

# **Cultural Universals and Particulars in the Philosophy of Kwasi Wiredu: Some Comments**

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to advance the horizon of Kwasi Wiredu's philosophical defense of the compatibility of cultural universals and particulars. Wiredu reflects on language, biological identity, inter/intra cultural communication, as well as epistemic and moral fundamentals as cultural universals. In pursuing further Wiredu's thesis on cultural universals, the present paper critically examines some of the inconsistencies implicit in Wiredu's position. As a consequence, the paper extends the frontiers of the realm of universals by establishing the plausibility of *causality* as another instance of a conceptual universal, transcending all cultural particularities.

## **Key Words**

Culture; universals; particulars; causality; Africa; Kwasi Wiredu.

## **Introduction**

A prominent issue that has dominated the enterprise of African philosophy since its inception in 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); there are also the anthropological claims of Durkheim (1912), Frazer (1922), Levy-Bruhl (1949) and Horton (1981) to the ethnocentric, racist and imperialist effects that rationality is a prerogative of Western civilization, while the Africans are mentally primitive. The significant role of 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 the post colonial era, should be active in the deconstruction of this battered identity (Balogun 2007, 1).

In this quest for African self-definition, two orientations are dominant. The first affirms the cultural pluralism postulated by Western scholarship, but denies the hierarchy of cultures (Owolabi 1999, 24). This first orientation is preoccupied with the discovery of authentic and unique African identity by insisting on Africans' own previously un-respected and neglected particularities. Scholars such as 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 can be categorized the ethnophilosophers, the defenders of negritude and other cultural nationalists.

The second reaction to the crisis of self-identity within African scholarship denies cultural relativism and ethnocentrism maintained by Western anthropological scholarship. Its contention 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 impression is that there is a dichotomy and incompatibility between the perspectives of African scholars on cultural universalism and particularism. This paper aims to interrogate the issues of universalism and particularism in human culture, especially in relation to the African search for self- definition. Towards this end, the paper critically examines Kwasi Wiredu's perspective on the discourse.

The following questions shall guide our reflections:

- \* What is Wiredu's perspective on the philosophical problem of cultural universals and particulars?

- \* How adequate is Wiredu's position?
- \* Are there cultural universals?

### **Wiredu on Cultural Universals and Particulars**

Kwasi Wiredu is one of the foremost contemporary African philosophers. A prominent and enterprising intellectual, his immense contributions to African philosophy have distinguished him among his peers of modern critical philosophizing on the African continent. In his book, *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (1996), Wiredu discusses the apparent 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. For him, the universal nature of some 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 (Wiredu 1983, 122). We can speak also of the degrees of generality. In this case, that which can be instantiated 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 virtue of their being conceptual in nature, they are intelligible across cultures. 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 connected with Wiredu's observation of the unprecedented intensification of interactions across cultures (reinforced by the advancement in information technology) in the contemporary world. 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. This should not be understood as an outright denial of particularities and differences among cultures. On the contrary, Wiredu (1996, 22) defends the position that there are elements of both particularity and universality in any culture. Accordingly, he argues that human behaviour is governed by both instinct and culture. Because of the element of instinct, 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 diversity and variation.

In Wiredu's view, instinct accounts for the possibility of objectivity and universality in the standards of thought and action in our species. On the other hand, culture accounts for various degrees of relativity and subjectivity. However, he points out that what unifies us is more fundamental than that which differentiates us. This unity, Wiredu tells us, is our biologicocultural 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).

Wiredu's point is that as *Homo sapiens*, 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).

Wiredu (1996, 60) believes that we can deduce the existence of certain universal canons of conceptualization from the biological identity of man. These universal canons of conceptualization consist of three norms of thought and conduct, which Wiredu identifies as the principles of non-contradiction, induction and the categorical imperative (Wiredu 1996, 22).

A preliminary understanding of what Wiredu means by “norms of thought” is important. Just like moral norms (rules of conduct), norms of thought are the rules of thought and talk that make human community possible. For Wiredu, a hypothetico-syllogistic relationship exists between thought, communication and community:

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). As Masolo (2005, par 25) explains, Wiredu 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.

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 identified by Wiredu - the principles of non-contradiction, induction and the categorical imperative. The law of non-contradiction is a canon of inquiry which states that no claim 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. Like the principle of non-contradiction, induction is also an epistemic norm, necessary for interaction in the human world. Nevertheless, Wiredu only referred to Hume's discussion on the relation between cause and effect without giving reasons for him (Wiredu) considering induction to be a universal.

Unlike Kant's categorical imperative which is an ethical principle, Wiredu's use of the term 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 norms of thought enables members of the human species not only to be adaptable to different language variations, but also to translate between them concepts, which like the rules of thought by which they are produced, are universal.

Given the universality of conceptual understanding, Wiredu makes a case for epistemic universals. Contrary to relativistic fancy, he argues for the possibility of cognitive criteria for the cross-cultural evaluation of the truth 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 scenarios. This 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, then, 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 moral universalism - to find out a principle of conduct such 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 view, customs are contingent facts of particular social formations and broadly constitute such things as usages, traditions, conventions, etiquette, fashions, aesthetic standards, taboos, rituals, folklore 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 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 cultures 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 is that sympathetic impartiality is a moral principle of universal appeal, because there is no society where everyone will gloriously avow and act contrary to this principle without experiencing a brutish and poor life. Thus such values 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, epistemic and ethical universals, Wiredu 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, communication and modes of transmitting values from one generation to the other, Wiredu asserts that the possession of one language or another by all human societies constitutes a cultural universal *par excellence* (Wiredu 1996, 30). As language is necessary for any human community, what the particular language consists in is a matter of contingency. Just as Wiredu insists that there are cultural universals, he also believes that philosophy can be universal, even though it is culture-relative in actuality (Wiredu 1980, 33).

### **Some Comments on Wiredu’s Philosophical Account of Cultural Universals and Particulars**

Following the above exposition of the thrust of Wiredu’s position on cultural universals and particulars, it is pertinent at this juncture to critically appraise his submissions. We think Wiredu

should be commended for the systematic and logical way in which he presented his position. Wiredu's attempt at providing an African perspective of the problem of cultural universals and particulars is a brilliant intellectual engagement. D.A. Masolo acknowledges this when he noted:

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 for the freshness of his analysis, we think that the extent to which Wiredu succeeded in this quest is questionable, as there are inherent contradictions and flaws in his position.

It does appear that Wiredu's biological universalism is not sufficient to account for cultural universals. In an earlier work, "The Akan Concept of Mind", Wiredu (1983, 121) noted that the universality of the 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, 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 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 choose to have, as we can often identify certain resemblances among two or more cultures. And as many categories come into the scene as universals, the whole idea of universalism becomes implausible. One serious challenge that this may pose to any philosophical enterprise in metaphysics or epistemology is: upon what universal consideration can we assess supposed claims to universal categories, truth, reality or value? This is an issue worthy of further philosophical reflection.

Wiredu in his recent writings attempts to explore conceptual decolonization as a means of asserting the full humanity of the African people. In this regard, he sees the demarcating elements in world civilization and culture on the basis of conceptual particularism. At the same time, he seeks to underscore what the Africans have in common 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 spurious universals, so that supposed conceptual contrasts such as those between physical and spiritual, substance and attribute, and a host of others may turn out not to be universal necessities of human thought. His works on conceptual decolonization using the Akan thought system as his basis are aimed at accounting for African self-identity. However, when one looks critically at Wiredu's idea of conceptual decolonization, it leaves one in doubt as to whether it is designed to arrive at particulars.

Wiredu has written on “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 themes discussed are attempts towards particularism. While there is nothing in principle 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 philosophical exercises have barely promoted conceptual universalism.

Furthermore, Wiredu’s confusion of *Homo sapiens* as universal biological identity and his interpretation of *Homo sapiens* as humans possessing mental capacities such as reflective perception, abstraction and inference are susceptible to objection. According to Masolo (2005), the basis of Wiredu’s notion of cultural universalism 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 mind, are the same in all members of the human species (Masolo 2005, 23). However, 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 conception of biological identity, which excludes the mind from the elements that make up a child (Wiredu 1983, 129), tends toward a kind of materialism. We may ask how a child comes to exercise "*adwene of okra*". One answer given by Wiredu is that it emerges as a result of the development of language, communication and other agencies of socialization. Communication makes the minds (Wiredu 1996, 21-22). Nevertheless, although language and communication, which Wiredu identifies as cultural universals, can enhance the thinking capacity, power of conception and articulation of a human being, they are not necessarily sufficient requirements for being a person. The reason for this is connected to the fact that there is a difference between a human being (*Homo sapiens*) and a human person. Every human person is a human being, but not all human beings qualify as human persons. This is due to the fact that beyond the biological features that qualify one to be a human being, there are social, psychological, cultural and moral requirements for 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.

Moreover, it is difficult to ignore how intercultural communication, which Wiredu emphasises in his support for cultural universals, will not be fatuous given the fact of the subtle concession he accords 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 one, 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. It is incontrovertible that divergence exists among the peoples of the world. These lie in their conceptual scheme, language, culture and beliefs concerning most fundamental issues of life. The consequence of this on Wiredu's view is that there are certain concepts that cannot be translated from one language into another. If this is permitted, it follows that universal concepts will contain within them certain untranslatable concepts. It is on this basis that Barry Hallen objects to Wiredu's position, insisting 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 establishes that translation is often a problem in intercultural communication. Indeed, even in several of Wiredu's works (1983; 2002 etc.), he has shown that there are certain concepts that are non-translatable across cultures. Thus when we engage in the translation of such concepts from one language into another, we are challenged by inaccurate interpretation and translation. If this is granted, 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 refers to as a conceptual universal, yet in reality have no more than a 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. Hallen is making a valid 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, when in support of this, he observed that "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:

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 above does not unearth the foundation of Wiredu's argument for universals. Wiredu's point 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, humans cannot talk without making reference to one or many. For instance, in the Platonic worldview, the concept of beauty is a universal whilst we have individual men or women that participate in the universal. However, logicians often argue that we cannot talk about certain propositions 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 share Wiredu's conviction 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, 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 negative consequence of this view on Wiredu's position is that it may lead us to put too many concepts into the class of universals.

Keita's objection to Wiredu's position, which is to the effect that a cultural universal is nothing but a 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 to be cultural and universal:

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 1997, 134).

According to Keita, cultural universals are items and practices that are found in all cultures, thereby warranting a general term for them, despite their extensive variability. Examples are social organization, economic institutions, educational establishments, religious organizations, and legal institutions, marriage, among a host of others. These are found generally in all cultures; but they only have particular cultural colorations 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 characteristics that are common to particular kinds of things. It may be a name, concept or something that all things participate in. These are what we conceive as universals. Therefore Keita's universals cannot be reduced to particulars or vice versa. But is Wiredu's conception of universals necessarily and sufficiently distinct from particulars? Do universals, whether conceptual or epistemic, arise from particular concepts or particular notions of truth? Or can cultural universals emerge without making reference to particular cultures?

We think that these questions pose a threat to the demarcation between universals and particulars. This may warrant the conclusion that universals are products of particular cultures.

One major implication of Wiredu's notion of universals is that conceptual universals, which are the cornerstone of his position, will amount to the absolutization of some cultures' conceptual particularism on other cultures. However, Keita's argument that mental capacity does not satisfy the feature of empirical sensibility appears to limit the argument for cultural universals to mere observable data. For the sake of argument, we could account for empirical justification of cultural ingredients on language. For instance, before one can communicate, one requires a language, which itself depends on mental capability, without which we cease to be human beings. On this basis, we agree that mental capacity is universal in all cultures. This is a position which Keita rejects, 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." However, Onah (2002) asks in what exactly these spirals consist if they are not biological. Wiredu seems to be aware of this difficulty, for he makes a remark which may appear

to offer a solutions to it: “There is the notion 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). However, Onah (2002, 69) questions further what this human level that advances beyond the biological is; and how this level can 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 asserts that it ontologically transcends the biological.

Odera Oruka criticizes Wiredu’s notion of morality, which he (Wiredu) defines 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, that is, 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).

From the broadest perspective, since morality accounts not only for the good but also for the bad, for us to have a universal moral doctrine it must take into cognizance the sympathetic impartiality as well as calculating impartiality. Both will account for what morality entails in the ordinary sense of the word. Thus Wiredu misrepresents the true nature of human beings in society. For people could be rational, irrational, egoistic, altruistic, selfish, loving etc. Thus morality attempts to unite human traits for the good of human society. But Wiredu has underestimated the encompassing nature of moral universals.

Furthermore, Oruka (1990, 28) correctly suggests that Wiredu “did not shut the door to the admission of other cultural universals.” On this basis, Oruka added “intuition” to the catalogue of cultural universals on the ground that it is the most obvious of all cultural universals, but the least recognized and appreciated in philosophical 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). However, we do not see any reason why Oruka’s notion of intuition could be considered to be a universal on the basis of his definition. Indeed, going by Oruka’s assertion, children around the age of two and the mentally ill would be excluded from the category of human persons, since they are probably incapable of exercising intuition. This suggests that intuition is a particular rather than a universal.

Like Wiredu, Oruka holds that there are cultural universals; but for him, there is also the reality of cultural fundamentals (“concepts, styles of language and a method of work or psychological expectation that helps to mark one culture from another”) that hamper smooth philosophical dialogues (Oruka 1990, 32, 36). To grant that cultural fundamentals are apt to impede philosophical dialogue, as Oruka claims, is not necessarily to foreclose the reality of cultural universals. Irrespective of the search for a distinctive African identity, we belong to the community of human beings.

### **Extending the Frontiers of Cultural Universals: A Case for Causality**

As Oruka has rightly noted, Wiredu has not shut the door to the admission of other possible cultural universals. This suggests that the realm of cultural universals is open – ended. On the basis of this, we seek to present a case for causality as another cultural universal that defies any cultural coloration.

The idea of causality can be found in all cultures of the world, although it has different interpretations from culture to culture, yet it underlines our modes of thought. Just like abstraction, inference and communication, causality is part of 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 found in all cultures of the world. Though many African scholars have made a case for a notion of causality which is different from that of the West. Such attempts are seen in the traditionalist account of African causal explanation. Pertinent among the traditionalists who have made contributions on a unique African notion of causality are J.O. Sodipo (1973) and K.C. Anyanwu (1983).

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 that cultures conception of the structure of reality (Anyanwu 1983, 26).

In the case of Sodipo, he argues that causal principles in science are different from those of traditional Yoruba thought. For him, causal explanations in science are provided through the application of general laws and the observation of empirical facts. In other words, causal explanations in science are “impersonal”, as they are out to tackle the question “How?” In the traditional African thought on the other hand, there is an easy recourse to gods in the people’s causal explanation, which makes the question “how?” yield too soon to the question “why?” As such, the principle of causal explanation, Sodipo tells us, 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. Instead, they attempted to answer 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 on the crown of hierarchy of force, followed by the divinities, ancestors, spirits, man, animals, plants and minerals.

To our mind, these answers do not imply that Africans have a notion of causality characteristically different from that of 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), with which we concur, “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 universal notion. If Africans had a notion of causality different from that of the West, what they would mean by the phrase ‘A’ causes ‘B’ would be evidently different from what Westerners mean by it. Like that of the West, the African understanding of causality entails temporal precedence, necessary connection, transitivity, and necessary and sufficient conditions. Hence causality is a universal, which further strengthens the compatibility of cultural particularities and cultural universals.

## Conclusion

We have examined Wiredu's perspective on the problem of supposed incompatibility of cultural universals with cultural particulars. We have examined Wiredu's view that the human species is universally bonded in biological identity, norms of thought and communication. For Wiredu, universals, correctly conceived in the light of our common biological identity, are not incompatible with cultural particularities, and in fact, are what make intercultural communication 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 Otakpor (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 great 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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