

African Philosophy: Yesterday and Today

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Philosophy is essentially a reflective activity. To philosophize is to reflect on human experience in search of answers to some fundamental questions. As man takes a reflective look at himself or the world around him, he is filled with "wonder," and some fundamental questions arise in his mind. When he reflects on these fundamental questions in search of answers, he is philosophizing. Both Plato and Aristotle tell us that this "wonder" is the beginning of philosophy. "It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize."¹ Plato echoes this same view in *Republic* when he says that there is no other beginning of philosophy than this "wonder." Thus the first step in the philosophical activity is this "wonder" that accompanies man's experimental contact with himself or the world around him. This wonder gives rise to some fundamental questions, and this is the second step. The third step is taken when man begins to reflect on these fundamental questions in search of answers. At this stage, the man in question is philosophizing, and if he puts down his reflections in writing he has written a philosophical book.

Human experience is the source of the reflective activity known as philosophy. This experience could either be man's own experience of himself (subjectivity) or his experience of the world around him (objectivity). Hence philosophy could start from subjectivity or from objectivity. The early

Greek philosophers began from objectivity. As they observed the world around them they were filled with the philosophic "wonder." They were amazed at two things that struck them with particular interest. First, they were struck by the diversity and the unity in the universe. They observed that things around them were amazingly diverse; but at the same time they also observed that there was a basic unity in the midst of this diversity. Second, they were struck by the fact of change in the universe. They noticed that things were constantly changing; but at the same time they also observed that there was a basic continuity in the midst of these changes. Thus they observed that the universe combined unity with diversity and continuity with changes. These phenomena set the early Greek philosophers thinking, in search of explanations. Thus the marvels of the physical universe led the early Greek philosophers into philosophizing. Indeed such phenomena as the immensity of space, the immensity of the universe, the amazing variety of things, the idea of time, the ceaseless changes going on in the world around us, the continuity in the midst of these changes, the basic unity in the midst of diversity, the seasons of the year, the heavenly bodies and their orderly circular movement, the starry sky, the sun, the moon, etc., have led to deep reflections and philosophizing all over the world. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant tells us that two things fill him with wonder, namely, the starry sky above and the moral law within.

But, as it has been already mentioned, philosophizing can also start from the human person. Indeed man has within himself a richer source of

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philosophy than the physical universe. For the marvels and the complexities of the human person far exceed those of the physical universe. The brevity of human life, the vicissitudes of life, man's superiority over the rest of nature which he controls and dominates, his power and weaknesses, his joys, sorrows, successes and failures, his finitude, his experience of suffering, misery, disease, death and decay, man's greatness and misery, etc., have led to deep reflection and philosophizing all over the world. Buddha's philosophy, for example, arose from his reflection on human suffering. Reflection on these phenomena of human existence gives rise to some basic questions about the nature of the human being: what kind of being is man, so powerful and yet so weak, so great and yet so miserable? Today he is strong and powerful, tomorrow he is gone, and that is the end of him. Man has a natural yearning for continued existence, his strongest instinct is the instinct of self-preservation – his wish to continue living. Yet his lifespan is brief and is often terminated contrary to his deepest desire, and all his efforts to resist this imposed termination are futile. Man has a strong natural desire to know, he is by nature curious. Yet his knowledge is so limited that he does not know even himself. He does not know why he exists and he has no answers to his own basic questions about himself. He did not choose to come into this world, he simply found himself in it without knowing why; and sooner or later he will be forced out of it. Like everything else in the universe, man simply appears in it and eventually disappears from it. "What a chimera is man!" exclaimed Pascal, a chaos, a subject of contradiction. Thus, man is to himself a problem, a mystery. What is his origin? What is his ultimate destiny? Why is he here? What happens when he is forced out of this life? Is he completely part of nature or does he transcend nature? Is the difference between him and the lower animals a difference in degree or a difference in nature? What is he living for? Has his life any ultimate meaning?²² Is there a force over and above man that controls all these? If there is such a force can it be known?

These and similar questions are fundamental questions about the human person. They have led to deep reflections all over the world. To reflect on such questions in search of explanations or answers is to philosophize. There is no part of the world where men never reflect on such basic questions about the human person or about the physical universe. In other words, there is no part of the world where men do not philosophize. The ten-

dency to reflect on such fundamental philosophic questions is part of human nature; it is rooted in man's natural instinct of curiosity – the instinct to know.

Human nature and human experience are basically the same all over the world, and the tendency to philosophize is part of human nature. Hence the German philosopher Karl Jaspers says that "man cannot avoid philosophizing."²³ In a certain sense, that is, in a loose sense, every man is a philosopher in as much as every man at one time or another in the course of his life reflects on some of the fundamental philosophic questions about human life or about the physical universe. At funerals, for example, or at the sight of a dead body, or in the face of suffering, sickness, pain, misery etc., men are apt to reflect on the meaning and value of human life. However, in the strict sense of the word, a philosopher is one who devotes a good deal of his time reflecting on these questions and who frequently and habitually does this. There are such people all over the world; they are to be found among all peoples, in all civilizations and in every part of the globe. It is not only in the Western world that men reflect on the fundamental questions about human life or about the universe. Those who, in any civilization, were particularly struck with "wonder" at the marvels and complexities of the human being or the physical universe, and frequently devoted a lot of time reflecting on the fundamental questions arising from these marvels or complexities, constitute the philosophers of these civilizations. It is not necessary to employ Aristotelian or the Russellian logic in this reflective activity before one can be deemed to be philosophizing. It is not necessary to carry out this reflective activity in the same way that the Western thinkers did. Ability to reason logically and coherently is an integral part of man's rationality. The power of logical thinking is identical with the power of rationality. It is therefore false to say that people cannot think logically or reason coherently unless they employ Aristotle's or Russell's form of logic or even the Western-type argumentation. Some people, trained in Western philosophy and its method, assert that there is no philosophy and no philosophizing outside the Western type of philosophy or the Western method of philosophizing (which they call "scientific" or "technical"). In his book *An Introduction to Western Philosophy*, Professor Antony Flew says that philosophy consists of argument "first, last and always," and since there is no argument in Eastern thought (or so he thinks) there

is consequently no philosophy in Eastern thought. Similarly, referring to African traditional philosophy, Professor Wiredu has this to say: "without argument and clarification, there is, strictly, no philosophy."²¹ African traditional philosophy, according to him, is termed philosophy only on a generous understanding of the term. Professor Wiredu is well-versed in Western philosophy, especially the Anglo-Saxon analytic tradition which sees philosophy essentially in terms of logic, analysis and clarification of terms. This is the impression one gets from his writings. He is certainly one of the leading African philosophers of today and he has contributed a great deal to African philosophy. However, when he says that without argumentation and clarification there is strictly no philosophy, he means Western-type argumentation. In other words, he means that if the reflective activity is not carried out through the Western-type argument and clarification (which the British analytic tradition insists on) then it is not philosophy. In the first place, the essence of philosophy is not argument but reflection, and this does not have to take the form of the Western-type argument. Wherever there is reflection on the fundamental questions about man or about the universe (whatever form this reflection may take) there is philosophy.

We must distinguish between philosophy and its mode of transmission and preservation. Philosophical reflections can be preserved and transmitted in a number of ways. By far the best way to transmit and preserve them is by writing, in the form of books. The advantages in this mode of preservation and transmission are enormous; not only are these reflections preserved and transmitted intact, the philosophers whose reflections are so preserved and transmitted are also identified and known individually. In this way it is possible to know who the original authors of certain ideas or views are, either through their own writings or through the writings of those who wrote about them (as is the case with men like Buddha, Socrates, Jesus Christ who in themselves left no writing behind). The Western world then has been fortunate in this regard since the art of writing has been in existence for a very long time in the West and consequently, this has made it possible to preserve substantially the reflections of its philosophers. We therefore can now talk of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, etc. But who can say that other civilizations do not have their own philosophers?²² Who can say that men of other civilizations do not think, do not reflect on the basic philosophic questions about

human life or about the universe? Men of the Western world were not the only people blessed with rationality, with intelligence, with thought, with the instinct of curiosity. These are all characteristics of human nature and are to be found among all peoples all over the globe. All civilizations, all people, have their own philosophers – their own Socrates, their own Plato, their own Descartes, their own Hegel, etc. In this Africa cannot be an exception. Unfortunately, due to the absence of records in writing in Africa until recent times, the philosophical reflections of African thinkers were not preserved effectively.

The fact that the philosophical reflections of African thinkers in the past were not preserved or transmitted by writing accounts for the fact that these philosophers remain unknown to us. But this does not mean that they did not exist, for we have fragments of their philosophical reflections and their views preserved and transmitted to us through channels other than writing such as mythologies, formulas of wise-sayings, traditional proverbs, stories, and especially religion. This is to say that writing, though the most effective, is not the only means of transmitting knowledge across generations. Apart from mythologies, wise sayings, world-views, knowledge can be preserved in the socio-political set-up of the people. These are the channels through which the reflections and views of African philosophers have been preserved and transmitted to us in Africa. These philosophical reflections and views have therefore become, in the process of transmission over ages, part of the African way of life, part of the African culture and heritage. But the individual original authors of these views remain unknown to us. Yet we know that these views must have been the fruits of deep and sustained philosophical reflections by some individual African thinkers in the past. For where there is smoke there must be some fire even when, for some reason, the fire is not seen. The fragments of philosophical reflections, ideas and world-views transmitted to us through the formulas of wise-sayings, through proverbs, stories, socio-political organizations, mythology, through religious doctrines and practices did not originate from a vacuum. They are evidences of deep philosophical reflections by *some gifted individual thinkers* who were the *African philosophers* of the past, the African counterparts of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, etc. Professor Wiredu calls African traditional philosophy "community thought" and says that it "is not the creation of any specifiable set

of philosophers.²⁶ He says it is the common property of all and sundry. Does Professor Wiredu mean that these ideas, these insights, these world-views etc., did not originate from individual thinkers? How then did they originate in the first place? We know that there is no such thing as collective consciousness or community consciousness in the strict sense of the word. For consciousness is always an individual consciousness and thinking is always done by individuals. The term "community thought" can mean nothing other than the thought of individuals in a community, for thinking is always done by individuals. African traditional philosophy must have originated from some particular individual thinkers, individual philosophers who have reflected on the fundamental questions arising from human experience. Professor Wiredu says that they are the common property of all and sundry, but this does not mean that they originated from all and sundry. Thoughts and ideas put forward by individual thinkers do eventually become common property of all and sundry in a given community, but this does not mean that they had no original individual authors. Let us take the example of the Akan concept of the human person described by both W. E. Abraham⁷ and Wiredu.⁸ According to the Akan, the human person is made up of five elements: (1) *nipadu* – a body, (2) *okra* – a soul, the guiding spirit, (3) *sunsum* – that part of a man which accounts for his character, (4) *ntoro* – that part of man which is passed on from the father and which is the basis of inherited characteristics, (5) *mogyia* – that aspect of man which becomes a ghost after death. It is something passed on from the mother and it is what determines one's clan identity. Now, this is a highly complex concept of man and it is obviously the fruit of deep and sustained reflection on the human person. Such a reflection culminating in this complex notion of the human person must have been carried out by some gifted individual thinkers among the Akan people. Although this Akan concept of the human person has become the common property of all and sundry among the Akan, yet it did not originate from all and sundry or from a vacuum. The authors were the Akan philosophers at some time in the past whose ideas have become part of the Akan heritage, part of their culture. These Akan philosophers must evidently have been reflecting on the nature of the human person, and this theory of man is the fruit of their reflection. The fact that we do not know who these philosophers were does not mean that there were no

such people, no such thinkers and that these ideas had no original individual authors. This concept of man is richer and more complex than anything we find in Western philosophy and it evidently has original individual authors. These were the Socrates, the Plato, the Descartes etc. of the Akan people.

Professor Wiredu also says that folk thought consists of bald assertions without supportive arguments.⁹ Yet we know that they are not gratuitous assertions, for the original authors of these ideas and views obviously had their reasons for holding and advancing them. They are not bald assertions but the fruit of reflection, the conclusions of a reasoning process. These African thinkers did not just advance these ideas and views without reasons or without thinking and reflecting on the issues in question. They did not put their reasoning in the form of Aristotle's syllogism or Russell's logical form, but they evidently had their reasons. When for example they held the view of reincarnation they evidently reasoned before coming to this conclusion. They must have made some observations about people they knew who had died and those born later. They noticed that certain traits in the former reappeared in the latter. They must have reflected on these phenomena before coming to the conclusion that certain aspects of man are reborn after death. Similar observation and reflection must have led the Akan philosophers to hold the view that the human person is composed of five elements as enumerated above. African philosophers therefore must have gone through a process of observation, reasoning and reflection before arriving at the ideas, views or world-views which they have transmitted to us through the channels of proverbs, wise-sayings, stories, mythology, socio-political organizations, religious doctrines, etc.

Now, how do we find out the reasoning process which led them to hold these views? How do we get at their reason for the ideas, views and doctrines transmitted to us? In a culture whose philosophy is preserved in books, this is an easy task. If for example we want to know why Plato held the view that the soul is immortal all we need do is read the *Phaedo*. But in a culture whose philosophy was preserved by memory through wise-sayings, proverbs, stories, mythology, religion, etc., handed down from generation to generation, elderly people (since they are the nearest we can get to the original thinkers) can be of some help. Since the philosophy was preserved by memory rather than by books, the memory of the elderly people should therefore, as it were, be consulted in order to find out the

reasoning process that led to these which have been handed down to us. The memory of the elderly people therefore takes the place of books. In the Western culture research of this nature is normally done in the library. Because of this peculiar situation of African traditional philosophy, there is need for field-work in our researches. This field-work aims at finding out the reasoning process that led to the views handed down to us, by interviewing the old, elderly and the aged. In other parts of the world, if you want to know the philosophy of the given people, says Professor Wiredu, "you do not go to aged peasant or fetish priests or court personalities, but to the individual thinkers in person or in print."¹⁰ In the case of African traditional philosophy, the memory of aged peasants or court personalities can be of immense help.

African traditional philosophy is not the only philosophy of Africa. Contemporary Africans also philosophize. We therefore agree with Professor Wiredu that the term "African Philosophy" should not be understood only in terms of African traditional philosophy since there is also *contemporary African philosophy*.¹¹ There are contemporary African philosophers and there is contemporary African philosophy. This means that a course on traditional philosophy should not be confined to traditional philosophy but should include contemporary African philosophers such as Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold S. Senghor, Nyerere and Kwasi Wiredu. The first three are political thinkers and politicians who have contributed immensely to contemporary African political philosophy. The last named, Kwasi Wiredu, is a professional philosopher, a professor of philosophy. There are of course several other professional philosophers in departments of philosophy all over Africa.

Professor Wiredu observes that contemporary African philosophers devote a lot of time on the question of African philosophy, which is distinct from doing African philosophy. He believes it is necessary at this stage to go beyond talking *about* African philosophy and get down to actually doing it.¹² Professor Wiredu accordingly gets down to work and advances two philosophical theses: first, that truth is nothing but opinion, and second, that to be is to be known. The first thesis, i.e., that truth is nothing but opinion, has been criticized by another African philosopher, Dr Oruka. Professor Wiredu has defended himself against both this and other criticisms.¹³

Wiredu denies any distinction between truth and opinion, and holds that "there is nothing called

truth as distinct from opinion."¹⁴ Common sense experience, he says, seems to indicate that truth is distinct from opinion. We sometimes hold some opinions as true but only to discover later that we were wrong. From this fact, common experience leads one to make a distinction between truth and opinion. Truth is then seen as an independent, objective reality, categorically distinct from opinion.¹⁵ Wiredu calls this an objectivist view of truth according to which truth is a timeless, eternal and unchanging reality whereas opinions do change. He rejects this objectivist view of truth on the ground that "if truth is categorically different from opinion, then truth is, as a matter of logical principle, unknowable."¹⁶ "Any given claim to truth is merely an opinion advanced from some specific point of view, and categorically different from truth. Hence knowledge of truth as distinct from opinion is a self-contradictory notion."¹⁷ Thus, the objectivist theory implies, according to Wiredu, that truth is unknowable. But this is at variance with common experience, for we sometimes know some propositions to be truth. "Therefore the objectivist theory must be incorrect."¹⁸ Wiredu contends that the element of "point of view" is intrinsic to the concept of truth, that truth is always truth from some point of view. Wiredu simply identifies "point of view" with "opinion" and contends that since truth is always truth from some point of view it follows that truth is always and nothing but opinion. "Truth then is necessarily joined to point of view or better, truth is a view from some point, and there are as many truths as there are points of view."¹⁹

I cannot subscribe to this subjectivist theory of truth which makes no distinction between truth and opinion. "To be true is to be opined," says Wiredu.²⁰ Truth is not identical with opinion. Truth is objective whereas opinion is always subjective. Opinion is always the opinion of somebody, a subjective view of something, but truth cannot be said to be the truth of somebody. Wiredu tries to dismiss the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity or to reduce objectivity to subjectivity so that objectivity will disappear. But if objectivity itself were to disappear or if it were reduced to subjectivity, we could no longer talk of subjectivity itself since it would thereby lose its distinctive characteristic which it has, only if and when it is contrasted with objectivity. This applies to truth (objectivity) and opinion (subjectivity). If, as Wiredu contends, truth is nothing but opinion, then opinion itself would lose its meaning which it can have only

if and when it is contrasted with truth. Wiredu's assertion that there are as many truths as there are points of view amounts to saying that every point of view is true or that every point of view represents the truth, and this is plainly false. Wiredu implicitly identifies "point of view" with "opinion." But in reality they are not identical. Opinion is always subjective but point of view can be objective. It makes no sense to talk of "an objective opinion" since opinion is always subjective, but one can talk of an "objective point of view," or "from the point of view of objectivity." Consequently, even if it is true that the element of point of view is intrinsic to the concept of truth it still would not follow that it is nothing but an opinion.

Wiredu's other thesis is that "to be is to be known." Just as the cognitive element of point of view is intrinsic to the concept of truth, so is the concept of knowledge intrinsic to the concept of being or existence. To say that an object exists, Wiredu argues, is to assert that the term in question refers to an object. "To be (to exist) then means for a given term 'x' to be asserted to refer to some object."²¹ Thus to say that "x" exists is to say that "x" has a reference. It is plain without argument, says Wiredu, that one cannot claim that a term "x" refers to some entity while disclaiming all knowledge about the entity in question. From this it follows that to claim or say that an object exists implies that one has some knowledge of that object.

Hence to exist is to be known.

Again, I cannot subscribe to this thesis. The similarity between this thesis and that of Berkeley (that to be is to be perceived) is obvious. Indeed Wiredu declares that the thesis of Berkeley is irrefutable,²² and his own thesis is simply another form of that of Berkeley. To say that to be is to be known, as Wiredu does, implies that the existence of an object is dependent on the object being known. But this cannot be the case because knowledge always presupposes an object which is prior to and independent of the knowledge itself. The act of knowing is an activity directed to an object, and this presupposes that the object of knowledge exists prior to, and is independent of, the activity of knowing which is directed to it. It is not the knowing activity that constitutes the object in being. Nothing can be known except it exists prior to and independently of the act of knowing. Objects therefore exist first of all before the activity of knowing is directed to them, thus becoming objects of knowledge. To be can therefore not be to be known. It is true that we cannot assert that an object exists without knowing the object in question, but that does not make the object dependent on our knowledge of it. To know an object is to make the object in question the object to which our knowing activity is directed, and this certainly implies that the object exists prior to and independently of our knowledge of it.

Notes

- 1 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b.10.
- 2 Cf. Karl Britton, *Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*, Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- 3 K. Jaspers, *Introduction à la philosophie*, Librairie Plon, 1974, p. 1.
- 4 K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Cambridge University Press 1980, p. 47.
- 5 Hegel, who saw philosophy as the self-consciousness of the Spirit, was led by racism to say that in Africa the Spirit had not yet attained self-consciousness, meaning that there is no philosophy in Africa, no rationality, no thinking.
- 6 Wiredu, pp. 46-7.
- 7 W. E. Abraham. *The Mind of Africa*, University of Chicago Press, 1962, pp. 59-61.

- 8 Wiredu, p. 47.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 47-8.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. vi.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 174, and the last chapter of the book.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 114.