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Alonge Ibrahim – ст. гр. ICH-22

Ternopil Ivan Pul'uj National Technical University

KWASI WIREDU

Scientific supervisor: PhD (pedagogics) J. Babiak

Kwasi Wiredu (born October 3, 1931) is one of the foremost African philosophers working today. Wiredu was born in Kumasi, Ghana in 1931, and attended Adisadel College from 1948 to 1952. It was during this period that he discovered philosophy, through Plato (which weaned him from his interest in Practical Psychology) and Bertrand Russell, and he gained a place at the University of Ghana, Legon. After graduating in 1958, he went to University College, Oxford to read for the B.Phil. At Oxford Wiredu was taught by Gilbert Ryle (his thesis supervisor), Peter Strawson (his College tutor), and Stuart Hampshire (his special tutor), and wrote a thesis on 'Knowledge, Truth, and Reason'. Upon graduating in 1960 he was appointed to a teaching post at the University College of North Staffordshire (now the University of Keele), where he stayed for a year. He then returned to Ghana, where he accepted a post teaching philosophy for his old university. He remained at the University of Ghana for twenty-three years, during which time he became first Head of Department and then Professor. Since 1987 he holds a professorship at the University of South Florida in Tampa. He has held a number of visiting professorships: University of California, Los Angeles, California (1979–1980), University of Ibadan, Nigeria (1984), University of Richmond, Virginia (1985), Carleton College, Minnesota (1986), Duke University, North Carolina (1994–95; 1999–2001). He was a member of the Committee of Directors of the International Federation of Philosophical Societies from 1983 to 1998. He has also been a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (1985) and the National Humanities Center, North Carolina (1986). He is Vice-President of the Inter-African Council for Philosophy.

Wiredu opposes the 'ethnophilosophical' and 'philosophical sagacity' approaches to African philosophy, arguing that all cultures have their distinctive folk-beliefs and world-views, but that these must be distinguished from the practice of philosophizing. It is not that 'folk philosophy' cannot play a part in genuine philosophy; on the contrary, he has acknowledged his own debt to his own (Akan) culture's history of thought. Rather, he argues that genuine philosophy demands the application to such thought of critical analysis and rigorous argument. From this it will be clear that his own work is in the 'professional philosophy' (and the Anglo-American) mold.

One of Wiredu's most prominent discussions revolves around the Akan concept of personhood. He believes this traditional framework hosts a two part conception of a person. First, and most intuitive to Western conceptions of persons, is the ontological dimension. This includes one's biological constitution. Further, Wiredu states that the second dimension, the normative conception of personhood, is based on one's ability to will freely. One's ability to will freely is dependent on one's ethical considerations. One can be said to have free will if one has a high regard to ethical responsibilities. This then designates a person to become a person. One is not born a person but becomes one through events and experiences that lead one to act ethically. This differs from the Western conception of personhood in that people, in Akan traditional thought, are not born as willed beings. His influences include, apart from his tutors at Oxford, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant, and the pragmatist John Dewey, and the epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical resources of the Akan culture. The result is philosophy that is at once universally relevant and essentially African.