

Book Review

Reading Wiredu, by Barry Hallen

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As Barry Hallen observes, Kwasi Wiredu needs no introduction to many philosophers. A Ghanaian Akan, a graduate of Oxford, and the author of more than a hundred essays, Wiredu is one of the most prominent philosophers to consider cross-cultural issues relevant to Africa as well as to the West. Hallen himself needs little introduction. As long ago as 1991, he was described by Odera Oruka as, among other things, a leader in the school of African philosophy that uses anthropological research to advance philosophical points (see Oruka 1996, 183). For “many years,” Hallen has known Wiredu as both “colleague and friend” (p. 21).

Hallen’s overview provides a comprehensive and synoptic picture of individual arguments within Wiredu’s general approach to philosophy, which Wiredu calls *genetic* and describes as inspired by the work of John Dewey. As Hallen notes: “According to Wiredu, a *genetic* approach aims to identify the origins of foundational components of human understanding” (p. 21). I focus on three topics: (a) Quine’s famous observation that to be is to be the value of a bound variable, (b) consensus, and (c) sympathetic impartiality.¹

Quine

Much of Wiredu's work considered by Hallen concerns Quine's use of symbolic logic to conclude that existence claims are always theory-dependent. The discussion is complex and nuanced.

Quine is commonly understood as using logic to conclude that the statements of a theory expressed in a natural language treat certain individuals and classes as existing in reality. For his part, Wiredu certainly insists on the strictly formal nature of logic, analyzing the relationships between the terms in a statement. He seems to think that, in some cases, logic should not be used to support existence claims about what is treated as real by the statements of a natural language. The reason is that statements expressed in English sometimes refer to the existence of things that cannot be referred to in Twi, the language of Akans.

Wiredu develops this point most thoroughly with respect to the mind-body problem when minds are viewed as nonspatial substances in the manner of Cartesian dualism. He thinks that this type of problem is "tongue-dependent" (p. 31). It obviously arises in such Western languages as French and English. But it does not arise in Twi. On the one hand: "The concept of 'mind' implicit here [Twi] is of mind as a *function* ['the *function* of thought'] rather than an *entity*" (p. 31). Specifically, minds are not understood as entities in space.² On the other hand: "There is no way of pretending in that medium [Twi] to be speaking of the existence of something which is not in space" (p. 56). That is, Twi speakers are monistic regarding space. In contrast with Descartes, according to Wiredu, Twi speakers think everything that exists does so in the space of material objects, including thought.

Wiredu advances two more examples of a philosophical problem as being language dependent. First: "The metaphysical distinction between a thing and its properties cannot be expressed in Akan [Twi] without unconcealed absurdities" (p. 30). This holds when things but not properties are viewed as existing in space. Second: "*The correspondence theory does not make sense . . . in Twi language usage*" (p. 57). According to this theory, statements are true when they correspond to the appropriate facts about the world. This requires the existence of a "realm of facts as an ontological order distinct from the realm of statements and entities such as trees and houses" (p. 56). In Twi, however, "a statement and the fact that

can make that statement true or false . . . are not expressed by different words” (p. 57). Consequently: “Trying to express the point of correspondence theory in Akan [Twi] is a tautology” (p. 58). “From [this] it follows that some philosophical problems are not universal” (p. 59).

Hallen mentions that J. T. Bedu-Addo offers an analysis of Twi somewhat different from Wiredu’s (p. 66). We can observe this points to the fact that Wiredu’s language-based arguments would be strengthened if supported by research in linguistics journals. In the meantime, the arguments invite further discussion regarding what seems revealed when Twi-speaking philosophy students learn to discuss in English the three problems referenced above.

Consensus

Another cross-cultural matter that invites discussion is the expansive view Wiredu takes of what he calls *consensual governance*. He first uses this term substantively to criticize Kwame Ninsin’s view that, rather than being independent citizens, traditional Africans were subjects of a leader with a divine right to lead (Ninsin 2012, 1118).³ In contrast, Wiredu thinks that “decision-making in traditional African life and governance was, as a rule, by consensus” (p. 85). In other words, decision-making was conducted by independent citizens without benefit of sacral authority. The most reasonable way to resolve this debate is to agree that both Wiredu and Ninsin are correct in their own ways.

Wiredu is right that, prior to a governing decision’s being declared in traditional African societies, all parties were invited to debate whatever alternatives were at issue: “Substantive dialogue between divergent individuals in a family or parties in a community enables everyone who is contending ‘to feel that adequate account has been taken of their points of view’ and serves to promote ‘a willing suspension of disagreement, making possible agreed actions without necessarily agreed notions’” (p. 86). Once consensus was reached traditionally, however, Ninsin is right that it was authorized by a leader as “representative of the gods as well as the ancestors” (Ninsin 2012, 1118) and, thereby, granted extraordinary force. Busia makes this point about the Ashanti of Ghana in particular, in which case a traditional chief was viewed as sacral by virtue of being “successor

of the ancestors” (Busia 1951, 36): “The most important aspect of Ashanti chieftaincy was undoubtedly the religious one. An Ashanti chief filled a sacral role. . . . His highest role was when he officiated in public religious rites which gave expression to the community values. . . . This sacral aspect of the chief’s role was a powerful sanction of his authority” (Busia 1967, 20).⁴

This said, the more important point for Wiredu is that there are three reasons why governance within liberal democracy inhibits the consensual approach to compromise just described. First, liberal democracy involves organizations—political parties—that often “become identified with specific ethnic groups” (p. 88) in multiethnic African nations where competition at the national level is often based on ethnicity. Second, citizens in a liberal democracy participate politically in “elections, which happen very occasionally”: “But those are the only occasions when citizens can exercise what is referred to as their vote” (p. 87). Third, liberal democracies use “majority rule” to decide “winner take all’ . . . [contests among parties] for overall control of government. . . . [This] attitude implicitly tends to disenfranchise minorities from playing a significant role in the governing process” (p. 88–89).

Instead, Wiredu prefers governance within what he calls *consensual democracy*: “In a consensual democracy, there will be no *political parties*. This means candidates will not run for office on the basis of their party affiliations. As individuals, they will run for office on the basis of their *qualifications* for office. . . . [W]ithout the constraints of membership in parties relentlessly dedicated to wresting power or retaining it, representatives will be more likely to be actuated by the objective merits of given proposals” (p. 86). As in liberal democracies, governance in consensual democracies will involve a hierarchy of representative officeholders. In consensual democracies only, however, “the voluntary acquiescence of the minority with respect to a given issue would normally be necessary for the adoption of a decision” (p. 91).

Basing political decisions on a proposal’s objective merits is obviously desirable. Political contests that avoid winner-take-all results might well be desirable. But Hallen is right to question whether consensual democracy would diminish the negative effects of group-based chauvinism

more than liberal democracy does: “Even in the absence of political parties, why should it be presumed that consensual governance would not face the same chauvinism problem that has troubled African liberal democracies?” (p. 91).

Wiredu’s discussion of consensual governance is most cross-culturally relevant regarding the requirement within consensual democracy that political decisions must involve the voluntary acquiescence of a minority. This requirement provides any minority with a veto power that is able to produce gridlock when it comes to group decisions at the national level. This sort of thing actually occurred at the founding of the United States when the question arose of each state’s responsibility for national revenue under the Articles of Confederation. Because of the emergency created by the Revolution, each colony did contribute its share to national revenue even though this was voluntary under the articles. After the war was won and the emergency eliminated, however, many of the new states failed to continue doing so. Rectifying the matter was a major reason for the founders adopting a new constitution replacing the old articles.

Granted, America’s constitutional founders explicitly hoped their own replacement would not lead to political parties. But it did—because parties are politically stronger than even brilliant and idealistic individuals when they lobby as individuals; and because political decisions are typically based on strength. Wiredu needs to explain why he thinks modern Africans would be willing to use something other than strength when making political decisions. Strength, of course, can be based on the persuasive power of rational as well as groupism factors.

Sympathetic Impartiality

Wiredu is most cross-culturally relevant when it comes to what he calls *sympathetic impartiality*. Much of that work focuses first on Akan ethics and morality: “Akan ethics . . . defines morality purely in terms of human interests. . . . Morality, strictly conceived . . . concerns the harmonization of the interests of the individual with that of society on the principle of sympathetic impartiality” (Wiredu 1996, 235, 237). As a part of his genetic approach to philosophy, however, Wiredu thinks sympathetic

impartiality is also “a universal principle that all human beings must live by if any community or society is to survive”: “Such values as truthfulness, honesty, justice, and chastity are simply aspects of sympathetic impartiality” (pp. 75–76).⁵

Concerning interactions among just a few individuals, Wiredu emphasizes that the element of sympathy includes “goodwill . . . that goes beyond mere duty” (p. 73). He compares this to the Golden Rule: “Let your conduct at all times manifest a due concern for the interests of others. . . . A person may be said to manifest due concern for the interests of others if in contemplating the impact of her actions on their interests, she puts herself imaginatively in their position, and having done so, is able to welcome that impact” (p. 76). Thus, for example, one might sympathetically forgive a loan that, through no fault of her own, a debtor simply cannot repay. Presumably, one’s sympathy in such a situation would extend to friends and family more than to strangers. In any case, sympathy here could be understood as just and as compatible with impartiality because the lender has endorsed this exception to the impartiality of a loan’s obligation, something that the lender has a right to do.

Concerning justice, however, sympathy applies to all members of a society and needs further explication with respect to the laws that organize those members. How might sympathy affect these laws? Wiredu does not address this question directly. However, sympathy in a just society’s laws can be easily and reasonably explicated by Rawls’s difference principle (see Rawls 1971, 65ff.). That is, inequalities should serve the interests of the members of a society who are the least advantaged. Likewise, the impartiality of a just society’s laws might be well explicated by the veil of ignorance in Rawls’s original position. That is, laws should be adopted by people without knowledge of those individuals who will benefit most or least from the available options. These two possibilities suggest further discussion comparing and contrasting Akan and Western views of ethics and morality.

Wiredu has done this himself in a number of publications (see Wiredu 1980, 1995, 1996). A recurring theme is one of contrast regarding what he calls *supernaturalism*. This denotes the view of colonizing missionaries that the Supreme Being has revealed certain norms to be universally binding on all people, marriage as monogamous in particular. According to Wiredu, for traditional Akans, the only norms that actually receive

governing support from any “extra-human being or force” are certain local customs that bind only themselves (Wiredu 1995, 404).⁶ By virtue of this universal/local difference in scope, Wiredu thinks traditional Akans tended to resist the supernaturalistic justification employed by colonizing missionaries to condemn the traditional practice of polygamous marriage.

Wiredu also thinks the view of various norms as universal by virtue of being supernaturally supported leads to a sense of personal infallibility. He thinks this sense sometimes extends to a person’s own normative beliefs, even those not viewed as revealed by the Supreme Being. This is true, for example, of beliefs regarding Western-style political bureaucracies:⁷ “In that case it becomes quite possible for policies which lead manifestly to human suffering to be advocated or pursued with a sense of piety and rectitude” (Wiredu 1980, 5).

It is easy to consider Wiredu’s examples of truthfulness, honesty, and justice as being norms that are both impartial and necessary for a society’s existence. However, none are as obviously sympathetic as they are obviously impartial. The reason is that they serve not just the interests of a society’s least-advantaged members but also those of its most advantaged. The social norms that can, indeed, be obviously sympathetic are those Wiredu calls *customs*, which are *rules of convenience* and *contingent preferences* that have been adopted by and for “human groups in particular places” (Wiredu 1996, 237–38). An example is progressive taxation in the United States whereby, in 2017, half the country’s income earners paid 96.89 percent of federal income taxes.⁸

What is more interesting is that it is much easier to understand sympathy as combined with impartiality while adopting social norms as laws than while judging violations of them when this involves more than just a few friends. Sympathy while judging a case of official lying, for example, could create an exception to the law requiring truthfulness in official matters. That would be incompatible with the law’s being impartial and would therefore seem unjust. This was true, for example, of President George H. W. Bush’s pardoning the Iran-Contra conspirators for their perjury.⁹ Even if we do want to allow some exceptions to truthfulness as required in official matters, impartiality requires another law that legitimizes these exceptions. Ideally, such a backup law would exclude

egregious cases such as Bush's that, according to Judge Lawrence Walsh, protected Bush's own "disturbing pattern of deception and obstruction," something Bush really did not have a right to do: "It demonstrates that powerful people with powerful allies can commit serious crimes in high office—deliberately abusing the public trust—without consequence" (Walsh 1992).

In any case, the combination of sympathy with impartiality is more easily understood while adopting a social law—via the difference principle and the veil of ignorance, for example—than while judging violations of it.

Whenever social norms are considered, it is important to appreciate that different people actually do and will almost certainly continue to value the balance between impartiality and sympathy differently. George Lakoff is one of the more prominent researchers to observe that "in the right's hierarchy . . . the top value is preserving and defending the moral system itself": "On the left, the highest value is helping individuals who need help" (2004, 28).¹⁰ Exceptions exist, of course, as when the right-winger Bush valued sympathy toward Weinberger and the other Iran-Contra criminals more than the legal system he had promised to defend and they had violated. Despite this lack of universality regarding the balance between impartially defending one's legal system and sympathy for individuals who need help under it, most members of liberal democracies in the West have flourished relatively well.

In short, Wiredu's idea that sympathetic impartiality is universally necessary for social existence invites further discussion.

Conclusion

Wiredu thinks one important contribution he makes to academic philosophy overall is the elaboration and application of a genetic methodology. Hallen therefore stresses that Wiredu regards his approach to philosophical issues as more than just an analysis of concepts. Nonetheless, Wiredu's contributions to the analysis of concepts are formidable. His cross-cultural background allows him to undertake analyses of philosophical concepts that are strikingly original. They provide some

of the best available ideas for consideration by philosophers interested in Africa as well as the West. Hallen's overview provides a clear and most helpful way of grasping these ideas.

Parker English, Chesapeake, Virginia

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NOTES

1. In personal correspondence, Phillip Noss, a professor of linguistics who lived among the Gbaya of Cameroon for more than thirty years, reflected about Quine's adage as it might apply to the Gbaya: "What do you do with 'to be' when your language does not possess a verb 'to be'? Gbaya can express 'being' four different ways, without a verb of 'being.'" Noss's further explanation is more detailed than is relevant here.

2. Noss (personal correspondence) thinks that the Gbaya understand the concept of mind in at least something like the way Wiredu understands that of the Akan: "Coming briefly to the concept of mind, I believe the Gbaya concept would be one of function, not of an entity that must be situated somewhere in the brain! Whether Gbaya thinking occurs in space, like Wiredu's Twi, I'm not sure."

3. Noss (personal correspondence) observes that this has become true for the Gbaya only recently: "The Gbaya were quite far from Ninsim's notion of the 'divine right' to lead. There are proverbs, and folktales, that speak to the value of leading, that is, of being first, or the disadvantage of being last. But traditionally the Gbaya were pretty decentralized in structure, 'acephalus' according to anthropologists. 'Coming to agreement' was the preferred procedure of making decisions, with accompanying rituals. However, there came historical events that brought about the development of centralized governing structures. And, of course, colonial powers came along too!"

4. In a different context, Wiredu himself posits that what he calls *taboos* are viewed by Akans as introduced by extrahuman beings via special relationships with traditional Akan leaders: "A taboo is a prohibition expressing the dislike of some extra-human being. . . . The idea here is that what a taboo prohibits is *ipso facto* bad. . . . [I]t is regarded as bad solely because it is thus prohibited." For example, sex in the bush is something "the earth goddess simply finds insupportable and will punish with soil infertility" (Wiredu 1995, 404).

5. Noss (personal correspondence) suggests that folktales about the Trickster in any traditional African society are "pertinent to philosophical reflection" about social values such as sympathetic impartiality, goodwill, and the Golden Rule: "In considering 'sympathetic impartiality,' I wonder how the role of Anansi, the [Akan] 'Trickster,' is interpreted. He goes by many names, from language to language and culture to culture. In Gbaya he is called 'Wanto.' . . . Does Wiredu bring Anansi into his discussion of 'goodwill' and 'the Golden Rule'?"

The answer is no. Noss's reason for suggesting the relevance of Akan folktales is that African folktales typically concern "a historical communal canon." "What does the collective canon tell us for the Akan," Noss continues, in terms of evidence as well as explication for social values such as sympathetic impartiality, goodwill, and the Golden Rule? Noss discusses how some of this is done for the Gbaya by performances about Wanto: "Wanto is the mirror through which they look at their own weaknesses and foibles thereby learning to tolerate each other as well as themselves" (Noss 1971, 11).

6. "Customs are rules of behavior adopted by human groups in particular places at particular times based on convenience, on contingent preference." Among them are "taboos, which, on the face of it, are based simply on the supposed likes and dislikes of what I called 'extra-human beings and forces.'" Under the face of it, "Akan customs, even when they have some reference to extra-human beings or forces, usually have a discoverable practical rationale" (Wiredu 1996, 237–38).

7. "The formal agencies transferred to African hands were . . . alien in derivation, functionally conceived, bureaucratically designed, authoritarian in nature and primarily concerned with issues of domination rather than legitimacy" (Chazan, Mortimer, Ravenhill, and Rothchild 1988, 41).

8. See <https://www.irs.gov/statistics/soi-tax-stats-individual-statistical-tables-by-tax-rate-and-income-percentile#earlyRelease>.

9. According to the Iran-Contra prosecutor Lawrence E. Walsh: "President Bush's pardon of Caspar Weinberger and other Iran-Contra defendants undermines the principle that no man is above the law. . . . In light of President Bush's own misconduct ['a disturbing pattern of deception and obstruction'], we are gravely concerned about his decision to pardon others who lied to Congress and obstructed official investigations" (1992). "President Bush acted with compassion and good conscience in his pardon, but we will not comment on Judge Walsh's report," said Andy Maner, the Bush spokesman (Johnston 1993).

10. For a more academic approach to this subject, see Lakoff (2016).

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