

# **Molefe on Wiredu's Humanistic Interpretation of Akan (African) Ethics**

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*Abstract:* In his 2015 *Theoria* article titled 'A Rejection of Humanism in African Moral Tradition', Motsamai Molefe argues that Kwasi Wiredu's humanistic interpretation of traditional Akan ethics cannot be the best account of African ethics because Wiredu overlooks the significant sentiment in traditional African thought that regards reality as a holistic totality of spiritual, social and environmental components. I point out that Molefe's rejection of Wiredu's humanism follows from the latter's de-emphasising of supernaturalism. I argue that Molefe overlooks the fact that the displacement of God in this humanism is consistent with the limited God sentiment in traditional African thought, which confirms Wiredu's humanistic ethics as one rooted in traditional African world-views. Adopting the method of philosophical exposition and analysis, I show how Wiredu's limited God framework motivates scepticism about the possibility of a supernaturalist ethics and renders a humanistic orientation a more attractive account of African moral tradition.

*Keywords:* African ethics, Akan ethics, humanism, Kwasi Wiredu, limited God view, Motsamai Molefe, supernaturalism

In this article, I argue that Motsamai Molefe's critique of Kwasi Wiredu's humanistic interpretation of traditional Akan ethics in his 2015 *Theoria* article titled 'A Rejection of Humanism in African Moral Tradition' overlooks the fact that the African limited God view, to which Wiredu commits himself, raises well-grounded scepticism about the possibility of an African supernaturalist ethics.



I argue that the same framework makes a strong case for Wiredu's humanistic orientation as a more attractive account of African moral tradition than the supernaturalist alternative preferred by Molefe. This state of affairs upholds the Africanist<sup>1</sup> credentials of Wiredu's humanism. According to Molefe, humanism, or secular humanism,<sup>2</sup> does not adequately reflect the African holistic, or complementaristic, conception of reality that regards the universe as a totality of spiritual and physical elements. These spiritual and physical elements embrace the divine, human, vegetative and mineral spheres. While God, lesser deities and the ancestors operate in the spiritual sphere of reality, human beings, vegetative life and elements of the mineral kingdom operate in the physical sphere (see, for example, Agada 2022a; Asouzu 2004; Gyekye 1995; Idowu 1973; Mbiti 1975; Metz and Molefe 2021; Ramose 1999; Senghor 1964). For Molefe, the spiritual sphere plays such a significant role in traditional African worldviews, that overlooking or rejecting it punches a big hole in the traditional African belief system. Consequently, humanism is not the best interpretation of traditional African ethics, according to Molefe.

I understand Molefe's invocation of the idea of the *best* account of African moral tradition in terms of which moral theory adequately reflects traditional African worldviews and is, accordingly, more plausible. The coherence of Wiredu's humanism within the African limited God framework grounds his moral theory in traditional African worldviews. The capacity of Wiredu's humanistic ethical orientation to exhibit the possibility of the reason-mediated, universally binding moral principle of sympathetic impartiality where ethical supernaturalism fails to disclose a clear set of moral rules instituted by God renders humanism a more attractive moral theory than supernaturalism. Humanism as promoted by Wiredu privileges human interests and welfare, and makes these human concerns the basis of morality, which in its turn is discoverable by human reason (Wiredu 2010; see also Dzobo 2010; Gyekye 1995; Imafidon 2013). Ethical supernaturalism proposes that morality is best grounded in a conception of God as a moral authority (see Molefe 2015). The literature on African Traditional Religion (ATR) and African philosophy of religion reveals that there are two broad views about God in traditional African thought, namely, the traditional theistic view and the limited God view (see Agada 2022a, 2022b; Attoe 2022;

Awolalu and Dopamu 1979; Bewaji 1998; Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Agada 2022; Gyekye 1995; Mbiti 1975; Idowu 1973; Wiredu 2013). The traditional African theistic view attributes omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence to God and makes him the very ground of morality. The limited God view regards God as limited in power, knowledge and goodness. Wiredu's conception of God falls into the limited God view. Wiredu's reliance on a sentiment of divine limitation rooted in traditional African thought means that privileging human interest and welfare as the most legitimate basis of morality rather than the unknown will of a limited God does not make his moral theory any less African.

To demonstrate my thesis in this article, I adopt the method of philosophical exposition and analysis. I do not extensively evaluate Molefe's preferred account of African moral tradition, which he dubs 'ethical supernaturalism', since he does not defend this moral theory in his 2015 article. Here, I focus on showing that Molefe's critique fails to undermine Wiredu's humanism as a plausible African moral theory. This article is divided into three sections. Section 1 presents Wiredu's humanistic interpretation of Akan ethics and draws a nexus between it and his limited God view. Section 2 critically examines and interrogates Molefe's critique of Wiredu's humanism. Section 3 raises possible objections to my thesis and presents appropriate replies.

### **Wiredu's Humanistic Interpretation of Traditional Akan Ethics and the Limited God View**

Wiredu treads the path of a number of African philosophers who assert that traditional African ethics is human-centred to the extent that the ethics unambiguously privileges human well-being (see Dzobo 2010; Gyekye 1995; Imafidon 2013). However, Wiredu goes further and formulates a coherent humanistic ethics based on his interpretation of traditional Akan ethics that de-emphasises supernaturalism.<sup>3</sup> The word 'traditional' is used here to denote belief systems and patterns of thinking derived directly from age-old worldviews and practices of African societies. According to Wiredu, the Akan do not locate the foundation of morality in the will of God or in any other spiritual entity. Rather, morality is a

wholly rational phenomenon instituted on the foundation of human needs, interests and welfare.

With the human being taking centre stage as the being that has value (Wiredu 2010: 194) by reason of the possession of the life principle (*ōkra*), the blood principle (*mogya*) and the personality principle (*sunsum*),<sup>4</sup> Wiredu defines morality in terms of the harmonisation of human interests in a way that promotes what he calls ‘sympathetic impartiality’, a moral principle that human reason discovers. The harmonisation factor is absolutely necessary, according to Wiredu, because human interests are varied and may clash even as some interests may be harmful to members of the community. Through the harmonisation process midwived by human reason, a balance is struck between the rational demand of impartiality and the equally rational demand of empathy. Thus, morality has empathetic and impartial components. The impartial component requires that reason prescribe rules that are universally binding on account of their strict applicability to everyone, while the empathetic component stipulates that the objective of the strict moral rules is the promotion of human well-being, a goal that cannot be reached if the factor of empathy is sacrificed in favour of the universal applicability of the strict moral rules. Thus Wiredu (1996: 31) notes: ‘Sympathetic impartiality represents a fusion of the two conceptions: the impartiality is what the moral rules embody, and the sympathy is what the moral motivation evinces’.

With the human being taking centre stage, Wiredu describes his account of African ethics as having a humanistic orientation. He does not claim that the God factor is irrelevant, since he acknowledges that the Akan believe in a God who is powerful enough to be the architect or designer of the world (see Wiredu 1998). But since this God is not morally perfect (Wiredu 1996, 1998), his will and commands, which are unknown – fatally for the ethical supernaturalist argument – cannot be the yardstick for determining morality. In other words, morality exists independently of a (morally) limited God, as I argue later in this section. Morality is a phenomenon that does not require the invocation of the sanction of spiritual entities, according to Wiredu. In a telling passage, he asserts that

what is good, in general, is what promotes human interests. Correspondingly, what is good in the more narrowly ethical sense is, by definition, what is conducive to the harmonization of those interests. Thus,

the will of God, not to talk of that of any other extra-human being, is logically incapable of defining the good. On the Akan understanding of things, indeed, God is good in the highest; but his goodness is conceptually of a type with the goodness of a just and benevolent ancestor, only in his case quality and scale are assumed to be limitless. The prospect of punishment from God or some lesser being may concentrate the mind on the narrow path of virtue, but it is not this that creates the sense of moral obligation. (Wiredu 2010: 195)

Wiredu commits himself to the view that morality is an objective phenomenon and that goodness mirrors this objective order. The promotion of goodness allows for human flourishing. What works against human flourishing, in Wiredu's thinking, falls short of the standard of goodness. A morally limited God may be capable of issuing rules that harm human beings. If God's goodness is more or less comparable to the goodness of a benevolent ancestor, then God is not a morally perfect being. Accordingly, he cannot be the source of morality, although he may well express morality like any entity endowed with a reason capable of discovering moral principles. This perspective is not clearly argued by Wiredu, but it is implied in his assertion that the Akan regard God as just another entity capable of expressing morality, no doubt on a scale higher than the human scale but only just, since God's expressive powers are of the order of ancestral expressive power. If the limited God is not above morality or equal to morality and is, in fact, liable to moral error, his will does not have to define the good. A morally limited God may prescribe laws antithetical to morality and injurious to human flourishing. Wiredu notes this point when he writes that: '[T]o say that "morally good" means "in conformity with the will of God" would leave it *logically* possible that the morally good could conceivably be at variance with the harmonious ordering of human interests' (1996: 74–75). Unfortunately, Wiredu does not explore the idea of the independence of morality in detail, although he notes clearly that God is not the source of morality. Additionally, even if the limited God has a set of moral rules that adequately express objective morality and that are conducive to human flourishing, there is still the problem of revelation. In Wiredu's limited God framework, scepticism about the nature and reality of God persists. A God who is benevolent enough to care about the welfare of human beings that he created has an obligation to communicate

his (good) will to human beings. If he does not reveal his will, as is largely the case in ATR, he is either unable to do so, being limited in power, is unable to devise the best means to reveal his will, being limited in knowledge, or is not sufficiently caring, being limited in goodness, or he does not exist after all. All sceptical scenarios justify the displacement of God and the appeal to human reason for the determination of what constitutes morality. Wiredu does raise the question of whether a quasi-physical God actually exists, but he fails to rigorously pursue the matter.

While articulating the idea of a spatio-temporally limited God in the context of his quasi-physicalism (which he presents as an accurate interpretation of the traditional Akan worldview), he notes: ‘A legitimate question is whether there is adequate evidence that such entities [God, soul, ancestors] exist’ (1996: 54; cf. Wiredu 2010: 196). The question is a legitimate one since the universe is conceived by the Akan in ultimately physicalist terms, according to Wiredu. This means that the spiritual–material distinction that demarcates the spiritual sphere of entities like God and contrasts this sphere with the physical world follows from a misreading of traditional African thought. Wiredu (1980, 1996, 1998) argues trenchantly that such a misreading is the result of the importation of Western conceptual categories into African thought.

For him, God is at most a quasi-physical entity. Quasi-physicalism is the view that while the universe is ultimately intelligible within the knowledge framework of science, there are some entities that do not behave like everyday physical objects (1996: 53–55). Quasi-physical entities like God and the soul do not exist outside the physical universe. According to Wiredu, as scientific knowledge advances, adequate physical explanations of quasi-physical entities will become available (see also Kwame 2004). Consequently, quasi-physicalism is properly a physicalist theory. While Akan philosophers like Kwame Gyekye (1995) and Has-kei M. Majeed (2017) dispute Wiredu’s reading of traditional Akan religious thought, the Akan philosopher Safro Kwame (2004) has notably defended Wiredu’s position. He notes that, given the current state of scientific knowledge and the problem of the empirical demonstration of the reality of quasi-physical entities, openness to the possibility of their existence and the other possibility of their non-existence becomes a virtue. The

considerations highlighted above favour a humanistic ethics at the expense of supernaturalism.

It has been well established in the African religious studies literature that the African God is a hidden God, either too remote from worldly human affairs in his majestic state, or inclined to deal with human beings through intermediaries like the lesser deities and ancestors (see, for example, Bewaji 1998; Fayemi 2012; Idowu 1973; Mbiti 1975; Ukpung 1983). Even when scholars like Laurenti Magesa (1997) assert that revelation is not an unknown phenomenon in ATR, they point to avenues like dreams and trance sessions as means that God uses to reveal his mind. However, such sources of revelation have not ensured that there is a body of clear moral rules and commands attributable directly to God. Indeed, in most traditional African societies, taboos are directly traced to the numerous ubiquitous lesser deities rather than God, the supreme being. I revisit this point in Section 3.<sup>5</sup> There does not appear to be a flattering reason for God not to clearly reveal his will in ATR; rather, as suggested above, there are four salient, unflattering reasons: (1) he is limited in power; (2) he is limited in knowledge; (3) he is limited in goodness; and (4) he does not exist. The relative absence of a culture of writing does not appear to be a good reason, since God could have instituted a sustainable priesthood tradition that would have carefully documented his will in a way that would have made a supernaturalist ethics possible.

Even if the obstacle of revelation is surmounted, a morally limited God will still not be the author of morality and will compete with humans, ancestors and lesser deities as expressers of an independent moral order. Perhaps God, being more morally developed than humans, will express morality better. But in the circumstances that he is a limited quasi-physical entity that is not empirically accessible and given that his precise moral commands are unknown, it makes sense that a limited God proponent like Wiredu will favour humanism over supernaturalism. The considerations above make a humanistic ethics more attractive than a supernaturalist ethics whose articulation must rely on human speculation about what God may desire rather than what God actually desires.

The limited God view is well rooted in the literature and has recently gained traction amongst African philosophers of religion for at least two reasons, namely (1) the claim that it reflects

traditional African views of God better than the traditional theistic perspective (Bewaji 1998; Fayemi 2012; Ofuasia 2022; Oladipo 2004; Sogolo 1993; Wiredu 1998); and (2) the claim that it resolves the controversial problem of evil and omnipotence by establishing the compatibility of evil and a limited God (Bewaji 1998; Chima-konam and Chimakonam 2022; Ogbonnaya 2022; Wiredu 1998). The limited God view is espoused by philosophers like Godwin Sogolo (1993), John A. I. Bewaji (1998), Olusegun Oladipo (2004), Oladele A. Balogun (2009), Okot p'Bitek (2011), Ademola K. Fayemi (2012), Aribiah D. Attoe (2022), J. O. Chimakonam and A. E. Chimakonam (2022), and L. Uchenna Ogbonnaya (2022). Based on their interrogation of oral sources of African worldviews and religious practices and of linguistic phenomena like proverbs and myths, these philosophers reach the conclusion that traditional African societies do not conceive God as omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent. Indeed, Bewaji (1998: 9) points out that in the orally transmitted Ifa corpus of the Yoruba people, Olodumare (God) is depicted as consulting wise men to know whether he is immortal, a clear indication of the cultural rootedness of the limitation view. Bewaji and Fayemi assert that in the Yoruba religious tradition, God is believed to be capable of doing evil in addition to good. Bewaji suggests God's moral arbitrariness when he writes: 'In fact, to say that God does not or cannot do evil is to unnecessarily circumscribe His power' (1998: 11). Fayemi (2012: 12) adds that God is blameworthy and 'cannot be rationally defended in the face of physical and spiritual evils'. By physical evils, he means such harms as natural disasters, disease and death that humans do not cause and cannot eradicate. Spiritual evils denote harm caused by invisible malevolent powers that are believed to interfere with human affairs while existing beyond the human visual range.

Wiredu's humanism is consistent with the limited God sentiment in African thought that has been briefly discussed above. This view raises scepticism about God being the source of morality and supports the assumption that the phenomenon of morality transcends God. The view also casts doubt about God's nature and his very existence. If God does evil, he is a being capable of capricious behaviour. His reason may be only a degree better than human reason. The additional fact that God is an invisible entity who has



not revealed his will in an African religious text further justifies the humanism of an African philosopher like Wiredu.<sup>6</sup>

However, Wiredu does not pursue his commitment to the limited God view to its logical conclusion. Attoe, a materialist like Wiredu, and p'Bitek take commitment to the limited God view to its logical conclusion and assert an anti-supernaturalist position. While Attoe (2022) argues that God, if he exists, must be an unconscious materialistic principle without a will, p'Bitek (2011) asserts that traditional African belief systems do not support the view that God exists.

According to p'Bitek, traditional African societies have no conception of the Christian God and rather reify natural forces. If the lesser deities are reified natural forces, then they have no objective reality and will fade from human consciousness as scientific knowledge advances. He notes: '[A]s most of them [Africans] did not hold beliefs in any deities similar in conception to the Christian God, we may refer to traditional Africans as atheistic in their outlook' (2011: 46). Both Attoe and p'Bitek displace God from their ethical systems and make morality a utilitarian social phenomenon. It is not within the scope of this article to interrogate the radical stances of the two materialists. I have highlighted these stances to show how commitment to the limited God view inspires pro-humanism sentiments at the expense of supernaturalism. Attoe's and p'Bitek's scepticism are implicit in Wiredu's religious thought, although the latter does not rigorously explore the sceptical intuitions in his thought that his commitment to the limited God view generates. In the next section, I proceed to examine Molefe's grounds for rejecting Wiredu's humanism.

### **Molefe's Rejection of Wiredu's Humanism**

The kernel of Molefe's rejection of Wiredu's moral account can be condensed into two basic assumptions: (1) the account does not adequately reflect the holistic worldview of traditional African societies that conceives reality in terms of a dynamic spiritual, social (human) and environmental interactive network; and (2) following from (1) above, the account is not the best account of African moral tradition. Molefe begins his critique with the clarification of the

terms humanism, secular humanism and ethical supernaturalism (which he considers a better account of African moral tradition).

He uses humanism and secular humanism interchangeably to describe Wiredu's interpretation of Akan ethics. Humanism is broadly an intellectual and moral commitment to the preservation and promotion of human interests. It is:

[A] meta-ethical claim – a view about the nature of moral properties – that the source of all moral value is essentially inherent in some human property or fact, hence natural/physical and secular. I note and emphasise that these authors [Wiredu and other African humanists]<sup>7</sup> deliberately sever God or any spiritual entity as responsible for the relevant moral property that inheres in human beings. (Molefe 2015: 61)

Thus, humanism, as understood by Molefe, is closely linked with secular humanism. He attaches the word 'secular' to Wiredu's humanism merely for emphasis and not because Wiredu espouses atheistic humanism. Whether one uses the term 'humanism' or reinforces it by going with the term 'secular humanism', the chief concern for Molefe is the privileging of the human being and the detachment of God from the big picture of African holistic ontology. Humanism clearly appeals to the role of reason in determining what values are worth pursuing. On the other hand, ethical supernaturalism grounds morality in an extra-human property, precisely in a property belonging properly to a spiritual entity, usually God. In Molefe's thinking, ethical supernaturalism promises to better reflect African holistic ontology than humanism by making room for the non-human elements, especially the divine element, that humanism overlooks. He implies that Wiredu's humanism falls short of the adequacy criterion. Molefe (2015: 64) asserts: 'I reject the claim that rightness and wrongness (or, morality) are definable only in terms of some human property(s), be it their interests, welfare or friendliness'. To support his thesis, he presents the case of animal cruelty and shows that Wiredu's humanism cannot tell us why tormenting animals for the fun of it is wrong.

Now we have a man called 'Thabo' who derives joy microwaving cats and throwing chimpanzees from tall buildings to their death. Thabo certainly is cruel towards these animals, but he is not necessarily cruel towards his fellow human beings as he enjoys healthy relations with people. From our human standpoint, Thabo's behaviour

is wrong for two reasons. First, such behaviour is unbecoming of a rational human being and, therefore, it demeans humanity. Second, the behaviour inflicts gratuitous harm on sentient entities, that is, animals. While Wiredu's humanist sentiment may well account for the first means of determining the wrongness of Thabo's behaviour, it cannot account for the second means. Molefe submits that Thabo's behaviour is wrong because animals possess a level of moral status that humanism overlooks. Moral status supplies a measure of the intrinsic worth of entities, for which they are deserving of moral consideration and on the basis of which they are to be treated with respect (see Anderson 2004; Brennan 1984; Molefe 2015: 65–66; Sussman 2003; Theunissen 2020). Molefe notes that while individualist accounts of moral status may identify rationality as the property that determines moral status, holistic accounts broaden the conceptual horizon by introducing more inclusive structures such as the dimension of the ecosystem. Relational accounts of moral status locate the moral property in care, love, fellowship and so on (Molefe 2015: 65–66). He suggests that an African account of moral status will belong to the holistic and relational schools, although he does not pursue this matter given that his focus is showing how humanism fails to adequately reflect African ontology.

For Molefe, an adequate African moral theory should be able to tell us why Thabo's behaviour is inexcusable. The most Wiredu's humanism can achieve is proposing the instrumental worth of animals. If charged with espousing narrow anthropocentrism, Wiredu may say in defence of his humanistic stance that animal cruelty is wrong because it degrades humanity and may predispose Thabo to inhumane treatment of his fellow human beings after he must have become attuned to perpetrating cruelty for its own sake. Molefe rejects this defence. After all, Thabo may derive fun from animal cruelty while remaining a good humanist, without his animal cruelty predilection counting as right behaviour. Molefe raises the possible objection that the term 'welfare' as used by Wiredu implies that animals have the capacity for welfare and should, therefore, not be harmed. This line of thought brings animals into the purview of welfare and categorically forbids animal cruelty. But, again, Molefe ambushes Wiredu and asserts that, if this is the case, Wiredu and other African humanists are obliged to change their stance so that morality will no longer be dominated by the anthropocentric

mindset but will instead embrace all entities with capacities for welfare (Molefe 2015: 66). The problem for Wiredu is that such a U-turn will entail the rejection of humanism.

Humanism fails because it is exclusivist. It overlooks African moral holism, ‘the claim that things are interconnected’ (Molefe 2015: 70) in a morally significant way. This moral significance follows from the African view that a life principle, or vitality, is distributed throughout the universe and is possessed in varying degrees by all entities in the universe (see Agada 2015; Metz and Molefe 2021; Molefe 2015; Tempels 1959).<sup>8</sup> For Molefe, humanity is just one dimension of reality in African relational ontology. The other dimensions of spirituality, animal life, vegetative life and the physical environment must be considered in the formulation of a plausible moral theory. He writes:

If ‘the good’ truly is to be a function of this holistic understanding of reality, it is problematic, it appears to me, to reduce the good to one aspect of this system – some human feature. A commitment to metaphysical/moral holism resists the kind of reductionism that characterises humanism, wherein one reduces all moral to one aspect of the whole, human beings. (Molefe 2015: 71)

By metaphysical/moral holism, Molefe is, of course, referring to the African relational ontology that brings God, humans, animals and physical objects into an existential network. Molefe is correct that Wiredu’s humanism cannot adequately account for cruelty towards animals.

However, the charge that Wiredu’s humanism does not sufficiently consider supernaturalist elements common in traditional African worldviews fails. As I argued in Section 1, Wiredu certainly pays adequate attention to supernaturalism from the limited God perspective but displaces the supernaturalist dimension from his ethical theory because humanism offers a more attractive account in the context of the limited God view. Wiredu’s commitment to the limited God view raises scepticism about God’s nature and the possibility that his will can ground morality. I briefly summarise the argument of Section 1 thus:

1. Akan (African) traditional worldviews represent God as a limited and spatio-temporally located entity.

2. A spatio-temporally located God is a limited quasi-physical entity.
3. The will of a morally limited God cannot ground morality, as morality transcends such a God who, consistent with his moral limitation, may will what is bad for humans.
4. The empirical inaccessibility of this spatio-temporally located God raises doubt about his actual existence.
5. Since human reason can discover the principles of morality without a recourse to the will of God, appeal to supernaturalism becomes superfluous.
6. Consequently, humanism is a more attractive account of African moral tradition.

It will appear, then, that Wiredu's humanism is a plausible African moral theory, and its rejection will only follow from perspectival bias rather than from the standpoint of plausibility or authenticity. In fact, Molefe's dissatisfaction with humanism follows largely from the fact that it downplays the place of God in traditional African worldviews. Thus, he has argued elsewhere for the plausibility of ethical supernaturalism, a moral account that identifies God with life and defines morality in terms of positive and negative interaction with vitality (Molefe 2018). As it is beyond the scope of this article to carry out an in-depth interrogation of Molefe's supernaturalism, I will summarise Molefe's argument.

In much of the literature on the vital force, the principle is regarded as some kind of ubiquitous energy or power. It is often regarded as issuing from God and distributed in varying degrees amongst all entities. In the human being, the vital force is identified with advanced features of life such as consciousness, sentience, reproduction and general activity. In seemingly non-sentient entities like rivers and hills the vital force is identified with activity. Molefe inserts his ethical supernaturalism into the vital force discourse, and asserts that (1) God is the source of life/vitality; (2) vitality is ubiquitous and fundamental in the universe; (3) the fundamentality and ubiquity of vitality means that God's effects are everywhere expressed and that a plausible account of African moral tradition does not have to reference the institution of prophethood and revelation for a supernaturalist ethics to be possible; and (4) consequently, the good is definable in terms of how we relate with

vitality, with morality involving what increases vitality and wrong involving what decreases vitality.

However, as intellectually daring as Molefe's meta-ethical and normative theory no doubt is, it is unclear how ethical supernaturalism is a better account of African moral tradition than Wiredu's humanism for the reason that God is presented as the source of vital force. Morality is located in vitality as a divine property even as vitality is identified with life, but how God wills and what his will may be remain a mystery in Molefe's supernaturalist theory. Like the humanist framework, ethical supernaturalism depends on human reason, rather than the will of God, for the determination of what actions are right and wrong, or, in Molefe's novel terminology, what actions validly increase or decrease vitality (see Molefe 2018; cf. Ani 2019). Given the persistent problem of revelation, the assumption that God's will can be gleaned from the operation of vitality in the world merely amounts to saying that God exists and that his manifestations are immanent in the world. Nothing in this assumption tells us what God desires and the commands he imposes on humans. Molefe is obliged to answer the questions of what God's will consists of and why the divine will has not been revealed in ATR. He is also obliged to respond to Wiredu's suggestion that the will of a supernatural entity cannot ground morality on account of the threat of moral arbitrariness and the anti-human commands that such an entity may issue. Molefe has not satisfactorily engaged these questions and this suggestion. Thus, humanism remains a more attractive ethical account than supernaturalism.

Molefe's moral philosophy has continued to mutate since the publication of his 2015 *Theoria* article. It may well be that he will eventually develop a supernaturalist ethics that trumps humanism. My arguments in this article do not make a case for moral absolutism in African ethics. What I have tried to show is that Wiredu's humanism does not overlook the supernaturalist dimension of traditional African ontology. This humanism is more attractive than supernaturalism in the context of the African limited God view. It is possible that in the context of traditional theism supernaturalism emerges as a more attractive moral theory. This possibility may enable African ethics to avoid moral absolutism and create space for alternative perspectives.

## Objections and Replies

One may object that it is not necessary to posit an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, and therefore morally perfect, God for an African supernaturalist ethics to be possible. That is to say, a morally imperfect God can be conceived as powerful to some degree and that such a God does issue commands that are binding on those who believe in this God and fear him. I respond that a limited God can indeed issue moral commands that followers may consider binding. However, such a God cannot be the ground or source of morality, since morality will be deemed to exist independently of this God and, in fact, transcend him. This is because morality consists of all that is good and right as contrasted with what is bad and wrong. For a being to transcend morality or be the source of morality, it must not only be good at one time and be bad at another time, it must be morally perfect. The moral fallibility of Wiredu's limited God makes him capable of issuing commands that sound human judgement may deem inimical to human flourishing.

Wiredu (1996: 74–75) rejects the claim that God (conceived from the perspective of limitation) can be the basis of morality, although he does not proceed to distinctly argue this point. A morally imperfect God will be just one more entity that expresses an independent moral order, like the human entity. The point here is not whether a limited God is incapable of issuing commands but whether this being can be the ground of morality. If he cannot be the ground of morality and he is a quasi-physical entity that is yet empirically inaccessible, it makes more sense, in Wiredu's thinking, to appeal to the reason of the human entity that is empirically accessible for the determination of what constitutes morality.

For Wiredu, there is a problem of arbitrariness and moral shortcoming in any scenario that raises the possibility that God's desires and wishes would negatively affect human flourishing. The mind of a morally imperfect God may not be much better than the mind of a human being in expressing the principles of an independently existent moral order. Wiredu underlines this point when he observes that the Akan regard God's goodness as a type similar to the goodness of an ancestor, a human being that has died and acquired some new powers but is still regarded as part of the human family. The

rationale for the assertion that God's will cannot define what is morally good is embedded in the limited God perspective favoured by Wiredu. Bewaji (1998) thinks along these lines when he notes pointedly that traditional Yoruba thought regards God as capable of visiting evil on humans. But when God is conceived as morally perfect, it can be plausibly argued that he is the maximal embodiment of morality, being the personification of the moral order itself, as the perfect being. Such a God necessarily issues only morally justifiable commands conducive to human flourishing, being not only all-good but also all-powerful and all-knowing.

To say some entity is a moral authority is surely different from saying such entity is the ground or basis of morality, or to suggest that morality should be located in a property of such an entity. To be the ground of morality, a larger picture unfolds that raises the question of the ultimate source of morality. If God is not morally perfect, his capacity to ground morality becomes questionable. We are then justified in looking beyond God for the ultimate ground of morality or in simply assuming that morality is an independent phenomenon from which God derives his standard.

Molefe seems to have fleetingly considered the relationship between moral perfection and the possibility of a supernaturalist ethics when he reflects on the notion of God as an apex, or maximal, being. The idea of an apex being is reminiscent of St Anselm's famous invocation of God as a being, one which is greater than any entity that can be conceived, an entity possessing the omni-properties. Molefe thinks that it makes more sense that an apex being like God will be deemed the source of morality rather than a central entity like the human being. God is conceived in much of African religious thought as the creator of the world and the maker of human beings. Expressing this sentiment, Molefe notes:

It appears strange to me that a central being can be the source of morality rather than a being that is most sublime and transcendental, God. I am here not making an argument but merely expressing an intellectual concern that this way of interpreting the African system of reality does not strike the chord of my intuition at all, given the dominant conception of African ontology. (Molefe 2015: 71)

If Molefe had taken up the argument he mentions above, he probably would have been compelled to discuss the relationship



between omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence and God conceived as the basis of morality. Wiredu pays adequate attention to the spirituality component of African holism, contrary to Molefe's stance, but realises that a conception of God as a limited entity raises scepticism about God's nature and his actual existence in a way that makes ethical supernaturalism unattractive. Consequently, he favours an ethical account that identifies human reason as an adequate expresser of morality rather than the will of God or even the will of some deity or ancestor (see Wiredu 2013). Having favoured the limited God view, Wiredu's moral philosophy would lose logical consistency if he turned around to make the will of a fallible and empirically inaccessible quasi-physical being limited in power, knowledge and goodness the ground of morality. For Wiredu, the principles of sympathetic impartiality are so logically well founded – even though they emanate from human reason – that the will of God cannot override them.

Additionally, if, for the sake of argument, we agree that the limited God is a moral exemplar worthy to be obeyed, how do we know his will beyond the intricate attributive structure of oral traditions that reference a multitude of deities as guaranteeing social norms, with God only playing an indirect role? In traditional African thought, God is often represented as hidden or inactive even as the lesser deities are ubiquitous (see, for example, Ukpong 1983). Reflecting on the Yoruba limited God perspective, Oladipo notes:

A crucial consideration in this regard is the acknowledgment, by the people, of other powers and principalities – divinities, spirits, magic, witchcraft, and so on. Some of these powers and forces are treated as ends in themselves. Hence, the people endeavor, through sacrifice, to be on good terms with them in recognition of their powers to aid or hinder human activities. (Oladipo 2004: 360)

While Molefe makes a good point when he notes that Wiredu's humanism cannot adequately account for the wrongness of animal cruelty, his preferred supernaturalist ethics remains unattractive compared to humanism on account of the problem of revelation. With humans not clearly knowing what God would have them do or not do, the onus falls on human reason to determine which manifestations of vitality (the divine property in which Molefe locates morality) represent right and wrong conduct. The recourse to the

human mind represents a significant somersault on Molefe's part, which takes one back to Wiredu's humanistic framework. This outcome confirms the attractiveness of humanism vis-à-vis supernaturalism.

Again, a Molefe defender may object to me placing the human mind on the same lofty pedestal occupied by God, even when he is conceived as limited, since he is still incomparably powerful and is the architect of the world. I noted above that if God is limited and merely ancestor-like, there is no strong reason for us to prefer a morality grounded in his will than one aligned with human reason. A defender of Molefe may insist that it is better to go with the mind of God since both the divine mind and the human mind are fallible while only the divine mind is truly sublime in its power to create worlds. The idea is that limited divine reason still exceeds limited human reason in power. Given this excellence, divine reason will align better with morality than the human mind and prescribe more impartial rules. One obvious reply to this objection is that human reason has the empirical advantage. Even if God's existence is assumed *a priori*, he remains a logical necessity, not an empirical fact. It makes more sense to align morality with the reason of the empirical being than with the will of a being whose existence is only assumed. I have noted above that Wiredu's limited God framework inspires scepticism about God's actual existence. If human reason constantly organises speculative knowledge of God as the link between God and humans, this reason does so much work that it can be relied upon to prescribe moral rules instead of divine reason which cannot directly communicate its content to human beings.

## Conclusion

In this article, I briefly but concisely presented Wiredu's humanistic interpretation of traditional Akan (African) ethics. I highlighted the underexplored connection between Wiredu's moral philosophy and his religious philosophy, and argued that, contrary to Molefe's thinking, Wiredu's humanism adequately reflects traditional African thought. I further argued that Wiredu's humanism is consistent with his limited God stance. I noted that for Molefe's preferred

ethical supernaturalism to be more attractive than Wiredu's humanism, there must be no reliance on human reason for the determination of what constitutes a positive relation with vitality (right conduct) and a negative relation with vitality (bad conduct). Future research should focus on Molefe's ethical supernaturalism and supply an in-depth critique of this holistic moral account in relation to Wiredu's ethical humanism.

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## Notes

1. I use the word 'Africanist' to underline Molefe's rationale for embarking on his critique of Wiredu's humanistic interpretation of traditional Akan ethics. I use the term loosely to indicate a proposition or a system of thought that is in firm agreement with traditional African worldviews and cultural phenomena. An Africanist philosophical intuition, then, will be one that can be justified with reference to traditional African thought and belief systems.
2. Molefe sometimes uses the terms 'humanism' and 'secular humanism' interchangeably to mean the intellectual attitude that privileges human beings and commits to the promotion of human interests above all other interests. He does not clearly distinguish between secular humanism and humanism broadly construed. While humanism in the broad sense captures a wide range of attitudes that make the human being the focal point of commitment, secular humanism, strictly speaking, may be oriented towards atheism (see Ehrenfeld 2003; Niebuhr 1964; Skinner 1978; Said 2004). While Wiredu's interpretation of traditional Akan ethics fits well into the broad sense of humanism, it does not fit well into the strict sense of secular humanism. In this article, I will use the terms humanism and secular humanism as if referring to the broad sense of humanism unless I state otherwise.
3. Wiredu's suspicion of supernaturalism arises from his conviction that traditional African societies, or, at least, traditional Akan society, regard the world in quasi-physicalist terms precisely as a spatio-temporal totality with no room for spiritual entities. For him, entities like God are in fact quasi-physical; they are spatio-temporally located but possess unique powers to act in ways surprising to empirical beings like humans. However, such unique powers are ultimately intelligible

- to science – if not now, then at some point in the future. Given this outlook, Wiredu naturally denies the plausibility of supernaturalism. More controversially, he denies that traditional Akan society exhibits a worshipping, or religious, character (for a detailed discussion, see Ani 2019).
4. Emphasis on these three principles implies that the human being is a rational and sentient being of a higher order that organises their own reality by appealing to reason.
  5. Amongst the Igbo of South-East Nigeria, for example, moral offences are regarded as offences against the earth and the various deities that control various communities. Making the interesting observation that traditional Igbo thought has no conception of a supreme being like God, M. J. C. Echeruo (1979: 19) asserts that Ala (the Earth) embodies the socio-moral order and determines moral standards.
  6. Indeed, some African philosophers have argued that the absence of a culture of prophethood and written religious texts like the Bible and Qur'an makes it impossible to formulate an African supernaturalist ethics. For a detailed discussion of this matter, see Molefe (2018).
  7. In Molefe's 2015 *Theoria* article, which supplies data for the current critique, he identifies several African moral philosophers who defend humanism and proceed to interrogate their assertions. In this article, I have chosen to specifically discuss the sections of Molefe's article that explore Wiredu's humanism.
  8. This stance will appear to validate panpsychism of some kind, since to say that all things possess degrees of life is to concede that entities are either now sentient or are potentially sentient. If sentience is a ubiquitous property of entities that has been realised, or can be realised, then experience is ubiquitous and fundamental. Such a stance involves panpsychism. Indeed, African philosophers like Gyekye (1995), Dukor (1990), Agada (2015) and Cordeiro-Rodrigues (2021) defend panpsychism as a legitimate conceptual framework for understanding the African universe. Molefe does not explore the panpsychist implication of his view of vital force, but panpsychism as a theory seems to have a place in Molefe's preferred moral account of ethical supernaturalism. A discussion of this matter is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

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