



## Chapter 10

# Wiredu's Empirical Metaphysics: The Political Nature of Becoming and Understanding

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### Introduction: The Consequences of Translation

Kwasi Wiredu begins his philosophy with a moral anthropology by drawing upon his Akan heritage and its communalism. For Wiredu, he finds that there are some cultural universals – namely, the need to communicate and a fundamental “Golden Rule” morality – which then are expressed through cultural particulars such as language and mores and norms. The key to this moral anthropology is that personhood is a status to be achieved, and it is done so through the community's esteem of an individual's actions and, consequently, their character.

The notion that “one becomes a person through community” is a widely explored African moral concept, but it often gets “cogitocized” in the process; meaning that its ontological elements – what makes a being a *human* being – gets repackaged into a Western framework. This is why this chapter is pivotal for our exploration on how African philosophers like Serequeberhan and Wiredu need to be read in their own right before being brought into conversation with Western Philosophy, and especially Western phenomenology.

Take, for example, the concept of Ubuntu, which in Zulu is spoken as “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*,” and literally translates as “a person is a person through others.” Ubuntu is translated/practised differently across multiple Southern African language and cultural communities, but it is often rendered into English as

“I am because we are.” Note the contra-Cartesianism at play here: rather than “I think therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*), we have “I am because we are” (*ego sum quia sumus*). Though this may be a well-intentioned way to convey African philosophy, in its translation it creates a dichotomy with (or worse, a dialectic with) the Western notion of the self and its ontology.<sup>1</sup> For one, note how “I am because we are” lacks any linkage to thought or self-reflection – this is why I provided cantilevering Latin translations to make this issue clear. Returning to the West’s problematic historical denial that African peoples possess a sufficient rationality to philosophise, this translation of Ubuntu into English betrays its complicity.

Given that Ubuntu has a wide-ranging and developing scholarship of its own, it is too unwieldy for our scope to explore it further.<sup>2</sup> I raise it here because, although Wiredu’s moral anthropology does not fall under Ubuntu, it shares the same communalist ethos and relational logic. What this brief discourse on Ubuntu shows is how difficult it can be – racially problematic even – to translate African thought into Western frameworks; especially given that these frameworks’ language and structure are built from fundamental metaphysical concepts and its presumptions.

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1 For more, see Uchenna Okeja, “Justification of Moral Norms in African Philosophy,” in *Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy*, Edwin Etieyibo, ed. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 213–220.

2 There is rich and developing scholarship in this area. For what many see as keystone text on Ubuntu and African philosophy, see Mogobe Romose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*, (Harare: Mond Books Publishers, 2005), 38–44. For a critique of Ubuntu as philosophy and an argument for developing a stronger moral-philosophical foundation to African philosophy, see: Aribiah David Attoe, *Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics*, (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022), 65–73. For Ubuntu’s role as a relational ethics, and the implications thereof, see: Thaddeus Metz, “Towards an African Moral Theory (Revised),” in Isaac Ukpokolo, (ed.), *Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), pp. 105–112; Anke Granness, “Concepts of Justice in Africa: Present and Past,” in Isaac Ukpokolo (ed.), *Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 310–315.

Wiredu notices this and urges caution when comparing African thought to other Western philosophies and its languages.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as Edwin Etieyibo argues, when trying to bring African philosophy *into* a Western discourse, one side or the other needs to be modified and often that side is African philosophy. This is what he calls a “Western Universalism,” whereby the West still dictates how far and how much African philosophy is allowed, if you will, into the discourse.<sup>4</sup> This is also why Tsenay Serequeberhan states that African Philosophy and Continental philosophy typically “dialogue at a distance,” where Continental philosophy engages African philosophy so as long as it is useful to Continental philosophy’s projects.<sup>5</sup> In short, the West’s discourses often pick and choose what they like within African philosophy, neutering these concepts from their broader implications. It is a hermeneutics of appropriation rather than a robust engagement.

Contrariwise, Wiredu also argues that one cannot fully grasp the importance of a moral anthropology unless they accept its metaphysical implications: if personhood is acquired through engagement with others, and thus one discovers who they are through these engagements, then it also follows that one discovers the world itself – in both a concrete and metaphorical sense – through these engagements. Hence, Wiredu emphasises that the Akans’ moral anthropology follows an “empirical metaphysic,” which follows an empirically social epistemology.<sup>6</sup> If one’s personhood is always-already becoming through engagements with the world, then one’s sense of the world – what it is and what it could be – is likewise always-already becoming. This is why Wiredu calls for a conceptual decolonisation – with an emphasis

3 Kwasi Wiredu, “Reflections on Cultural Diversity,” *Diogenes* 205 (2005), 118–121.

4 Edwin Etieyibo, “African Philosophy in The Eyes of the West,” *Phronimon*, 17.1 (2016), 87. Note that Etieyibo’s critique is against Metz’s reading of Ubuntu, which relates to the issues mentioned throughout this Introduction.

5 Tsenay Serequeberhan, *Existence and Heritage: Hermeneutic Explorations in African and Continental Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana, 2015), Chapter 2, “Dialogue at a Distance,” 39–56.

6 Wiredu, “Empiricism: The Empirical Character of an African Philosophy,” in Helen Lauer, Nana Aba Appiah Amfo, Jemima Asabea Anderson (eds.), *Identity Meets Nationality: Voices from the Humanities* (Legon-Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2011), 22.

on *conceptual*, or the notion of what a concept psychically is – since merely rejecting anything colonial requires a rational negotiation of what makes it colonial, whether it is beneficial to the community despite its colonial genealogy, and whether it has already been embedded into the given community’s ethical-empirical self-understanding.<sup>7</sup>

This is also why he has an aversion to the West’s reading of the Akan as overtly spiritual or superstitious, and why this shoehorning of Akan philosophy into a Western paradigm is so problematic. For instance, the notions of spirituality and materiality are foreign concepts to the Akan: “Yet not only is the notion of the spiritual unintelligible within [Akan thought and culture] ... it also is objectively a very problematic one.”<sup>8</sup> He then carries on to show that it is problematic because it skews the relationship the Akan have to God, to their ancestors, and to their community. Thus, Western spirituality, like many other concepts in Western discourses, is “not a universal feature of human thinking,” and, consequently, concepts such as spirituality are neither philosophically innocent and cannot be presumptuously employed. What this means for us is that, if one is to explore African philosophies and religions, then they must be extremely careful – hermeneutically suspicious – with how they employ Western terminologies, which are beholden to specific intellectual assumptions.<sup>9</sup>

In what follows I will keep this in mind as we investigate the political nature of Wiredu’s empirical metaphysics. What I will emphasise throughout is how his moral anthropology *builds to* a metaphysics – it is crafted “from the bottom to the top” rather than hoisting an anthology into a metaphysical framework – and thus is always-already moral (and hence, always-already political). I will do so by first showing how Wiredu’s critique of faith is really a critique of anti-rationality. This critique of anti-

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7 Kwasi Wiredu, “An Oral Philosophy of Personhood: Comments on Philosophy and Orality.” *Research in African Literatures* 40.1 (Spring 2009), 9. See also Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1996), 137, 142–143.

8 Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 55. Note: hereafter this title will be abbreviated as *CUP*.

9 *CUP*, 55.

rationality is important to him since it solidifies that the Akans' metaphysics is not spiritual nor divine in any way; it is a purely rational framework of understanding.

Once this is made clear, I will then describe Wiredu's reading of the Akans' empirical metaphysics, highlighting how its basis on concrete encounters with other people and the world itself eschews a transcendent/immanent (or supernatural/natural) paradigm. Of greater significance is that, for Wiredu, an Akanian empirical metaphysics is entirely spatial: it is based upon both experience and the capability of forming ideas from these experiences. This displays how Wiredu's metaphysics eschews any abstraction or speculative rationality; everything is spatialised, even metaphor, and even then cannot be merely described as purely immanent. Finally, we will unpack the way in which this moral, spatialised empirical metaphysics entails an always-already becoming of a political-moral nature and what that means to both a person and their community.

### **Wiredu's Rationality Over and Against "Faith"**

Wiredu has consistently been critical of the concept of faith and, by extension, the Western distinctions of supernatural/natural and the religious/secular. From my reading, I think that why Wiredu is so critical of the concept of faith is that he is frustrated by the ways in which the West renders African thought as overly emotional, spiritual/superstitious, and therefore not sufficiently rational. This concern runs similarly to Tsenay Serequeberhan's complete dismissal of *Africanté* and *Negritude*. Furthermore, Wiredu's critique carves a space where African rationality can be understood through its own distinctions.

Wiredu's critique holds vast decolonial implications, but it also emphasises a key philosophical point: the Akan (and other African traditions) simply do not have these distinctions, and the West problematically imposes these categories upon African culture, distorting these cultures in the process. For example, Wiredu argues that it was Christian missionaries who bastardised the Akan language (and thus Akan cultural and thought) to both delegitimise the Akans' intellectual heritage and to convert

them.<sup>10</sup> In missionary circles, this bastardisation was justified through the notion of *preparatio evangelica*, or the belief that God had predisposed Africans to Christianity due to their overtly spiritual nature.<sup>11</sup>

One can see this in his early, highly influential article, “How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought.”<sup>12</sup> Here, Wiredu emphasises how African Traditional Thought – often construed as primitive religion – is contrasted with Western science and reasoning. “Nevertheless,” he argues sarcastically, “since [African] traditional thought is inferior to modern science-oriented thought in some obvious and important respects, some Western liberals have apparently had to think hard to protect themselves against conceiving of Africans as intellectually inferior.”<sup>13</sup> He continues by lamenting how African traditions are delimited to “spectacles of otherwise enlightened Africans” and how the West tends to see these acts as “superstitious” and not recognising “the content of a belief,” seeing it rather as a “mode of entertainment.”<sup>14</sup>

Where the West views African witchcraft as superstitious, in short, what they surmise is an irrational spectacle for their own amusement, bereft of serious reflection. However, Wiredu is keen to point out the hypocrisy in all this: there are people in London who proudly purport to be witches; superstition runs rampant throughout Western society; Westerners too pray for rain or for a good harvest. The list goes on and on, and yet how is any of this at all different from Africa?<sup>15</sup> And finally, in contrast to the superstitious, there are plenty of Africans who employ rationality throughout their daily lives, and this cannot be relegated to an accessory to their consciousness. Rather, it is germane to their

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10 CUP, 52.

11 James Kombo, “The Trinity in Africa,” *Journal of Reformed Theology*, 3.2 (2009), 128. Note that Kombo gathers this from his reading of John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 39; John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 44.

12 Kwasi Wiredu, “How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought with Western Thought,” *Transition*, 75/76 (1997): 320–327.

13 Wiredu, “How not to Compare African Traditional Thought,” 321.

14 Wiredu, “How not to Compare African Traditional Thought,” 321.

15 Wiredu, “How not to Compare African Traditional Thought,” 322.

own sense of being. Consequently, Wiredu argues that “the truth, then, is that rational knowledge is not the preserve of the modern West, nor is superstition a peculiarity of the African peoples.”<sup>16</sup>

What this article advances, and what Wiredu will expand upon throughout his work, is that superstition, religion, or “faith,” construed in whichever sense, can only be cross-culturally compared with corresponding counterparts, and one cannot delimit African culture to the realm of the spiritual as so many Christian missionaries (amongst others, but he specifically singles them out) are wont to do.<sup>17</sup> In short, he is clearing away, by his own means, the colonial view of Africa being too superstitious to be rationally serious and, in its place, Wiredu posits that Africa’s rationality is not inferior to the West’s in spite of its different orientation and operation.<sup>18</sup>

This is why he begins with a moral anthropology which expands to an empirical metaphysics rather than the other way round, which is typically how Western philosophies present their larger claims. He finds no need to generate or explain African philosophy on the West’s terms: he only needs to do so from his own Akan perspective. In fact, presenting his Akan philosophy in a Western fashion would strip from it all nuance and intellectual force. Therefore, dispensing with the concept of faith – removing it from philosophical consideration – allows him to place African rationality as the focal point of West’s dialogue with African thought. Africa’s intellectual beliefs become the centre of consideration rather than being ancillary to Africa’s religious beliefs and practice, which the West does not understand but nonetheless fixates upon.

This being the case, Wiredu’s definition of faith holds some peculiar details and needs to be read in full. Note how, although he allows space for a self-reflective practise of faith, his definition emphasises an unthinking adherence to dogmatism:

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16 Wiredu, “How not to Compare African Traditional Thought,” 322.

17 *CUP*, 48–52.

18 Wiredu, “How Not to Compare African Traditional Thought,” 326.

The word 'faith' can be used in various senses. ... [in the way I employ it, I mean that] *what is believed by faith is, by virtue of that fact, inaccessible to rational evaluation. Accordingly, there can be no discussion with non-believers.* There is another complication. Religious dogmatists (of the anti-rational variety) are apt to maintain the dependence of morality on religion. The notion of what is morally right now comes to mean what is willed by the God in whom the particular believer believes. *The combination of anti-rational faith with this divine-command view of morality can lead to imperiously held views, not only about how abysmally wrong-headed non-conformers are, but also about how ungodly and unregenerate they are.* ... Given [that they believe their morality is God-given] they will hold their beliefs very strongly; indeed, with uncompromising inflexibility. ... Clearly, so long as such beliefs hold sway among their proprietors, there can be no chance of a dialogue. *The reason is that dialogue presupposes the fallibility of all its participants.* Consequently, if such beliefs should happen to function even as undertones of political dispute, the difficulties of conflict resolution are multiplied a thousand-fold. The only ray of hope that one espies in this matter is owing to the fact that in some dogmatic religions ... there are some devotees who do not entertain their beliefs in an anti-rational manner. *They appear outnumbered,* but, since time is infinite, such believers might, perhaps, come some day to outnumber their more faith-based partners in piety by the power of rational education.<sup>19</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Wiredu often references this notion of faith within his works, but not quite as openly as quoted above.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, it is

19 Kwasi Wiredu, "Reflections on Cultural Diversity," *Diogenes* 205.1 (2005), 126.

20 See: Kwasi Wiredu, "Truth and Dialogue," in Christian Kanzian and Edmund Runggaldier, S.J. (eds.), *Cultures, Conflict, Analysis, Dialogue* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2007), 127; Kwasi Wiredu, "Identity as an Intellectual Problem," in Jose Cabezon and Sheila Greeve Davaney (eds.), *Identity and Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2004), p. 212; Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1980), 28, 169n.22.

quite problematic that Wiredu establishes his own definition of faith without serious consideration or investigation into the way in which the concept of faith operates in various theologies and philosophies of religion.<sup>21</sup> This makes him liable to creating a strawman against faith, particularly so when emphasising its so-called unquestioning nature. In a sense, his critique of the unthinking, stereotypical rendering of African Traditional Thought could likewise be held against him and his definition of faith. Furthermore, I also know that numerous theologians – from Jurgen Moltmann in the 1970s up to Elizabeth Johnson in the 2020s – likewise critique the fundamentalist faith Wiredu highlights, and they do so to emphasise the “pro-rational,” open faith he espouses at the end of the above quote.

On the other hand, granting Wiredu some reprieve, I find that what Wiredu really is critiquing is an unquestioning anti-rationality and its resultant dogmatic ideolog(ies). In his moral anthropology, which is not revealed by or indebted to a god, Wiredu argues that ethical personhood is inherently rational. “Faith” becomes a means for him to critique an irrational – or blindly applied – morality that enters society under the guise of religious dogma and/or ideology. Contrarily, though his morality is impartial, it is sympathetic and therefore is fundamentally rational: it holds to a moral standard of conduct, yet one’s actions are weighed and judged – hence reasonably considered – against that standard.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout his work, Wiredu makes substantial critiques against unthinking dogmas and irrationality. Importantly, while he will often attribute it to religion, secular institutions and frameworks are not immune either. Their problematics arise through a susceptibility to ideologies divorced from reason. So crafted, they employ an unthinking, instrumental reasoning which relies on a set of unquestionable values for their moral-social positions and acts: “A man pushing a doctrinaire line does

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21     Motsamai Molefe offers the strongest critique I have seen against this. See Motsamai Molefe, “A Critique of Kwasi Wiredu’s Humanism and Impartiality.” *Acta Academia*, 48.1 (2016): 91–110.

22     Kwasi Wiredu, “Society and Democracy in Africa.” *New Political Science*, 21.1 (1999), 35–36.

not in the standard case say, 'I know that the policy I am pursuing is not reasonable but I don't care.' What usually happens is that his sensitivity to observation and reasoning is dulled by emotion; his perception is distorted and consequently he honestly regards his line as the best."<sup>23</sup>

What this critique of faith and/or dogmatism means for us is that Wiredu is intent on showing the empirical nature of morality and thus the rational theory of mind which crafts an Akan empirical metaphysics. As Fimono Julia Awajiusuk puts it, for Wiredu, "African morality is not founded on religion but on rational reflection as to what is conducive to human welfare. African traditional ethics is thus based on natural light of reason with conscience playing a central role."<sup>24</sup> Remember that personhood is something one acquires through social esteem; it is communally awarded and not a mere given. Thus, even being "someone" requires rational – not ritual – consensus. If this is so, if the basis of even being a person is socially rational and derived from empirical encounter, then so is our entire understanding of the world.

Thus, for Wiredu, we arrive at a bottom-up metaphysics: we require communication and a foundational "golden rule" (however construed) to survive; in our survival we develop a shared language through which we develop a shared culture – a society – and within that shared culture we develop personal esteem through others whilst reflexively giving that to others as well; from this shared culture and its moral encounter with the outer, concrete world, we develop a sense about this world and the way in which it works together (whether in harmony or discord); this sense becomes a metaphysics in the way that it helps further organise our moral-social encounters and our own sense of personhood as we interact with others and the world at large.

In the next section, I will set this out in detail. For now, though, notice how intent Wiredu is on the rational nature of this metaphysics: as we shall see, he is not arguing that there is no God

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23 Wiredu, *Philosophy and African Culture*, 177. Emphasis is mine.

24 Fimono Julia Awajiusuk, "Reflections on African Ethics: A Case For Cultural Relativism." *Ciências da Religião: história e sociedade*, 12.1 (2014), 41.

(for indeed the Akan believe in a God), but that we cannot rely upon an unthinking ideology for moral or personal comfort. Not only is our view of the world at stake, but so is our own personhood. This amplifies the consequences of an empirical metaphysics.

## Wiredu's Empirical Metaphysics

At this juncture, it is important to remember that what follows will be Wiredu's reading of Akan metaphysics, not a definitive account of Akan thought itself.<sup>25</sup> That being said, Wiredu sees the Akan as "a highly metaphysical people in that they are very curious about concepts such as God, human personality, destiny, free will, causation. But they are preeminently empirical in their intellectual orientation."<sup>26</sup> The primary difference from Western cultures lies within this relation to experience (i.e., empirically) and its implications of what could be called God and how God "operates," if you will, within the universe. As Wiredu explains:

In radical contrast, the Akan Supreme Being is a kind of cosmic architect, a fashioner of the world order, who occupies the apex of the same hierarchy of being which accommodates, in its intermediate ranges, the ancestors and living mortals, and, in its lower reaches, animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Thus the universe of being is ontologically homogenous. In other words, everything that exists exists in exactly the same sense as everything else. And this sense is empirical, broadly speaking. In the Akan language to exist is *wo ho*, which, in literal translation, means 'to be at some place.' There is no equivalent, in Akan, of the existential 'to be' or 'is' of English, and there is no way of pretending in that medium to be speaking of the existence of something which is not in space. This locative connotation of the Akan concept of existence is irreducible except metaphorically. Thus you might speak

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25 For his primary critics, amongst other examples, Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, (eds.), *Personhood and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, Vol. I* (Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992). Wiredu addresses these critiques in the final chapter of *CUP*.

26 *CUP*, 87.

of there existing an explanation of something...without incurring any obligation of special specification, because an explanation is not an object in any but a metaphorical sense, and to a metaphorical object corresponds only a metaphorical kind of space. The same applies to so-called abstract entities. In the Akan conceptual framework, then, existence is spatial. Now, since whatever transcendence means in this context, it implies existence beyond space, it follows that talk of any transcendent being is not just false but unintelligible from an Akan point of view.<sup>27</sup>

Note how, while there is an implied hierarchy of being, each entity exists in the same fashion as every other being. The hierarchy is crafted through esteem, or status, rather than anything ontologically pre-ordained: God exists in just the same sense as an ant, and in the same realm of space as an ant, where each occupies a specific place and time. Though God or an ant may hold different social statuses, their ontological and spatial status remains the same.

Moreover, as part of being in this same sense of space and time, both God and the ant are subject to the same rules: the Akan adhere to an “inherent law-likeness of reality. And the crucial consideration is that God’s relationship with the rest of the universe, that is, the world, is also conceived to be inherently law-like. ... Divine law-likeness *only* ensures that there will be no arbitrary interferences in the course of the world-process.”<sup>28</sup> Wiredu explains that this is why the Akan do not appeal to God for intervention, since God is not supernatural to the law-likeness of the world; the supernatural/natural dichotomy “has no place in the Akan system of thought.”<sup>29</sup>

This has moral implications for the argument, namely, that even metaphorical (note: not abstract!) notions accord to concrete experiences. This entails, for Wiredu, the “concrete” nature from which these notions are derived maintaining their “concreteness,” or physicality. What this means, for

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27 *CUP*, 49–50.

28 *CUP*, 50.

29 *CUP*, 51. Emphasis is mine.

Wiredu, is that Akan metaphysics is entirely spatial: it does not separate contemplation about the world (say, a transcendental categorisation of the principles of knowledge) from the physical nature of the world itself. Every concept reflected upon in the Akan worldview thus corresponds to the concrete experiences within the world; one cannot abstract the world to reflect upon the world. Even metaphors exist in a form of metaphorical space.

What holds this empirical metaphysics together, then, are two key concepts: First, that metaphysics cannot be done alone through an inward introspection. Metaphysical contemplation must be done through reflecting upon shared (i.e., relational) experiences, whereby these reflections are socially negotiated to arrive at a consensus about the world. Second, in order for these experiences to happen, they must happen in a given space for them to be concrete. Accordingly, one's reflection upon those experiences cannot divorce said experiences from their spatialised nature. Doing so would negate their concrete actuality and move them into an abstract realm accessible only to the individual. This negation destroys the social-empirical nature of the concept/experience in question.<sup>30</sup>

Returning to this notion of "law-likeness," Wiredu states elsewhere that "in sum, a human being is a rule-following animal, and language is nothing but an arrangement of rules."<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, when thinking about the world and/or cosmology, Wiredu argues that the Akan hold that everything has its explanation: "*biribiara wo nenkyerease* – a kind of principle of sufficient reason."<sup>32</sup> This explanation is found in the order of the world, but a lingering concern is whence this explanation comes?

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30 This negation, or divorce between the social reflection and empirical experience, is the great contrast between Akan metaphysics and Western metaphysics. As mentioned above, this contrast is often omitted when translating African thought into Western paradigms. This is why many perceive Africans to be overtly spiritual people when their worldviews are, in fact, incongruent to the supernatural/natural paradigm altogether. Moreover, addressing Akan metaphysics as a purely immanent metaphysics is likewise a problem since it denudes Akan metaphysics' social – and thus morally political – nature.

31 *CUP*, 24.

32 *CUP*, p. 50.

I argue that Wiredu sees the origins of this explanation as emerging out of the universal, vital forces he locates within basic human survival.

Going back to Wiredu's cultural universals – communication and the “golden rule” – we find Wiredu describing how communication builds a language through referents between things/events which become words out of which – and through relational interaction with others – a vocabulary, syntax, and grammar arises. Furthermore, morality – especially the notion of treating others the way one would wish to be treated if they were in the others' situation – arises through relational interaction which therefore establishes ethical/moral standards: a sympathetic impartiality. Wiredu's general theory of language, part and parcel with his general theory of morality, are built through experiences and interchanges between persons.

These interchanges create a network or society, whereby explanations for the unknown are negotiated in the same way in which one struggles to describe – or a community struggles to judge or understand – an event or experience. As these vital forces evolve within a community, they frame an explanation of both that community's purpose and the meaning of (and order to) the world. This is what makes his empirical metaphysics, to my mind, always-already political: it is socially vital to the sustenance of the community itself and thus it is always-already being socially negotiated as the community encounters the world, and persons within their community encounter each other. Both events build a sense or explanation or meaning of the world order, i.e., a metaphysics.

What makes this exceptional to a Western metaphysics – whether religious or secular – is not an appeal to God or to any transcendent *a priori* or abstract idealism, but the fact that speculative reasoning is never a consideration. In technical language, speculative reasoning, in the Kantian/Hegelian sense at least, is the philosophical notion of thinking about thought itself (i.e., infinite reason), and this would literally be “none sense” due to the pure fact that it never practically relates to the here-and-now of the person or community participating in the reflection

upon the issue at hand.<sup>33</sup> If a thought cannot be construed in or corresponded to a experiential sensation, then it holds no sense whatsoever to think it.

Moreover, speculative reasoning's solitary introspective tilt, where one could rationalise the world by oneself through inwardly reasoning about thinking itself, would be 'none sense' due to its ignorance of the fact that all about which we think comes through engagements – through sensory experiences – with the people and the world in which we inhabit. We cannot survive in the world alone, *pace* Wiredu, therefore we cannot think of the world alone. We must always remember that we live in communion with others – whether harmoniously or discordantly – and that communion always-already imparts our notions about the space in which we live.

Finally, just as an empirical metaphysic refuses abstraction, and therefore cannot be stereotyped as overtly supernatural or transcendent, it likewise cannot be confused as overly immanent. Nor can it be understood as a remixed Lockean *Weltanschauung*. Remember that empirical, for Wiredu, is not merely an existential ideal, but entails the capacity for critically reflecting upon experience. Empirical, here, means not just the experience itself but the *capability to contemplate experience itself*. Importantly, this capability reflexively allows one to think or reflect upon previous, present, and future experiences in their becoming a person within community. Wiredu distinctly points out:

In other words, we are not born with a mind that is a tabula rasa, as the seventeenth-century British empiricist philosopher John Locke suggested. *Rather we are born with only the potential for one.* The acquisition, through suckling, nursing, and nurturing by parents or persons in loco parentis, of the gestured rudiments of language is the first hint of a baby's pretension to mind. *Even this much is already heavily laden with culture, that is, with a certain particular*

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33 For more on speculative reasoning, see: Justin Sands, "The Concept of *Aufhebung* in the Thought of Merold Westphal: Appropriation and Recontextualization." *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* (June 2015), 3n.13.

*way of becoming sensitive to “the other” and subsequently cognizant of the self.*<sup>34</sup>

Sure, the Akan are curious about God, nature, and events unknown, but their curiosity flows not just through their own experience. It flows also through the practical, pragmatic functioning they experience within and through the world; the capacity for mind is met with their reception of the culture which nurtures them. Furthering this, the laws through which they experience the world also dictate the way in which the Akan understand that world and, consequently, the way in which they morally engage that world. Again, it is a bottom-up metaphysics: from the potentiality of forming fundamental, vital exchanges to culture and moral norms, to exploring the questions of both the mundane and cosmos, Wiredu’s Akan metaphysics is one in which its practitioners need to go out into the world to find their sense of both themselves and their world.

Finding one’s sense of the world and, in tandem, finding one’s personhood or character entails a sense of becoming. Again, one *becomes* a person through their engagements with their community, and a community *becomes* itself through interpersonal interactions and external encounters with the world in which they find themselves.

From the above, we now understand the way in which an empirical metaphysics develops from the rationality an individual employs to not only find understanding or meaning from worldly events, but also understanding and meaning of their own moral character. This rationality thus guides one on their path to becoming a person, but, through its metaphysical nature, there appear to be larger concerns involved beyond one’s personhood. This is what our final section will explore.

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34 Wiredu, “Identity as an Intellectual Problem,” 214. Emphasis is mine.

## The Relational Implications of a Moral Anthropology and its Empirical Metaphysics

What we have detailed thus far is how Wiredu's moral anthropology is not just communal in the sense of personhood and community, but also communal in the sense that its metaphysics is socialised in nature. For the former, one only becomes a person through social esteem; for the latter, a thing only becomes worthy of contemplation in relation to other things in and through the space which we all co-inhabit. This final section will touch upon what I find to be the lynchpin that connects Wiredu's thinking: a relational, or consensual, logic that is necessarily political.

Wiredu argues that humanity is a rule following species.<sup>35</sup> From its language formation, to its development of the "Golden Rule," through the formation of specific customs and laws, humanity seeks an order to the world not only to survive but, as we have seen in his metaphysics, to find meaning in that survival. It makes sense, then, that his reading of the Akans' empirical metaphysics establishes a set of rules for contemplation and even has its own principle of sufficient reason ("*biribiara wo nenkyerease*"). What I find interesting is that these rules – from who is a person to what is God – are both co-developed and co-effective: one can only form a language with others; through culture, one can only bestow personhood (let alone acquire it) through others; finally, through a shared logic, one can only find meaning in the world through a shared inference of signs and symbols with others. Each aspect cannot be done in silo; nothing can be understood or fundamentally comprehensible without community.

Moreover, nothing develops or changes without encounter. This is why spatiality is so fundamental to Wiredu's empirical metaphysic: if a fundamental order is to be applied to the world, it can only be applied insofar as there is a *shared experience of the world*. Empirical experience is required for two reasons: First, something must happen in order for it to be shared. Second, in order for something to be meaningful it must be understood in relation to other things/events.

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35 CUP, 25–26.

Concerning the first requirement, since there is no divine revelation or anything beyond the world itself, then something must have happened for it to be shared. The happening of the event takes place within the world – i.e., in our time and space – which means that the event can be comprehended by others since they have baseline referents. Even if it is a brand-new experience, for example someone witnessing a new technology that at first appears to be magic, it can be logically broken down by the community in accordance with what they already believe to make it appear possible within time and space. In so doing, a co-development occurs: their notion of how the world works – what is possible and impossible – changes in tandem with their comprehension of the new experience in question. This co-development has a knock-on effect in that it may re-orient their notions of other concepts, objects, and even laws or order.

Concerning the second requirement – even presuming the first one is false – in order for anything to generate meaning it must do so in relation to other experiences. Even in the realm of metaphor or concept, if one is to convey their thoughts they must employ a shared language – or, more importantly, a shared sensibility – so that it is understood by others. There must be referents for others to grasp, and those references are derived from shared experiences. It is only thus that someone can share their beliefs with others. One can experience something alone, to be sure, but its meaningfulness expands when that experience is taught to others whilst others share their own experience in turn. In conversation or, more technically, through social negotiations, a community comes to understand the world in which they live and the meaning of life within that world. If something “otherworldly” happens, then it changes as these social negotiations carry on throughout generations. It does not matter what experience a person has; if they share it and it is received by the community, then the community judges it with their remembrance of past experience to arrive at an understanding of the situation and event at hand.

This second requirement adds moral weight to Wiredu’s empirical metaphysics in that *understanding the world and its order is a communal effort*. This requires what I have called social

negotiations, but what Wiredu refers to as consensus building.<sup>36</sup> Wiredu argues that societies work best when they accept a consensus-based approach to social negotiations. This entails, while not everyone will be in absolute agreement, the ability to come to terms with each other on some key ideas/concepts that not only provide social cohesion but also further the moral prerogatives of the community. There is variance of opinion, but an agreement on fundamental or essential ideas that are related to the time and space in which those ideas disclose themselves.

Concerning Wiredu's empirical metaphysics, what his notions of consensus inform us of is that beliefs not only require a symbolic/linguistic community of referents to be expressed, but also a social community of persons where they can be shared and understood. Far too often, rationality – especially within Western Philosophy – is adversarial in nature, whereby “the best idea wins.” Yet, who picks the “best idea,” and is it always the correct one? Far too often, adversarial rationality has silenced the voices of the marginalised in pursuit of a *self-assured* sense of progress; a progress that often becomes an unthinking – or at least unquestionable – ideology. Thus, rationality fails both its function as a mode of thought but also its impetus as a moral component of social cohesion and progress. I cannot help but think that one of the reasons why Wiredu is so critical of faith as an unthinking concept is the result of this historic denial of a Christian majority who saw themselves as just in their subjugation via colonialism.

A detour is in order to make this concept's metaphysical implications clearer and to connect them to Wiredu's wider philosophy. Scope and space prohibit us from delving too deeply into Wiredu's critique of democracy and his advocacy of a consensual democracy, but his rationale for a consensual democracy can be helpful in detailing how these social negotiations work. For Wiredu, Western democracy is combative in nature.<sup>37</sup> He finds that Western democracies function on an adversarial model whereby each candidate or party is pitted

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36 CUP, 8–9, 106, 120, 143–144, and especially 163–164, 184–186.

37 Kwasi Wiredu, “Democracy by Consensus: Some Conceptual Considerations.” *Philosophical Papers* 30.3 (November 2001), 230–231.

against the other and, by extension, the entire citizenry's notion of what is morally right for their society is placed into competition. This "winner takes all" form of governance is innately confrontational and, at times, can even inhibit the moral-social growth of a community by its sheer competitive design.<sup>38</sup>

Consider, for instance, how voting for a third-party candidate in the United States of America's presidential election is often a wasted vote since your candidate has no chance of winning. Compounding the matter, it could even be seen as helping the party least representative of your views since you have effectively taken away a vote from the party "who could win" and best represent your views. In contrast to this framework, Wiredu advocates a democracy by consensus where communities come together to arrive at an agreement or compromise.<sup>39</sup> Again, agreement is not total, but in conversation with other points of view, people arrive at the best path forward through what they agree upon and not against what they disagree with. The point of consensus is not to dissolve dissent, thereby creating a univocal vision of governance, but to remove the belligerence one sees in adversarial democracies when the winning party often dominates and silences the losing party, thereby marginalising them and creating more and more resentment.<sup>40</sup>

Conversely, a moral anthropology which develops a metaphysics in pursuit of understanding its own moral progress finds its purpose in contrast to this adversarial rationality and its social order. Derived from the core needs of human survival, to how humans become persons, and how societies form cultures, it circles back to question the "hows" along this journey: how did we become persons? How did we become a society? Now that we know new things about the world – which has changed the way in which we think the world works (i.e., the "laws" of the universe) – how does that change the meaning of not just our own lives, but the meaning of our community?

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38 Wiredu, "Democracy by Consensus," 228–229, *CUP*, 178–179.

39 Wiredu, "Democracy by Consensus," 237–238.

40 *CUP*, 175, 179.

Importantly, these questions, asked through Wiredu's framework, never really end but keep evolving. Good persons become better persons, good communities become better ones, and good encounters with the environment or other cultures become better encounters. Likewise, when they become worse – and there is that flip side to the coin – one can rationally trace back where everything went wrong. It can because nothing is unquestionable, nothing is held by “faith” in Wiredu's sense of the term (however problematic it may be).

One could say, in sum, that Wiredu is at once denouncing Western rationality and its concepts of faith, whilst proclaiming another way to display how we are not alone in our reasoning. We are not alone in our expressions about the universe (religious or otherwise), nor alone in our contemplation. We have others to contemplate with and against, and the whole enterprise of thinking itself is a communal one. Idealistic it very much is, but it is a good distance away from the idealism which subjugated his continent and its people. From bottom-up, his moral anthropology declares a metaphysics that is moral before it situates itself amongst the stars, amongst the cosmos and the meaning of cohabitating this planet. This morality, though, is socially negotiated, therefore it nakedly recognises that it too can be co-opted for ill-gotten means. The question becomes, then, what society should we negotiate?

## Conclusion

In lieu of an answer to this question, perhaps it is not our place to dictate or imagine an ideal society in a solitary chapter. I hardly think Wiredu would even appreciate such a task given that it would disinvite future generations from the discussion. What we have done in this chapter is to explore the metaphysical implications of a moral anthropology and how they may present threads to weave a decolonial communion between worldviews. We did not have the scope and space to explore in depth his notions of an ethic and ethics, but for those who know it they should be able to see how they do fold into his larger project of a communal, consensus-

based ethic for African communities and beyond. Furthermore, his debates about these ideals have been well covered in other areas.<sup>41</sup>

However, what this chapter sought to do was to connect his notion of personhood through community to his larger metaphysics, and what it unpacked is the empirical and spatial nature of this metaphysics. It is not a static metaphysics, nor is it one grounded upon god or some other self-legitimising entity, as seen in Heidegger's critique of the onto-theological construction of metaphysics. It sought to show the socialised and moralised nature of a metaphysics which eschews any unthinking ideologues such as a god to present itself as viable.

However, there is a danger here. Humans are more than capable of transforming anything into an unthinking ideology. Even Jesus himself, who taught non-violence and the fulfilment of the religious laws of his time, has been used as an impetus for war. Wiredu's metaphysics is not immune to this, if the consensus of a people – however rationally divorced from adversarial thought or faith they are – can still agree upon war, even genocide. We should be mindful of this, without dismissing Wiredu's metaphysics out of hand.

Why? Because Wiredu's metaphysics, if meaningful to those who adhere to it, openly states that it is in the hands of the people – and incumbent upon the people – to find order and harmony in the world according to the rules and order of the world. This is why his belief that the Golden Rule is fundamental to uniting humanity, speaks volumes. The concern becomes, then, how does a community negotiate this rule for peace and not violence?

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41 For an overview, see: Barry Hallen, *Reading Wiredu* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Kindle Edition, 2020), Ch. 5 "On Sympathetic Impartiality," 70–80; See also: Kwame Gyekye, "Person and Community in Akan Thought," in *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies Vol. I* (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2010), 101–122; Motsamai Molefe, "A Critique of Kwasi Wiredu's Humanism and Impartiality," *Acta Academia*, 48.1 (2016), 91–110; Motsamai Molefe, "An African Perspective on the Partiality and Impartiality Debate: Insights from Kwasi Wiredu's Moral Philosophy," *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 36.4 (2017), 470–482.

This chapter sought to show the political nature of not just Wiredu's metaphysics, but the concept thereof. It did so by unpacking what Wiredu means by shared knowledge and how an epistemology is a socially construed concept, which is liable to ideology or instrumental reason if handled improperly. A bottom-up metaphysics is beholden to the morality it exhibits, and although Wiredu's concept of personhood through community holds this morality, it is up to both the person and the community to express that morality as they see it unfold, in the here and now, in the spatiality of existence itself, and not in the clouds or skies which move at the will of a select few.