

Culture in Retrospect

Essays in honour of **ED Prinsloo**

Editors
APJ Roux
PH Coetzee

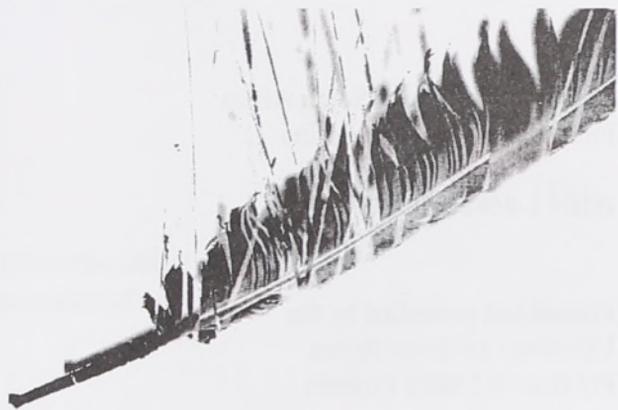
Culture in Retrospect

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Edited by ED PRINCE



Edited by
ED PRINCE
and
D. COOPER

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APJ Roux
PH Coetzee

University of South Africa
Pretoria

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CONTENTS**Page**

Preface (vii)

SECTION 1: Hermeneutics of culture

African identity and the matter of universals

J. Margolis 1

Dialectics and logicity

Between cultural diversity and ontical universality

D.F.M. Strauss 21

Kultuur, kulture, kultuurgoedere

A.M.T. Meyer 37**SECTION 2: Culture and rationality**Philosophike martyria. Aristotle, Gadamer and the relevance
of practical-ethical knowledge in a multicultural society*P. Duvenage* 46Uncovering rationality: Variations on a theme by Janz,
Trompf, Amato, Masolo, Serequeberhan and Outlaw*P.H. Coetzee* 62

The re-vision of Western rationality and African philosophy

P. Higgs 116**SECTION 3: Culture, knowledge and science**

The inadequacy of the Turing test to detect thought in computers

W. Kistner 134The smell of fried onions and other stories: A case study in a narrative
understanding of multicultural competence*W.J. Jordaan* 146

CONTENTS**Page**

Knowledge and belief: The agent-oriented view <i>J. Heidema & W. Labuschagne</i>	194
Is an African science possible? <i>A.J. Antonites</i>	215
SECTION 4: Culture and politics	
Relativism and rationalism in science and politics <i>M. Faure</i>	246
Ethnicity in nation states: a perspective on South Africa <i>F.C. de Beer</i>	268
SECTION 5: Cultural products	
What is African about African art and thought? <i>J.R. Wilkinson</i>	291
Moderniteit, historiese bewussyn en kultuurbewaring <i>M. Schoeman</i>	310
SECTION 6: Culture and life	
<i>Sangomas</i> , witches, the problem of belief and African justice <i>J. Hund</i>	319
Hobbes and existential meaning <i>M. Macnamara & Z. Postma-de Beer</i>	344
Ubuntu and the concept of the family of man <i>J. Broodryk</i>	366
Appendix: Publications by Prof E.D. Prinsloo	374

PREFACE

At the end of 1999 Prof. E.D. Prinsloo, then head of the Department of Philosophy at the University of South Africa, retired. In the six years in which he occupied this post the University and the Department faced enormous challenges. The members of the Department decided to honour him for his contributions to the Department of Philosophy, particularly as Head of the Department, and also for his contributions to philosophy in general, by means of this *Festschrift*. Emeritus Professor A.P.J. Roux and Mr Pieter Coetzee were requested to act as editors. Colleagues and friends of Prof Prinsloo from different philosophy departments and from different disciplines were invited to participate. Eventually it turned out that most of the contributions received in some or other way touched on one of his enduring interests, culture; it became *Culture in Retrospect*.

Prof. Prinsloo's career as a philosophy teacher started on 1 January, 1967 when he was appointed as a lecturer at the University of South Africa. In 1983 he was promoted to senior lecturer, in 1988 to associate professor and in 1993 to professor. In 1994 he was appointed head of department.

In a career which stretched over 33 years there were many highlights. We mention only two which had a decisive influence on philosophy at Unisa: the initiative he took to open up African philosophy and make it part of teaching and research programmes, and secondly, the labour he undertook to rescue studies in logic.

When Prof. Prinsloo became head of the Philosophy Department in 1994, African philosophy did not really form part of the philosophical scene in South Africa. A course or a module in African Philosophy was offered at three universities but it had little impact and there was no co-ordination between these institutions. It had no place on the programmes of the South African Philosophical Society and no articles on it were published in the *South African Journal of Philosophy*. However, it became clear to Prof. Prinsloo and the members of his Department that this situation was untenable. The Department accepted it as a departmental research project to find out about African philosophy, to research specific issues in this field, and to establish contacts with academics who specialized in it. Prof.

Prinsloo's application to Unisa's Research and Bursary Committee for financial support resulted in a substantial grant for a period of three years. This led to the establishment of the Research Unit for African Philosophy (RUFAP) in the Department of Philosophy with Prof. Prinsloo as chairperson. RUFAP organised three annual colloquia on African philosophy to which leading African philosophers of international standing, such as Godwin Sogolo (Nigeria) and Kwasi Wiredu (Ghana and U.S.A.), were invited as keynote speakers. These international contacts were kept up and extended and the Department benefited in various ways from them in pursuing its African philosophy projects. The colloquia were well attended by local philosophers many of whom presented well-researched papers on aspects of African philosophy; thus the Unisa initiative affected most universities in the country. The proceedings of the second colloquium¹ and a selection of papers read at all three colloquia² were published, thus starting a knowledge and database. From the RUFAP activities it became clear to Prof. Prinsloo that some transformation of the course content in philosophy had become inevitable - African philosophy had to become a part of teaching programmes. This led to the restructuring of the courses and syllabi in the Department and the preparation of completely new study material, all in record time. Graduate students were also sensitized in this field and a few dissertations and theses in this field prepared under Prof. Prinsloo's guidance have already been accepted. At present African philosophy is well established at Unisa and the staff is involved in different projects.

The second initiative concerns logic. For many years Unisa offered Logic. In the three courses formal logic comprized about one third of the contents with theory of meaning, epistemology and philosophy of science making up the rest. Unfortunately the number of students who enrolled for the Logic courses decreased with the result that when Unisa started with rationalization they had to be phased out. The philosophy sections could be accommodated in other ways but it seemed as if logic, particularly at a higher level, came to the end of the road, which would

¹ Malherbe, J.G. (ed.) 1996. *Decolonizing the Mind*. Department of Philosophy, Unisa: Pretoria.

² Roux, A.P.J. & Coetzee, P.H. n.d. *Beyond the question of African Philosophy*. Department of Philosophy, Unisa: Pretoria.

have been a loss not only in the Unisa context but for South Africa, because Unisa was the only university which offered advanced logic in the context of philosophy. The computer scientists were at that time toying with the idea of introducing a course in Artificial Intelligence. Prof. Prinsloo saw a possibility for cooperation and started negotiations with them. This was not as easy as it sounds because not only were two Departments involved but two faculties with different cultures. After months of preparations Artificial Intelligence with Logic, to be taught by the Department of Philosophy, as one of the major subjects, was approved. In this way studies in logic at all levels were guaranteed and as a spin off, the staffing position of the Department of Philosophy also improved. Again it meant the restructuring of courses, the development of new syllabi and new study material but Prof. Prinsloo and his lecturers were ready when the Artificial Intelligence course was launched at the beginning of 1997 as planned.

These and other similar initiatives in teaching and research were underpinned by Prof. Prinsloo's preparedness to question existing views and practices, his inclination to approach academic studies in a 'practical' way, his sensitivity to interdisciplinary possibilities, and, as befits a good teacher, his ability to plan teaching programmes with the students and their needs and interests in mind. With these also go true leadership abilities, the ability to convince people to participate in what he sees as worthwhile projects - and to do so with enthusiasm.

Prof. Prinsloo studied as an extra-mural student at the University of Pretoria, where he obtained a B.A. degree in 1957 with Philosophy (with distinction) and Psychology as majors, adding Greek III and Afrikaans-Nederlands III for non-degree purposes. In 1962 he obtained the Higher Education Diploma and the next year he passed the M.A. in Philosophy with distinction with a dissertation *Die wetenskapsbeskouing van Curt John Ducasse* with Prof. P.S. Dreyer as supervisor. He obtained the D.Phil. also with distinction, in 1982 on the thesis *Die fenomenologiese benadering*, with Prof. P.S. Dreyer as promoter. As part of his doctoral studies Prof. Prinsloo spent his sabbatical leave in 1977 at the University of Leiden where he studied under the guidance of Prof. C.A. van Peursen, wellknown for his contributions to the philosophy of culture, and Prof. G.

Nuchelmans, who applied the analytical methodology of Austin, Wittgenstein and Ryle.

Prof. Prinsloo always favoured the metaphilosophical view of philosophy as philosophizing. This played a part in his teaching where he emphasised discussion and argumentation and always tried to create opportunities in this regard for his students. But he also practised this. He was a keen participant in national and international conferences, and played an active role in professional societies such as the South African Philosophical Society, The Wittgenstein Society, The Phenomenological Society, The Society of the History of Science, and the Ubuntu Society. He read the following papers at international conferences: 'Criteria for cultural differences' in 1986 at the Tenth International Wittgenstein Symposium, Kirchberg, Austria; 'The context dependency of rationality' in 1988 at the Twelfth International Wittgenstein Symposium, Kirchberg, Austria; 'The function of personal and impersonal idioms in explanations' in 1989 at the Eighteenth International Congress of the History of Science, Munich, Germany; 'Language games and forms of life' in 1989 at the Thirteenth International Wittgenstein Symposium, Kirchberg, Austria; 'The status of explanation in African thinking' in 1993 at the Nineteenth World Congress of Philosophy, Moscow, Russia; 'Metaphors and science', and 'Constitution and artificial intelligence' in 1993 at the Nineteenth International Congress of the History of Science, Zaragoza, Spain.

Prof. Prinsloo became interested in talk about culture soon after he left school. In the early nineteen fifties themes such as cultural differences, the advancement of cultures and the link between culture and politics were often discussed. He was an eager but critical participant. His formal studies gave an edge to this interest and broadened his horizon. He concentrated on methodology particularly because this seemed to him of crucial importance in addressing the generally accepted difference between natural and cultural sciences which he found problematic. In the nineteen eighties he started on a book on the philosophy of culture. At that stage the course structure of the Department was revised and he decided to develop and teach a course in the Philosophy of Culture and the book had to wait. He published two important articles on aspects of culture in the *South African Journal of Philosophy*. Perhaps with the new

freedom of retirement he will return to the book. At the time of his retirement he was busy with research on a different aspect of the culture debate - post-colonial thinking. His main concern here is the content of the reaction to colonial domination.

Prinsloo also always found time to take part in community activities. During his years as a student at the University of Pretoria he served in different capacities on the Extramural Students' Representative Council and the Central Students' Council. He was chairperson of the Afrikaanse Studentebond for three consecutive years and a founding member of the Philosophical Society. He was awarded with honorary colours and a medal by the Central Students' Council in 1963 for outstanding services to the student community. For a time he also concerned himself with marriage counselling.

Erasmus Daniël Prinsloo was born on 24 September 1934. He grew up on a farm in the Bronkhorstspuit district. He matriculated (First Class, distinction in Mathematics) in 1952 at the Afrikaanse Hoër Seunsskool, Pretoria and occupied different clerical positions before he took up teaching in 1963. He is married to Reinet.

AFRICAN IDENTITY AND THE MATTER OF UNIVERSALS

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I

When I reflect on black African identity - politically, and philosophically - I think of a pure construction, an invention that for reasons of contingent history is now more than incipiently real despite having been a fiction through nearly all of the history for which it has been claimed. In that curious sense, 'racial' identity, 'black' identity, has, by a remarkable irony, proved to have a function favourable to achieving a measure of continental solidarity in spite of the fact that it could not possibly support any of the racial or cultural 'universals' it ever invoked. The young American-trained African philosopher Kwame Appiah argues convincingly for instance that there could not have been anything like an African identity earlier than the turn into the twentieth century, with the first genuinely deep penetration of Eurocentric conceptions into the whole of African life; that European patterns actually exacerbated the fragmentation of any would-be pan-African identity, but that, in spite of that, it did also contribute, in time, to an increasing convergence among oppositional movements capable of yielding whatever unity was possible. But it was always constructive and opportunistic.¹ In that sense, black African identity will be (already is) an artifact of African solidarity, not the other way around. Political effectiveness is a talent, I hardly dare say a skill, for sensing where a contingent and changeable *praxis* may yield in the direction of increased power - for a time at least. It has no use for universality or invariance, except as an ideological instrument that may actually serve our political interests. Bear that in mind, please.

¹ See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), Ch. 9.

Here, the African experience is hardly different from the European - or the Eurocentric - with which it has been inexorably bound, except of course for the hardly negligible fact that it has been mercilessly exploited by the other, disordered and deformed to such an extent that its provisional pan-African identity can, at the moment, be little more than that of the reactive perception of a continuing victim and relatively powerless aspirant (or supplicant) petitioning and needing to reenter a global market the Eurocentric world commands more effectively now than ever it did at the beginning of the century. The conspiracy of history is bound to refashion the disadvantageous universals of 'race' that Afrocentric and Eurocentric theorists had implicitly agreed on, however innocently, in pondering the 'inability' of the black world to compete as well as other 'races' sharing the same earth.

The enthusiasms of W.E.B. du Bois² and Léopold Senghor, for instance, in search of the essence of blackness, could hardly fail to play into the hands of the adverse progressivisms drawn from such theories as those of Lewis Morgan and E.B. Taylor; for, *if* the patterns of societal progress were genuinely universal in the species, as the evolutionists argued, then, on the plainest evidence, the black achievement could support only the most unfavourable finding. One could easily argue, then, that to reject the pertinence of race now, now that the racial identity card has been played - and found wanting - confirms our worst suspicions: except that, on perfectly independent grounds, it never had a proper footing and was doomed (as hindsight advises) to play into a power game it had no chance of making into a fair contest. *And, of course, it has none yet.*

The trouble is, the 'black' African world - you see how impossible it is to avoid the epithet - sees no other corrective ideology before it but one that rests on an appeal to a profound 'racial' injustice which, in being made explicit, risks its own irrelevance. In this, I see little difference between

² Compare, W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Conservation of Races', in Philip S. Foner (ed.), *W.E.B. Du Bois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses, 1890-1919* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970); and *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Schocken, 1968). See, also, Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and Illusion of Race', *Cultural Inquiry*, Autumn 1985.

'black' African experience and recent Afro- (African-American) experience, 'except' for differences of scale (which are hardly negligible) and, more tantalizingly, the potential promise of the evolved cultures of the entire African continent (possibly joined by the black Caribbean world) that might draw on indigenous sources of ethnic power ultimately inseparable from their recent hybrid forms. But of course, the promise of diverse ethnic solidarities signifies as well the devastating tribal wars that threaten the entire pan-African vision.

In the United States, 'African' sources are pretty well a form of self-deceptive nostalgia. African-Americans are simply Americans: they are Afro- (politically) only in the sense of the perceived injustice that was never rightly corrected in their history, the effects of which still estrange and disorganize them politically, but which they believe are recoverable through the force of their racial perception. (They could not be more mistaken in their prophecy, though their memories are accurate enough.) African-Americans must abandon being 'Afro-' if they are to succeed *now* in America. It's also likely that 'black' Africa cannot possibly succeed unless it now finds a way to *be* 'pan-African', which, frankly, means abandoning all reference to racial essentialisms and dampening ethnic primacies. In a word, black Africans are not pan-Africans but they need to be; and African-Americans are merely Americans who can no longer afford to divide their identity and commitment in the racially fashionable way. (All this is meant in purely calculative, hardly 'moral', terms.)

African-Americans view themselves as having been 'deprived' of 'their' ethnic heritage. They are right to see in this the absence of the very source of power on which, alone, they might have functioned politically as a unique people. Apart from genealogies, however, black ethnic sources can hardly be traced, in America, beyond slavery - which is to say, *not* in the African way at all. Otherwise, 'African-' signifies a local juridical claim that the American Supreme Court has all but dismissed. African-Americans bear witness, of course, to their peculiarly mixed fortunes: to the continued massive disadvantage of remaining African-American, which they cannot overcome by their own power and which they cannot meaningfully abandon; and to the visible rise of an all-but-gratuitous, much-publicized,

small, even affluent, and politically marginalized black middle class (less marginal in the white world than in the black), whose existence has no noticeable affect on the growing disparity between whites and blacks and for which blacks cannot even take political credit. (Think, for instance, of Tom Wolfe's 'Radical Chic'.)

It was probably a very plausible guess after the success of the civil rights movement in the sixties that 'black' politics should *continue* to be 'racial' in America. But the would-be allies of the African-Americans - the Hispanamericans, various Asian populations, women as a political force, gays, American Indians - find no natural alliance with them; or, as in such bland coalitions as the one led by the Reverend Jesse Jackson, these other minorities outstrip them at their own game (the Hispanamericans, women), or have no strong interest in appearing as a racial group at all (the Asians), or cannot possibly succeed by frontal political means of any kind (the gays), or have given up confrontational politics except through the courts (native American tribes). All of these 'minorities' are likely to succeed, in time, by means that are not particularly racially focused: the gays, by a change in American sexual taste and tolerance; women, by infiltrating every other political community; the Hispanics, by their ethnic resources and sheer size and concentration; the Asians, by the professional skills they visibly excel at and by their lack of any link to the troubling periods of early American history; native populations, by pressing the terms of existing treaties.

The race card was played to maximal advantage, in the United States, by Martin Luther King, but now seems to have spent its resources in its victory. No doubt Americans remain racist at a very profound level of their shallow politics, but they also refuse to permit their politics to continue to be conducted along explicitly racist lines. And no doubt, black America is not racist in its global vision, but it believes in the advantage of conducting its business along invented racial lines.

Now, a new breed of notably abstract political and economic forces - forces that cannot be confined geographically, demographically, or even physically - are gathering for the next phase of global hegemony, in terms

that are almost completely indifferent to racial, ethnic, even conventional political struggles, except opportunistically or with an eye to eliminating all 'retrograde' conflicts. These forces will have little or no regard for the principled resolution of perceived injustices or the defense of rights or political entitlements among second- and third-world peoples, except as may impede the flow of informationally embodied power. Perseveration at the level of racial struggles will signify an inconvenient and unacceptable cost: the evidence will probably appear in more or less permanently dismissed populations and regions maintained at whatever sub-subsistence levels prove possible without revolt, possibly a good part of Africa, perhaps even among first-world populations if deemed 'necessary'. Seen in such terms, which are not entirely fanciful, pan-African visions are already partly 'behind the curve'.³

The truth is, we are on the edge of an entirely new 'cultural' order that has already begun to diminish, palpably, all of the supposed universal, invariant, necessary, historically entrenched human values of the Eurocentric world. The full collision between canonical Eurocentric norms and the various social norms of Asia has yet to be tested. We can be reasonably certain, however, that the first will give way to the technologized demands of an abstract, increasingly autonomous global economy that will elude the grasp of most conventional national states. At the moment, it is largely the United States, Western Europe, Japan, and China that appear best able to afford to mingle explicitly the perceived requirements of their 'abstract' role in the new economy with their traditional conceptions of national power. This gives the misleading impression that the continuity of the West's discourse regarding political

³ For a well-regarded analysis of these tendencies, see Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), particularly the new Afterword. Bell's clarity is difficult to better, but his insistence on 'the sacred, [on] what is beyond us and cannot be transgressed' (p. 338), is itself a dated, however humane, complaint that will be swept out by the very forces he is bent on chronicling. Whatever the 'political morality' of the future will be, it will be a 'construction' of our altered history. The superannuation of 'racial' justice, local or global, is, hard as it may be to admit, a matter of historical 'timing'. One can already foresee that most of the humane values prized in the West for instance will either be abandoned or radically redefined. It is not, as Bell supposes, the result of exalting individualism over social membership and responsibility as it is the redefinition of the inseparable relationship between individual and society (see pp. 285-287).

morality and justice (notably: human rights) can be counted on to offset the 'rational' demands of an idealized global capitalism that is bound to view history and social formation in entirely instrumental terms.⁴

But even if this proved to be an exaggerated picture of a change we do not yet fully understand, we cannot ignore the unprecedented vulnerability of 'racially'- and ethnically-centered strategies and conceptions of justice: they all require a source of power they cannot command at will - alliances for instance with the interests of one or another of the first-world powers already mentioned. Whatever the African motivation for continental solidarity, whatever the historical conscience of Western Europe regarding the colonial exploitation of Africa, whatever the validity of African-American resentment, the global drive for skilled labour and reliable markets and sheer control are not likely to make common cause with any such thinking, except for the contingency of a perceived advantage in the flow and accumulation of world capital. Marx would have been closer to his truth, writing now, than ever he was in the early stages of nineteenth-century capitalism. The humanizing ideologies that will be required - and they will certainly be required - have hardly begun to take debatable form. The question remains whether, like the pan-Africans and African-Americans, 'we' will be too late to avoid the new forms of exploitation that will surely ride roughshod over every entrenched convention of social justice.

II

There is a growing vacuum, a break in the conceptual ozone layer of our global politics, that threatens to permit an increasing fraction of world market forces to spin out of local political control; no doubt abetted by the shifting interests of the primary states that could in principle agree to control such forces. They cannot be reliably controlled piecemeal, even by such large or relatively advanced states as Russia, India, Pakistan, Brazil, Argentina, Indonesia, Korea, South Africa. Furthermore, *all* of the states

⁴ For a particularly perceptive recent analysis, see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The End of the World as We Know It: Social Science for the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

that are the charter members of the world's advanced trading bloc are divided in their need to pursue the relentless rationale of the new economy and their own loyalties (on whatever grounds) to conventional views of social justice and equality at home. They yield increasingly in the direction of the first and they contrive, *ad hoc*, to dampen the disorders threatened by reversals involving the second.

The strategy of featuring the themes of 'racial' unity and injustice finds its principal sense of political realism within the terms of such processes, but it misjudges the field. It correctly senses the vulnerability of governments under these new tensions - witness China - but it wrongly believes that the 'racial' issue has any chance of being more than a subsidiary or an opportunistic feint.

There might have been a moment, for instance, when Islamic solidarity might have been effectively rallied as a somewhat 'racial' theme (among diverse societies) linked by the scarcity of oil. But that moment is surely gone - or gone for the present. Technology has defeated it (as in Gamal Nasser and the Ayatollah Khomeini), and nothing comparable has made an appearance. Now, pan-African themes can collect only around a contract of dependency to first-world powers: if survival (in the most literal sense, as in Africa) is the principal objective, then so be it. In any case, it will not be able to be detached from larger efforts to fill the deep conceptual lacuna that the twenty-first century promises. That is the ozone breach of our nearest future.

Political forces will of course play out their hand: there is no way to halt the contest of power. But it is never entirely clear how actual vectorial forces will finally be exerted. Theory's role lies chiefly in rehearsing the rationales for various options. For instance: the mystifying essentialism of *négritude* has had to give way to a clear grasp of its vacuity and dangerous

self-manipulation and has had to concede the sheer 'invention' of its own ontology.⁵

That, perhaps, is the single most important lesson: viz., that *essence*, in the human world, is a form of opportunism and invention - at some considerable risk - formed under the terms of an analysis of supposed political advantage (or even philosophical clarity).

I'm sure that what I am saying risks sounding like the worst sort of cynicism or opportunism or mere conceptual fatigue or a theoretical blunder of a kind that 'must' be corrected or simply the meddling of a white voice. I know, I may say, no stronger African voice, more alert politically to the issues of 'essential humanity' and 'ethnic particularity', that is also philosophically acute and practicing today, than that of the Ghanaian (Akan) philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu. But he is a partisan of essences and universalism, and I think that these notions can never be more than 'instrumental' or 'strategic', in a sense that never treats ethnic or racial essences in philosophically realist terms. I hope he will not misunderstand me, therefore, or take me to oppose 'for the wrong reasons' his very clear universalism. I see its attraction (and I have no right to demean it) at the level of open ideology, though I'm bound to say, I cannot see how the appeal to 'humanity' can be expected to be more effective *now*, than, say, Senghor's *négritude*, which Wiredu himself politely sets aside. The colonial imagination that Senghor opposed was inclined to say, when it had actually read him: 'Just what we have always thought! Thank you.' The capitalist imagination that Wiredu hopes to enlist (or at least render more responsive to the corrective efforts of the African world) will be inclined to say: 'So it's true! Those at the lowest and highest levels of "capacitation" [to invoke

⁵ Compare Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Orphée noir', in Léopold Sédar Senghor (ed.) *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et madagache de langue française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972) and Marcel Towa, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: négritude ou servitude?* (Clé: Yaoundé, 1971). (I have benefited here from D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994). See, also, Léopold S. Senghor, 'Negritude and African Socialism', in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (eds), *The African Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), reprinted from K. Kirkwood (ed.), *St. Anthony's papers*, no. 15 (Oxford), pp. 9-22; and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

Amartya Sen's very sensible corrective to Western notions of justice⁶] do share the same humanity, after all. Period!

I do indeed have serious misgivings about appeals to universal humanity *anywhere* - whether in moral and political matters or in the analysis of science and ordinary communication. I cannot see what determinate questions such appeals can possibly resolve convincingly - and I think most arguments that rely on universalisms are seriously misguided and mistaken or completely vacuous. So I am bound to raise doubts about the startlingly plain argument that Wiredu offers in reviewing the sensitive matter of cultural differences:

Our question [he says] is 'Are there Cultural Universals?' I propose a *reductio ad absurdum* proof for an affirmative answer as follows. Suppose there were no cultural universals. Then intercultural communication would be impossible. But there is intercultural communication. Therefore, there are cultural universals it is tautologically obvious that for any two persons to communicate at all they must share some common medium of communication. In turn this implies that at some level they must share a conceptual scheme, however minimal its dimensions. Any such scheme of concepts is a universal for, at least, the given participants in the communication. The question now is 'Is there any scheme of concepts which can be shared by all the cultures of humankind?' The answer, in fact, is 'Everything'.⁷

I see the imagined political importance of insisting on the cognitive and normative 'universals' of humankind in the face of the alleged reluctance of the West to 'admit' such features. But I cannot see what is gained; and,

⁶ See Amartya Sen, *On Economic Inequality*, expanded ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997). I have explored the issue of 'essential' values in the context of Sen's and Martha Nussbaum's work in an as yet unpublished paper, 'Morality as Insurably Culture-Bound', which bears on Wiredu's thesis but does not mention it.

⁷ Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 21.

more important, I cannot see how Wiredu proposes to confirm his claim in any nonvacuous way.

I oppose the thesis, therefore, on the grounds that universalist ideologies are a dime a dozen and are as divisive as any openly 'particularist' ethnic orientation you can imagine (in fact, are hardly more than such teachings which have 'succeeded' politically); also, on the grounds that the argument obscures the truth that would-be 'universals' actually range in the blithest way over our greatest differences and deepest disagreements - at any 'level' you care to mention.

I see no 'communicative' failure, for instance, between the Serbs and the Kosovars or between the Hutu and the Tutsi, no matter what incommensurabilities obtain. But what does that signify about 'sharing' universals *at any 'level'?* Nothing that I can fathom. I cannot see the *reductio* at all.

I don't regard this as a purely verbal matter, I may say. On the contrary, it is, in the most practical sense, absolutely decisive for the success of any and every effort at understanding the nature of human understanding, or communication, or agreement, on norms and values, or any of the rest of the usual undertakings. But nothing is gained by pronouncements on shared universals except *what any such affirmation itself effectively entails* - that is, *by being affirmed and believed and politically supported*, as opposed to its being merely 'true'! There's the difference between an ideology and a philosophically objective analysis of 'universals'. I offer the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in evidence.

I do in fact take Wiredu at his word: 'it is tautologically obvious', he says, 'that for any two persons to communicate at all they must share some medium of communication'. Of course it's tautological in the same sense in which, famously, opium has 'dormitive powers'. We *may* in fact discover what the factor in opium is that answers to those powers. But can we claim that *what* answers to communicative success *is* a universal concept that all humans share - or are we clear what it means to claim that they do? And is it even the case that what answers to opium's dormitive powers *is* a

'universal' in the required sense? I very much doubt it. I more than doubt it. I say there are no demonstrable 'universals' in the sense required, though there are certainly occasions of successful communication.

I quite agree that respect for 'particular' (and different) local cultures is fully compatible with respect for what is 'common' to mankind - very possibly is necessary for such respect; but I cannot see that we add anything in introducing 'cultural universals' beyond what the parties to such an agreement would be willing to support - which will be general, never universal in the sense of being exceptionless (or, necessarily exceptionless). Whatever they support in *that* spirit may indeed count as the effective 'cultural universals' they have 'found' - which of course others will dispute. *There will be nothing left over.* There are no universals that hold *in spite of being seriously contested, or there are too many that are incompatible with one another.*

Let me put this in a teasing way. I communicate with my cats and they, with me. But I deny that there is any concept that we share *in virtue of which* we do communicate. Most people agree that we communicate with our pets. If you say that we do so through some 'medium of communication' (gestures, utterances), I would not for the life of me deny what you say - you might be saying something quite instructive. But I don't think you could be saying anything helpful in the way of isolating an actual, independent 'animal' universal that, *qua* universal, was a determinate condition of that particular success - the one that obtains when I call my cats to feed. Now, I claim that *the same is true for language and communication among humans.*

I can put the point in another way. *If* you argue that there *must* be universally shared concepts that are common coin in every successful communication, then I should argue that, for every would-be determinate concept of that sort, I would be able to demonstrate that the parties to the exchange cannot be shown to share, and indeed need not share, *that* concept; or I should demonstrate that saying that they do simply tautologizes the entire issue in the direction of the dormitive powers of opium. For a hint - for no more than a hint - consider this: if you say that

the ugly quarrels at abortion clinics show at least that 'pro-life' and 'pro-choice' phalanxes agree on the inviolable worth of human life, I draw your attention to the fact that neither side would see matters that way, or each would view the generic doctrine as entailing entirely incompatible abortion policies; or else they might be said to 'share' the same concept in the Pickwickian sense that each claims the phrase as exclusively their own. Is there more to it than that?

Peter Galison makes a very plausible case (controversial, I don't deny, since it concedes the coherence of the incommensurabilist thesis shared by Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend and the Edinburgh sociologists of science and philosophy) to the effect that it is quite possible for a company of cooperating high-technology scientists to 'agree' on what their joint experiments yield, without actually sharing the same operative 'paradigm' (read: concepts).⁸ The idea is coherent - also plausible - even if you don't happen to favour Kuhn's or Feyerabend's incommensurabilities - if for no other reason than that, short of Platonism (which is surely inaccessible to humans), the judgement that we have indeed discovered a conceptual universal of any kind is itself a consensual artifact of discourse, *not* an independent enabling condition of such discourse.⁹ I am pressing the argument, here, in terms of the natural sciences, but, in general, I am concerned in this discussion with 'practical', not 'theoretical', universals. (Although I am also prepared to insist that that distinction is more than doubtful.)

In effect, this means, *not* that there are no universals but that *universal* concepts, like *concepts* in general (where what we mean by concepts answers to the predicates we use, which are themselves 'general', in being applicable to indefinitely many things if they are applicable to any), are so designated always 'after the fact' so to say. Concepts are, only trivially or redundantly, *conditions of successful communication*; otherwise they are

⁸ See Peter Galison, *Image and Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), Ch. 1.

⁹ I have developed the point in a paper (as yet unpublished), 'Incommensurability Modestly Recovered', presented at a conference: 'Incommensurability (and related matters)', University of Hannover, Hannover, Germany, June 11-13, 1999.

products (of a sort), very abstract products at that, *of* discourse itself, or they are merely nominalizations hypostasized from active predicates. (That is, of course, the opium problem again.)

I have made a lot of this - you may even think too much - because it seems to me that if we remove the chimera of essences, universals, universalistic norms, and similar exotica from our debates about science and political morality alike, we force ourselves to view our practical commitments in an entirely different light. If you allow me to take advantage of Wiredu once again, let me juxtapose two remarks he makes in the opening page of his book. He says:

without [the possibility and actual existence of cultural] universals intercultural communication must be impossible, and the possibility of cultural universals is predicated on our common biological identity as a species of bipeds.¹⁰

There are many ways of challenging this enthymeme. But the principal thing to notice is that Wiredu has in mind answering the question, 'What is it that unifies us?' I don't deny that 'what' unifies us is that we are human and share a natural language (for which there are always apt bilinguals).

'The beginning . . . of an answer [Wiredu says] is [that] it is our biologicocultural identity as *homines sapientes*'.¹¹ If I understand this correctly, then if we should ever communicate with Martians, for instance, creatures of another 'race' altogether, then a slightly different inference would hold - to the same purpose, however. In fact it holds 'already' in the famous sign-language exchanges between the gorilla Koko and her human trainer, and (as I should argue) it also holds between my cats and me (if it holds at all). It is of course trivially true that our 'biology' makes our culturally formed communication 'possible'. But if the foregoing argument is at all reasonable, then what in our biology makes sharing concepts possible will

¹⁰ Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 1.

¹¹ Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, p. 22.

be theoretically assigned this or that part of our biology *as a result* of its being agreed that we do share this or that concept *and* that our biology makes it possible!

My own way of putting this is to say that all sub-functions of our molar functioning (the biological facilitation of our linguistic success) are intelligible only as those sub-functions. *They cannot then be independently identified*: they are defined only relationally. I claim that this marks the same difficulty that subverts all computationalist views of the mind and any and all would-be moral, political, or scientific 'universals'. That is not an uninteresting challenge, that is, a challenge that moves from 'practice' to 'theory'.

Now it follows from this, by parity of reasoning, that our *linguistic* success, which Wiredu agrees is primarily cultural, is made 'possible' (we may say), apart from our biology, by our sharing a common language and a common culture . . . and a common tradition . . . and a common history . . . and so on. But nearly everyone agrees that a 'common tradition' is nothing more than a nominalization from what we project as predicatively common to our ordinary activities. So there cannot be a conceptual gain there. Hans-Georg Gadamer is fond of saying, for instance, that though we belong to the same tradition, there is no tradition to which we belong. And Wittgenstein says in (what seems to me to be) the same general vein that, although speaking a language is 'following a rule', there is no rule that we follow.¹²

We rarely stop to consider how subversive these remarks are, regarding our confidence in isolating *any* genuinely universal concepts shared by the whole of humanity and believed necessary for objective discourse in science or politics. We isolate such 'universals' all the time, of course. But empirical studies show, for instance, that different societies (culturally and linguistically different societies) don't actually ever use even such elementary notions as the common prepositions - *in*, *on*, and *under*, or

¹² See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), Pt. I, §§201-202.

colour words, for that matter - in precisely the same way.¹³ W.V. Quine thinks it is entirely possible to work empirically (and in a way without behavioural detection) with very different ontologies.¹⁴ And it may be plausibly argued that Chinese or some other language may not have the same universal structure Noam Chomsky supposes every natural language has (except in the 'dormitive' sense). It is certainly not demonstrable that every language must have such a structure, in order to account for the fact that we do 'understand' Chinese and other languages. On the argument, 'understanding', 'communicating', 'knowing' are themselves consensual posits that we propose under conditions of pertinent fluency and lack of misadventure.

There is a further nest of extremely curious - but very important - consequences of the universalizing tendency, which I must mention here. Theorists who admit 'essences' and 'universals' begin to characterize our cognitive powers (by which we manage theoretical and practical affairs) *in* such a way as to be congruent with our insisting on their role *vis-à-vis* such universals! Certainly the most impressive effort of this kind appears already in Aristotle, who invents out of whole cloth a unique rational ability, *nous* he calls it - as close to the divine as one can imagine - the sole function of which is, precisely, to discern the invariant essences of things that he is prepared to postulate.¹⁵ Nothing could be prettier.

If it were not for that ability, Aristotle would have had a much more difficult task in formulating his own formidable conception of science, since, particularly in the biological sciences, he himself finds evidence that the empirical data do *not* quite conform with his official doctrine; and, particularly in the *Ethics* and *Politics*, the very idea of invariant essences is more than dubious. Consider, also, that, for all his talk about the Forms, you cannot find anything of Aristotle's confidence in Plato. And, among the

¹³ See Melissa Bowerman, 'Learning a Semantic System: What role do cognitive predispositions play?' in Paul Bloom (ed.), *Language Acquisition: Core Readings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); also, Eleanor Rosch, 'Principles of Categorization', in *Cognition and Categorization*, eds Eleanor Rosch and Barbara B. Lloyd (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978).

¹⁴ W.V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), §§15-16.

¹⁵ See Aristotle, *De Anima*, Bk. III, chs. 4-8.

recent 'Kantians', notably John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, it is plainly taken for granted that rational agents (occupied with practical affairs) regularly think in universalistic terms. They will have nothing to do with norms that are not strictly universalistic! I admit that philosophers and political theorists since Kant think this way more insistently than they ever did before Kant, but it does produce some very unworldly scenarios, as one sees in both Rawls and Habermas.¹⁶

Gayatri Spivak has in fact turned the tables very deftly on this general line of thinking. Her strategy requires two steps: first, she remarks that the genuinely *human agent* of political life is imperceptibly displaced by an invented abstract *rational subject* (or something of the sort) - Kant is the paradigm - *and* practical matters (among both colonial peoples and their colonizers, which provide the context she favours for drawing out the political importance of the tendency in question), come to be formulated *in terms of these displacing abstractions*; and, second, the exposé of that same practice, by which we are meant to be returned to the perception of actual political reality, tends to be discounted (by the partisans of the other) as being itself out of touch with just such ('confirmed') practices.¹⁷ I find her argument entirely reasonable; and I remind you that the same pattern, which makes an ambiguous appearance already in Descartes and which reaches its apotheosis (in Western philosophy) in Husserl and (very differently) in Heidegger - where the matter takes the impossible form of deciding *what* the right relationship is between the human being and the Transcendental Ego or *Dasein* - becomes the foremost conceptual puzzle of philosophy's entire undertaking.¹⁸ Which begins with a complete fiction. (Which therefore affects practical life 'even' in Africa, ever at the end of a long journey: witness Wiredu!)

¹⁶ See Jürgen Habermas, 'Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification', *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).

¹⁷ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), Ch. 1.

¹⁸ See for instance Eugen Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation: The Ideal of a Transcendental Theory of Method*, trans. Ronald Bruzina (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

I see a much thinner version of this same tendency in Rawls and Habermas - and (as I say) Wiredu - than I see in Aristotle and Kant. I draw from all this a finding-*cum*-recommendation, which bears directly on the question of African identity and ethical and racial policy: I see no evidence at all that moral, political, or scientific findings require in any way the admission of invariant, exceptionless, universal, or necessary concepts. They are neither needed nor wanted in theoretical or practical inquiries.

I don't deny that we idealize observed regularities of a causal sort in the direction of the supposed exceptionless laws of nature; and I don't deny that the usual discussions of moral, political, legal, and related concerns (human rights for instance) regularly claim to discern the universal norms of human life. But where we think such claims beneficial, we cannot show that it is so because their universality is confirmed but only because they are ideologically persuasive - wherever they are persuasive. If, finally, these conceptions are projected from the dense (local) practices of particular societies, then their objective standing may be empirically challenged in a way no universalism seems able to defeat - except ideologically. Furthermore, it will be essential, in *defending* such concepts, to remain in touch with the cultural particularities that are their source, if we are not to fall victim to the displacement Spivak speaks of. A parallel practice, I may say, has been analyzed in the explanatory work of the physical sciences.¹⁹ (Though I remind you once again that I am confining my argument to 'practical' universals, normative universals regarding human conduct.)

I'll add one final thought. I have always been convinced that human beings find it well-nigh impossible to think in terms of what *would be 'right'* (say, morally or politically or legally or religiously or aesthetically) *for everyone* - for every rational person, under all possible circumstances. That is, unless *that* meant, trivially, no more than whatever was formally consistent in the way of usage: that is, under the rule '... similarly in similar circumstances'.

¹⁹ See Nancy Cartwright, *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983).

(That is, no matter what we thought the term 'right' rightly designated.²⁰) Utilitarianism has always seemed preposterous from this perspective. And Kantian 'morality' can always be forced back to coherence and consistency (as Hegel slyly shows), though Kant was aware of the problem and attempted, via 'perfect' and 'imperfect' duties, to infuse his Categorical Imperative with some incipient moral substance. He could not succeed of course, since to do so would have committed him to a 'heteronomous' doctrine. But Rawls and Habermas have no such compunction.

Wiredu arrives at the same puzzle, though he has done so through a deeper sense of historical and cultural 'particularities'. I put my question to him for that reason, because he is plainly among the most perceptive of the new African philosophers who wish to bring their technical work into line with a sense of responsibility regarding Africa's future.

I agree that mere 'particularism' is hopeless - and counterproductive - and reduces, in moral and political matters, to intuitionism. But so also is 'universalism' hopeless, though for different reasons. The point is: there is at the present time no developed conception of objectivity in science or morality cast in generalizing terms intended to range 'over humanity' (or 'nature') that *simply abandons essentialism and universalism and modally necessary norms and invariances*, and is *still quite capable of legitimating its invented (or idealized) 'universalities'* (in covering laws or in universal norms). The universalism seems to be little more than the sign of legitimation, *or* the vacuous result of a vacuous hypostatization along the lines Spivak has tracked. The point is already there for the asking in Aristotle's practical philosophy, though no one to my knowledge has rightly captured it.²¹ The deeper question is: What is the point of universalism? What might be offered as a third way between particularism and universalism?

²⁰ The matter is aired, not always perspicuously, in R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963).

²¹ I find it seriously misunderstood, for instance, in Martha Nussbaum's attempt at applying Aristotle's doctrine in moral matters. See Martha Nussbaum, 'Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings', in Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Grover (eds), *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

I can only venture a few slim summary clues. For one, 'universalizing', construed as consistency of usage, is always a trivial constraint (though certainly not an unimportant one); it is, however, empty in any substantive sense (scientific or moral, say). 'Universalizing' in the substantive sense, said to be 'rationally' binding or compelling on all rational subjects, is *never epistemically* operative as such, never more than a courtesy or ideological flourish. Nevertheless, there is, in actual practice, hardly ever a reason for making a particular claim, or a claim about a particular event, action, object, or the like unless one implies some larger *general* uniformity of the substantive kind (*not* captured by the first sense of universalizing but not meant to violate it either), which might *then* be pressed into service. But what the epistemological status of such generalizations is is an entirely separate question for which we obviously lack a convincing decision procedure.

Finally, in spite of all this, substantive disputes about *general*, *not* universalized, regularities (both theoretical and practical, both empirical and prescriptive, both normative and non-normative) *are* admitted to be open to objective and disciplined dispute. The reason we resist universalizing here is because we believe we exceed our better intuitions wherever we move from determinate contexts of experience to the abstractions of *exceptionless* universals. In this sense, even theory is a form of *praxis* and is constrained by the conditions of local application.

It is on the strength of such considerations that I say that 'racial' politics, 'pan-Africanism', and the like, are, when universalized, merely ideological and utopian; when, by contrast, they serve to instruct, to identify the key words for flagging favoured policies, circumscribed by the limits of meaningful and effective choices in familiar contexts, they have a chance of being reasonable - in the sense in which debates about commitment are linked to the conditions of actual historical life.²² But I would not say we ever escape ideological loyalties in practical matters; and I would not deny

²² Quite by accident, I have found the good sense of these clues (unintentionally) confirmed by an exchange of views just published in *Metaphilosophy*, XXX (1999), on particularism and universalism, between Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Bernard Gert, and Jonathan Dancy.

that a similar constraint affects the sciences. We do not usually speak of ideologies in theoretical matters; but it comes to much the same thing to admit that 'objectivity' (not neutrality in the canonical sense) is recovered only in a critical and constructivist way. But that seems to be enough to permit the effective resolution of disputes. I have no doubt that conceding this much alters our utopian expectations *and* the logic of political reasoning.

I permit myself one last small clue. Reflexively, at level of sociological description, normative regularities may be empirically confirmed. If they are invested with greater normative force - for instance if they are judged to be essential or universal or binding on an entire people or even mankind - they cannot fail to be ideological. That is not a defect in my opinion. But if they are ideological, they will be contested. Senghor's *négritude* is a specimen case: it correctly perceived the ideological usefulness of trading in 'essences', but it turned out to be politically and culturally short-lived. Politics and morality in the largest sense are, I should say, experiments in what may be projected in the direction of the universal from the general practices that effectively support the cultural norms that obtain among an actual people. A genuinely grand vision of this sort, for instance those of the great religions, effectively coopts the local norms and practices of many peoples and holds their loyalty through pertinent crises. That is what the vision of pan-Africanism is seeking. The point to bear in mind is that what may be 'found' will have been constructed, but constructed in a way to catch up the diverse particularities of the populations to be unified. To say that, where successful, these universalities are actually 'there', may actually be found, is to put the conceptual cart before the conceptual horse. To refuse to think in terms of 'universals' is to choose to be politically ineffectual.

DIALECTICS AND LOGICALITY

Between cultural diversity and ontical universality

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INTRODUCTION

Against the background of some historical transitions which shed light on the modernity/postmodernity discrepancy, an attempt will be made to explore important insights of prof. E.D. Prinsloo regarding logical universality and cultural particularity. In doing this attention will also be given to ontical features to be acknowledged in a dialectical understanding of motion - once again finding a point of connection in important analyses and distinctions made by prof. Prinsloo. The outcome of these reflections will finally be used to consider anew the dilemma of (cultural) relativism.

What brought universal reason into an impasse?

During the last number of centuries many more or less related changes emerged on the horizon of the self-understanding of the Western scholarly mind. The glory of an unbridled appreciation of the power and scope of the universalities of human reason did not survive the confines of the age of Enlightenment too well - although the way in which many portray the long-standing influence of *modernity* may create that impression.

Soon after the heyday of the 18th century *rationalism* radically new alternatives emerged. Niebuhr, the tutor of Leopold von Ranke, demonstrates the transition from the 18th to the 19th century in a remarkable way. From the *romantic movement* - including Goethe and Schiller (Germany), Bilderdijk and Da Costa (The Netherlands), and Shelley and Keats (Britain) - Niebuhr receives his appreciation of *mythical thought*. Without relinquishing the imaginative exuberance present in myths and sagas, Niebuhr wants to treasure the *historical way of thought* in its own right.

With an obvious hint to Plato's classical allegory of people living in a cave (*The Republic*), Niebuhr compares the historian with a person whose eyes are adapted to the dark so effectively that he can observe things that would be invisible to a newcomer. Where Plato evaluates these 'shadow-images' *negatively*, Niebuhr assesses them positively - on occasion he characterizes the work of the historian as 'work done under the earth'. In opposition to Plato, who acknowledges only knowledge directed at the true (static) *being* of things as worthwhile, Niebuhr is convinced that only *historical change* provides true knowledge. This kind of knowledge is the most appropriate type of knowledge for the human being as a living and self-developing entity.

Against the deification of universal (conceptual) knowledge as in the 18th century, we are here confronted with the importance of *historical change*. However, this *irrationalist* and *historicist* reaction against Enlightenment *rationalism* contains hidden problems that would be made explicit only by the end of the 19th century. It is noteworthy that this process was anticipated by the first critical reactions to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. It was in particular Jacobi, Hammann and Herder who pointed out that Kant ignored the nature of *language*.¹

The powerful tradition of *natural law* which held sway from Grotius up to Kant continued the conviction that there are *universally valid* principles of law founded in *human reason* - such as the rule *pacta sunt servanda* (agreements ought to be kept). At the beginning of the 19th century the historical school of law ushered in the new historicistic mode of thought into legal science and, as a consequence, considered the following two theses not open to serious objection: (1) *positive law* is as such a historical phenomenon that cannot deny its link with the past; (2) there is no room for a second *system of law* (with an eternal and unchangeable content) next to

¹ That Kant indeed distorted the meaning of history became clear during the 19th century - apart from the rise of historicism as such. The discovery of non-Euclidean geometries (by Gauss and Lobatsjevski) relativized Kant's *table of categories* by making it clear to what extent his analysis of *understanding* is *historically dependent* upon Newton's *Principia* (1686).

or above the historically developed positive law. In the opening article of the first volume of the *Zeitschrift für geschichtliche Rechtswissenschaft* (1815) F.C. von Savigny (cf. 1948:14ff.) explicitly opposed the 'historical school' to the 'un-historical school' of rationalistic natural law.

UNIVERSALITY AND INDIVIDUALITY

Prof. Prinsloo (1989) approaches this problem from the angle of the relationship between *logic* and *culture*. He discusses examples offered by thinkers such as Peter Winch and Evans Pritchard. Where these thinkers argue that *consistency* is something different for Westerners and 'primitives', Prinsloo successfully shows that both are actually observing the (logical) principle of non-contradiction. The applicability of this principle, however, presupposes the nature of *logical concept formation* which, in turn, relies on the nature of *universality*. But it was exactly this problem - regarding the relationship between universality and individuality - that casted a shadow over the then new claims of historicism during the 19th century.

This becomes clear as soon as one realizes that *concept formation* - inevitably using *universal* features - is actually blind to what is unique and historically changing. Cultural events are supposedly truly unique and *individual*. Therefore the mind-boggling question of 19th century historicism concerns the relationship between universality and individuality.

Before we explore this development briefly it is important to realize that the legacy of restricting *knowledge* to *universality* (and therefore to concept formation) is quite old. Having introduced his *primary substance* Aristotle realized that the purely individual substance cannot be grasped conceptually - forcing him to introduce the *secondary substance* as the *universal substantial form* of entities (cf. *Metaph.* 1035 b 32; *De Anima* 412 b 16). When *this* house burns down, says Aristotle, then *houseness* is still intact. The implicit identification of *knowledge* with *conceptual knowledge* already present in Aristotle's approach is continued by the adage: *omne individuum est ineffabile*. We mention just one example from

the 20th century - H.J. de Vleeschauwer (1952:213) categorically states: 'But knowledge of the individual is simply impossible'.

Without realizing that the problem concerning the relationship between universality and individuality is a direct consequence of the long-standing identification of *conceptual knowledge* with knowledge *as such*, the attempt to resolve the tension in the Baden school of neo-Kantian thought, was made by endeavouring to distinguish the natural sciences and the humanities in a peculiar way.

In 1896 Wilhelm Windelband presented his influential rectorial oration: *Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft*. He distinguishes between two types of science: *nomothetic* and *idiographic* (the former sets out to grasp what is *universal* and the latter aims to understand the *unique* and *individual*). Rickert argues that we can subsume the 'world' under two different *logical* points of view: if we view it from the perspective of the *universal* it becomes **nature** (studied by the 'generalizing natural sciences'); if we view it from the perspective of the *unique* and *individual* it becomes **history** (studied by the 'individualizing cultural sciences' (1913²:224). In order to understand better what is at stake here, we first need a critical appraisal of the nature of *nominalism*.

Nominalism: the powerful 'under-current'

According to our understanding *rationalism* typically absolutizes knowledge in terms of universal features, i.e., it deifies *conceptual* knowledge. *Irrationalism*, on the other hand, focuses on the unique, individual, unrepeatable and contingent, thus restricting knowledge to the *approximating* understanding of concepts stretched beyond the limits of their natural application (*concept-transcending* knowledge or *idea-knowledge*). The perplexing fact is that **nominalism** comprises **both** these elements: In respect of the *typical structure of entities*, nominalism does not accept any *conditioning order* (*universal structures*) *for*, or any *orderliness* (*universal structuredness*) of such entities. Every entity is *strictly individual*. In terms of our distinction between *rationalism* and *irrationalism*, nominalism surely represents an *irrationalistic* view of the

nature of entities, since every individual entity is completely stripped of any *universal orderliness (law-conformity)* and *conditioning order*. This applies to both *moderate nominalism*, viz. *conceptualism* (Locke, Ockham, Leibniz and others), and to *extreme nominalism* that rejects all general and *abstract ideas* and accepts only *general names* (Berkeley and Brentano).

This irrationalistic side of nominalism does not, however, exhaust its multifaceted nature, because *universals* are fully acknowledged *within* the human mind, at least as *general words* in the case of Berkeley's and Brentano's *extreme nominalism*. This restriction of knowledge to *universals* is typical of *rationalism* as defined by us. Therefore, it is possible to see *nominalism* as being simultaneously *rationalistic* in terms of the universals - concepts and words - in one's mind, **and** *irrationalistic* in terms of the strict individuality of entities outside one's mind. Karl Mannheim did grasp something of this *twofold* nature of nominalism.

Nominalism proceeds from the unjustifiable assumption that only the individual subject exists and that meaningful contextures and formations have being only to the extent that individual subjects think them or are somehow oriented toward them in a conscious manner (Mannheim 1982:224).

THE HERMENEUTICAL 'TURN': LANGUAGE AS THE NEW HORIZON

Dilthey explicitly introduces the issue of *hermeneutical interpretation* in order to transcend the limitations of *conceptual knowledge* with regard to *universality*. By doing this, Dilthey transposes the emphasis from *universal concept formation* to the possibilities of human *language use*. Concepts are supposed to be marked by their *clear-cut exactness*, whereas language pre-eminently confronts us with its *ambiguity*. Due to this feature, the use of language always requires *interpretation* and presupposes *choice*: by its very nature language allows for *multiple interpretations*. The implication of a hermeneutical approach for the humanities would be that they have to

realize that more often than not they have to work with interpretations of interpretations (cf. Van Niekerk 1992:31).

The advantage of language is that it displays the capability to deal with what is *unique* and *individual* - something to which (universal) concept formation is *blind*. The *deictic* feature of language, i.e. the capacity to *point* at something, already evinces the hold language can attain on what is *individual* (compare also *proper names*).

Habermas has a lucid understanding of how the tension between *universal concepts* and *unique historical events* shaped the transition from *thought* to *language*. Of course the whole project of Dilthey's philosophy gives ample support for this understanding. According to Habermas the problem Dilthey faced was the following:

How is it possible to grasp the meaning of a unique life context by unavoidably using general categories? (Habermas 1970:203).

Habermas explains that our everyday language apparently enables us to understand the *individual* by using *general categories*. Hermeneutics could only be developed fruitfully when it explicitly manages to illuminate the structure of our everyday language by achieving what is forbidden by the syntax of such a language: indirectly to communicate the *inexpressibly individual*.²

It does seem therefore as if *language* can mediate between *universality* and *individuality* in a way which transcends the limitations of *concept*

² 'Offensichtlich hat die Umgangssprache eine Struktur, die es tatsächlich erlaubt, im dialogischen Verhältnis Individuelles durch allgemeine Kategorien verständlich zu machen. Dieser gleichen Struktur muß sich auch das hermeneutische Verstehen bedienen, die ja die alltägliche kommunikative Erfahrung des Sich- und Andere-Verstehens nur methodisch in Zucht nimmt. Zu einer expliziten Verfahrensweise läßt sich freilich die Hermeneutik erst ausbilden, wenn es gelingt, die Struktur der Umgangssprache in der Hinsicht zu klären, in der sie erlaubt, was die Syntax einer reinen Sprache gerade verbietet: das unaussprechlich Individuelle wie immer auch indirekt mitteilbar zu machen' (Habermas 1970:206).

formation. Also in this regard Mannheim had a clear understanding of these issues. In connection with the *conceptual basis of asserting* he writes:

Everything subject to assertion is to be identical for everyone in every assertion of it: and the concept thus universally valid in two ways: referable to all objects of the same kind (the concept 'table' is thus applicable to all tables that have ever existed or ever will exist), and valid for all subjects who ever will utter it, and who accordingly always understand the same thing by 'table'. That this tendency inheres in every concept-formation cannot be doubted; and the creation of such a conceptual plane upon which one concept can be defined by others, with all concepts thereby forming an objective self-contained system, should not be denied. ... In contrast to this, there is also an altogether different tendency in concept-formation, long in existence and rooted in a different movement, and this alternative must not be neglected. It rests on the possibility of using every concept, including the most general, as a *name*; and what is to be understood by name in this case is the specific property of words whereby they designate a specific thing in a specific function in its unique relationship to us in our specific conjunctive community. ... That is precisely the miracle of living speech: that it always places each word in a unique context and that it can bestow an *individual meaning* (I am emphasizing - DFMS) to each word from the specific totality of the sentence, and even more, from the undercurrent of the communication flowing from its rhythm and the stream of association (Mannheim 1982:196-197).

As a consequence, we can speak about a general shift from *concept* to *meaning*, from *thought* to *language*.

The outcome of the shift from thought to language is significant: the *allusivity* and *equivocal* nature of language, particularly well revealed in the role of *metaphors*, expands and deepens the historicistic critique of supposedly *universally valid concepts* - thus apparently **strengthening** the *relativism* already present in *historicism*.³

One of the prominent philosophers and social thinkers of our day, Jürgen Habermas, remains remarkably critical about the relativistic consequences of historicism and the 'postmodernist' shift to language. Over against Rorty's relativistic position (cf. Rorty 1980) and in line with the arguments in favour of acknowledging the universality of the principle of non-contradiction advanced by Prinsloo, Habermas still wants to maintain the idea of truth and its implied universality as a necessary condition for humane forms of cohabitation:

If I understand Rorty correctly philosophy would have to pay for its new modesty with the rationality claims with which it was born. With the decline of philosophy the conviction that the transcending power which we link to the idea of truth or the absolute, necessary conditions for humane forms of society, should also pass away.⁴

These considerations invite us to return to the *underpinnings* of nominalism by paying special attention to its *irrationalistic side*. This side indeed offers an equally 'fruitful' breeding ground for the development of philosophical perspectives. Linked to it, we often see the rise of the typically *irrationalistic tendencies* of modern philosophy: the development of the *post-Kantian freedom idealism* (in which the ideology of the unique

³ Diltthey did not want to concede that the liberation achieved through historicism inevitably ends in relativism. Nietzsche saw the link between relativism and the secularization of Christianity: 'Relativism is based on Nietzsche's view that absolute truth is found on "our longest lie," the belief in God' (Hollinger 1994:66).

⁴ 'Die Philosophie soll, wenn ich Rorty recht verstehe, für ihre neue Bescheidenheit mit dem Vernunftansprüchen bezahlen, mit dem doch das philosophischen Denken selber zur Welt gekommen ist. Mit dem Absterben der Philosophie soll auch die Überzeugung vergehen, daß die transzendierende Kraft, die wir mit der Idee des Wahren oder des Unbedingten verbinden, eine notwendige Bedingung für humane Formen der Zusammenlebens ist' (Habermas 1983:11).

ethnic spirit of every trans-individual nation-organism appears - followed by Nazism), the emergence of *existential philosophy*, *pragmatism*, *personalism*, *neo-Marxism* (except Habermas), *historicism*, the *existential-phenomenological movement*⁵ and what is currently designated as *postmodernism*.

Prof. Prinsloo justifiably reacted to the extreme consequences of *historicism* with regard to cultural diversity. Acknowledging cultural diversity and historical uniqueness does not eliminate universality but presuppose it. Only if the phenomenon of culture is something *universally human* is it possible to differentiate between the peculiarities of different cultures.

Because Prinsloo's confrontation with Marxist dialectics opens up other significant avenues to combat cultural relativism we now pay attention to this issue.

Does movement deny formal logic and the principle of non-contradiction?

Prof. Prinsloo (1989:97) mentions the Marxist conviction that 'movement results in the abolition of the principle of non-contradiction which in its turn involves a denial of the validity of formal logic'. Engels simply continues the mechanistic main tendency of classical physics (Hobbes, Newton) which attempts to understand matter purely in terms of *motion*. He claims that matter is inconceivable without motion (Engels 1954:92) and considers motion to be the *only universally valid* reality studied by science (1954:317; cf. Lobkowitz 1973:471).

According to the Marxist physicist Hörz classical physics (Newton and his successors) teaches that a moving body finds itself at a specific point in time at a specific place. But if this is the case, he continues, it will be impossible to gain an understanding of true movement. As an alternative Hörz chooses the conception of motion developed by Engels. In his

⁵ In which all honour is given to the uniquely-individual and the *contingent*.

dialectical-materialistic conception one can say that a moving body engaged in a change of place at the same time is and is not at a specific place. Hörz (1967:58) explains the inner tension (dialectics) of this position as follows: 'insofar as the body changes from one place to another it moves, and the Body reaches, as a result of its movement, always at a specific time a specific place'. This is according to him the 'dialectical antinomy (Widerspruch)' of *change of place*. A formulation precluding every logical contradiction runs as follows: 'as the result of movement a body finds itself at a specific place and with regard to the movement itself the body does not find itself at a specific place' (Hörz 1967:58).

This subtle distinction between *contradiction* and 'Widerspruch' highlights an important distinction normally neglected in the study of logic. In order to elucidate this point we have to explore an important distinction and insight of Prof. Prinsloo's into the shortcomings of *reductionism*. He says that the most common counter argument against the dialectical Marxist account of movement and change is the one based on reductionism: 'we cannot explain movement by reducing it to rest or dynamism in terms of a static state' (Prinsloo 1989:98).

Descartes already negatively demonstrated this argument through his view of the *res extensa*. Descartes identifies motion with a 'change of situation' (*Meditations*, III). His general description is: 'But motion ..., in the ordinary sense of the term, is nothing more than the *action by which a body passes from one place to another*' (*Principles*, Part II, XXIV). If the essential feature of a body is its *extension* (i.e., the *place* it occupies), then *motion*, defined as a 'change of place', is a self-contradictory notion: any *change* of place must imply a change of *essence* - but then the enduring subject of motion is abolished! Zeno, a pupil of Parmenides, formulated this *antinomy* with astonishing lucidity in the last of his four fragments that

is still accessible to us: 'Whatever moves, neither moves itself in the space which it occupies, nor in the space which it does not occupy' (B Fr.4).⁶

A contemporary account of the 'impossibility' of motion is given by Von Kibéd. He makes an appeal to the (logical) law of identity in order to account for the *constancy* of an entity: 'The principle of identity, according to which everything is only identical to itself, actually forbids every change, every becoming-different, every stepping-outside of a substance from its being-itself' (1979:59). He is well aware of the fact the some thinkers (like Aristotle) employ the distinction between *essence* and *appearance* to account for both the *identity* and the *change* of an entity:

The difficulties accompanying the concept of the changes of an unchangeable thing are side-stepped by dividing the entity into an essential and accidental part, thus producing the possibility to associate unchangeability with its essence and changeability with what is accidental (Von Kibéd 1979:60).

However, according to Von Kibéd (1979:60) this would not help us, because the accidental features of an entity are subject to the law of identity too: 'according to the principle of identity also the accidental must remain identical to itself and cannot abolish its essence, which is given in its accidental nature'. His conclusion is therefore to be expected: 'The concept of change is therefore logically unthinkable' (1979:60). What is needed in

⁶ Without being able to articulate it further, I have to mention that there is an important difference between an antinomy - pertaining to the irreducibility of a unique mode of explanation - and a mere *logical contradiction* - pertaining to the mere confusion of two entities or different properties belonging to the same mode. For example, Descartes's impasse mentioned above concerning the abolition of the 'essence' of a body in his 'definition' of motion as change of place is based upon the *antinomic* attempt to *define* motion in *non-kinematical terms*, namely the spatial term *place* and the physical term *change* - as correctly pointed out by Prof. Prinsloo. Zeno's arguments against movement are antinomic in a similar way because in them he reduces the kinematical aspect to the (static) spatial aspect. Whenever an attempt is made to define something *primitive*, (antinomic) reduction is the inevitable result. Merely confusing two figures within the spatial aspect, such as is exemplified in the Cassirer-Russell example of a *round triangle/square/circle*, is only *contradictory*, not antinomic. The ontic principle of the *excluded antinomy* serves as the foundation of the logical principle of non-contradiction and not vice versa.

order to account for change, namely 'the concept of causality, is logically seen non-transparent and shows the limits of logical explanation' (Von Kibéd 1979:60-61).

The question is: is it possible to explain the relationship between constancy and dynamics (change) in a non-antinomic way?

Galileo did realize that motion ought to be acknowledged in its *irreducible uniqueness*. For that reason one cannot speak about the *cause* of motion! If (uniform) *motion* is unique and irreducible - i.e., a *primitive* notion in the discipline of kinematics, then one can only speak about the *cause of a change in motion (acceleration or deceleration)* and not of a cause of motion as such. The *law of inertia* as formulated by Galileo captures the irreducibility of a *uniform or constant* motion. A convenient shorthand to record this unique and irreducible meaning of the kinematic mode is to designate it as *constancy*. The *law of inertia* therefore highlights the primitive meaning of (kinematic) *constancy*. That this law was anticipated by thinkers from the fourteenth century is convincingly shown by Maier (cf. 1964:132-215). In a different context P. Janich also emphasizes a 'strict distinction between phoronomic (subsequently called kinematic) and dynamic statements' (1975:68).⁷

The Pythagoreans stumbled upon the irreducibility of space in their discovery of *incommensurability* (the discovery of irrational numbers). Their inability to account for these numbers *arithmetically* lead to a fundamental geometrization of mathematics and at the same time provided a starting-point to the *space* metaphysics of the subsequent medieval speculation about the 'chain of being'. The rise of the mechanistic world view in early modernity introduced the switch to a new mode of explanation: the aspect of movement (the kinematical aspect). This mechanistic main tendency of classical physics lasted until the end of the 19th century. The last great representative of this mechanistic approach

⁷ Kepler and Newton introduced *force* as a **dynamic** principle by viewing it as a cause of *change of motion*. Cf. Stafleu 1987:74.

was probably Heinrich Hertz - the German physicist who did experimental work about electromagnetic waves more than a hundred years ago.⁸

Within the confines of a *kinematical* perspective all processes of nature are *reversible*. However, already in 1824 Carnot discovered fundamentally irreversible physical processes. The implications of this discovery were further developed simultaneously by Clausius and Thompson in their formulation of the *second main law* of thermodynamics.⁹ In 1865 Clausius introduced the term *entropy*. This law accounts for the *irreversibility of physical processes* - it determines the *direction* of a physical (or chemical) process in a closed system. In 1910 Planck therefore justifiably states that the 'irreversibility of natural processes' confronted the 'mechanistic conception of nature' with 'insurmountable problems' (1973a:55).

Twentieth century physics therefore had to explore the physical mode of explanation properly. The core meaning of the physical is found in *energy operation*. The operation of energy always *causes* certain *effects* - and it stands to reason that the relation between cause and effect is *asymmetrical*: the effect always comes *after* the cause.¹⁰

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF ONTIC UNIVERSALITY

From our preceding considerations it must be clear that universality and individuality are irreducible traits of reality - i.e., that one can only opt for the one while opting simultaneously for the other one as well. Similarly,

⁸ This work not only established him as the founder of wireless telegraphy and the radio, but also immortalized his name in the unit of frequency (Hertz) named after him. Soon after his death in January 1894 his large theoretical work appeared: 'The Principles of Mechanics developed in a New Context' (*Die Prinzipien der Mechanik in neuem Zusammenhange dargestellt* (312 pp.). Restricting himself to the first three functional aspects of reality only (represented by the concepts *time*, *space*, and *mass*) he rejects the concept *force* (a physical concept) as something *inherently antinomic* (cf. Katscher 1970:329). Thus we can see how consistently he carried through the mechanistic approach.

⁹ The first law is the law of *energy conservation*.

¹⁰ Kant already realized that *succession* ought to be distinguished from causality (cause and effect). Although the *day* succeeds the *night* and the *night* the *day* none could be seen as the *cause* of the other.

constancy (kinematical) and *change* (physical) are also both unique and mutually coherent. Change can only be detected on the basis of an underlying element of constancy. These statements are only possible on the basis of an acknowledgement of the *modal universality* of the aspects of number, space, the kinematic and the physical.¹¹ These modes of explanation provide us with the most basic statements a philosopher can make about reality, namely that everything is unique (the numerical intuition of its being distinct), that everything coheres with everything else (the spatial intuition of connectedness), that everything remains constant (the kinematical intuition of constancy) and that everything changes (the physical intuition of cause and effect).

However, anyone at home in the contemporary postmodern philosophical climate may react by saying that the most basic orientation of a philosopher has to include the *historicity* and *meaning-constructed* nature of our world. This is indeed the huge contribution of the 19th and the 20th centuries to the history of philosophy - the discovery and acknowledgement of the *modal universality* of the historical mode of explanation and the sign/meaning mode of explanation. But just as the consideration of the first four modes suffered from one-sided over-estimations (everything is number; everything is space; everything is motion; everything is change) also these last two fell prey to similar distortions: *everything is history* and: *everything is interpretation!*

A brief rebuttal on historicism may be the following argument: If everything *is* history, as the historicist claims, then nothing remains which could *have* a history. This is the irony of historicism: that which is exalted to the one and all loses all *meaning*, since, if everything is history, nothing remains which can have a history, and we lose history itself! Phrased in

¹¹ In passing we must note that Einstein's theory of relativity is actually a theory of *constancy* because he postulates the velocity of light *c* in a vacuum as a *constant*, and whatever moves is moving relative to this order of constancy. Without arguing it we have to point out that the foundational position of the kinematical aspect with regard to the physical aspect also suggests a more 'exact' formulation of the first main law of thermodynamics: it ought to be seen as the law of *energy constancy*.

terms of the claims of hermeneutics, we may quote Grondin in his lucid work on philosophical hermeneutics (with an introduction by Gadamer):

Some have tried to construe the universal claim of hermeneutics as climaxing in the thesis that everything is historically conditioned, a thesis supposed to be universally valid. If this thesis is meant to apply universally, then it must apply to its own claim, which must itself be historically limited and therefore not universal. The universal claim of hermeneutics is thus considered self-contradictory (Grondin 1994:10).

The human condition is co-determined by a multiplicity of irreducibly cohering ontic modes. The inherent modal universality of these modes explains why one can never escape from functioning within each one of them. Consequently it does not help to attempt 'escaping' from anyone, also not from the historical mode and the sign mode. The acknowledgement of *historicity* (obviously a universal trait!) and the (universal) human quest for *meaning* ought to make us *modest* in our claims. But since all changefulness presupposes something constant we don't have to fall prey of a nihilistic relativism either.

Since I do believe that some of the core insights of Prof. Prinsloo explored in this contribution solidly support my stance, my hope is that he will nonetheless assess my account critically!

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