

## A CRITIQUE OF CULTURAL UNIVERSALS AND PARTICULARS IN KWASI WIREDU'S PHILOSOPHY

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**Abstract.** The paper is an attempt to revisit and examine the recondite issue of cultural universals and particulars, taking into consideration Wireduan philosophical account. The paper strengthens further the basic tenets of Kwasi Wiredu's philosophical defense of the compatibility of cultural universals and particulars. Through critical exposition, the paper appraises some of the inconsistencies and contradictory notions implicit in Wiredu's position on cultural universals and particulars. It discusses the relevance of the scholarship of Wiredu to an understanding of the dichotomy between universalism in philosophical discourse, and within African philosophy in particular. Beyond Wiredu's submissions on biological identity, inter/intra cultural communication, epistemic and moral universals, and language as cultural universals, the paper, in its contribution to knowledge, extends the frontiers of this realm of universals by establishing the plausibility of 'causality' as another instance of a conceptual universal, transcending all cultural particularities.

**Keywords:** culture, universals, particulars, causality, Africa, Kwasi Wiredu

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### 1. Introduction

A prominent issue that has dominated the enterprise of African philosophy since its inception in the written form is the question of how to define African identity (Owolabi 1999:22). Most intellectual discussions in African philosophy are reactions to this problem of identity. Two things are largely responsible for this search for African identity. One is the negative impact of the colonial experience of domination and exploitation in Africa. The second is the ethnocentric assertion of Western scholarship to the denigration of anything that is African. At the base of that Western intellectual discourse is the Hegelian claim that:

Africa "is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it – that is in its northern part – belong to the

Asiatic or European World.... Africa is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History (Hegel 1956:99).

Hegel is not alone in this epistemic ethnocentrism (Mudimpe 1988); the anthropological claims of Durkheim (1912), Frazer (1922), Levy-Bruhl (1949) and Horton (1981) also support the ethnocentric, racist and imperialist claim that rationality is prerogative of Western civilization while the Africans are mentally primitive. The significant role played by Western scholarship and erstwhile Western imperial lords in presenting and treating the African people as inferior and deserving of external control, necessitates that African scholarship in post-colonial era, should be active in the deconstruction of this negative and battered identity (Balogun 2007:1).

In this quest for African self-identity and self-definition, two orientations are dominant. The first affirms the cultural pluralism of Western scholarship, but denies the hierarchy of cultures (Owolabi 1999:24). This first orientation is pre-occupied with the discovery of authentic and unique African identity by insisting on particulars – their own previously un-respected and neglected particularities. Scholars like Abraham (1966), Mbiti (1969), Sodipo (1975), Anyanwu (1983), Tempels (1959) and Senghor (1991) who are in this category have sympathy for the orientation in African philosophy, which emphasizes the peculiarities of African culture. To these scholars, all philosophies are cultural philosophies and no philosophical datum of any given culture is applicable to other cultures. Within this orientation, the ethno philosophers, the defenders of negritude and other cultural nationalists can be categorized.

The second reaction to the crisis of self-identity within African scholarship denies cultural relativism and ethnocentrism maintained by Western anthropological scholarship. The argument is that though certain aspects of societal cultures are different, human cultures still share certain fundamental traits that allow for cross-cultural comparisons and interactions (Owolabi 1999:24). Hence, Bodunrin (1985), Hountondji (1983), Appiah (1992), Towa (1991) and Wiredu (1980) who are members of this orientation insist on cultural universalism.

From the above dominant orientations in the quest for African self-identity, the general deducible impression is that there is a dichotomy and incompatibility between the perspectives of African scholars on cultural universalism and particularism as related to the quest for an identity. This paper aims at philosophically discussing, the issues of universalism and particularism in human culture, especially in relation to African's search for self-definition. In doing this, however, an attempt is made to examine critically Wiredu's perspectives and contributions to the discourse.

The following questions shall guide our discussions in the paper: Are there cultural universals? Is there any scheme of concepts, which can be shared by all the cultures of humankind? Are the ways of reasoning and living among the different peoples of the world such that will make possible, cross-cultural evaluation of truth or soundness of belief system? What are the implications of cultural

particularities? What are the implications of the possibility or impossibility of universal canons of thought and actions on the unprecedented intensification of inter and trans-cultural communications in contemporary world? What is Wiredu's perspective on the philosophical problem of cultural universals and particulars? How adequate are his positions? The attempt to provide plausible answers to these fundamental questions constitutes the focus of the paper.

## 2. Wiredu on cultural universals and particulars

Wiredu is one of the foremost African philosophers; a prominent and enterprising intellectual, whose immense contribution to African philosophy has distinguished him among his pioneers of modern critical philosophizing on the African continent. In his book, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, Wiredu (1996) discusses the paradox of universalism and particularism in human culture. In the book, Wiredu argues that it is possible to arrive at concepts of universal relevance, which can be disentangled from the contingencies of culture. The universals of concepts make them intelligible within different cultural groups. In his opinion, there are universals and particulars in philosophy, religion and culture.

According to Wiredu, universals are ultimately based on human nature, which is common, whereas particulars stem from some accidental variations in culture. Universal is what is general, and what is general is what can be instantiated, i.e. what can have an instance (Wiredu 1983:122). We can speak also of the degrees of generality. What can be instantiated in this case may itself be an instance of something more general. The characteristic of something, be it object or entity, of being an instance but incapable of being instantiated is the defining feature of particulars. Wiredu believes that there are universals, and by their virtue of being conceptual in nature, they are intelligibly conceivable. On the basis of the intercultural intelligibility of universal concepts, Wiredu (1980:33) assumes that philosophy can be universal, though it is culture-relative in actuality. Through logical application of the inferential rule of *reductio ad absurdum*, Wiredu attacks the concept of particularism and shows that it is a self-refuting notion. His argument is this:

*Suppose there were no cultural universal, then intercultural communication would be impossible. But there is intercultural communication. Therefore, there are cultural universals* (Wiredu 1996:21).

The above logical proof is not unconnected with Wiredu's observation of the unprecedented intensification of interactions (reinforced by the advancement in information technology) in contemporary world. In view of inter-cultural dialogue made possible with this information and communication technological feat, Wiredu believes that cross-cultural evaluation is achievable. This fact of interpersonal, intra/inter cultural communication, Wiredu tells us, makes relativism self-refuting.

Wiredu argues against relativism in its various forms: cognitive, ethical and cultural, and shows the possibility and actual existence of universals on conceptual, cognitive and ethical grounds. The assumption behind his argument is that the entire human race shares some fundamental categories and criteria of thought in common. This should not be understood as an outright denial of particularities and differences among various tribes of humankind. On the contrary, Wiredu (1996:22) defends the position that there are elements of both particularity and universality in culture and in any culture. Accordingly, he argues that human behavior is governed by both instinct and culture. Because of the element of instincts, we can be sure of a certain species-distinctive uniformity in human actions and reactions. In view of the elements of culture, such as those of habit, instruction, and conscious thought, we have the natural presence of diversities and variations.

In Wiredu's account, the first consideration, instincts, accounts for the possibility of objectivity and universality in the standards of thought and action in our species. The second consideration, culture, accounts for various degrees of relativity and subjectivity. However, Wiredu points out that what unifies us is more fundamental than what differentiates us. This unity, Wiredu tells us, is our biological-cultural identity as *Homo sapiens*:

*This status of being a human person implies that man has more than instinct in the drive for equilibrium and self-preservation... [In other words,] being a human person implies having the capacity of reflective perception, abstraction, deduction and induction. In their basic nature, these mental capacities are the same for all humans; irrespective of whether they inhabit Europe, Asia or Africa... (Wiredu 1996:23).*

The point of Wiredu is that as *homines sapientes*, humans go beyond instincts by complementing it with wit in their struggle for social order and self-survival. Wiredu's fundamental thesis on the possibility of conceptual universals and particulars is put thus:

*Two assumptions that may safely be made about the human species are, one, that the entire race shares some fundamental categories and criteria of thought in common and, two that nevertheless, there are some very deep disparities among the different tribes of human kind in regard to their modes of conceptualization in some sensitive areas of thought (Wiredu 1996:45).*

Conceptual universals refer to the common criterion of thought in our common humanity. Action presupposes thought, which involves reflective perception, judgment and inference. Social action, which is an essential element of human existence, involves not only thought, but also communication, which is present at a very early stage of the development of the thinking powers of a human person. Instinct accounts for the possibility of communication among different peoples. As for cultural particularities, it accounts for the difficulties and complications that frequently beset global interactions. Writing on what counts as our common human identity,

Wiredu notes:

*The human constitution of flesh and bones, quickened by electrical charges and wrapped up in variously pigmented integument, is the same everywhere; while there is only one world in which we all live, move, and have our struggles, notwithstanding such things as the vagaries of climate. These facts, which underlie the possibility of communication among kith and kin, are the same facts that underlie the possibility of communication among the various peoples of the world (Wiredu 1996:23).*

Contrary to the relativists' contention that conceptualization and articulations, which are the defining elements of communication, are relative to different languages and speakers, Wiredu is of the opinion that the argument for inter-cultural communication, and hence for the existence of objective, cross-cultural evaluative criteria, is found in the biological unity of humankind (Afolayan 2006:49). On this account of biological similarity of all human beings, Wiredu bases his argument on inter-personal and inter/intra cultural communication, morality and universalism in general. Wiredu (1996:60) believes that we can deduce and predicate the existence of certain universal canons of conceptualization on biological identity of man as biped species. These universal canons of conceptualization consist of three norms of thought and conduct, which Wiredu named as the principles of non-contradiction, induction and the categorical imperative (Wiredu 1996:22).

A preliminary understanding of what he meant by norms of thought, as well as its imperative is important first, before elucidating on its tri-categories. Just like moral norms – the rule of conduct –, norms of thought are the rules of thought and talk that make human community possible. A hypothetical-syllogistic relationship exists between thought, communication and community. Wiredu explicates thus:

*Without communication, community is impossible, and without thought, communication is impossible. But without some common norms of talk, communication is impossible and without common norms of thought, common norms of talk are unavoidable. Therefore, without some common norms of thought a human community is impossible (Wiredu 1996: 34).*

Communication is seen as the transfer of meanings between interlocutors. Wiredu identifies the primary goal of communication as that of sharing meanings. He argues that if the fundamental goal of communication is to share meanings or significations, then meanings or significations must be objectively accessible to all people who engage in that basic and defining human practice. Meanings surpass the finiteness of either their referents or the forms of their culturally specific linguistic expressions. They are objective, and so they can be accessed by anyone capable of handling communication (Masolo 2005: par 25).

In Wiredu's analysis, the objectivity of meaning, and hence the universality of communication, lies precisely in the difference between signification and reference. He is of the view that the objectivity of meanings is based on their role in defining universal human nature. We therefore bear the distinctive characteristic we have as humans by virtue of our universal biological system, which allows us to receive and process information by forming meaning as the general communicative content of

others' intelligible utterances. Meanings go beyond the specific communicative mediums by which they are transmitted and received; they are more general than the multiple and idiosyncratic human languages. Humans are biologically structured to process and use meaning in communication with others irrespective of their basic cultural medium of doing so (Masolo 2005: par. 26).

Having stated the imperative of the universal norms of thought, as well as the nexus between communication, meaning and objectivity, let us now return to the meanings of the principles underlying universal canons of thought- the principles of non-contradiction, induction and the categorical imperative, discussed by Wiredu. The law of non-contradiction is a canon of inquiry, which states that no class can be both true and false at the same time and place. In the absence of this canon, individual human survival would be in jeopardy because one would not be able to differentiate affirmation from denial in communication, differentiate between believing and not believing. One's survival as a member of the club of humans is in doubt, if there is an absence of the norm of non-contradiction. Like the principle of non-contradiction, induction is also an epistemic norm, necessary for interaction in human world. Though a subtle term, Wiredu only relayed Hume's discussion on the relation between cause and effect, as well as Hume's critique without an elucidation of the nexus of induction with the conceptual basis of universals that he sets out to establish.

Now to categorical imperative – the last of the principles Wiredu discusses. Unlike Kant's categorical imperative that is a principle of good conduct, which serves as the foundation of ethics, Wiredu's use of the word categorical imperative is in the sense of a norm of thought. In this sense, categorical imperative is a peremptory norm that overrides contrary disciplinary inclinations and tendencies in the domains of thought (Wiredu 1996:38). Wiredu builds on what is well known to be particularly underdeveloped in Kant's enterprise. Kant's categorical imperative inadequately accounts for the transfer to others of independently attained moral principles. Wiredu closes that gap by suggesting that the unity between the individual and the universal does not reside in the abstract. Rather, it is in the biological unity (relational inter-dependence) of the species (Masolo 2005:36). The universality of the three principles of norms thought allows members of the species not only to be adaptable to different language variations, but also to translate between the concepts, which like the rules of thought by which they are produced, are universal.

Given the universality of conceptual understanding, Wiredu equally makes a case for epistemic universals. Contrary to relativistic fancy, he argues the possibility of cognitive criteria for the cross-cultural evaluation of the truth, soundness and rationality of belief systems. Bearing in mind the inconsistency that would be involved in granting the possibility of conceptual universals and denying its cognitive variety, Wiredu establishes a link between conceptual and epistemic universals. His argument is that the power of conceptualization – which is one of the factors of communication, involves the capacity to react to stimuli in the external world in a law-like manner. Such capacity involves a basic sensitivity to

the principle of non-contradiction and the ability to contemplate empirical hypothetical. This ability to contemplate empirical hypothetical implies the capacity to learn from experience through the principle of induction. If the principles of non-contradiction and induction that are basic to human knowledge, are implicit in the power of conceptualization, Wiredu concludes, "it is apparent that together they unite the human activities of understanding and knowing in such a way as to make it impossible that different peoples might be able to communicate but unable to argue rationally among themselves" (Wiredu 1996:24).

Furthermore, Wiredu explores the possibility of establishing ethical or moral universalism. His basic consideration in this regard is to find out such a principle of conduct that without its recognition, the survival of human society in a tolerable condition would be inconceivable. In doing this, he distinguishes between custom and morality. In his analysis, customs are a contingent fact of particular social formations and broadly constitute such things as usages, traditions, conventions, etiquette, fashions, aesthetic standards, taboos, rituals, folklores etc. All these are rules of thought and action and to say that the basis for evaluating them is contingent is to say that there are no universally valid principles to that purpose (Wiredu 1996:28). In other words, the rightness or wrongness of these rules is culture relative. However, morality is never particularistic like custom. Rather, it is a cultural universal.

Wiredu defines morality in the strict sense as the motivated pursuit of sympathetic impartiality. This definition of morality by Wiredu naturally suggests the imperative "let your conduct at all times manifest a due concern for the interest of others". A person is said to show due concern for the interests of others "if in contemplating the impact of his/her actions on their interests, the person puts him/herself imaginatively in their position, and having done so, is able to welcome that impact" (Wiredu 1996: 30). Sympathetic impartiality represents a fusion of impartiality and sympathy: the impartiality is what the moral rules embody, and the sympathy is what the moral motivation evinces (Wiredu 1996:31). This principle of sympathetic impartiality is, according to him:

*A human universal transcending culture viewed as social forms and customary beliefs and practices. In being common to all human practice of morality; it is a universal of any non-brutish form of human life (Wiredu 1996:31).*

Wiredu's point in the above excerpt is that sympathetic impartiality is a moral principle of universal appeal because there is no society where everyone will gloriously avow and act to the contrary of this principle without experiencing a brutish and poor life. Values such as truthfulness, honesty, justice, chastity, etc. are aspects of sympathetic impartiality and do not differentiate morality from culture to culture. The contingencies of cultures may only introduce some variations of details in the definitions of some of these values (Wiredu 1996:31).

On the basis of the intelligibility of conceptual universals, epistemic universals and ethical universals, Wiredu therefore argues for cultural universals. Construing culture as not just the social forms and customary beliefs and practices of a human group, but also inclusive of the phenomenon of language, knowledge, communica-

tion and modes of transmitting values from one generation to the other, Wiredu said the possession of one language or another by all human societies constitutes cultural universal *par excellence* (Wiredu 1996:30). As language is necessary for any human community, what the particular language consists of is a matter of contingency. Much as there are cultural universals, Wiredu equally accepts that philosophy can be universal, even though it is culture-relative in actuality (Wiredu 1980:33).

### 3. A critique of Wireduan philosophical accounts of cultural universals and particulars

Following the above exposition of the thrust of Wiredu's positions on cultural universals and particulars, it is pertinent at this juncture to critically appraise his submissions. We think Wiredu should be commended on his theoretical positions, at least for the systematic and logical ways in which he presented his positions. Wiredu's attempt to provide an African perspective on the problem of cultural universals and particulars is a brilliant intellectual engagement. D.A. Masolo acknowledges this when he theorized on the issue of universals and particulars:

*Wiredu contributes and adds an African tone to the familiar and perhaps one of the most influential preoccupations of twentieth-century philosophy, viz., analytic theories on the relation between language, meaning, and mind. What he adds to the literature is the view that meaning cannot be understood in pure logical terms without the collective and relational social base that makes the very idea of meaning possible. Meanings and, by implication, mind, are objective in the sense that they are biologically made possible, and not in the sense that they exist as entities independently of the communicative act* (Masolo 2005: par. 27).

While we join Masolo in commending Wiredu on the freshness of his analysis he introduced a perennial and unresolved issue in Western philosophy, we think that the extent to which Wiredu succeeded in this quest is, however questionable, as there are inherent contradictions and flaws in his positions.

It does appear that Wiredu's biological universalism is not as forceful as or perhaps not the only element sufficient to account for cultural universals. In an earlier work, "The Akan Concept of Mind", Wiredu (1983:121) noted that the universality of one human family is based on the *okra* which according to him is equal in all human beings at all time because it transcends the biological. *Okra* is a quasi-material part of man "whose presence in the body means life and whose absence means death and which also receives the individual's destiny from God" (Wiredu 1995:133).

Elsewhere in his work, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, Wiredu (1996: 34–41) based the biological universality of man on the standards of thought and actions in *Homo sapiens*, which include: reflective perception, abstraction, principles of non-contradiction and induction. Given these shifts in Wiredu's



philosophy, it is vital to note that unless he explicates on the relations between these varying accounts, his analysis may after all be rocked with conceptual inconsistency. One foreseeable implication of such conceptual conflation is that we will have as many universals, as we can identify certain resemblance within two or more cultures. And as many categories come into scene as universals, the whole idea of universalism becomes odious. One serious challenge that this may pose to any philosophical enterprise, whether metaphysics or epistemology, is upon what universal consideration can we assess the supposed claims to universal categories, truth, reality or value? On this, we wish to submit that this is an issue worthy of further philosophical consideration.

Wiredu in his recent writings attempts to explore conceptual decolonization as a means of achieving the genuine humanity of the African people. In this regard, he sees the demarcating elements in the world's civilization and culture on the basis of conceptual particularism. At the same time, he seeks to underscore what the Africans have with the rest of the world with his emphasis on conceptual universals. Wiredu claims that his agenda for contemporary African philosophy – conceptual decolonization – has the potential of unmasking the spurious universal so that the supposed conceptual contrast, e.g. between physical and spiritual, substance and attribute, and a number of others may in the end appear to be universal necessities of human thought. However, when we look critically at Wiredu's idea of conceptual decolonization, we cannot help wondering whether it is designed to arrive at particulars. His works on conceptual decolonization using the Akan thought system as his basis are aimed at accounting for African self-identity.

For instance, his articles include "The Akan Concept of Mind" (1983), "The Concept of Truth in the Akan Language" (1985), "An Akan Perspective on Human Rights" (1990), "The African Concept of Personhood" (1992) amongst others. In all these works, Wiredu's conclusions on the discussed themes are attempts towards particularism. While there is nothing essentially wrong with Wiredu's exercises in conceptual decolonization as a means of justifying the particularity of the self-identity of the Africans, the issue at stake is that such philosophic exercises have barely promoted conceptual universalism.

It can further be pointed out that Wiredu's confusion of *Homo sapiens* as universal biological identity and his interpretation of *Homo sapiens* as a human being possessing mental capacities such as reflective perception, abstraction and inference are incorrect and susceptible to critical objection. The basis of Wiredu's notion of cultural universalism in Masolo's (2005) interpretation is panpsychologism. This is the view that the cognitive capacity and process(es) through which knowledge and other forms of consciousness are generated, and which is the very basis of the idea of the mind, are the same in all members of the human species (Masolo 2005:23). While we agree to an extent with Wiredu on the biped species of man as a defining universal feature, we think there is a problem in Wiredu's position, especially when we consider his claim that at birth, a child is not born

with a mind (*adwene*), which is the capacity for thinking as well as the outcome of the ideational exercise of that capacity (Wiredu 1983:120).

The simple implication of this is that Wiredu's concept of biological identity, which removes the mind from the elements that make up a child, tends toward materialism of a sort (Wiredu 1983:129). We may ask how does a child come to exercise 'adwene of *okra*'? One answer given by Wiredu is that this emerges as a result of the development of language, communication and other agencies of socialization. Communication makes the minds (Wiredu 1996:21–22). As much as language and communication, which Wiredu identifies as cultural universals, can enhance the thinking capacity, power of conception and articulation of a being, they are not necessarily sufficient requirements for being a person. The reason for this is not unconnected with the fact that a difference exists between man (*Homo sapiens*) and human person. Every human person is a man but not all men qualify as a human person. This is due to the fact that beyond the biological features of being a man, there are social, psychological, cultural and moral requirements of being a human person. Personhood is in degrees contingent on the extent of fulfillment in these given areas, while the biological constitution of humans is constant and therefore universal.

Furthermore, it is difficult to ignore how intercultural communication, which Wiredu emphasizes in his support for cultural universals will not be fatuous given the fact of subtle concession he accorded to the differences in the capacity of languages. Though, he is quick at pointing out that:

*As human beings of different cultures interact more and more and become more and more familiar with each other's languages and philosophies, with any fallacies of racial superiority dropped, one can expect that there will be increasing cross-appropriation, and consequently, cross-fertilization of ideas; so that cultural difference will become more and more unreliable as an index to philosophical difference (Wiredu 2002: 204).*

Being cautious on the issue of language, A.G.A. Bello (2004:266) logically posits that while it may be true that no language is intrinsically superior or inferior to another, it is safe to say that some languages may be better than some others. This position entails some fundamental difficulties in Wiredu's attempt to give his biologism a theoretical defense. For us, it is incontrovertible that divergences exist among most people of the world. These lie in their conceptual scheme, language, culture and beliefs about most fundamental issues about the world. The consequence of this on Wiredu's view is that there are certain concepts that cannot be translated into another language. If this is permitted, it follows that the composition of concepts into universals will contain within it certain untranslatable concepts, whose true meaning is not well contained in the universals.

It is on this basis that Barry Hallen joins issue with Wiredu. Hallen argues that:

*While the assumption of the universality of meaning that enables cross-cultural linguistic interaction possesses obvious utility for a field linguist, who is confronted with the need to translate an alien language, the resultant manual if translated cannot preclude an ethnocentric bias, since the translator "will likely*

*favour the meaning of their own native language-English, for example, effectively universalizing them into propositions, and then proceed to impose English meanings upon other languages via the process of translation” (Hallen 1995:379).*

Hallen's refutation of Wiredu's conceptual universals seems plausible. He established that translation is often a problem in intercultural communication. In his works "Conceptual Decolonization as an Imperative in Contemporary African Philosophy: Some Personal Reflections," (2002) "Akan concept of mind" (1983) amongst others, Wiredu has shown that there are certain concepts that are non-translatable within one culture. When we therefore engage in the translation of such concept into another language, we are challenged with wrong interpretation and translation. If this position is attested, then it follows that if we are to communicate with other societies, there will be an imposition of one cultural meaning on another. And by this, we may have what Wiredu affirms as a conceptual universal, which is disguised conceptual colonialism.

The linguistic bias in the above arises from the fact that each national language is a unique human creation that has its own intricate conceptual network(s) – ontological, epistemological aesthetic, etc. – with distinctive semantic predispositions (Hallen 1995:379). From this putative conclusion of Hallen, we arrive at the threshold of cultural particularism/relativism. Really, Hallen is making a good point because there is the possibility of untranslatability, and this will hamper the process of cross-cultural understanding. However, it is equally arguable as Gordon Hunnings (1975:13) does that "un-translatability does not necessarily imply unintelligibility." This is particularly so when we realize that there is no human language that cannot be learnt in principle by a non-native speaker as a second language. Wiredu is quite right, and in support of this when he said "a human being is a rule-following animal, and language is nothing but an arrangement of rules. Therefore, barring the impairment of faculties, any human being will necessarily have the capacity to understand and use a language... [and] any language" (Wiredu 1996:25).

Contrary to Wiredu's claim above, Bello gives an argument that dampens the case for objective criteria for cross-cultural translation. According to Bello:

*It is neither necessary nor important to classify problems, data, ideas, concepts or techniques as either universal or particular, especially since Wiredu himself concedes that the universality of a mode of conceptualization does not guarantee its objective validity.... Let us not limit our thoughts to ideas we reckon universals, for whatever reason(s), whether linguistic or indigent of language (Bello 2004:267).*

Yet Bello's position that it is not necessary to classify problems or ideas as either universal or particular, especially since Wiredu himself concedes that the universality of a mode of conceptualization does not guarantee its objective validity, does not unearth the foundation of Wiredu's argument for universals. The point of Wiredu is that humans as *Homo sapiens* share certain traits or qualities that enable them to communicate. Whether such qualities as identified by Wiredu

are necessary, sufficient or exclusive conditions of humanness and universalism or not is a different question altogether. Apparently, men cannot talk without making reference to one or many. For instance, in Platonic worldview, the concept of beauty is a universal, whilst we have individual men or women that participate in the universals. However, logicians often argue that we cannot talk about certain proposition without making reference to some, one or all. If this is true, then Bello's position that it is neither necessary nor important to classify concepts as either universal or particular fails the logical test.

We argue like Wiredu that we can only access the world through our conceptual categories either particularly or universally. Although Wiredu argues that the conceptualization of a universal does not guarantee its objective validity, but it does not follow that its conceptual objectification is invalid. What is required in this regard is substantial argument for its existence or validity. However, in contradiction to the position of Bello and in support of Wiredu, we do not accept that it cannot be established. To this end, whatsoever we wish to account for under the concept of universal must be radically demonstrated. The implication of this is that anything, if it can be rigorously demonstrated as a concept of universal, becomes one after such demonstration. The negative consequence of this view on Wiredu's position is that it may lead us to project into reality or put many things into the class of universals even when such concepts do not have the validity of such.

Keita's objection to Wiredu's position, which is to the effect that cultural universal is nothing but cultural particular, is worthy of explication. On the biological identity of human beings as *Homo sapiens*, Keita (1997:171) argues that the human mental capacity for reflective perception, abstraction and inference, which for Wiredu are cultural universals, miss the mark since the mental does not satisfy the feature of being empirically ostensible, which is necessary for something being cultural and universal. Thus Keita (1997:134) submits that "Wiredu is correct in arguing that there are cultural universals, but they are none other than the general forms of what we refer to as cultural particulars."

Keita argues that Wiredu is right in holding that there are cultural universals, but to him, they are none other than the general forms of what we refer to as cultural particulars. According to him, cultural universals are items and practices that are found in all cultures, thereby warranting a general term for such despite their extensive variability. Examples are social organization, economic institutions, educational establishment, religious organizations, legal institutions, punishment, restitution, marriage and many others. All these are found generally in all cultures; however, they only have particular cultural coloration in respective cultures.

It is reasonable to note that we can talk of cultural universals in terms of cultural particulars, while in actual fact they do not mean the same. There are certain things that unite things of the same nature. This is what we conceive as universals. It may be a name, concept or something that all things participate in. Whereas such things are different from particulars in that, there are certain things

that differentiate them. Therefore, Keita's universal cannot be dissolved in particulars or vice versa. For this to exist, it requires a further clarification. But the question is: Is Wiredu's concept of universals necessarily as well as sufficiently distinct from particulars? Do universals, whether conceptual or epistemic, arise from particular concept or particular notion of truth? Or can cultural universals emerge without making reference to any particular culture?

We think that these questions pose a threat to the demarcation between universals and particulars. This may warrant the conclusion that universals, whether that of culture, morals or epistemology, are product of a particular culture. One major implication of this in Wiredu's notion of universals is that a conceptual universal, which is the cornerstone of his position, will amount to an absolutization of superior cultures' conceptual particularism on other cultures of the world. However, Keita's argument that mental capacity does not satisfy the feature of empirical sensibility appears to limit the argument for cultural universal to mere observable data. For the sake of argument, we could account for empirical justification of cultural ingredient on language. For instance, before one can communicate, one requires a language which also depends on a mental concept without which we cease to be a human being. On this basis, we agree that mental capacity is universal in all cultures. This is a position that Keita fails to acknowledge, but which Wiredu plausibly presents.

Still on the critique of Wiredu, we have Godfrey Onah's refutation. Wiredu (1996: 35) speaks of a continuum in human existence, which moves "from its biological base to all the spirals of potentialities." Onah (2002) raises a rhetorical question about what exactly do these spirals consist of if they are not biological? Wiredu seems aware of this difficulty, for he says something, which may appear to offer some solutions. "There is the notion," he writes, "of an advance beyond the biological at the human level, (but) there is no suggestion of an ontological transcendence of the biological" (Wiredu 1996:36). But Onah (2002:69) questioned further: what is this human level that advances beyond the biological? How can this level be said to advance beyond the biological without being ontologically transcendent of the biological? Inconsistently, however, and despite his protestations, Wiredu (1995:133) at least once translates *okra* in Akan conceptual scheme as soul and it ontologically transcends the biological.

Odera Oruka criticizes Wiredu's notion of morality, which he defined in terms of sympathetic impartiality. Citing "Rawls' principle of rational egoism", Oruka argues that sympathetic impartiality may not in fact be necessary. Rational egoism alone, i.e. calculating impartiality, is enough as a conception of morality. "In Rawls' state of nature," Oruka comments:

*Individuals lack sympathetic impartiality and they do not even acquire it in a civil state otherwise there would be little need for police, prisons and class wars. They remain egoists and many of them are still rational, otherwise the society would have melted away* (Oruka 1990:27).

It must be stressed that it is not true as argued by Wiredu that morality is necessarily universal in all human community because it is based on the principle

of sympathetic impartiality. Instead, moral laws may also come to scene on the basis of what Rawls described as calculating impartiality. From the broadest perspective, since morality accounts not only for the good, but also for the bad, it follows that for us to have a universal moral doctrine it must take into cognizance the sympathetic impartiality as well as calculating impartiality. Both therefore will account for what morality entails in the ordinary sense of the word. The problem with Wiredu's position is that he undermines the true nature of man in the society. For people could be rational, irrational, egoistic, altruistic, selfish, loving etc. Thus morality attempts to unite human traits for the good of the human society. But Wiredu has underestimated the encompassing nature of moral universal.

Furthermore, Oruka in his article, "Cultural fundamental in philosophy: Obstacles in philosophical dialogue" correctly suggests that Wiredu "did not shut the door to the admission of other cultural universals" (Oruka 1990:28). On this basis, Oruka added 'intuition' into the catalogue of cultural universals on the grounds that it is the most obvious of all cultural universals but the least recognized and appreciated in philosophical dialogues and inquiries. By intuition, he means a "form of mental skill which helps the mind to extrapolate from experience and come to establish extra statistical inductive truths--- or to make a correct/ plausible logical inference without any established or known rules of procedures" (Oruka 1990:29). Although we agree with Oruka that Wiredu did not shut the door for subsequent universal concepts, yet we do not see any reason why Oruka's notion of intuition could become one on the basis of his definition. Our objection to Oruka is that children until the age of two, as well as lunatics, will be excluded from the category of human persons since they are most possibly incapable of exercising intuition. And doing this presupposes that intuition is not universal for all mankind. Upon such consideration, it follows that intuition does not cut across all humankind, and as such could be regarded as particular.

Like Wiredu, Oruka agrees that there are cultural universals. But for him, "despite the existence of cultural universals, the reality of cultural fundamentals, which he construes as "concepts, styles of language and a method of work or psychological expectation that helps to mark one culture from another" (Oruka 1990:32), "hamper smooth philosophical dialogues" (Oruka 1990:36). To grant that cultural fundamentals are apt to impede philosophical dialogue, as Oruka claims, it is not necessarily to foreclose the reality of cultural universals. On this note, we wish to account that there are universals as well as particulars. This attempt we consider worth pursuing, in view of our conviction that it is better to seek what unites us, than pursue what divides us. Irrespective of the search for a distinctive African identity, we belong to the community of human beings.

#### **4. Extending the frontiers of cultural universals: a case for causality**

Oruka has rightly noted, Wiredu has not shut the door to other possible cultural universals. Hence, this suggests that the realm of cultural universals is open-ended.

On the basis of this, we seek to make a case for causality as another possible cultural universal that defies any cultural coloration.

The idea of causality could be found in all cultures of the world, although it has different interpretations from one culture to culture, yet it underlines our modes of thought. Just like abstraction, inference and communication, causality acts as the foundation of our thought. For instance, everybody acts today on the bases of what happened in the past, whether the recent or distant past. We believe that what happens in the past provides a ground for our understanding of the future. Without this inference, we may not be able to communicate our experience, and would thereby cease to be human beings. Consequently, it is plausible to hold that causality is the foundation of language and inference. If this is acceptable, it follows that without causality we cannot even appreciate conceptual or epistemic universals. We can infer from this that behind Wiredu's biological traits is the idea of causality.

The notion of causality is universal and the same in all cultures of the world. Though many African scholars have made a case for a notion of causality, which is characteristically different from that of the West. Such attempts at establishing a cultural particularistic distinction between African and Western notions of causality are seen in the traditionalist account of African causal explanation. Among the traditionalists who have made contributions on a unique African notion of causality, mention should be made of J. O. Sodipo (1973) and K. C. Anyanwu (1983). These scholars show in their works that there is a difference between African notion of causality and Western idea of causality by clearly demonstrating the supposed difference in causal explanations between the two modes of thought.

For Anyanwu, there can be no culturally neutral conception of causality. His argument presupposes that the idea of causality in Western science is deeply rooted in Western culture and as a result cannot be a yardstick for judging the conception of causality in traditional African thought. Similarly, causality in traditional African thought is a product of the African culture and therefore cannot be compared with causal principles of Western culture or any other culture for that matter. And by implication, every culture or thought system has its own unique conception of causality. What is considered as the cause of an event in any culture depends on the structure of reality within that given culture. Therefore, the modern European and the traditional African differ in their conception of causality since they both depend on the structure of their different cultural realities in their explanation of events (Anyanwu 1983:26).

In the case of Sodipo, he argues that causal principles in science are different from those of traditional Yoruba thought. He notes that causal explanations in science are provided through the application of general laws and through the observation of empirical facts. In other words, causal explanations in science are 'impersonal' as they tackle the question 'how'. In the traditional African thought on the other hand, there is an easy recourse to gods in people's causal explanation, which makes the question 'how' yield too soon to the question 'why'. The principle of causal explanation, Sodipo tells us, thus simply becomes personal. He

therefore concludes that the “causal principles of science are fundamentally different from those of the traditional Yoruba, because while the goal of causal explanation in science is designed to satisfy cognitive ends, in traditional Yoruba thought, it is adopted to satisfy emotional and aesthetic needs” (Sodipo 1973:14).

We can therefore see that the fact of difference in Western and African causal explanations implies for both Sodipo and Anyanwu a difference in their notion of causality. However, such temptation must be rationally resisted because if Africans were to have a unique notion of causality, then the traditionalists should have given an African analysis of the phrase ‘A’ causes ‘B’, which is the cornerstone meaning of causality. Apparently, none of the traditionalists attempted this. A critical review of their contributions on causality revealed that they attempted answering the question of what things the Africans regard as causes. Sodipo (1973:22) for instance, said “entities such as *Olodumare*, divinities, spirits, magic, witchcraft, *ori* (destiny), etc. feature prominently in Yoruba causal explanation”. Anyanwu’s (1983:63) answer is that causes of events in Africa are based on the structure of African reality, which he argues, centers on hierarchy of force. God is the crown of hierarchy of force, followed by the divinities, ancestors, spirits, man, animals, plants and minerals.

To our mind, these answers do not mean that Africans have a distinct notion of causality characteristically different from the West. Such traditionalists’ attempt to portray Africans as having such is aptly described by Balogun (2004:2) as “a reaction and reflection bid to bail Africans out of colonial subjugation and battered identity.” In Balogun’s recent view (2010), which we align with, “the cultural particularistic attempts by traditionalists to defend a unique African causal explanation only mean that the West focuses more on event causation (material, scientific and general notion of causal explanation) and Africans more on agent causation (metaphysical and personalized notions of causal explanation).” Both event causation and agent causation are different kinds of causal explanation but do not necessarily imply different notions of causality. Causality is a cultural universal notion. Perhaps Africans truly have a different notion of causality, in which case what they mean by the phrase ‘A’ causes ‘B’ would be apparently different from the Western notion of causality. Like that of the West, it entails temporal precedence, necessary connection, transitivity, necessary and sufficient conditions. Hence, causality is a conceptual kind of universals, which further strengthens the compatibility of cultural particularities and cultural universals.

## 5. Conclusion

Thus far in this paper, we have examined Wiredu’s perspective on the problem of supposed incompatibility of cultural universals with cultural particulars. We noted Wiredu’s strong view that the human species is universally bonded in norms of thought, communication and biological identity. For Wiredu, universals, rightly conceived on the basis of our common biological identity, are not incompatible



with cultural particularities, and in fact are what make intercultural communications possible. Contrary to popular speculations that such things as history, culture or ideology unify humans, Wiredu's argument is to the effect that these features are the causes of diversity rather than the unification of humans. Wiredu therefore maintains that our biological constitution is the core basis of our commonality and language is the fulcrum of the idea of cultural universals. This paper has attempted a critical assessment of these assertions and others of Wiredu's assumptions

Furthermore, we have attempted to explore the plausibility of causality as an example of a cultural universal. While the existential reality of culture shows that particulars can neither be undermined nor ignored as unintelligible, "the different cultural worlds," we agree with Otafor (1999:18), "can benefit each other by respecting and accommodating that which is not common property: the varieties of art forms, philosophies, religions, literatures, histories, and ways of life." The level of success achievable in this regard is contingent, to a larger extent, on the reality or myth of a universal language and trans-cultural communication.

In the light of the foregoing reflections, we conclude that while Kwasi Wiredu's contribution to the discourse on universalism and particularism is philosophically illuminating and provoking, it makes some debatable assertions which call for further inquiry.

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