

KANTIAN ETHICS AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: RECEPTIVITY AND DISPUTATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Kant's works have been the subject of reflections on ethics by academic African philosophers from the very beginnings of their discipline³. However, much engagement with his philosophy since the 1980s has centred on his anthropology of race and its influence on implicit justifications for racism and colonialism⁴. Kant's racial differentiation and its prejudicial conception of people of colour is well documented, although it is worth noting that much of this thought was adopted and adapted by Kant from earlier sources rather than strictly originating with him.⁵ In *Observations on the Feeling of the beautiful and Sublime*, Kant sketches a taxonomy of four distinct varieties of the human species that derive from an ideal original stem genus. Of these, "the race of whites", particularly those that are "very blond" is at the pinnacle whereas the species "black" is third in hierarchy. This hierarchy is reaffirmed in his 1775 essay "On the Varieties of the Different races of Men"⁶. Larrimore has suggested that this essay simultaneously inaugurated the discourse on race and "invoked a concomitant invention of 'whiteness'"⁷. Such philosophical affirmation of "difference" between Europeans and Africans, it has been argued, constituted "a pervasive bias" located in modernity's self-consciousness of itself, and served as "a pretext" to implicit metaphysical prejudices of enlightenment philosophy⁸. The pretext grounds the core metaphysical belief that European existence is naturally, i.e., ontologically, superior to other forms of human existence, and extends into construing European existence

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as exemplifying human existence *per se* and the humanity of Africans as well as Asians and native Americans as belonging to a sub-human species. Thus, the pretext moved to universalize humanity in a manner that exempts the humanity of non-Europeans, and as such contributed to justifying the idea that European colonization and exploitation was normal, or even necessary⁹. Without underestimating the importance of hermeneutically elucidating these odious tenets of Kantian philosophy, our paper focuses on an alternative theme: on reflections on Kant's ethics by Ghanaian philosophers, particularly on the foundations of moral principles and the attributes of moral personhood.

Kant sets out a "supreme principle of morality", the Categorical Imperative (CI), which he considers to be that supreme principle of practical reason which can serve as a sufficient condition for making sound moral judgments. The first of three formulations of this principle is "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law".¹⁰ (4:421) Much philosophical scholarship on CI interprets Kant as reasoning that CI is a principle of *pure* practical reason – i.e., it contains nothing but an appeal to practical reason itself. This is hardly controversial, when one considers it in light of Kant's opening statement of his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, that nothing can possibly be conceived or called good without qualification except a good will. (4:393) The good will is good in itself, unconditionally good, and the outcome of the highest function of reason. (4:396/7) Hence conduct that complies with CI is that which originates from a good will. The goodness of the good will is unqualified because it is good in-itself, and not good as a means to some other good. By claiming the good will as good in-itself, Kant means that to act morally is to be guided neither by self-interest nor by the interest of others, but by the duty to observe CI. (4:401/2)

We proceed from a perception of various formulations of CI as representing the nodal point in Kantian ethics, in the sense that Kant envisions it: as representing the ground of motivation and justification of moral behavior, and press the limits of Kant's CI with questions that emerge in the context of Ghanaian philosophical deliberation on CI: is the idea universalizable, that the good will proceeds from pure intentions – i.e., not 'coloured' by prior interests of the moral subject – to fulfill moral obligations dictated by reason alone? Can the idea be universal, that morality consists in acting in strict compliance with, and respect for, the moral law? Is rationality a sufficient condition for the grounds of morality, or are inclinations and virtues, such as kindness and generosity, equally necessary bases of moral behaviour? What moral significance do relational qualities exemplified by relationships carry? We argue that the Ghanaian philosophical response rejects Kant's evacuation of conative content from the good will, instead confirming feeling as an indispensable constituent of consciousness of the good. The Ghanaian response thus casts doubt on Kant's thesis that moral excellence excludes commitment to inclinations and substantive ends, without completely rejecting CI. Ghanaian moral philosophy develops an orientation that might be thought of as a halfway house between Kant's idealism and Hume's moral sentimentalism, albeit with decidedly African foundations. Following our exposition of the Ghanaian critique of Kant's moral philosophy, we then consider how Kant might have responded to these criticisms. We shall suggest that the 'empty formalism' objection, most famously advanced by Hegel, may in fact rest on a misunderstanding of the

sort of principle Kant claims CI to be. Reservations about Kant's rather dismissive views about the importance of the emotions in relation to moral agency have rather more bite. Possibly, however, Kant had good though not conclusive reason for being wary of the emotions in that context.

REASON AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF ETHICS

Three Ghanaian philosophers – J. B. Danquah, Kwame Nkrumah and Kwasi Wiredu – join a chorus of criticisms of Kant's supreme law in its function as the foundation of morality. In this section we consider these critiques and the moral theories they espouse in contrast to Kant.

The critique of Kant's CI has a long history, beginning with Hegel. At least two interrelated objections can be delineated in this history. The first is that the formality of CI renders it empty of substantive content, and that one cannot make a moral judgment in the absence of substantive content. A correlate criticism is that Kant posits rationality as the only source of justification for moral conduct, and that this unduly restricts the sources of warranted moral justification. Early versions of these critiques were advanced by Hegel in his objection that CI operates purely in formal terms, and because of this cannot plausibly give any content to morality. Therefore, CI cannot really constitute a supreme principle of morality at all¹¹. The necessary dependence of CI on reason is problematic, for "the criterion of law which Reason possesses within itself fits every case equally well, and is thus in fact no criterion at all."¹² For these reasons, Hegel wonders if there is need for a supreme principle of morality at all: "if particular duties were to be derived from or grounded in such a principle: it is these particular duties that must be treated as fundamental, as the higher principle is too abstract to serve plausibly as their foundation or basis [and any such foundation will work only if it provides] "determinate principles concerning how to act"¹³.

Danquah concurs with these critiques. Danquah's main concern in his *Thesis*¹⁴ is with the nature of the consciousness that characterize a developed moral personality. To this end he discusses the role of reason and feelings in moral motivation. For Danquah, the practical function of reason in the development of such personality is to direct, coordinate and stabilize the aims of feelings, and thereby to enhance "the working energy of feelings out of which reason itself is engendered"¹⁵. We must understand this to mean, not that feelings beget reason, but that feelings promote and enhance the regulative function of reason in that they expand the horizon of reason's acuity and judgment. Character is the outcome of such a rationally systematized unity, and its expression the source of good or bad judgment. It is clear from this that Danquah partially rejects Hume's moral sentimentalism. Although Danquah accepts Hume's claim that sentiments serve as principles of moral motivation, they do so only if they have a cause (a feeling of pleasure or pain outside the agent), an object (a living being on account of whom the motive is activated) and an end which the subject strives to attain¹⁶. Hence, we can take Danquah to accept Hume's claim that reason alone cannot "distinguish betwixt

moral good and evil”¹⁷ and therefore that “actions do not derive their merit from a conformity to reason, nor their blame from a contrariety to it”¹⁸. However, Danquah obviously rejects Hume’s position that this shows that “It is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger”¹⁹, for he cautions that the function of reason to regulate or direct desires to their proper objects must not be denigrated to reason acting on the dictates of impulse or having no role in moral determination²⁰.

But the place of reason in moral foundations does not mean that reason alone determines the value of the good or good conduct, and it certainly cannot determine these *a priori*, as Kant is said to have held²¹. For Kant, practical reason enjoins all rational beings to a law of duty which opposes all non-rational inclinations of consciousness: it is the function of reason, in fact, to expunge these elements. Danquah opposes this with the perspective that the principle that manifests in a self-conscious agent’s ability to subject her impulses to practical reason is not reason or the intellect, but her character. The regulatory value of reason stems from “a measure of systematic organization of his personality in which feeling, impulse and reason work in harmony wherein the guide or controlling influence is neither feeling nor will, neither connotation, nor cognition, but the systematic unity or the principle of the organized self”²².

Were we to consider the basis of morality not in terms of his developed personality but in Kantian terms, the motivational principle in the system of morals would “appear as a sort of tyrant who is omniscient but powerless, has the right but not the strength, has the authority but not the power”²³. Hence, Danquah comes to agree with Hegel that the nature of the distinction that Kant draws between inclination and duty subjects his moral law to the objection of “formality, stringency and vigorous austerity”²⁴. Two conclusions can be drawn from Danquah’s work: the first is that the object of value in a self-conscious moral agent is “not in feeling, willing or thinking taken in isolation. It is that of which all these are constitutive”²⁵. Additionally, this implies that intellectual contemplation, isolated from affection and the will, are insufficient to determine the content of morally good conduct. A morally good judgment, or judgment of an end the realization of which is of sufficient value to motivate conduct, originates from a synthetic unity of desires, volition and the regulative function of reason.

Notwithstanding Danquah and Nkrumah’s deep differences in political ideology and strategy²⁶, they are quite like-minded in ethical thinking. Like Danquah, Nkrumah questioned the idealistic origins of CI, although he accepts Kant’s judgment that CI is a cardinal ethical principle. He denies that CI is derivable from reason alone, not least given the principle’s second formulation: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end”²⁷. In Nkrumah’s view, CI is more cogently derived from materialism, in its function as the objective ground of egalitarianism. For Nkrumah, the “grounding of cardinal principles in the nature of man”²⁸ is philosophically prudent, and the ethical expression of materialism is egalitarianism.

Materialism offers a theory about the nature of reality, and its egalitarian inflection claims that man is equal in value. It is worth noting here, that Nkrumah outrightly rejects Hume’s guillotine and its modern defense in contemporary African philosophy by philosophers like

Metz, who claim that “nothing moral, just or otherwise prescriptive straightaway follows from any ‘purely’ metaphysical view, by which I mean one that is about the nature of reality and is free of evaluative and normative elements”²⁹.

Admittedly, the claim to equality is not unique to materialism. Idealist philosophy, too, can lay claim to egalitarian commitments? Christianity, for example, is deeply non-materialist, but certainly committed to the essential (spiritual) equality of all human beings. Again, there are versions of materialism (or naturalism) that are deeply inegalitarian. For example, Aristotle thought there were natural slaves, and women were not by nature full members of the *polis*; and early secular natural scientists, as indicated earlier by citing Carl Linneaus, certainly thought there was a natural hierarchy among the races. It is in fact not Nkrumah’s view that only a materialist philosophy could lay claim to an egalitarian outlook. To the contrary, Nkrumah acknowledges the egalitarian/democratic character of Aristotle’s ethics, and points to its orientation for its shortcomings. Nkrumah believes that egalitarianism as a principle “does not pre-determine its own future course”³⁰. This means in its practical application it can be formulated in terms of individualism and perverted into a social atomism comprising “a barbaric free-for-all”³¹ in which each man is granted licence to exploit each other. But the egalitarianism of *Consciencism* does not grant such license but rather imposes a duty upon all to support one another and consider the well-being of others as a condition for one’s well being, hence it heads toward socialism in practical application. What this suggests is that while Nkrumah did not think egalitarianism unique to materialism, he did agree with Marx that a materialist conception for human nature provided the best basis for an egalitarian morals and politics.

Hence, the materialism of Nkrumah’s philosophical consciencism prescribes that action that objectively attends to the fact that human beings are basically the same in nature and in value, “must be guided by general principles which would prevent [such] action from proceeding as if men were basically different”³². And because they relate to fact, such principles can be stated with such generality as though they were autonomous, like Kant’s supreme ethical principle. Thus, on Nkrumah’s terms, ethical principles founded on egalitarianism are objective as they express a non-differential generalization of human nature, and humanist as they express the inherent worthiness of every human³³. Therefore, although the cardinal principle of philosophical consciencism is the same as Kant’s second formulation of CI³⁴, Nkrumah’s ethics is founded on a materialist metaphysics that opposes Kant’s version of philosophical idealism. A main inspiration for this, he states explicitly, is his agreement with, among others, the traditional African “grounding of cardinal principles of ethics in the nature of man”³⁵, and the humanistic impulses of its communalist social organization which fit antecedents to contemporary principles of socialism³⁶. Additionally, the humanistic impulse of consciencism may be considered to differ in orientation from the humanism of Kant’s CI. Nkrumah’s moral persons promote a socialistic responsibility of each for all and all for each³⁷ and such responsibility is fostered by the organizational virtues of traditional African society, such as generosity, compassion, hospitality, compromise³⁸. Clearly, such virtues are at variance with Kant’s rejection of particular substantive commitments relative to CI.

Of the three Ghanaian philosophers, Wiredu engages most extensively with Kant. He extends Nkrumah's views by espousing a humanistic moral philosophy founded on naturalism. For him, a moral principle is a rule of conduct the absence or persistent reversal of which would precipitate the collapse of human community³⁹. His humanistic approach to normative theory begins with his belief that "the will of God, not to talk of that or any other extra-human being, is logically incapable of defining the good"⁴⁰. Additionally, his naturalistic theory of norms is humanistic in as much as it belongs to the set of "theories that define and explain norms in terms of the interests, capabilities, and circumstances (present and primeval) of the human species" without a wish to answer for "the metaphysics of naturalism"⁴¹.

For Wiredu, moral rules and cognitive rules converge to unite cultures. And although his cognitive and moral theories are not logically equivalent, the latter is implied by the former: "my theory of the cognitive concept of truth contains the moral principle mentioned as an integral part"⁴². He offers an elaborate argument for this, which is worth recounting in order to map in clear terms his engagement with Kant. Wiredu argues that rules of thought are necessary conditions for the possibility of human community, for thought is a necessary condition for communication, and communication a necessary condition for community. Community is common to humanity; hence humanity has norms of thought in common⁴³. And it is our basic biology that underlies our common norms of thought; and ultimately grounds viable accounts of the objectivity of concepts and conceptual constructs and thus of universalist philosophy: "it is the biological affinity between one person and another that makes possible the comparison of experiences and the interpersonal adjustment of behavior that constitutes social experience"⁴⁴. Thus, the biological similarity of human beings facilitates a system of interpersonal correlation of inner experiences which is the basis of the objectivity of concepts. The brain, at birth, is a *tabula rasa* for conceptual mapping, but contains innate conceptual possibilities⁴⁵. The substantiation of these possibilities, the making of mind and development of the toolkits of communication, unfolds in the context of society. The objectivity of this toolkit is guaranteed by the rule-governed character of language as the basis of social formation.

There is reason for unease with Wiredu's position. If biological affinity is the basis for morality, why is there so much moral - and other - disagreement? The answer cannot be that people are somehow mistaken about the basis for morality, for if that basis is biological, they really have no choice in the matter, and if they have no choice, they cannot make mistakes. Furthermore, "conceptual possibilities" are not conceptual determinants. But biology is irreducibly deterministic, so Wiredu's talk about possibility suggests talk about something other than biology, as we could all start off with a *tabula rasa* yet nonetheless end up realizing quite different conceptual possibilities. These are valid objections, but we believe there may still be a way to validate Wiredu's position nevertheless. Wiredu's claim seems to be that biological development is not independent of social rules, hence the foundation of norms (via communication) can be ultimately biological, in a non-deterministic sense, distinct from how determinism is construed in the objection. Wiredu's view, it appears, implies a non-deterministic theory of biology, at least in the relationship of biology to behaviour. Wiredu here draws on traditional Akan thought which according to him forecloses a strict natural/non-natural divide by theorizing the existence of a person as a continuum "from its biological

base to all the spirals of human potentialities”⁴⁶ without any suggestion of the ontological transcendence of the biological. The objective ethical commitment that arises from this non-reductively naturalistic base, and which is also the ultimate end of morality, is the pursuit of human well-being. In Wiredu’s view, human well-being is an irreducible presupposition of all morality as every moral endeavour has human well-being as its object⁴⁷. Human beings have a substantial communality of needs, desires, feelings etc., as well as peculiar ones. Yet, the specifically moral preferences of human beings are not those that depend on the psychological peculiarities of any particular person’s preferences but those that seek to harmonize the conditions of the well-being of particular individuals with those of the well-being of society at large. It is this intentional relation between the preferences of an individual and the common well-being that is the basis of objective (inter-personal) assessment of moral persuasions, and the condition for the universalizability of moral judgments. Besides, because human beings have in common certain basic needs and desires etc., human normative preferences “might be expected to coincide, at some fundamental level”⁴⁸, even though they vary at other levels across places and cultures and social stations. Also “If human beings differed in an absolute, all-pervading and systematic way on fundamental moral principles, there would be no such thing as rational moral discussion among men. But it is an empirical fact that such a scale and quality of disagreements does not exist and – one might say – cannot exist where there is a human community”⁴⁹; for it is a “psycho-epistemological fact”, that an inclination toward rational inquiry is part of the basic make-up of the human psyche⁵⁰. Hence, in the realm of normative values, too, “nothing is gained by seeking foundations...beyond [the naturalistic conception of] human nature”⁵¹. Because justifiable explanations of moral judgements can be obtained non-arbitrarily, by “inter-personally specifiable criteria of rationally warranted assertability”⁵².

What, then, is the subjective motivation for pursuing the universalist teleology of human well-being? In Wiredu’s view, a necessary condition for the universalization of a moral principle is its consistent application. But such consistency is insufficient as the foundation of morals. Such sufficiency can be obtained only by showing the necessary connection between morality and human interests. Human beings are intuitively self-regarding, and this fact of human nature strengthens the need for two things, (a) the harmonization of the interests of the individual with those of others as the *rationale* (end) of moral rules, and (b) the motivation for acting to achieve this end as the sympathetic appreciation of the interests of others, i.e., the cultivation of a mind-set that facilitates the possible assimilation of the interests of others in contemplating one’s self interest⁵³. As discussed above, the possibility of such a mindset inheres in the biological theory of norms. According to this theory the self-concerned individual agent, insofar as he understands her nature as a human being, will come to accept that other people too have needs similar his which his imperfect nature cannot address alone. This realization of mutual dependence enables the individual to conceive of the interests of others as often divergent yet also as essentially non-competitive relative to his own: the safeguarding of his interests depends on others’ recognition of their moral validity as much as the safeguarding of others’ interests depends on his recognition of their validity. There is, then, an interlocking of the interests of self and others grounded in a recognition of mutual dependence the source of which is ultimately biological in the sense described above.

Wiredu's principle of sympathetic adjustment of interests (Wiredu renders 'sympathetic adjustment' as 'empathetic harmonization'⁵⁴ elsewhere, and uses the two interchangeably) gives formal expression to this idea of mutual dependence as a biological-cum-moral fact about humans. The principle is fundamental to Wiredu's moral philosophy; according to him, mutual sympathy is crucial in guiding deliberation on how to act. In the absence of recognition of mutual dependence and sympathetic concern for one another "the survival of human society in a tolerable condition would be inconceivable"⁵⁵. Morality thus requires the reasoned (where this doesn't mean exclusively rational) pursuit of sympathetic impartiality (SI): "let your conduct at all times manifest a due concern for the interest of others"⁵⁶. "Due concern" for the interest of others entails imagining oneself in the position a person whose interest your act will impact, and welcoming that impact. SI, then, implies the Golden Rule, that one ought not to "do unto others what you would not that they do to you"⁵⁷. At this juncture, it is worth noting that the principle of the equality of rational opinion and the right to it, which are implied in Wiredu's cognitive theory, are being applied to SI. For, "judicious claims of universality imply that contending adults can, in principle, discuss their differences rationally on a basis of equality"⁵⁸. Thus no one has a right to impose his beliefs on others without warrant of rational deliberation in the process of adjusting moral interests. For such imposition would offend against objectivity, and sympathy, and impartiality and pervert the formula for seeking the common good. Wiredu's naturalism is unapologetically Humean. So is his resort to sympathy as a principle of moral motivation. In both of these, he is at one with Nkrumah. He also agrees with Danquah that reason and sentiments mutually condition other to constitute the foundations of moral law.

Similarities and contrasts between Wiredu's SI and Kant's CI can now be drawn. The objective aspect of Wiredu's moral theory, the empathetic harmonization of interests, renders SI universally obligatory, just as CI does. Further, the fact that SI doesn't rest on subjective motivations conforms with Kant's understanding of a moral rule as an imperative; and Wiredu agrees with Kant that the highest principle of morality should unconditionally be an imperative. Further, SI is a substantive moral theory in as much as it is the master principle of morality as a set of rules and a pattern of conduct cognizant of those rules. Hence Wiredu thinks that his SI and Kant's CI would be conceptually equivalent but for CI's lack of the "dose of compassion" that is integral to SI. A dose of compassion is germane to moral considerations, for "ability without sentimentality is nothing short of barbarity"⁵⁹. In Wiredu's view, such absence of compassion evacuates the humanistic impulse of Kant's CI. On Kant's terms, a reasonable action is action in reverence for the moral law. That reverential outlook is not directed to any external object other than the moral law as a law without exception, as illustrated by Kant's example in *Groundwork* of a man who has lost all love of life but nonetheless pull himself up in order to do his duty even though he doesn't feel like it. One must wonder how this accords with treating every human being as an end but not a means to an end. Indeed, the fact that SI is a naturalistic theory that admits of sympathy as the basis of moral motivation distinguishes it from CI. It is the absence of such sympathy, in its function as a substantive commitment to human interests which, in Wiredu's view, primarily renders CI non-humanistic⁶⁰.

ASSESSMENT OF THE GHANAIAN CRITIQUE OF KANTIAN ETHICS

Having set out the reception of Kant's moral thought in modern Ghanaian philosophy, we now turn to an assessment of that reception, focusing once more on Wiredu, whose thinking on this issue incorporates much of that of his predecessors, Danquah and Nkrumah. Noticeably, none of the three thinkers considered rejects Kant's moral theory outright: the universality claims of CI in particular appear to be a constant *positive* reference point – in this respect, at least, CI is to be amended rather than dismissed. In one sense, Kant's universality claims in behalf of his moral theory are unsurprising – Kant himself acknowledges that any philosophical theory worthy of its name will necessarily claim universal validity, i.e., it will necessarily claim to hold true in general for all human beings, or for all civilised peoples, or for all males, or for all who are reasonable. Thus, Aristotle, for example, plainly thought his virtue ethical position valid for all civilised or well-educated males, and in Aristotle's world this presumably included all Greek citizens, though it excluded barbarians, slaves and women. Similarly, Hume presumably considered his naturalist conventionalism valid for all sensible human beings, though again implicitly restricting the latter category to male Europeans. In our own times, John Rawls constructed a theory of social justice of which he claimed that all reasonable persons could endorse it whatever else they differed about – Rawls' ideal-typical reasonable person was modelled on male heads of North American households. Universality claims are nothing new in the history of (Western) philosophy, even if it typically turns out that the scope of such claims is in effect severely restricted. What, then, is so special about Kant's universality claims such that Kant's critics often seek to preserve this aspect of his moral theory even as they set about dismantling and repudiating other aspects?

One should distinguish between universality and universalizability.⁶¹ The former is a descriptive term: to say of a given theory that it is universally valid is to affirm that the theory holds for all those assumed to fall within its scope – all Europeans, say, or all male adults, or all civilised or reasonable folk. By contrast, universalizability is a normative term. More specifically, it is a normative demand of sorts: universalizability requires that one's maxim (i.e., one's subjective principle of volition) be such that it could be adopted by all. The universalizability demand may be distinctive to Kant's moral theory, and the peculiar attraction of Kantian moral thinking even to his critics may lie in the fact that his theory does not so much claim universal validity as demand universalizability. One way of putting this point is to say that the universalizability demand is a normative demand articulated from within the framework of Kant's critical philosophy in general. A critical philosophy in general is above all one that works reflexively, which is to say that it is first personal. Critical philosophy requires of the thinker that he or she inquire into the necessary presuppositions of any propositions in behalf of which s/he claims universal validity. Critical philosophy thus understood seeks to test the rational warrant of any actual claims to universal validity from the first-personal perspective. This is in fact exemplified in the first formulation of CI, which is a universalizability demand, not a claim to universal validity: 'act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.' The formula asks the prospective agent critically to reflect on her proposed maxim of action – her subjectively adopted principle of action: is my proposed

reason for action one of which I can be reasonably confident that anyone in my situation could adopt it as well as me? Or, for short: am I acting on the basis of what I judge to be objectively valid reasons?

One may ask: why should it be thought essential to morality that one act from reasons of which one judges that they can be reasons for action for anyone? Kant's answer would be that this is what we take morality to consist in. The 'we' in question here is anyone who takes herself to act morally at least on occasion. When she takes herself to be acting morally, the agent acts in a way that is different from the way she acts when she does not act morally. For one thing, she does not then act in such a way as to make an exception of herself – i.e., she does not take her claims to have special priority over those of anyone else. For another, she takes her reasons for action to be justificatory reasons, not just explanatory reasons. Thirdly, and relatedly, the agent assumes responsibility for acting the way she does. She does not just happen to act this way rather than that, nor does she think she might equally well act in myriad other possible ways; she takes herself to be required to act in this way rather than that, and it is *because* she takes herself to be required so to act that she does so act. Kant thus associates impartiality, justifiability, and agential responsibility with moral agency, and he in turn associates all of these features of moral agency with the human capacity for reason. Moreover, and perhaps most crucially, Kant claims to be following 'common intuition' in this regard – that is, he claims that moral agents do in fact associate impartiality, justifiability, and agential responsibility with moral agency and associate these features of moral agency with their capacity for reason.

Is Kant right about what we take moral agency to consist in? Well, the quickest test is to ask *yourself*: in reflecting on what it is you do when you act morally, do you think that not making an exception of yourself, being able to justify your actions to all others, and taking responsibility for your actions are essential features of acting morally? Moreover, do you think that all of these essential aspects of morality are related to your capacity for reason? Kant's wager is that, based on your own experience of moral agency, you will answer both these questions in the affirmative. He may be wrong. If he is wrong – if you do not associate your moral agency with the above features and those in turn with your capacity for practical reason – then, arguably, Kant has nothing further he can say to you with regard to morality. The point of Kant's account of practical reason is that he has to carry you with him all the way: given his reflexive, first-personal way of proceeding, his philosophical reasoning about morality must be followable by yourself, as moral agent.

This feature of Kant's critical philosophy, including his moral philosophy, takes us to a response to Hegel's 'empty formalism' charge. According to Hegel, recall, CI is morally empty because it is a purely formal, non-substantive principle. As such, the principle tells us nothing about morality. The contrary claim now is that CI tells us quite a lot about morality: it tells us that moral agency is impartial (not biased towards oneself), that it must be capable of justification to all others, and that it requires one to take responsibility for one's reasons for actions. That is hardly 'empty talk' – to the contrary, Kant's claim is that everyone associates these features with moral agency. Of course, the Hegelian retort may be that while these are indeed formal features of morality, they are not substantive in that they fail to tell us what exactly to do in any specific

situation. To this complaint, the Kantian response will have to be that the point of moral responsibility precisely consists in you judging for yourself what, concretely, you ought to do in any given situation. The CI is a principle of moral judgement for beings who take themselves to act from reasons. Reasons for actions in general are substantive in the sense that they are always responsive to given contexts of action. The CI does not itself describe any particular reasons for action: it merely asks you to consider whether, in your judgement, your proposed reasons for action, whatever their contextually relevant substantive context, could qualify as reasons for anyone in that situation. Are your proposed reasons impartial such that you can justify them as moral reasons to anyone who asks, and are you prepared to take responsibility for acting on your proposed reasons: can you stand by them, morally? The impartiality demand is expressed through the requirement that your subjective maxim of action qualify (in your judgement) as universal law. The justificatory requirement is expressed through the idea of your maxim being justifiable in principle as a potential universally valid law. The responsibility requirement is expressed through the demand that you yourself bring your maxim in conformity with what you judge to be a possible universal law. In short, CI is indeed a formal principle of practical reason precisely because it serves as a general criterion for moral judgement in an endlessly diverse range of possible morally relevant contexts. Insofar as Hegel's 'empty formalism' charge reduces to the complaint that CI fails to specify a set of substantively determinate 'dos and don'ts' that hold for each and every conceivable moral context, the Kantian response is that it would be a failure of CI if, instead of enabling agents to judge for themselves, it prescribed a set of moral commandments to them. To the extent to which Danquah, Nkrumah, and Wiredu accept the Hegelian complaint, they too fundamentally misunderstand Kant's moral theory as seeking to identify a set of universally valid dos and don'ts, rather than offering a criterion for the universalizability of contextually proposed maxims of action. But it cannot be a criticism of a moral theory that it fails to deliver on what it never set out to deliver.

There is, however, a second aspect to the Ghanaian critique of Kant's moral theory; it concerns Kant's apparent disdain for the emotions, including what one might think of as the specifically moral emotion of sympathy. This critique is most fully developed by Kwasi Wiredu, who goes so far as to suggest that he fully endorses Kant's moral theory except for Kant's rejection of the contribution of the emotions to moral judgement and agency. Recall: according to Wiredu, his proposed principle of morality conscientiously tracks CI, except for this one necessary amendment which requires that you "let your conduct at all times manifest a due concern for the interest of others". Wiredu calls this the principle of sympathetic impartiality (SI). On the face of it, sympathetic impartiality sounds like a contradiction in terms, for while impartiality requires one not to take sides, sympathy requires – or allows – one to show special concern for particular others. But this charge of contradictoriness may fail to take seriously Wiredu's intended meaning. For Wiredu, unless one interacts with others as a human being one misses something that is essential to morality – namely, the 'human touch'. This is presumably why Wiredu both rejects the idea that the moral good for humans could issue from a divine will and associates Kant's moral theory with one that might as well have issued from a divine will. While the divinity may be 'pure intellect', human beings are not only rational, they are also embodied, earthly, and possessed of emotions. A moral theory, such as

Kant's, which bases its authority on an appeal to reason alone is therefore an essential non-human and possibly even an inhumane theory: it demands more of human beings than they can deliver and fails to engage morally rich feelings of companionship and fellow-sympathy that are distinctive of beings who possess both reason and feeling. Like Danquah, Wiredu in effect rejects what he perceives as Kant's dualism – the sharp separation between reason and feeling. As noted, Wiredu nonetheless acknowledges that Kant captures something essential about human morality: this is the universalizability demand. It is not in fact entirely clear whether or not Wiredu conflates universality and universalizability. Unlike many of Kant's other critics, Wiredu advances his amendment to CI in the form of a supplementary imperative that addresses potential moral agents first-personally: 'let your conduct manifest concern...'. Possibly, therefore, Wiredu has in mind something very much like CI according to which agents should ask *themselves* what due concern for the interests of others might require of them in any given situation. Let us suppose that this is indeed what Wiredu has in mind – i.e., he endorses Kant's reflexive and first-personal agential standpoint as the philosophically appropriate standpoint to take when inquiring into the nature of morality. His dispute with Kant is then not the 'empty formalism' of CI, but rather Kant's account of human nature, including in particular Kant's dualistic distinction within human nature between reason and feeling or emotion. For Wiredu, as for Danquah, human reason and the emotions work in tandem, rather than conflicting with one another. This view seems quite close to an Aristotelian conception of human nature in which reason, though in one sense divine – i.e., extra-natural – nonetheless works in harmony with the emotions in developing a virtuous disposition that allows the agent to experience the full palette of human emotions in ways that are consistent with good conduct. Yet while Aristotelian ethics is essentially self-regarding in that it is focused on self-perfection, all the Ghanaian philosophers demand of the moral agent a concern with the interests of others.

This alternative emphasis is again remarkably Kantian: Kant's account of imperfect duties enjoins us to make *others'* happiness our moral end (6:398; 6:448-61). We are to act in ways that further the happiness of others rather than our own happiness, as in Aristotle. Here, again, the spectre of Christian self-denial may loom unattractively, but let us set that thought aside for now. The chief point is that insofar as Kant's account of imperfect duties demands that we take an interest in others' happiness one might think that Kant has a strong rejoinder to Wiredu: namely, that the demand to ensure that one's conduct manifest concern for the interests of others is already built into his moral theory through his account of imperfect obligations. But what if Wiredu were to retort that Kant's demand that we make others' happiness our moral end is inconsistent with his more general theory of human nature and morals! After all, insofar as morality rests on reason alone, why should we concern ourselves with others' happiness – an aspiration of their sensible nature which Kant relegates as beneath moral concern? Arguably, the thought of others' happiness as a requisite moral end is inconsistent with Kant's general moral outlook. Moreover, Wiredu might go on to aver, for one to be able to make others' happiness one's moral end, one needs not only to value human happiness in general, one needs also have some experience of it oneself. How else could one truly understand others' desire and hope for happiness? The good of happiness then needs to enter into one's moral

deliberations not just as an end to be furthered but also as an experience to draw from. On both counts then, Kant arguably cannot include others happiness in his moral theory without thereby undermining his own fundamental commitments: it is inconsistent to elevate a sensibly conditioned human good to a moral end, and it is impossible for any moral agent to allow considerations of happiness to figure in moral deliberation so long as the latter are meant to be based on reason alone. Wiredu might say that Kant is consistently able to accommodate others' happiness as a moral end only on pain of adopting SI as a necessary supplement to CI: we should indeed ask ourselves whether our proposed maxims of action are universalizable, hence morally permissible, but we should also, additionally, ensure that our maxims consistently display concern for the interests of others.

It is not clear whether Wiredu's amendment can easily be appended to Kant's CI. It seems either to add so little as not to make a difference – Kant's account of imperfect obligations takes care of SI already. Alternatively, SI in effect replaces CI by introducing a set of substantive requirements that specify exactly what it means to take the interests of others seriously. While Kant's moral theory is not strictly inhumane in the sense of being tailored for Gods rather than for finitely rational human beings, his general conception of the relation between emotions and reason that is antagonistic more than harmonious. Reason constrains feelings more than working alongside them as Wiredu and indeed Danquah and Nkrumah all maintain. Is Kant's conception of the potentially deleterious effects of the emotions on reason unrealistic or unduly pessimistic? Again, this depends in part on one's own experiences of the conflict – or lack thereof – between reason and inclination, feeling, emotion. It would be extremely odd to think that there are people who have never experienced the pull of the one over the other; extremely hard to believe that for some people reason and passions always work in harmonious co-ordination. It is less difficult to entertain the idea that reason and emotions can be brought into harmony with one another – but even that thought is premised on prior tension or antagonism. On reflection, none of the Ghanaian philosophers appears in fact to reject the thought the emotions must be tutored by reason at least to some extent. To that extent, the disagreement with Kant once more disappears. However, Danquah, Nkrumah and Wiredu all subscribe to the view that once tutored by reason, the emotions nonetheless are a constitutive part of moral agency: without the right sort of emotional engagement. Moral agency would be impoverished. This worry about Kant's expulsion of the emotions from morals is reminiscent of Schiller's original complaint that Kant's moral person is a rather unsympathetic 'cold fish' who does her duty dutifully but without any warmth of feeling for those at the receiving end of her actions.⁶² Reason and sentiment will often find themselves in conflict, but often also they will not; often they align. It is surely preferable, morally, for one to do one's duty willingly and with warmth of feeling rather than 'merely for the sake of duty'.

This objection does have some bite. Kant arguably does overplay his hand when, in the example in *Groundwork* mentioned above, he praises the man who, despite having lost all feeling for life, tears himself out of his stupor and discharges his duty towards others irrespective of his own indifference to life. Most of would surely rather interact with someone who displays warmth of feeling in the discharge of her duties. The question nonetheless remains: what is ultimately decisive – what, when the chips are down, should determine the will to action –

reason or feeling? For Kant, it cannot be a bit of both; this simply leads to the problem of overdetermination at the level of the will's determining ground. If theory really is to guide action, it must do so reliably. And while it is all very well to act with warmth of feeling towards those whom we like, or those who are close to us, it is quite another thing to act well towards those whom we find we dislike, and with whom we may even disagree quite deeply. The moral test case, for Kant, is the latter kind of scenario: acting well towards those for whom we have no warmth of feeling – acting well towards our enemies, as it were. It is definitional of an enemy that you dislike them –that you have strongly negative feelings towards them. On Kant's account, this is precisely where true moral worth shows itself: if you act well towards those whom you dislike you respect the humanity in them irrespective of your personal dislike for them. Could Wiredu marshal SI in behalf of acting well towards one's enemies, or would it be contradictory to act sympathetically towards someone of whom one dislikes? The Kantian wager would be that to the extent to which one does act well towards one's enemy one will do so on the basis of CI, not SI.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have explored Ghanaian philosophical responses to Kant's practical philosophy. We have found that although all of the three thinkers considered – Danquah, Nkrumah, and Wiredu – endorse some version of Kant's universalizability requirement, they also all express unease over Kant's rejection of the emotions as constitutive part of any adequately human and hence humane moral theory. Of the three thinkers, Wiredu's critique and engagement with Kant is the most comprehensive in that he seeks both to contest Kant's underlying conception of human nature whilst nonetheless supplying a principle – SI – that seeks to preserve Kant's first-personal universalizability demand. In our assessment of the Ghanaian critique of Kant, we found that the emptiness charge – inherited from Hegel – is arguably relatively easy to rebut: Kant never set out to provide a substantive moral theory so much as a criterion for moral judgement that has validity for anyone, however diverse their contextual moral setting, precisely because it is a formal principle. The second objection – Kant's dismissal of the emotions – seems to us harder to put to rest. While we have suggested that Kant does have a potential response to his Ghanaian critic – the demands of morality extend even to those whom we actively dislike – it is not clear that this response necessarily satisfy the general case. In general, it surely would be preferable if those who acted well towards us – and we towards them – did so from good feelings as well as good will. Kant does not disagree – but he does not believe that the positive emotional involvement adds anything to the moral worth of our actions. It is not clear to us that Kant could accommodate SI alongside CI – his moral philosophy does depend on a metaphysical distinction between our sensible and our noumenal nature, and for Kant the unconditional nature of morality is ultimately explicable only as a feature of our noumenal nature. As soon as sensible considerations are introduced as constitutive of morality, unconditional validity necessarily disappears. This means that while Kant is unable to accommodate SI, Wiredu is unable to claim the allegiance of CI to his moral

theory. Wiredu's underlying conception of human nature rejects an idealist metaphysics: but its acceptance is required for unconditional validity in the Kantian sense to get off the ground. In the end therefore, it appears that the basic metaphysical differences between Kant, Danquah, Nkrumah and Wiredu mean that it is not possible for them to accommodate each other's legitimate demands regarding the emotions on the one side, and universalizability on the other side. This hardly shows mutual engagement with one another's moral thinking to be a futile endeavour.

Abstract: African philosophers have long engaged with Kant's practical philosophy. Since the 1980s, much of this engagement has been with Kant's anthropology of race and its role in the theoretical foundations of racism and European colonization. Our paper departs from this latter orientation by examining Ghanaian philosophical reflections on the Categorical Imperative, which Kant sets out as the supreme principle of practical reason. We assess this critique, and conclude that while the Ghanaian philosophers accept several aspects of Kantian ethics, they depart from Kant's idealist metaphysics and associated dualistic conception of human nature. More specifically, while the Ghanaian philosophers accept Kant's universalizability demands in relation to moral judgement, they also make a sustained case, contra Kant, in favour of the role of the emotions in moral motivation. The paper thus contributes to broader efforts underway to enrich the discourse on the reception of Kant's philosophy in the global south.

Keywords: Ghanaian philosophers; Danquah; Nkrumah; Wiredu; Moral philosophy.

NOTES

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³ We take an unusual turn in the history of African philosophy by placing the genesis of its corpus in J.B. Danquah's Ph D thesis, *The Moral End as Moral Excellence*, submitted to the University of London in 1927; rather than in Placide Tempels *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Présence Africaine), which in usual accounts is considered as the origin of the discipline.

⁴ Eze, 1998, "Modern Western Philosophy and African Colonialism", in (ed.) Eze, E. C., *African Philosophy, an Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 213-221, pp.213-221. Also Serequeberhan, T, "Colonialism and the Colonized: Violence and Counter-Violence", in Eze, E. C., *African Philosophy, an Anthology*, pp. 234-254.

⁵ The most important of these sources would have been Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist and taxonomist who was among the first to systematically distinguish between different human races, including hierarchical rankings of these races, which consistently placed Africans at the bottom.

⁶ Eze, E. C., 1997, (ed.), *Race and the Enlightenment: A reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 38-49, particularly p. 40, 48.

⁷ Mark Larrimore, 2008, "Antinomies of race: diversity and destiny in Kant", in *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 42, Nos 4-5, pp. 341-363, p. 346.

⁸ Serequeberhan, T. 1997, "The Critique of Eurocentrism and the Practice of African Philosophy", in (ed.) Eze, E. C., *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 141 – 161; p. 142, pp. 144-145.

⁹ Eze, E. C., "Modern Western Philosophy and African Colonization", pp. 214-215.

¹⁰ All citations from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* are taken from H. J. Paton's English translation and edition *The Moral Law: Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (London: Routledge, 1948). The in-text page references are to the Prussian Academy edition of Kant's Collected Works.

¹¹ Hegel, 1977, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, (trans.), Miller, A. V., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 256–262. Also, Hegel, 1991, *The Philosophy of Right*, (trans.), Nisbet, H. B., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 161–164.

¹² *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 259.

¹³ *Philosophy of Right*, p. 163.

¹⁴ Danquah, J. B., 1927, *The Moral End as Moral Excellence*, a thesis submitted to The University of London in fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy. This is Danquah's most prominent extant work on ethics.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120-121.

¹⁷ Hume, 1975, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), 2nd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 457.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 458.

¹⁹ *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition*, David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (eds.), Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2007, T.2.3.3.6.

²⁰ Danquah, *Thesis*, p. 23.

²¹ Danquah, *Thesis*, 45

²² Danquah, *Thesis*, p. 54.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 55.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 23-24.

²⁶ During the struggle for the independence of Ghana, Danquah is known to have preferred the strategy of working toward "independence at the shortest possible time whereas Nkrumah demanded "independence now!". Additionally, Nkrumah was an avowed socialist whereas Danquah's political economic orientation is considered to have tilted more toward a private-sector led economy.

²⁷ *Kant, Groundwork*, 4: 429.

²⁸ Nkrumah, K., 1970, *Consciencism*, London: Panaf Publications.

²⁹ Metz T, 2014. Questioning African Attempts to Ground Ethics in Metaphysics. In Imafidon E., Bewaji J. A. I., eds., *Ontologized Ethics: New Essays in African Meta-Ethics*. Lexington Books: 189-204, p 190.

³⁰ Nkrumah, *Consciencism*, p. 46

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Consciencism*, 1970, 96-97.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 95.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 97.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 74.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p 69.

³⁸ Gyekye, K. 1987, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought, The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, p. 132.

³⁹ Wiredu, K. 1996, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 63 .

⁴⁰ Wiredu, K. 1992, "Moral foundations of an African culture". In Wiredu K. & Gyekye, K. (eds) *Person and community: Ghanaian philosophical studies, 1*. Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, pp. 193-206, p. 194.

⁴¹ Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 36.

⁴² This contrasts with objectivist theories where Mp is not internal to Ct.

⁴³ Danquah agrees with the claim to language as essential to community, and pf community as essential to morality. In Danquah's view "Language is the primordial requisite of social intercourse, and morality is only possible for a rational being in a social community" (thesis, p. 218). But, as seen above, Danquah rejects the thesis of the biological foundation of morals.

⁴⁴ Wiredu 1996, 19.

⁴⁵ There are differences between Wiredu and Locke's idea of a tabula rasa. This is because we are born with not a mind that is empty, but only with the potential of a mind (p.21). There is also some differentiation between his position and the theory of innate ideas. On Wiredu's view, the brain (the seat of mind) doesn't contain innate ideas in the sense of dormant or inactive ideas contained in it at birth, waiting to be activated by education, as in Plato. Rather, the brain functions as the possibility of the acquisition of ideas.

⁴⁶ Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 35-36.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 64.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 93.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 217.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 56.

⁵² Ibid., p. 210.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 64.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

⁵⁷ Wiredu, "Moral Foundations of an African culture", p. 198.

⁵⁸ Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 31.

⁵⁹ Wiredu, "Moral Foundations of an African culture", p. 197. Arguably, the notion 'ability' in this affirmation by Wiredu, is elliptical. In the context of the quote, it is clear that he understands the term to mean not merely mental aptitude but rather the skill to deploy one's mental faculties toward an end, i.e., skillful action toward an end. If so, then the quote can be rendered as "reasonable action without sentimentality is barbarity".

⁶⁰ Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 95.

⁶¹ On the distinction between universality and universalizability, see Onora O'Neill, 2000, "Four Models of Practical Reasoning" in her *Bounds of Justice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 11-28. See also David Velleman, 2006, "The Voice of Conscience" in his *Self to Self: Selected Essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 110-28.

⁶² Schiller famously penned a jibe caricaturing Kant's position: Gladly I serve my friends, but alas I do it with pleasure Hence I am plagued with doubt that I am not a virtuous person To this, this answer is given: Surely, your only resource is to try to despise them entirely And then with aversion do what your duty enjoins.

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