to criticism, a general type of scepticism and fallibilism and non-veneration of

authorities'.<sup>19</sup> The emphasis Wiredu places on reason and his argument for 'the relation between philosophy and African culture', rather than being ahistorical, as a critic suggests,<sup>20</sup> is informed by a concrete, indeed historical, interpretation of the African condition. This, I suggest, is an interpretation that can hardly be contested, given the fact that

The feeling of racial superiority over us which the colonialists had, and their achievements which developed in us a colonial mentality were due to their scientific and technological achievements ...<sup>21</sup>

Thus, although Wiredu is of one mind with the logical positivists in his insistence that beliefs be rationally grounded, and also shares their love of rigour and clarity in philosophical analysis, he is markedly different from them in his conception of the role of philosophy. Whereas the concern of the logical positivists was primarily metaphilosophical, i.e. 'to rid Philosophy of fruitless inquiries and disagreements'<sup>22</sup> — a purpose for which they formulated a formal criterion of demarcation between what is meaningful and what is meaningless — Wiredu's preoccupation, in **Philosophy and an African Culture**, is to put philosophy in the service of human well-being by subjecting to critical examination the intellectual foundations of certain habits of thought which impede human development in all its interlocking facets. Thus, rather than see philosophy, as the logical positivists were wont to do, simply as a critical activity — an activity geared towards the demarcation of that which is cognitively significant (meaningful) from that which is not (meaningless) — Wiredu sees it as an activity which is both critical and constructive. This explains the reason why, although he considers it an urgent task of African philosophers to promote in Africa a scientific outlook, he also urges them to be sensitive 'to the specifics of the African situation', by making it their 'particular responsibility ... to research into their traditional background of philosophical thought'.<sup>23</sup> For Wiredu, then, clarification, rather than being an end in itself, is a means to an end — that of bringing philosophical activity to 'bear upon human problems, so as to liberalize and humanise and, in a word, enrich life'.<sup>24</sup>

Given these considerations, it becomes very difficult to see the sense in which Wiredu can be said to advocate 'logical positivism as an model of philosophical thinking to help solve the problems of contemporary African culture'.<sup>25</sup>

For, as we have seen, a distinctive mark of his Philosophy is that he sees, like John Dewey, but quite unlike the logical positivists, the connection between philosophical inquires and practical issues in human life, thereby acknowledging the humanistic essence of the philosophic enterprise. What he advocates is not the kind of unnecessarily tough-minded ('technocratic') intellectual outlook characteristic of the logical positivists, but an intellectual orientation that recognises the human essence of fundamental concepts such as 'truth', 'beauty', 'goodness', and thus strives to define them 'in terms of the basic needs and capabilities of human beings'.<sup>26</sup> His central argument is that it is only this kind of intellectual orientation that can ensure even development and mutual understanding in human societies.

Wiredu's philosophy, a glimpse of which we have in **Philosophy and an African Culture** is therefore humanistic because it puts knowledge in the service of mankind. And by being able to show the connection between abstract philosophical issues such as the question of the meaning of truth and practical issues, and the question of the relationship between ideology and development, he demonstrates both the centrality of philosophy to any academic programme that is geared towards the attainment of a humane society, and the compatibility of commitment to the realisation of certain human ideals with a high degree of theoretical finesse. **Philosophy and an African Culture** is, in many respects, 'an adequate characterization and a good example' of one type of philosophy that is relevant to human needs. It is a shining example of humanistic scholarship.\*

#### NOTES

1. Godwin Sogolo, Review of **Philosophy and an African Culture** in **Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies**, No. 3, October, 1983, p. 157.
2. **Ibid.**, p. 159.
3. Keith J. Ansell - Pearson, 'The Question of African Philosophy and Kwasi Wiredu's **Philosophy and an African Culture**' in **Journal of Humanities**, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, No. 1, April, 1987, p. 86.

4. Kwasi Wiredu, **Philosophy and an African Culture**, Cambridge: The University Press, 1980, p. 1.
5. **Ibid.**,
6. **Ibid.**, p. 2.
7. **Ibid.**, pp. 3-4.
8. **Ibid.**, p. 4.
9. **Ibid.**, p. 53.
10. **Ibid.**,
11. **Ibid.**, p. 55.
12. **Ibid.**, p. 70.
13. **Ibid.**
14. **Ibid.**, pp. 66, 155, 175.
15. **Ibid.**, p. 66.
16. Keith J. Ansell Pearson, **op. cit.**, p. 76.
17. Kwasi Wiredu, **op. cit.**, p. 32.
18. P.O. Bodunrin, in P.O. Bodunrin (ed.), **Philosophy in Africa: Trends and Perspective** Ile-Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife Press, 1985, p. xii.
19. Kwasi Wiredu, **op. cit.**, p. 32.
20. Keith J. Ansell - Pearson, **op. cit.**, p. 87.
21. P.O. Bodunrin, **op. cit.**
22. Milton K. Munitz, **Contemporary Analytic Philosophy**, New York and London: Macmillan publishing co. inc. and Collier Macmillan publishers, 1981, p. 241.
23. Kwasi Wiredu, **op. cit.**, p. 36.



24. **Ibid.**, p. 141.
  25. Keith J. Ansell - Pearson, **op. cit.**, p. 86.
  26. Kwasi Wiredu, **op. cit.**, p. 97.
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