
CRITICAL NOTICES

TRADITION AND MODERNITY

In its first three of nine chapters, *Tradition and Modernity. Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (by Kwame Gyekye. Oxford University Press, 1997. xx + 338 pp. £42.50 cloth, £16.95 paper) offers a set of ethical principles and empirical postulates explicitly designed to guide the making of Africa's varied future national policies. So it is a big work. At the outset the author proposes a kind of activist role for philosophy. 'African philosophy' is so called because it is focused on contemporary social and political concerns that happen to be acutely vivid for Africans today: legitimising state power, nation-building, analysing individual integrity and distributive justice, studying group cohesion, division and interdependency. Judging from the vocabulary and literary style sustained throughout the book, it is clearly passé to be worried any longer about whether 'Africa' denotes anything outside the colonial imagination, or whether philosophy reduces to sociology when studying beliefs maintained in an oral tradition.

Chapter 2 corrects stereotypes of the individual's subordination to the family in the African community. The discussion moves in a broadly international context with references to the work of famous African thinkers (Nyerere, Nkrumah) and of professional philosophers well-known in North America and Europe (MacIntyre, Rawls, Raz, Charles Taylor) along with classic works in the western canon (Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Kant).

Chapter 3 sketches a prescription for how to build a cohesive nation out of historically and culturally diverse groups. Gyekye highlights several senses of the term 'nation' that do not connote the geographical and political characteristics captured by the terms 'country' and 'state'. And 'national development', correctly understood, reaches beyond macro-economics and material standards of living. Having a 'national identity' is like having a cultural identity and unlike having an ethnic identity. Ethnic identities are bogus; ethnic categories are social fictions (pp. 99, 101, 105–7, 127), fabricated from misconceptions of a common lineage tracing back to a single biological ancestor. National identities are socially constructed as well, but a national identity may be constructed from traditions of the cultural subgroups comprising a larger political collective. And, unlike ethnicity, a genuine tradition cannot be an invention (pp. 229–30, 271). Like racial categories, ethnicity—on balance—does more harm than good. So it is assumed that the exposure of the myths buttressing ethnic identity will contribute to the eventual dissolution of ethnic categories altogether (pp. 99, 103–5, 107). It is assumed that people relieved of false beliefs about ethnicity will rather identify themselves with wider, more oecumenical and humanistic groups, an upper bound of these being one's "metanational" identity.

Nation-building and in general “the development of human society [are] consciously and purposively pursued” (p. 163); it is not something that merely happens, like tree growth (pp. 92–4). On Gyekye’s view, good nation-building consists of social engineering and skilful statesmanship in pursuit of this ideal he calls “metanationality”. He says a cohesive nation is built by instituting a single national language, by centralising control and support of cultural activities (like music, dance, crafts), by decentralising routine government responsibilities and benefits, and by ensuring individuals’ civil rights and economic opportunities in order “to keep the lid on the seething cauldron of discontent . . .” (p. 84).

It is difficult to critically approach any of these controversial proposals about nation-building. The four-tier and summation models (pp. 83–88) invoked to delineate normative and descriptive meanings implied by the term ‘nation’ pose no special problem in themselves. But subsequent usage of ‘nation’ and its cognates ‘nation-state’ and ‘nationhood’ obscures the different senses that were delineated by these models. In a span of six pages, the term ‘nation’ is used to denote an activity (p. 87), an ideal, a complex entity with essential features (pp. 82, 89) as well as a feature or characteristic of a state (p. 87). ‘Nation’ denotes a “level” and a “stage” of political development (p. 87), it also denotes a “simple concept” and an inclusive “complex concept” (pp. 87, 89), it also denotes a style of public administration (p. 86). A ‘nation’ is a creative agent (p. 89) generating “norms, ideals, outlooks, attitudes . . .” (p. 86); it is also a theory (p. 88). In explicitly normative usage ‘nationhood’ denotes both an “incomplete” object or an unachieved “goal” for pursuit by a collective (pp. 87–88, 91); and it also denotes an already established component of an individual’s identity (p. 88).

Of course, writing in a loose and informal style is ideal if it serves an audience wider than that of professional philosophers, as this book is expressly intended to do. Yet the looseness may account for why it is often difficult to tell where the empirical posits leave off and the normative claims begin. The context of a remark like ‘We must do A’, for instance, will not always convey whether the intended meaning is: ‘Ideally we ought to bring about A’; or ‘Inevitably we are bound to try A’; or ‘Necessarily our doing A will come about whether we want it or not’. One is reminded that clarification of the most elementary terms remains an unfinished task in foundations work for the human sciences generally.

Chapter 4 gives a moving portrait of democratic process as it presided traditionally in West Africa prior to colonial intrusion (pp. 135–39); while Chapter 5 is devoted to disassociating African communitarianism from Marxian socialism as interpreted by “the Communist theoreticians” (p. 145). African ‘communitarianism’ here connotes a general humanitarianism and an inclusive, consensual, participatory style of democratic process (p. 149). It is unclear to what extent the author considers it viable to translate traditional participatory methods of governance to a large and diverse modern community. On the one hand, decentralised democratic processes are adaptable to “any size” community and should be encouraged in both city and village (pp. 138–9). On the other hand, classically African vehicles for legitimising

democratic leadership are “incongruous in the modern situation” (p. 135). In particular, choices made by hereditary or regal lineage “would be a hindrance . . . [and] will therefore have to be expunged” (p. 136).

This last remark is typical of a totalitarian tone that recurs throughout the book (pp. 83–4, 263, for example, *et passim*). This might be less alarming if the reasons for preferring any of these imperatives over their alternatives had been canvassed in further detail. For instance, a national language policy is mandated in the interest of “political unity and survival”, notwithstanding the expectation that this will be “resisted tooth and nail” (p. 93). No indication is given of the protracted debates about whether language engineering is even feasible, let alone desirable, in a country like Ghana where roughly thirteen million people speak 34–54 languages (depending how ‘language’ is defined).¹ It is not clear whether Gyekye regards sharing a common language as essential to individuals’ “feeling they belong to a community” (p. 89), nor whether a cohesive “cultural identity” entails or is entailed by sharing a common language (pp. 92–5, 113). In some passages it is couched as benign to extinguish a people’s language since their aesthetic expression and practical contributions to the greater polity (pottery, regional dances and so on) will survive (pp. 94–5). It is the integrity of the greater polity that matters most, after all, in this vision of “metanation”-building. But in other passages, the individual’s moral and cognitive autonomy from the collective is what gives the future its hope, because critical examination of mainstream beliefs and values yields innovations for the nation at large (pp. 52–6). Then sustaining cultural unity in a “weak” sense (p. 44) by preserving distinct languages might only enhance individuals’ independent thought and creative contributions to nation-building. Globally, the evidence indicates that a common language can be of service for bureaucratic purposes without its belonging to the cultural profile of any participating group (English in India, for instance). Yet there is also evidence that enforcing an official language may be a key component of protracted political oppression (for example in Quebec, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, and the former Republic of South Africa). Some religious traditions rely on maintaining a fixed language of sacred discourse and scholarship for their integrity (notably Arabic for the Nation of Islam).

In principle it is not clear to what extent social engineering can or should be expected to serve the ideal of metanationality. Nation-building requires the purposeful creation of a national culture by “elevating features . . . of component cultures to a national status” (p. 109). In fact appropriation of music and folklore by a centralised state agency meets with indignant, sometimes militant, resistance in Ghana.² This is so for the very reason cited by Gyekye when he reviews traditional customs of private ownership and concepts of property (p. 151). Specific musical, dance and dramatic productions

1. Mary Esther Kropp-Dakubu, *Korle Meets the Sea: A Sociolinguistic History of Accra* (Oxford University Press), p. vi.
2. John Collins, ‘Folklore—Some Problems of Copyright’ (*Ghana Copyright News*, January 1991–December 1991, Accra).

are recognised as the exclusive property of the Asantehene court, or of the guilds, age sets, religious cults, secret societies and clubs that created and sustain them regionally. Nor is this problem only practical. Although *ethnicity* is an invention (as noted above), the “concept of an invented or constructed *tradition* is not intelligible” (p. 230). So exactly how should one analyse a (genuine) tradition which is commonly recognised as the heritage of a (fictitious) ethnic group? Does a Fante *tradition* belong in the class of clans and fetish groves—empirical referents of false beliefs? Or is a *Fante* tradition a chimerical property of a non-existent entity (the Fante ethnic group)? Perhaps further study is required of the contrast between something being a social fake (Liza as a Hungarian princess, say) as opposed to being a socially constructed fiction (such as the Fante queen mother). In some way as yet mysterious, social constructions have causal efficacy in the empirical world, and the ones of which we may heartily disapprove don’t seem to go away when their fraudulence is exposed. For instance, in a skilfully constructed nation political opportunities are not based on ethnic affiliation but rather on individual merit (p. 88). So one solution that Gyekye advocates in detail is to rotate the periodic nomination for national presidency, say, among ethnically identified groups so each gets a turn at the executive seat; this is implemented by mandating that each political party be forced to limit its nominations for candidacy to the ethnic affiliation stipulated for each election round (p. 90)!

Chapters 6 and 7 address the problem of establishing the legitimacy of a central government in a previously colonised society. Corruption, ignominy and instability are such entrenched features of the current African political scene since independence that some outsiders misconstrue such vices as bribery, nepotism and opportunism to be indigenous to African elites’ way of life. After patiently clearing away this absurdity Gyekye proposes the idea of a moral revolution to change people’s attitudes and behaviour in public service (pp. 209–15).

In the final two chapters, modernity is characterised as a “significant stage . . . in the civilisational trajectory of humankind” (pp. 265, 297). Selected principles of traditional wisdom should guide the pursuit of technology and free enterprise in Africa. The reasons why traditional wisdom failed to encourage scientific discipline in Africa are “not fully known or intelligible” (p. 246); but it is generally assumed that superstitious reverence for the supernatural and morbid preoccupation with moral cause, responsibility and fate are to blame for impeding scientific investigation. Further, the unsophisticated secrecy and personalisation of knowledge exhibited by herbal practitioners is representative of an attitude that resists the rigours of transparency and scientific methods of verification (p. 281). Yet herbalists are obliged to protect themselves from foreign pharmaceutical firms exploiting their intellectual property, since the relevant legal measures are typically not enforced in African countries. There appears here to be an oversight concerning the self-protective protocols that shroud the scientific elite in post-industrial societies, where sciences have flourished alongside superstitious faith in the powers of technology and excessive reverence for the priest-like

vision of the expert in a white lab-coat.³ Further, the history of the scientific enterprise tacitly assumed here seems to neglect the fact that Islamic scholarship throughout sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East (during Europe's dark ages) was crucial to subsequent breakthroughs in mathematical physics in seventeenth-century Europe. Careful reading of Akan proverbs reveals that several of them disclose in explicitly causal and naturalistic terms the basic principles of Newtonian mechanics.⁴

This book is destined to be a classic in the literature of African philosophy, wherein the author is already established as a distinguished contributor. Nearly every page is an invitation to work harder at understanding current crises of the human condition, and to work more deeply at resolving problems in the foundations of the human sciences.

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THE LAST WORD?

Thomas Nagel's latest book (*The Last Word*, Oxford University Press, 1997, x + 148 pp. £16.99) purports to be a defence of the claim that there are objectively good reasons for both belief and action, and it includes, amongst others, chapters on logic, science, and ethics. His target is any view which seeks to unmask apparently objective principles of reasoning as merely those principles that happen to be endorsed by some people at some place and time; he argues that the objectivity of principles of reasoning amounts, and must amount, to much more than that. Since I deplore what he aptly terms "the ambient climate of irrationalism" (p. 4), I approached the book with high hopes. Unfortunately, my tentative conclusion after a first reading is that it does not come close to succeeding. It contains some ideas that if suitably refined and developed by an army of philosophical underlabourers may prove to be fruitful and possibly even correct, but Nagel himself has not done the necessary work. One such idea, though I would not swear that it is novel, is the suggestion in the chapter on science that someone who proposes that our inductive propensities are nothing more than psychological inclinations is in effect proposing an empirical hypothesis concerning the world, human minds, and the relation between the two which has to be evaluated in the usual observational and inductive ways and hence take its chances in competition with the rival hypothesis that our inductive propensities actually guide us to the truth. I also liked the idea in the chapter on ethics that ethical scepticism can in principle be rebutted by sufficiently strong first-order moral reasoning for a first-order moral conclusion.

I might have found the book more persuasive if I had been able to understand more of it. Broad themes are discernible, but I was repeatedly unable to tie down the details of either his specific conclusions or the premises

3. Otto Neurath, *Empiricism and Sociology* (Reidel, 1973), pp. 319–22.

4. George P. Hagan, 'Modern Technology, Traditional Mysticism and Ethics in Akan Culture' in H. Lauer (ed.) *Ghana: Changing Values/Changing Technologies* (Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, forthcoming).

allegedly supporting them, and certainly not well enough to venture a serious evaluation of them. And just in case, since Nagel enjoys a reputation as a clear writer, my incomprehension is taken as evidence that I am a poor reader, here is a passage from his final chapter which forms part of a response to Robert Nozick's suggestion that the human ability to reason is somehow explained and underwritten by natural selection.

The only form that genuine reasoning can take consists in seeing the validity of the arguments, in virtue of what they say. As soon as one tries to step outside of such thoughts, one loses contact with their true content. And one cannot be outside and inside them at the same time. If one *thinks* in logic, one cannot simultaneously regard those thoughts as mere psychological dispositions, however caused or however biologically grounded. If one decides that some of one's psychological dispositions are, as a contingent matter of fact, reliable methods of reaching the truth (as one may with perception, for example), then in doing so one must rely on other thoughts that one actually *thinks*, without regarding them as mere dispositions. One cannot embed all one's reasoning in a psychological theory, including the reasonings that have led to that psychological theory. The epistemological buck must stop somewhere. By this I mean not that there must be some premises that are forever unrevisable but, rather, that in any process of reasoning or argument there must be some thoughts that one simply thinks from the inside, rather than thinking of them as biologically programmed dispositions.

So my conclusion about an evolutionary explanation of rationality is that it is necessarily incomplete. Even if one believes it, one has to believe in the independent validity of the reasoning that is the result. (pp. 136–7)

I apologise for the length of this quotation, but potential readers of the book need to know that, in its clarity and rigour of argumentation, this passage is typical of too many in Nagel's book. I do not say I have no idea at all what it means; on the contrary, there seem to be too many possibilities. Nor do I say that it is philosophically worthless. The problem illustrated by this passage is that Nagel has left altogether too many of the details as an exercise for the reader.

A second reason for finding Nagel's defence of the objectivity of reason unpersuasive is his treatment of the anti-naturalism he thinks his view requires. One component of Nagel's anti-naturalism is his explicit rejection of physicalism: the intentionality of beliefs, he holds, must be treated as an irreducibly non-physical feature they possess (pp. 42 and 138). I find this problematic in three ways. First, Nagel does not make it at all clear how rejecting physicalism about intentionality assists the cause of defending reason. Possibly he holds that it is easier to make sense of our beliefs' being regulated by objective and non-empirical principles of reason if beliefs are non-physical, but I am only guessing. Secondly, Nagel's argument for the non-physical character of intentionality is simply that, since the Kripkensteinian paradox about meaning cannot be resolved except by rejecting the assumption that

meaning addition by 'plus' is analysable into something else, meaning addition must be treated as irreducible to anything. Now for all I know this is a good argument. The trouble is that Nagel does nothing to defend it beyond briefly recounting the paradox (pp. 41–7). But there is a literature on this topic, in which people like David Lewis and Jerry Fodor deny that Kripkenstein has succeeded in showing that there is nothing that meaning addition could consist in, and I cannot believe that all of this literature is so bad as not to be worth engaging. Nor is this the only point in the book where Nagel fails to forge adequate links with what is going on in highly relevant literatures. Thirdly, Nagel does next to nothing to render his anti-physicalism acceptable to the presumably numerous physicalists who might read his book. For example, he offers no critical discussion of any of the several arguments for physicalism that can be found in the literature. It may be, indeed, that he thinks that all endorsement of physicalism rests on prejudice; certainly he launches the entirely unsubstantiated speculation that what is “responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time” is a desire for it not to be true that God exists (p. 131). At any rate, the upshot is that all the weight of his anti-physicalism rests on the Kripkenstein-based argument which he presents so skimpily. He does acknowledge that his anti-physicalism commits him to “fundamental and irreducible mind-world relations” and hints that these are no more troublesome than fundamental and irreducible laws of physics (p. 131). But he does not consider the riposte that we should keep the number of fundamental and irreducible laws we believe in as small as possible, just as we do in endorsing a molecular understanding of matter rather than resting content with treating any number of phenomenological laws as fundamental and irreducible. I suppose he would reply that in the case at hand it is not possible to do away with fundamental and irreducible mind-world relations; but if so, all the weight once again falls upon the under-argued Kripkenstein point.

A second component of Nagel's anti-naturalism is harder to pin down, but it concerns the status of reason itself. Nagel holds that sometimes we have objectively good reasons for believing (or acting) as we do, but what sort of thing is an objectively good reason? My best guess is that, according to Nagel, you have an objectively good reason for believing something just in case you arrive at the belief on the basis of objectively correct principles of deductive or inductive logic, and you have an objectively good reason for doing something just in case your decision is based on objectively correct principles of practical reasoning. But what are these objectively correct principles, and what does their correctness consist in? Nagel cannot answer, with the reliabilist, that their correctness consists in their truth-conduciveness, given the way the world happens to be, and that their normative force extends only to those who desire the goal of truth, since such an understanding makes them too contingent and insufficiently imperative for his taste. His preferred answer, I think, is that objectively correct principles reflect the holding among propositions of some objective relation of what for want of a better word I will call support, where this support may be total, as in the case of the relation of entailment, or partial, as in the case of the relation of probabilification that

might hold between certain evidential propositions and some proposition expressing an empirical hypothesis. But this talk of propositions and the relations of support that hold among them cannot be reduced to anything else, for instance, sentences and linguistic conventions governing their use. At least, this is how I interpret both his insistence on pages 37–41 that logical necessity cannot be explained in terms of linguistic practices and the following remark: “If we can reason, it is because our thoughts can obey the order of the logical relations among propositions—so here again we depend on a Platonic harmony” (p. 129). So if my interpretation is on the right lines, Nagel’s position is non-naturalistic, being committed to non-physical, and presumably abstract, objects and relations.

But how is this all supposed to work? In particular, how exactly is it supposed to come about that my reasoning, at least when I am reasoning well, does conform to objectively correct principles, given the non-naturalistic nature of those principles? On its face, there are three possibilities. The first is that I can grasp these principles by somehow coming to know which propositions objectively support which others, and then I apply what I have learnt to my reasoning. The trouble with this possibility is that it requires me to learn about the relations among things that stand outside the causal order and that therefore can have no effect upon my physical senses—or, for that matter, any non-physical ones I may possess—and Nagel gives not the smallest clue as to how he thinks this could happen. I do not say that this familiar objection to Platonism is insuperable, only that if this possibility is the one that Nagel endorses, then he should have responded to it.

The second possible explanation of how I can reason well, on Nagel’s view of what that amounts to, is that I am simply born with innate knowledge of the objectively correct principles of reasoning and thereafter apply them as often as I do. But only the extremely incurious would not seek for an explanation for such innate knowledge, and what could it be? Not God, since Nagel is at pains to insist that his non-naturalism does not require theism. Natural selection? Possibly, though we get from Nagel no indication of how the story might go—indeed, he expresses hostility toward evolutionary explanations of human mentality (p. 131).

The third possibility for explaining how I can reason in accordance with Nagel’s non-naturalistic principles is to suppose that my mind is so constructed that, at least some of the time, the contents of my propositional attitudes are in fact related to one another in accordance with the Nagelian principles, but that this happy harmony does not result from my having previously learnt what those principles are. But what in that case does it result from? Not the providence of a divinity, for the reason just mentioned. From natural selection? Possibly, though Nagel offers no suggestions as to how this might work, and there is a danger of being left with the puzzle of explaining why conformity to Platonistic principles should help us to get along in the nitty-gritty physical world.

I do not stress these huge gaps in Nagel’s non-naturalistic defence of the objectivity of reason in order to suggest that it could not in the end be made to work, nor even to show how far he has failed to address the entirely

predictable concerns of naturalistic readers, but because they play right into the hands of the enemies of reason. One of the most influential grounds for scepticism about objective reasons for either belief or action is the suspicion that if they were to exist they would have to be spooky, weird, or—to recall Mackie's word—queer things, unknown to and dubiously consistent with the substantive results of scientific inquiry. Naturalistic accounts of objective reasons, such as the reliabilist tradition provides, obviously address this concern directly. But in light of how underdeveloped and underdefended Nagel's non-naturalistic account is, an obvious reaction on the part of the sort of sceptic I have in mind would be: 'I told you so! Belief in objective reasons requires belief in weirdness—and unacceptable weirdness if the claims of current science are approximately true.' Moreover, in his introduction, Nagel takes one important goal of his book to be showing how reason is possible. But given the holes in his non-naturalistic defence of reason, this is precisely what he has failed to do. We did not need Nagel to tell us that a position of the general sort he advocates is one of the options; such a view is probably the first one to occur to an intelligent beginner in philosophy who considers the issue for the first time. What we needed was a careful and rigorous formulation of a particular version of this view, followed by a careful, rigorous, well-informed, and patient response to what have been widely taken to be serious difficulties with it. Sadly, that is not the book Nagel has written.

I have criticised Nagel's book on the assumption that it is directed toward a philosophical audience, and it occurs to me that he may have intended to address a wider intellectual public and therefore have done deliberately what I have charged that he did inadvertently. But let us hope not. For I fear that all that the general reader will take away from a reading of this book, aside from the knowledge that at least one distinguished philosopher champions reason and truth, is the idea that there is something wrong with trying to provide an objectively good reason for believing that there are no objectively good reasons for believing anything.

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