

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF WIREDU'S CULTURAL UNIVERSALS

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Abstract

The question of the existence of African philosophy has been diversely addressed by scholars. While some scholars are of the view that there is African philosophy, others are of a contrary opinion. In the attempt to clarify these diverse views, Kwasi Wiredu examines the question via the existence of cultural universals. He argues that since there are universals which are conceptual in nature and are intelligible across culture, then, philosophy can be universal, though cultural relative. This paper assesses critically some of the major arguments and claims of Wiredu in his defence of African philosophy with major emphasis on the humanistic traits identified by Wiredu. This study also points out the gap in his argument about the principle of sympathetic impartiality. The study uses the method of argumentation and conceptual clarification.

Keywords: Wiredu, Cultural Philosophy, Africa

Introduction

Wiredu's idea of cultural universals is a form of response to the question about the existence of African Philosophy. If there is African Philosophy, what is it and can it be compared with Western Philosophy in its methods and comprehensiveness? To justify comparative philosophy between the westerners, Africans and even the global world at large, Wiredu sets out to argue for some common grounds that can allow inter-cultural dialogue by identifying certain conceptual issues and humanistic traits which are consistent in serving as the basis for the interaction of cultures.

This paper attempts to critically examine the basic conceptual issues and humanistic traits as identified by Wiredu. It uses the method of argumentation, logical and conceptual clarification to drive home its points.

Wiredu's View of Cultural Universals

Earlier before his book on cultural universals and particulars, Wiredu opines that universal is what is general and what is general is what can be instantiated (Wiredu 1983: 122). What can be instantiated may itself be an instance of something more general. The characteristics of something, be it object or entity, of being an instance but incapable of being instantiated is the defining feature of particulars. For Wiredu, there are universal, they are conceptual in nature and they are intelligible across culture. It is on this basis that Wiredu holds that philosophy can be universal, though culture relative.

Wiredu's first point of arguments about cultural universals is through his use of a *reduction ad absurdum*:

'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)

He builds this argument from what is too visible to be disputed (intercultural communication) and from there builds the idea that there must be at least a conceptual scheme for the parties (from the two different cultures) involved in the communication. Such scheme of concept is a universal and for him, there could be such a scheme of concept that can be shared by all the cultures of humankind.

Basically, Wiredu's argument can be said to be from two different perspectives; first, from the nature of humans in general, through communication and language and second from the aspect of ethics through a principle of conduct that cuts across human society.

From his argument on the nature of man, all humans for him 'are not born with a mind, not even one with a *tabula rasa*. This poses Wiredu as a materialist of a kind, but then, is materialism compatible with universalism? I shall return to this later. Humans for him are only born with a potential of a mind which is progressively actualized through forms of communication. For him, two factors are involved in communication- conceptualisation and articulation. At this level of communication, instinct and culture guides the human behaviour, such that instincts ensures distinctive uniformity in human actions and reactions while culture gives room for plenty of variation in our habits, instructions and conscious thoughts. Instincts accounts for objectivity and universality in the standards of thought and actions of humans whereas culture accounts for relativity and subjectivity (Wiredu 1996: 22). In all for Wiredu, what unifies us as humans, is more than what differentiates us. This implies that for Wiredu, there are those things that unify us (universals) and there are also those things that differentiate us (particulars). With this, he defends the existence of both particulars and universals in any culture of the world.

Those things that unifies us as humans are our *biologico-cultural identity* as *homines sapientes*, our capacity for reflective perception, abstraction, deduction and induction, regardless of our culture and they are the same for all beings everywhere. This is why he holds,

‘the human constitution of flesh and bones, quickened by electrical charges and wrapped up in variously pigmented integument, is thesame everywhere; while there is only one world in which we all live, move and have our struggles, notwithstanding such things as thevagaries of climate’ (Wiredu 1996: 23)

However, language for him is a system of skill that is fundamental to being human. It is nothing but an arrangement of rules and any human being will necessarily have the capacity to understand and use language. If one can understand any one language, one can understand any language (Wiredu 1996:25). In addition to this, Wiredu holds that ‘all human languages are, at bottom, inter-learnable and inter-translatable (Wiredu 1996:26).

Apart from Wiredu’s arguments for the existence of cultural universals using the idea of the descriptive relativism from our languages through communication, he further attempts to argue for cultural universals using the ethical dimension via his explanation of moral universals which according to him, are the easiest to characterize (Wiredu 1996: 29).

Drawing from the Kantian principle of Categorical Imperative, Wiredu specifies a principle of conduct such that without its recognition, the survival of human society in a tolerable condition would be inconceivable. Beginning from the premise that every human being has a concern for his or her own interest (egoism) and coupled with the fact that we must relate in the society, the natural inclination to ensure our conduct at all times manifest a due concern for the interests of others.

As an imperative, Wiredu frames the golden rule of *sympathetic impartiality* which for him is a human universal transcending cultures viewed as social forms and customary beliefs and practices. Morality for Wiredu in the strict sense and from the standpoint of conduct, is the motivated pursuit of sympathetic impartiality. Values such as, truthfulness, honesty, justice, chastity, etc., are simply aspects of sympathetic impartiality. Customs for Wiredu can differ and does differ from culture to culture but morality for him is a social constant which does not and cannot differ from place to place although we may have alternative moralities in different societies, yet they will be composites of the universal morality (Wiredu 1996: 30). This principle for Wiredu is common to all human practice of morality and it is essential to the harmonization of human interests in the society. The implication of this principle of morality is that, although humans in general are globally self-interested, the characteristics of human interaction does not end with egoism. With

this Wiredu seeks to advance the claim that in any part of the world, morality obeys the rule of sympathetic impartiality, hence, it is a cultural universal.

Critical Appraisal of Wiredu's Idea of Cultural Universals

Cultural universals exist because all people in the world are similar physically, have the same biological needs and face common problems that the humanity poses to the environment. People are born and die; therefore, all nations have traditions and customs associated with birth and death. People live together; they have songs, dances, games, greetings, labour division, etc. cultural universals are a kind of the civilization experience. No matter what nationality a person belongs to, no matter what time he/she is born, what views and ideas he/she adheres to, and no matter what social environment he/she belongs to, there is a certain system of signs that encodes common ideas for all people on earth about the world and about interaction with it. This happens because all representatives of the human race live according to the same biological laws, they have the same needs, they are all equal in front of the tasks that nature sets before them.

In the light of the above, I think I agree with Wiredu that there are cultural universals. But, for something to be a universal, Wiredu admits that it is objective, yet, while listing some of the universals he claims exist by the nature of man, Wiredu holds that the human mental capacity for reflective perception, abstraction and inference are universals but these cannot be empirically perceived.

Still on the nature of humans, Wiredu holds that there are cultural universals based on the fact that human beings share the same biological traits which makes them capable of reflective perception, abstraction, deduction and induction, regardless of our culture and they are the same for all beings everywhere. He holds,

‘being a human person implies having the capacities of reflective perception, abstraction and inference. In their basic nature these mental capacities are the same for all humans, irrespective of whether they inhabit Europe, Asia, or Africa, just as in their basic nature the instinctive reactions of, say, the frogs of Europe are the same as those of the frogs of Africa’ (Wiredu 1996 :23)

It can be argued that these are forms of mental capacities which Wiredu opines are the same for all humans, but they do not necessarily imply that when they are used, all humans across culture will project the same things from their use. For instance, through these mental capacities we may come to form a conceptual scheme about marriage being a union but our different projections about the forms of marriage may differ. For instance, it may be a union of males and a female, for some others, it may be a union of a male and a female, while for some others, it may be a union of females and a male, etc. the

implication of this is that mere identification of common biological traits may not necessarily implies that we share the same projections about our conceptual schemes about reality. The reflective, abstract, deductive and inductive conceptions for all humans is not enough to be a cultural universal. Ogungbure (2012) refers to Wiredu's analogy with the frog here as a *weak analogy* as the same thing cannot be said about our categories of thought.

On the other hand however, I think cultural universalization does not mean unification that is, reducing the diversity of national cultures to a single model. It is, first of all, about the relationship, mutual understanding of national cultures, which is possible subject to the adoption of common cultural prerequisites.

With the similarities of universals, their specific cultural content may be different. For example, family forms of life can be found in all cultures, but some societies prefer monogamy (one spouse), others polyandry (several husbands), and third, polygamy (several wives). Therefore it is generally accepted that the true universal features are not the identity of the content, but the similarity of the classification. (Baklanov & Zhdanov 2020). Since national values are diverse, cultural universals are used to overcome social, cultural, mental and linguistic barriers, bringing together different cultures, facilitating the acculturation of people from these different cultures and the assimilation of the universal values.

Cultural universals also include the phenomenon of language. All languages have vowels and consonants, similar grammatical forms. Speakers of different languages can discuss not only events, actions, people but also existential states such as fear, hatred, enthusiasm, etc. these ones and other categories confirm that the existence of languages is based on universal mental operations as argued by Wiredu.

On the issue of language in Wiredu's account, he holds that 'barring the impairment of faculties, any human being will *necessarily* have the capacity to understand and use a language; and if one can understand any one language, one can understand any language'. With this, Wiredu commit a fallacy of hasty generalization. What gives him the impression that once you are able to understand one, then you can understand any? He further holds that 'the ability to perceive the untranslatability of an expression from one language into another is a mark of linguistic understanding...' (Wiredu 1996: 25). This is because for him, there is a concept of object in general which is a common possession of all human beings, who are all rule-following animals standing on the same pedestal of sensible perception. As such difficulties in communication can be overcome or reduced to something less than absolute impenetrability. On this note however, Wiredu failed to acknowledge the fact that there are some communication problems and that of inter

translatability which cannot be overcome as result of some terms within the language which cannot be directly translated. This accounts for why Wiredu's writings itself shows that there are some concepts that one cannot translate, given that he retains the use of some Akan words or concepts in his writings, probably to avoid loss of the direct meaning or to guide against the misinterpretation. Given this, does it imply that we will have some cultural untranslatable universal or that universal concepts will contain within them some 'untranslatable universals' given that Wiredu does not see the untranslatability as a challenge to his argument, or won't this render his arguments as absurd? With this, it is difficult to agree with Wiredu that the inability to interpret certain aspects of a people's language is a hallmark of understanding, rather it is pointer to the fact that there is at least, a problem of partial translatability yet to be addressed on Wiredu's account and subsequently defeats his arguments on cultural universals.

Still on the issue of language however, though I have been able to point out some of the challenges with Wiredu's position, yet, I still agree with him, that language is a cultural universal based on what is obtainable in reality. Language helps people to bond as well as mix easily with one another. There is this sense of belonging that comes to one when you naturally come across people who speak your language. In reality, when you understand or speak the language of another person, it opens doors of opportunity and benefits.

From Wiredu's principle of sympathetic impartiality, although with the premises of Wiredu, the principle sounds convincing, yet, there seems to be some elements of logical inconsistencies with the principle. First, the principle violates one of the logical principles of thought, the principle of non-contradiction. The principle of non-contradiction which states that 'something cannot be 'P' and 'not P' at the same time and place. With this, one may interpret Wiredu as saying 'sympathetic' from the word 'sympathy' which means 'pity' can be one and the same with 'impartial' which means 'unbiased'. Grammatically, to show pity should go with being partial and not otherwise. Hence, one may argue why 'a sympathetic ethical principle' which should be subjective theory be merged with 'an impartial ethical principle' which is an objective theory. This entails a flouting of the principle of non-contradiction. Viewed differently, it may be argued that Wiredu for instance might be ignorant of this principle but in the actual sense of it, this is not the case, as Wiredu alludes to the principle earlier in the same paper (Wiredu 1996: 22)

Still on the principle of sympathetic impartiality, Wiredu holds that as long as a custom has rationale, it has, at least a qualified universality via its transcultural intelligibility, I want to say that on these grounds, Wiredu would want to say that the African moral tradition has the principle of sympathetic impartiality as a universal since his major aim is to defend African philosophy. By implication then, the African moral tradition therefore

can be said to be 'sympathetically impartial' in its judgment of right or wrong moral actions. But in the actual sense of it, can the African moral tradition be correctly interpreted as such? The reason for this argument is that the African moral culture, contrary to Wiredu's claim, is best interpreted as a partialist culture rather than an impartialist culture given some of its moral practices and culture.

For instance, proverbs in the African culture are short traditional utterances that encapsulate cultural truths and sum up recurrent social situations (Lau, Tokofsky and Winick 2004: 8). To achieve clarity of purpose, our proverbs for instance in the African Yoruba culture are mostly partial. As an example, 'kii se gbogbo aja to ba n gbo'ni loja, la nda lohun' meaning 'it is not all dogs that bark at one at the market place that one responds to'. This means that you should not react to all persons actions, since not all human beings are human persons, some humans should be disregarded. Also, 'omo to sipa niya e n gbe' meaning 'it is only the child that raises his hand that the mother will carry', which implies that you may assist one and leave the other, 'akii fi oju oloore gungi' meaning don't be an ungrateful fellow which implies that when you are involved in any form of consideration, consider first the fellow who has been of benefit to you at one point or the other and lastly, 'omo eni kii sedi bebere, ka fi leke si tomo elomiran' meaning 'your child cannot be in need of a favour and you will deprive him because of another child. The major implication of these proverbs is that you are to consider first those of your household in case of allocating benefits. With the above and many others, the African moral tradition can be said to be more partial than impartial. With this then, the moral theorisation of Wiredu on the African principle of sympathetic impartiality do not cut across Africa and as such should be reviewed as a cultural universal.

Although I am not unaware of the arguments of Molefe on how to bridge the gap between partiality and impartiality building from Wiredu's argument (Molefe 2017: 478-480) Molefe argues that the impasse between partiality and impartiality can be resolved from an under-explored African moral perspective. For him, impartiality deals with proper moral issues that have to do with the survival of human beings as such and partiality deals with particular issues of human existence that are not strictly moral. The domain of universality for him is characterised by impartiality and the terrain of particularity is characterised by partiality. Both partiality and impartiality are two characteristic feature of human existence; one concerned about the well-being of all humanity, and one concerned about facilitating well-being at a level or subgroups. Contrary to Mofele's argument, the domain of universality in the African moral perspective is not as strictly characterized by impartiality as he points out and therefore the principle of sympathetic impartiality in the African moral perspective may not be strictly argued as a universal.

Conclusion

This paper examined the question of cultural universals as explicated by Kwasi Wiredu. It examined some of the common grounds identified by Wiredu for the existence of cultural universals. While examining the humanistic traits in the nature of man, the paper disagrees with Wiredu on some certain grounds while strengthening some of his arguments. On Wiredu's argument from the ethical dimension however, the paper disagrees with Wiredu by showing that sympathetic impartiality as a principle of right action is partial using the African Yoruba proverbs as an illustration. Although the paper agrees that there are cultural universals, yet it also advocates the existence of cultural fundamentals which distinguish one culture from the other.

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