

REVIEW

Kwame Gyekye: *African Cultural Values. An Introduction*. Philadelphia, Pa/Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company 1996; XV, 194 p.

Kwame Gyekye: *Tradition and Modernity. Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997; XIX, 338 p.

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These two books of Gyekye belong closely together. They form a new important contribution to African philosophy after his previous works written in the 1980s.¹ On the cover of both of the recent books, we find a combination of two 'Adrinkra'-symbols (above each other) which are well known among the Akan, Gyekye's own ethnic group. On page IV of *African Cultural Values* he gives the following explanation: 'The Adrinkra symbol on top, Sankofa (a bird looking into its own neck), means 'return for it'; the bottom symbol, Ofamfa (a geometrical figure of entangled lines), means 'critical examination'. Combined, the symbol means: 'a Return to the past must be guided by critical examination'.² This combined symbol describes in an inimitably condensed way what the two books are about. It is a pleasure and an honour for me to present this enterprise and to make it itself subject of a critical examination.

The first book deals with traditional African culture. Mainly by using and interpreting proverbs, folktales, myths, institutions, and customs of the Akan, Gyekye explains the values of this culture. He regards these sources to a certain degree valid for all Africa south of Sahara. There are, according to him, 'sufficient commonalities in many areas of the cultures of the African people to make interminable disputes over the use of the term "African" unnecessary and unrewarding'.(CV XIII-XIV)³ He had discussed the controversies over this question already at length in *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*⁴ and he comes, in *Tradition and Modernity*, to the conclusion that he and a number of scholars 'recognise the existence of common features or commonalities among the cultures of (sub-Saharan) Africa'.(TM XII; the remark between brackets is mine) This is certainly true for most of the fundamental features of these cultures. It might be different, however, for some of the subjects, which are under discussion in Gyekye's books. With regard to the wide scope of different political systems, and also with regard to certain religious beliefs as e.g. the myths of creation or the assumption of deities, differentiations might be necessary. I will come back to this question later.

African Cultural Values starts with 'Religious Values'. This starting point is near at hand because "Africans are notoriously religious, and ... religion permeates into all the departments of life", as Gyekye says with J.S. Mbiti.⁵ In other words: "One cannot detach oneself from the religion of the community, for to do so would be to isolate oneself from the group".(CV 4) Although traditional African religion is "a natural religion, independent of revelation", it 'is not nature worship as such' but worship of 'spiritual beings or deities' inhabiting the 'objects of nature'.(CV 5, 7) Gyekye's interpretation of traditional African religion as a whole is very clarifying. Nevertheless, I have two critical questions or remarks. E.G. Parrinder, who has done comparative research of African religions in different parts of the continent, points out that the 'belief in nature gods' or deities is characteristic for a number of 'leading peoples of West Africa' with the exception of those in Sierra Leone. Before all in Central and Southern Africa, but also in parts of East Africa 'the ancestors are all-important' and there are, according to Parrinder, 'only vague beliefs in other spirits'.⁶

In another statement of Gyekye, which is rather fundamental, I find a problematic generalisation, too. He says: 'A belief common to all African religions is that there is a supreme being – God – who created all things'.(CV 7) What Ogotemmel, the famous sage of the Dogon, tells about the creation of human beings on earth sounds a bit different. It is more a co-operation between Amma, the 'unique God', and the earth, a star which plays a minor role in one of the 'fourteen solar systems'. Nommo, two 'homogeneous beings', that have come forth from a sexual intercourse between Amma and the earth, are present in all appearances of the water. 'This couple is the water'. And of the water is said that without it it would not have been possible to create the earth, for 'it is by the water (by the Nommo) that she (the earth) received life'. This is an important condition, among others, that at a certain moment 'a human couple emerges from the clods'.⁷

'Aesthetic Values', which are presented rather broadly in Chapter 8 of *African Cultural Values*, only play an incidental role in the later work (TM 247). What is presupposed there, is that 'moral behaviour also is subject to aesthetic evaluation' (CV 132) and that a correct argumentation should at the same time be an 'elegant' one. The conception of 'art for art's sake' is held to be un-African in both books. Gyekye stresses the functional and economic aspects of traditional African art. However, in *African Cultural Values* he also mentions the significance of 'purely aesthetic qualities of African art'.(CV 125-127; Italics are mine)

Different to the famous definition of a 'judgement of beauty' as being 'without interest' by Immanuel Kant, Gyekye describes it as being 'characterised by delight, interest, and enjoyment'.(CV 125; Italics are mine) He gives the example of a traditional wood-carver who wants 'to excite the purely aesthetic judgement of an observer' by a piece of his art. The artist ex-

pects, however, at the same time that 'its beauty may induce the observer to buy it'. (CV 127) This observation will certainly be correct. But I doubt that it is a valid refutation of the Kantian definition. In this connection, I want to refer to the Akan proverb 'Beauty does not pay off a debt', which stands as a motto at the beginning of the chapter and which is interpreted later as a somehow reserved 'traditional attitude to extreme beauty' which will not help to get out of financial problems. (CV 124, 130-131) Could it not also mean that beauty is beyond (financial) interest?

Most of the first book can be said to be incorporated into the second one. *Tradition and Modernity* gives a more 'elaborate and in-depth philosophical discussion' of the situation in traditional Africa. (CV XIV) And it is dealing more directly with Africa in the present-day period which is characterised by the transition from traditional culture to modern forms of life. Again reference is made to traditional values, but it is asked at the same time how these can 'function in' or in how far they are 'in harmony with' emerging modernity.

Gyekye considers 'reflections on the African experience' as a genuine task of philosophy. Philosophy in general is characterised in Chapter 1 'Philosophy and Human Affairs' as 'a critical and systematic inquiry into the fundamental ideas or principles underlying human thought, conduct, and experience.' (TM 5; Italics are mine) In this connection, Gyekye combines two approaches to philosophy: 'conceptual analysis' and the 'speculative or substantive (normative)' approach. (TM 7) He is equally strong in both of them. His texts are especially clear and also come to important substantive conclusions.

Conceptual analysis is done throughout the book in a distinct and patient way. Certain lines of argumentation are followed quietly and extensively, and often only then they are proved to be one-sided. Using the formula 'with all this said', Gyekye usually comes to a critical evaluation of the presented arguments. Or he is busy with what he calls 'conceptual unpacking' by which he shows the different elements and their relation to each other in a certain concept or symbol.⁸ The methodological aspect of his way of philosophising is very impressive and leads to convincing conclusions in most cases.

Gyekye's 'speculative approach' is also guided by a critical and analytical way of thought. He shows what the different elements or aspects of the ideas, attitudes, institutions, or customs of traditional African, modern Western or modernising African societies are. The starting point of the analysis often is what 'is said' in the context of the respective culture. On this basis he judges what the ethical value of the phenomena under discussion is, that is to say the value within the functional whole of the corresponding culture. This is close to the way in which Aristotle derives ethics from ethos (what lives and is accepted in a society and its language) or Hegel's 'Philosophie der Sittlichkeit' which is based on the actually existing 'ethical life'.

In the discussion about 'African philosophy' as a culturally determined specification of philosophy in general, Gyekye chooses for the 'universalist thesis'. He introduces the distinction between 'essential universalism' and 'contingent universalism'. All philosophies, Western, Eastern, African or other, contribute to 'essential universalism', which refers 'to certain basic values and attributes so intrinsic to the nature and life of the human being that they can be considered common to all humans'. Examples are 'friendship, knowledge, happiness, respect for life, the avoidance of pain'. (TM 32) Later in the book, Gyekye refers to 'a core of fundamental human values' which he finds in the 'respect for human life' that forbids 'wanton killings', and the 'sociality' of human beings which means that they cannot but live in community. He characterises these fundamental human values also by saying that without them 'a human society cannot survive for any length of time'. (TM 261)

I think that this distinction is very helpful to characterise two different kinds of philosophical discourse. In my own reflections, I used to work with the same distinction in a somewhat different way. In the last characterisation of Gyekye I see no longer a reference to substantive universal values, but a formal description of what these values have to be like. That leads me to the following question: If a substantive description of them is given, will this not always be done already in a contingent way, showing how they have been given shape in the context of a certain culture? My answer to this question is 'yes'. Therefore, I would like to propose, not to speak of 'essential universalism', but of 'formal universalism'. In the sense of this argumentation, I have tried to define culture 'as the organisation of a community by which this community can maintain and sustain itself in relation with other communities and with nature'.⁹

'Contingent universalism' stands for philosophical ideas which clearly have originated in the context of a certain culture, but have gained acceptance in virtually all other cultures in the course of time. An outstanding example for that are for Gyekye the 'human rights' as they have been formulated in the specific context of Western history of the 18th, 19th and 20th century, and as they can be traced to the much older tradition of 'natural right' in Western philosophy. They are accepted more or less universally all over the world by now, notwithstanding the fact that they can be related also to specific traditions of other cultures. This kind of universalism is obviously existing. It might be helpful, also in the line of Gyekye's argumentation, to call it 'universalism a posteriori' as I have done in earlier publications. Then we get a distinction between a 'contingent' or 'universalism a posteriori' and an 'essential' or 'universalism a priori' which is, according to me, only a formal one.¹⁰

Different to *African Cultural Values* (see above) and to Gyekye's *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*¹¹ the book *Tradition and Modernity*

does not deal with (philosophy of) religion in the African context. This subject is touched upon, remarkably enough, only in the section 'Negative Features of Our African Cultures'.(TM 243) Its highly positive appreciation by Gyekye becomes obvious only when he criticises 'anti-supernaturalism' in Western philosophical thought (TM 267, 270). I do not see why a detailed reflection on religion as an important feature of the African experience is missing.

After the discussion of the meaning of philosophy for practical life, which is preliminary in a certain sense, *Tradition and Modernity* starts with a topic which is a very prominent one in the discourse of African philosophy: 'Person and Community'. In earlier publications, Gyekye had criticised Menkiti's article on this theme¹² as stressing one-sidedly the 'ontological primacy of the community'.(TM 37) Now he partly agrees with this author in so far as he has pointed out 'a moral conception of personhood'. The main aspect of this unique African conception is that personhood 'has to be attained, and is attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life' and that it presupposes 'an ethical maturity' which is not yet to be found in 'early childhood'.(TM 48-49)

This is a very important concept for Gyekye's argumentation in this chapter. We have to keep this concept in mind when we try to find out what is specifically African in Gyekye's idea of 'moderate communitarianism'. As an African, Gyekye criticises the Western communitarian conceptions of M. Sandel, A. MacIntyre and Ch. Taylor, because they are too radical in stressing the importance of the community and neglecting 'individual autonomy and individual rights'.(TM 62) This seems to be a strange change of positions between African and Western ideas. It becomes understandable when we take into account the African moral conception of personhood. This conception grants in a very specific way autonomy, rights, and responsibilities to the individual in the process of becoming a person by participating in communal life. Therefore, Gyekye can sum up his arguments by saying 'that a moral political theory that combines (1) an appreciation of, as well as responsibility and commitment to, the community as a fundamental value, and (2) an understanding of, as well as commitment to, the idea of individual rights, will be a most plausible theory to support'.(TM 76; numbers between brackets are mine) In Gyekye's opinion, this might be regarded, I think, as an emerging contingently universal conception, having its origin in African traditions and becoming valid world-wide. With that opinion I would fully agree.

The salient point of Gyekye's analysis of 'Ethnicity, Identity, and Nationhood' in Chapter 3 is again 'a theory about the moral worth of the individual' which is not individualistic in any sense, but 'also recognises the important role of the cultural community in the life of the individual'.(TM 103) This theory is the foundation for Gyekye's conception of 'meta-nationality' which is introduced by distinguishing four types of nationality. The ethnic or,

as Gyekye prefers to say, 'communocultural' groups are nations in the most elementary sense. They have strong feelings of belonging together, so that the social cohesion is very strong. As a consequence of the colonial history, which cannot be made undone, several of them are united in a 'nation-state'. As an important contribution to the task of 'nation building', the 'ethnic' groups should 'de-emphasise' their common feelings and transfer them to the 'nation-state'. This leads to a conception of the nation which has as its constitutive parts individuals in the above mentioned sense. Gyekye calls it 'meta-nationality'.

This is a highly important conception. The 'meta' refers to the nationality of the most fundamental nation, the communocultural group. Looking at the European experience of this time, one could ask: What about the transition from the nation-state to even larger political entities. And there have been endeavours in this direction in Africa too. B. Davidson reminds us of the political union between Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda, which has been striven after in the 60ies, and of ECOWAS, the economic and financial union of the French speaking countries in West and Central Africa. In the same line can be mentioned the Pan-African ideology, as it has been propagated by Kwame Nkrumah, Cheikh Anta Diop and many others. This is a perspective for Davidson in which he situates his idea how to overcome the present difficulties of the nation-state.¹³

Besides the tendencies of enlarging the conception of the nation which even go beyond the nation-state, it is important to take into consideration also the opposite trend of stressing the significance of regional and local communities. Unfortunately, during this last period of history there have often been cruel and violent ways to accentuate ethnicity in this sense. They remind everybody how important it is not to forget this tendency and to look for peaceful ways how it can be realised. This aspect has to be added to Gyekye's argumentation, which is in favour only of the first tendency as far as the transition from the communocultural groups to the nation-state is concerned.

Most of the information which is given in Chapter 7 of *African Cultural Values* on 'Chiefship and Political Values' we find again in Chapter 4 of *Tradition and Modernity*. In the second book 'Their Status in the Modern Setting' is more prominent. We learn about the political structure of the Akan society where the 'chiefs' are chosen from the members of a governing family by the 'heads of the families or clans', and the 'kings' out of the members of a 'royal' family by the chiefs. The democratic elements in this structure are stressed rather emphatically. It is clearly stated that the 'king' or 'chief has to rule with the consent of the people'. (CV 111, TM 128) The idea of taking decisions not just on the basis of majority, but preferably on the basis of unanimity, what is called the African 'consensus method', helps, according to Gyekye, to come to a more 'comprehensive conception of democracy' than the Western states have achieved. (TM 140-143) The traditional Akan politi-

cal system 'not only made real despotism almost impossible but also gave due recognition to the wishes of the governed'.(TM 127)

V.G. Simiyu's scepticism with regard to *The Democratic Myth in the African Traditional Societies*¹⁴ is totally refuted by Gyekye.(TM 118-120) I do not think, however, that Gyekye is quite right in doing this. Simiyu's article wants to give a differentiated picture of political systems in traditional Africa which range from completely 'egalitarian' systems, as we find them e.g. with the Gikuyu, to strongly 'despotic' ones, as they existed in the ancient kingdoms of Kongo or Swaziland. The same intention we find in the book of M. Fortes and E.E. Evans Pritchard: *African Political Systems* (Oxford; Oxford University Press 1940). This does not mean that Gyekye's conclusion is wrong. Even very autocratic political leaders in traditional Africa could not govern against the wishes and the welfare of their peoples at any length of time. In this sense we find also here some 'democratic' elements. If I see it well, the Akan political institutions which express, according to Gyekye, 'certain basic ideas of democracy', can be classified somewhere in between the 'egalitarian' and the 'despotic' systems, but certainly closer to the first than to the second.

In Chapter 5 of *Tradition and Modernity: 'The Socialist Interlude'* Gyekye deals with what he calls in Chapter 6 of *African Cultural Values: 'Economic Values'*. He defends the thesis that 'the first generation of African political leaders of the postcolonial era', among others L.S. Senghor, S. Touré, K. Nkrumah, and J. Nyerere, 'have misinterpreted the traditional communal system' as being close to the Western ideology of socialism.(CV 95) Gyekye convincingly shows that communal and private ownership existed under traditional Akan economic circumstances, there were poor and rich people and economic behaviour was guided by socialist and capitalist principles.(TM 149-157) This is an important correction of what often is said about African communalism and its affinity to socialism. And I can fully agree with Gyekye's conclusion that 'from the point of view of the development of the African economy', as it actually has taken place, 'the choice of socialism was a disaster'.(TM 163)

Yet there is a problem with Gyekye's presentation of this topic. He understands socialism solely as an 'economic doctrine that stresses the overriding role of the state in the development of the economy'. Therefore he can describe communalism opposite to this doctrine as 'socio-ethical, not economic'.(CV 95-96, TM 146-149) He agrees with K. Kaunda that traditional African communalism should not be characterised as socialism, but as 'humanism'.(TM 159-162) However, Kaunda does not make a difference between socialism and humanism. He stresses the humanistic character of African socialism. And he is aware of the fact that this is an interpretation of socialism, which is in accordance with the current possibilities of understanding this doctrine or ideology. Gyekye's conception of socialism appears to be

economistic, not fully recognising the humanist roots of K. Marx's thought, the limitation of an economy which is planned by the state to a certain period of socialism, and the enterprise of 'democratic socialism' in the Western world.

The 'Quandaries in the Legitimation of Political Power' in Chapter 6 of *Tradition and Modernity* try to bring some clarity into the political situation of African states where civil governments are frequently overthrown by military coups. In most cases, this is justified by saying that the civil government was corrupt and that the new military leaders will organise democratic elections in due time. Gyekye states clearly and decidedly that a military government which does anything else than prepare the way for democratic elections is not legitimate at all, even if it succeeds to perform well economically. (TM 180) That means, the 'informal legitimacy' of a military coup (and also of a revolution of the people) has to be brought (back) to 'formal legitimacy'. In a final analysis formal legitimacy is the only one which exists. It can be gained by 'such procedures as elections as well as modalities sanctioned by tradition and custom'. (TM 175) Thus the modern (Western) and the traditional (African) ways of legitimation are declared equally valid as long as both of them can be said to form a government that enjoys the consent of the people.

Legitimacy can be lost. Gyekye shows that 'de-legitimation' is a complex matter which contains different elements: stability of the political situation; consent and economic welfare of the people; participation of the people in public affairs; living up to formal, constitutional rules. They are lost step by step, and they have to be put together in the same way during the process of building or rebuilding legitimacy. Because it is often difficult to judge which elements of legitimacy are (still) there or not, quandaries can arise. It is a task of philosophy 'to refine the concept' of legitimacy so that it can 'work better in politics'. (TM 191) Chapter 6 of *Tradition and Modernity* certainly contributes to this task.

In the following Chapter, Gyekye elaborates on the many causes of 'Political Corruption'. These can be found in the political and social system of a state. Officials are often helped financially to get their job, and it is expected that they give back something when they have got it. Weak political leadership and lack of control belong to the causes, as well as the fact that Africans in the aftermath of colonialism perceive their governments 'as distant or objective entities', at any rate as something alien to which they do not feel committed. (TM 193-197) Political corruption also existed in traditional Africa, although much less, because there were less 'elaborate bureaucracies' and less 'complicated ways of achieving' personal goals. What traditionally was an expression of a positive structure: to exchange frequently gifts or give them to elders, can lead easily to corruption in the modern setting.

In the end, political corruption turns out to be a moral phenomenon for Gyekye. Although widespread, it is never accepted morally by the people as a whole. It can (only) be overcome by a 'moral revolution', that is to say, by a radical change of morality and morals. Therefore, this revolution has two aspects: it has to be a 'Substantive Moral Revolution' and a 'Commitmental Moral Revolution'. The moral standards have to be put higher and understood more strictly. And the attitude of the actors, the public officials who might get bribes and the private persons who might give them, has to change and become positive with regard to the new moral standards. The will to act morally has to be steeled in order to enable the moral actors to make 'the transition from knowledge to action' which can, different to Socrates' famous dictum, not at all be taken for granted. (TM 210)

Gyekye is not the only one who hopes for a radical moral change. Many others, as e.g. J.N. Kudadjie, like Gyekye from the University of Ghana, reflect on 'Ideals, Realities, and Possibilities' of a *Moral Renewal in Ghana*¹⁵ and in *Africa*. But is it true that this change has to happen in a revolutionary way? If a situation is a revolutionary one, certain contradictions are presupposed which seem to be unsolvable. I can see the contradiction between traditional life in Africa with high moral standards and the loss of these standards in the process of modernisation. However, I do not believe (any more) in revolutions. Certain experiences which surely are not apt to recommend revolutions are undeniable. In the pre-revolutionary period there is always a positive feeling combined with (too) high expectations that (all) things will become better. And after the revolution everybody is deeply disappointed. Political revolutions end up regularly in dictatorship, because the old order is overthrown and the new one does not come (automatically). I would expect more from a gradual change. With Kudadjie, I would see a chance in education as the main means of a 'Moral Reformation Movement'¹⁶.

And I have another problem here. In my view, the change of morality and morals, if it is achieved, is not part of an ongoing 'moral progress'. Gyekye uses the concept 'progress' rather often. (TM 242, 258, 263) The movement from traditional African culture to modernity is irreversible. And if modernity is combined predominantly with moral features, this change is regarded by Gyekye as a progress. But he is also sceptical about this concept. He knows that progress sometimes takes place in specific spheres or ways of life and in others not. And he is aware of historical periods of 'decline or demise of civilisations'. (TM 268)

I would like to go one step further in this direction. For me, the statement of Th.W. Adorno is important, that there is no progress in the field of humane conduct, but a huge progress in the field of technology, especially the technology of weapons¹⁷. This statement may be one-sided too, but it indicates rightly where progress can be expected easily and where not. In a gen-

eral sense, I have come to the conviction that every progress has its price, that progress in one sphere or way of life is accompanied by decline in others, and that progress in moral life is not only difficult to achieve, but also specifically in danger to get lost again¹⁸. That does not mean that it is not worthwhile to work on progress, especially moral progress. But my views provide a more realistic framework for this kind of endeavour.

The extensive Chapter 8: 'Tradition and Modernity' and Chapter 9: 'Epilogue. Which Modernity? Whose Tradition?' of the book *Tradition and Modernity* work out in detail and in depth what is given as a short prelude in Chapter 12: 'The Place of Traditional *African Cultural Values* in Modern Africa' in the book *African Traditional Values*. Let me quote from this prelude a short and very condensed summary: 'Certain features of modernity, as conceived and pursued in Western societies, such as secularism and extreme individualism, would not be endorsed and cherished by non-western cultures and societies. Nevertheless, there surely are other features of Western modernity that will receive the embrace of non-western cultures: these would include science, technology, and the private enterprise economic system'.(CV 171-172; Italics are mine)

As we have discussed above, Gyekye sees starting points for a 'private enterprise economic system' in the cultural values of traditional Africa. Also technologies, especially in the fields of agriculture, food production and preservation and in medicine, did exist in the traditional African societies. It is a difficult question to find out why there have not been asked questions in these societies which could lead to scientific knowledge. Especially the scientific foundations of the existing technologies never have been investigated. Although Gyekye wants to claim 'the intellectual capacity' to do that, according to him the 'proclivity' or 'impulse for sustained scientific or intellectual probing does not appear to have been nurtured and promoted' in the traditional African cultures.(TM 246) It is the main negative feature of these cultures that they did not come to 'sustained observations and investigations into natural phenomena'. The reason is that questions in the line of 'empirical causation' always have given way too quickly to 'agentive causation' which 'leads to the postulation of spirits or mystical powers as causal agents'.(TM 244) In this connection Gyekye repeats his criticism of *African Cultural Values* that 'the African people pay unnecessarily excessive and incessant attention to their ancestors'.(TM 257)

Despite this clear and self-critical picture of the traditional African culture, Gyekye argues convincingly that there are enough positive features in this culture which can be regarded as foundation for an own African way to modernity. Since science and advanced technologies should be taken over from Western traditions, the anti-supernaturalist metaphysics and extreme individualism should be rejected. He mentions the following positive features. African humanism in which the individual and the community are given

equal moral consideration, a certain integrative and normative conception of economy or economics, as it is expressed in the Akan language, the importance of the extended family for the whole community which leads to the idea of universal brotherhood, the ideology of a communal democracy, and last but not least the practical wisdom in proverbs and in the teachings of the sages form the basis for the conception of an 'authentic African modernity'. Of course, the result will be a mesh of Western and *African Cultural Values*, but there will be important constitutive African elements in it. In order to get there, ways 'have to be found for translating the positive traditional values and institutions into the functional idiom of modern circumstances'.(TM 295)

For this position, Gyekye presupposes that the notion of modernity is a complex one. He defends the statements that modernity 'is certainly not a completed thing' and that it does not make much sense to talk of postmodernity.(TM 265-267) I agree with both statements, but I come to somewhat different conclusions. In my view, a modern society or world can be described by welfare and convenience of life, which presuppose the political atmosphere of a democratic constitutional state, and which are based on advanced forms of economy, science, and technology. That means, modernity is characterised as a sociological, political, economic, scientific, and technological structure. It can certainly have different cultural specifications besides the historically constitutive ones of the Western culture. But I do not subscribe Gyekye's conclusion that 'modernity can be defined as the ideas, principles, and ideals covering a whole range of human activities that have underpinned Western life and thought since the seventeenth century', and that it therefore is 'a philosophical doctrine', linked to this culture.(TM 264)

The way of thought, which underlies the modern life is characterised, according to B. Latour, by a number of clear distinctions between nature and society, human being and thing, right and wrong, true and false, natural and supernatural sphere. This way of thought has, however, always been accompanied by mixed or 'hybrid constructions' of natural phenomena, politics, rationality, emotions, and unconscious impulses. Because modernity just describes one side of this way of life and thought and thus does not give a comprehensive picture, Latour is right, when he states: *We Have Never Been Modern*¹⁹.

Philosophically speaking this kind of distinctions, which can be formulated as (dialectical) oppositions is typical for Western metaphysics from Parmenides and Plato to Hegel and Nietzsche. M. Heidegger has often pointed at this historical context. Th.W. Adorno has criticised systematic philosophy in the same historical range. And a group of French thinkers, among them M. Foucault, G. Deleuze, J.F.Lyotard, and J. Derrida, refers critically to it and tries to get beyond it. This makes clear that in philosophy a broader and more sweeping problem is under discussion than the 'ideas, principles and ideals' of Western history from the 17th century until now. I

do not think that the term Western metaphysics is a good characterisation for this problem. It is the way how generality and unity are thought of and how these concepts are confronted with specificity and multiplicity. The Western way of thought in this sense concentrates on the rational exposition of opposite distinctions and forgets *The Other Side of Reason* which is expressed in mixed constructions which are more open for a broader field of different kinds of varieties. This is clearly shown by G. and H. Böhme with regard to the philosophy of I. Kant²⁰.

J. Habermas has used the notion of modernity for a discourse on philosophy by which he wants to criticise, referring to a broad concept of rationality, the philosophical enterprise of the just mentioned group of French thinkers who are concerned with the differences which are forgotten in the distinctions of 'Western metaphysics'²¹. One of these thinkers, J.F. Lyotard, also applies this terminology and speaks of *The Postmodern Condition* of knowledge, which is not confined to the distinctions of the dominant Western way of thought²². Unfortunately, this terminology, which does not meet with the indicated broader and more adequate philosophical discussions, is rather frequently used and has already been taken over by 'critical dictionaries'²³.

Lyotard has later desisted from the notion of postmodernity as a characteristic of a philosophical enterprise. Philosophically it seems to be correct to regard modernity as a structure which does not cover 'a whole range of human activities', but only one side of it. And the conceptual enterprise of thinking in the framework of opposite distinctions does cover more than the history of Western philosophy since the 17th century. Therefore, a detailed philosophical critique of modernity in the sense of Latour's book and of the philosophical endeavours of Heidegger, Adorno and a group of French thinkers has to be worked out. That will also deliver a more adequate framework to discuss different cultural specifications of 'modernity' and its ever present counterpart.

Notes

¹ K. Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought. The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, rev. ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1995; *The Unexamined Life. Philosophy and the African Experience*. (An Inaugural Lecture delivered at the University of Ghana, 1987.) Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company 1996.

² Italics and remarks between brackets in the quotation are mine.

³ (CV + a number) in the text refers to a page in the book *African Cultural Values*, while (TM + a number) in the text refers to a page in the book *Tradition and Modernity*.

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- ⁴ Op.cit. (in note 1), rev. ed., p. XXII-XXXII and 189-212.
- ⁵ J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1970, p. 1; quoted TM 243.
- ⁶ E.G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*. London: Sheldon Press 1974, 3rd ed., p. 43
- ⁷ M. Griaule, *Dieu d'eau. Entretiens avec Ogotemmelé*. (God [of] water. Conversations with Ogotemmelé.) Ed. G. Calame-Griaule. Paris: Fayard 1975, p. 23-31; for the quotations see p. 26 and 29; Italics, the second remark between brackets and the translation are mine
- ⁸ See e.g. the 'unpacking' of the 'concept of moral revolution' in TM 205-215
- ⁹ H. Kimmerle, 'The intercultural dimension in the dialogues between African and western philosophies'. In: *Issues in contemporary culture and aesthetics*, no. 6, 1997, p. 57-67, see 62.
- ¹⁰ Kimmerle, 'Universale Erkenntnis a posteriori.' (Universal knowledge a posteriori.) In: *Die Dimension des Interkulturellen*. (The intercultural dimension.) Amsterdam/Atlanta, Ga: Editions Rodopi, 1994, p. 145-152.
- ¹¹ Op. Cit. (in note 1), p. 68-76 where the explanation of *The Akan conceptual scheme* starts with a section on 'God and the other categories of being'.
- ¹² I.A. Menkiti, 'Person and Community in African Traditional Thought.' In: R.A. Wright, *African Philosophy. An Introduction*. Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1979, 2nd ed., p. 157-186. Gyekye refers to this article in his *Person and Community in African Thought*. In H. Kimmerle (ed), *I, We and Body*. First Joint Symposium of Philosophers from Africa and from the Netherlands. Amsterdam: Verlag B.R. Grüner 1989, p. 47-60. He comes to a partly positive judgement of this article in his *Person and Community in African Thought*. In: K. Wiredu/K.Gyekye (eds), *Person and Community*. Washington, DC 1992, p. 101-122.
- ¹³ B. Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden. Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*. North Wootton: Somerset 1992, Chapter 9.
- ¹⁴ In: W.O. Oyugi/A. Gitonga (eds), *Democratic Theory and Practice in Africa*. Nairobi: Heinemann 1987, p. 49-70.
- ¹⁵ Accra: Asempa Publishers 1995.
- ¹⁶ Op.cit., p. 59-64 and 68-70
- ¹⁷ Th.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*. (Negative dialectic.) Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1967, p. 314.
- ¹⁸ Kimmerle, 'Vooruitgang en zijn prijs.' (Progress and its price.) In: *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* (Journal for Philosophy) 50 (1988), p. 611-627.
- ¹⁹ The original French edition has been published in Paris: Editions La Découverte 1991; English translation by C. Porter. Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1993.
- ²⁰ G. Böhme/H. Böhme, *Das Andere der Vernunft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1983.
- ²¹ *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*. (The philosophical discourse of modernity.) Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1985.
- ²² *La condition postmoderne*. Paris: Minuit 1979.
- ²³ St. Sim (ed), *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*. Cambridge: Icon Books 1998; see p. 31-14.