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# HIV/AIDS and modernity in Africa: a philosophical perspective

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HIV/AIDS poses the greatest threat to human life in sub-Saharan Africa. Although the general awareness of the various modes of HIV-transmission has increased significantly over the past few years, the continuing threat of this deadly disease seems to be unstoppable. To make matters worse, our understanding of HIV/AIDS has been dominated by Western philosophical discourses that somehow question Africa's ability to understand fully the serious nature and extent of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This article addresses the possibility of Africa's right to life from the perspective of the philosophical discourse of modernity in Africa.

## MIV/VIGS en moderniteit in Afrika: 'n filosofiese perspektief

MIV/VIGS is die grootste bedreiging in vir die menslike bestaan in sub-Sahara Afrika. Alhoewel algemene bewustheid van die verskeie vorme van MIV-oordraagbaarheid in die laaste paar jaar aansienlik vermeerder het, blyk dit dat die voortdurende bedreiging van hierdie dodelike siekte onstuitbaar is. Om dit te vererger, is ons begrip van MIV/VIGS gedomineer deur Westerse filosofiese diskoerse wat Afrika se vermoë om die ernstige aard en omvang van die MIV/VIGS pandemie ten volle te verstaan, in twyfel trek. Hierdie artikel spreek die moontlikheid van Afrika se reg op lewe aan vanuit die perspektief van die filosofiese diskoerse van moderniteit in Afrika.

The process of understanding human tragedy, either individual or collective, invariably occurs within a particular hermeneutic context, which normally provides us with the appropriate frames of reference for coming to terms with the cause(s) of our suffering. In this regard, the wisdom of a community usually provides both the resources (spiritual, moral, and psychological), as well as and the appropriate support structures to help us through our times of suffering and grief. Even when threatened by the certainty of death, for instance in the form of an incurable disease, violent crime, social conflict, genocide, or diseases of poverty, as long as human suffering and death can be explained in a “language” that somehow makes sense to us, the chances are that we will find the strength to accept whatever fate life may have in store for us.

When conventional wisdom loses its power of persuasion, and we are unable to find an alternative frame of reference, we are likely to experience a “spiritual crisis” beyond which there is no way forward. The future seems to be devoid of all meaning, and the past seems to have lost its legitimacy to address us with any authority in the present. We find ourselves cut off from the familiar ties of human solidarity since the community that is historically and culturally responsible for providing the normative context for our self-understanding as human beings has somehow, rather mysteriously and inexplicably, been transformed into a world of strangers, where communication now takes the form of either distorting and trivialising the “spiritual crisis” that has overtaken us, or of denying that AIDS even exists at all.

This article investigates the philosophical question of the possibility of life from the perspective of the “spiritual crisis” that has gripped the lives of millions of people, either suffering from or affected by HIV/AIDS in Africa. In this regard, I seek to establish a philosophical basis for defending a fundamental moral claim: the right to life is the most basic of all human rights. More specifically, I am of the view that all human rights have their normative origin in, and derive their significance from, the basic right to life which, in an African ethical context, implies that the

main goal of African ethics is fundamentally life itself [and that the] community must guarantee the promotion and protection of life by specifying or ordaining ethics and morality (Bujo 2001: 20).

From an African perspective, the right to life originates within a historical consciousness of the cultural significance of land ownership as the condition of the possibility of life. In the present postcolonial context, this means that the question of historical justice must include not only an acknowledgement of the destructive impact of colonialism on precolonial Africa but also the possibility of land restitution as a first step towards the harmonisation of relations between Africa and its former colonial masters. M B Ramose (2002: 2) correctly points out that the large-scale dispossession of African land by the European colonial wars of conquest has not only resulted in the loss of African sovereignty, but has also, more importantly, constituted a serious violation of Africa's right to life. While I do not, in the scope of this article, include a detailed discussion of the "land question" as such, I am nevertheless of the view that this complex issue presents a serious challenge to those who claim that poverty alleviation in Africa can best be achieved through technical programmes of structural adjustment that deliberately ignore or trivialise the historical and cultural contexts of the very people who have been targeted for such programmes of relief. Historical justice dictates at the very least the need to acknowledge the unspeakable suffering that has accompanied the European projects of slavery and colonialism in Africa. My primary objective, however, is to address from a philosophical perspective the implications of the reduction of Africa's right to life to the economic and technical possibilities offered by Western-inspired programmes of development and, on the other hand, to show how these have affected Africa's choices in the struggle against HIV/AIDS.

The effectiveness of our collective response to HIV/AIDS will depend on the possibility of overcoming the philosophical legacy of racism at the root of the Western "project of modernity" (Habermas 1981), in which the "African mind" has traditionally been represented as the "Other of reason". Even as we acknowledge our "debt" to the Western philosophical tradition, we need to think beyond the trappings of a philosophical discourse that seems to lack the resources to recognise and acknowledge the "Other" as human, rational, equal, different — and, therefore, worthy of respect.

## 1. HIV/AIDS and poverty

There is general consensus among the leading researchers and practitioners of the medical establishment that the syndrome of diseases, collectively referred to as AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is caused by an immune-destroying virus, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). It is further agreed that this virus enters the human body either by way of sexual contact, blood transfusion, needle injections, and mother-to-child transmission during pregnancy, at birth, or by way of breastfeeding.

According to the medical establishment, there is currently neither a cure nor a vaccine to neutralise HIV. Upon entering the human body, it is just a matter of time before this deadly virus claims the life of its host. If the host happens to be resident in a country that forms part of the developed world, the availability of expensive antiretroviral drugs and therapy can produce a stay of execution in conditions of relative security and comfort for the person living with HIV. For all those unfortunates who are forced to fend for themselves in conditions of “absolute poverty”, and therefore beyond the immediate benefits of antiretroviral drugs and therapy, no such stay of execution is likely to be announced in the foreseeable future. It must be pointed out that, although antiretroviral drugs are known to be generally available in most parts of the African continent, there are several factors (cultural, social, political and economic) that make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for those most in need of such medical resources to gain access to them. For example, if a person has to cross large tracts of war-ravaged land in order to obtain antiretroviral drugs at health centres and clinics situated some distance away from his/her place of abode, considerations of the more immediate danger of a violent death, being abducted for military purposes or being raped, would outweigh all other options. In such circumstances, if a mother chooses not to abandon her family, but to support and provide for them for as long as she can in the full knowledge of the fatal consequences that are likely to arise in the wake of her decision not to go for medical help, from her more “realistic” perspective, she would surely be doing the right thing.

In addition to the ever-present possibility of personal danger and risk, the struggle against HIV/AIDS for the majority of Africans has to be waged amid the ubiquitous presence of “absolute poverty”. According to Andrew Webster (1990: 16), absolute poverty is

a situation in which people are barely existing, where the next meal may literally be a matter of life and death as the cumulative effects of malnutrition and starvation enfeeble all, particularly children, whose weakness gives them the tragic distinction of having the highest mortality rate for any group anywhere in the world. Thus in these circumstances, poverty takes on an ‘absolute’ status since there is nothing beyond or ‘beneath’ it except death.

When, in circumstances of absolute poverty, the threat of death is the only certainty, how much more terrible must this threat be when it is linked with those very experiences that we normally associate with “life” — sexual activity, pregnancy and childbirth — which also happen to be the dominant modes of HIV-transmission in Africa? As a life-threatening medical condition, HIV/AIDS has the potential to wipe out human life in postcolonial Africa. As a life-threatening disease, HIV/AIDS targets primarily the sexually active, who also happen to be the main providers and breadwinners within the community. Given the constant threat of HIV infection in the African community, survival can either take the form of calculated risks and desperate attempts aimed at delaying the inevitable, or it can take the form of denialism and scepticism. Either way, the threat of HIV-infection remains a “positive” possibility, despite the metaphysical comfort that ostensibly arises from the choice to remain ignorant.

The potential threat of human extinction on the African continent is indeed a real possibility that can overtake us in the not too distant future. According to Godfrey B Tangwa (2002: 225),

{w}hile the prospect of the possible annihilation of the entire human race by the HIV/AIDS pandemic is indeed far-fetched, that of erasing the African continent of its human inhabitants is not too far from the realm of possibility.

Even if the argument regarding the possible annihilation of the African population is rejected as an exaggeration, there are those who despair of the possibility of Africa ever becoming a major force in the global economic order of the free market system. While poverty constitutes

an obstacle that has to be overcome by postcolonial Africa, the ability to reverse the current trend of economic dependency clearly presupposes the urgent need to break the stranglehold of globalised poverty, the structural by-product of the globalisation of capitalism (Chussudovsky 1997: 33–44). In this regard, we should recognise that “poverty” and “wealth” are but opposite sides of the same coin in the Western sense, thus giving the lie to the popular but questionable argument that Africa’s current social-economic woes are a direct consequence of its failure to appreciate the “universal” nature of the economic principles of global capitalism. The claim of economic universalism has, however, invariably been invoked by the Western world as Africa’s only hope of overcoming its position of dependency in an integrated global economy. In practice, however, this claim has constantly been linked with threats of foreign disinvestment, and the withdrawal of other vital programmes of infrastructural support, as the Western world seeks to impose its own neo-liberal model of development on postcolonial Africa. According to Solomon R. Benatar (2002: 168),

[a]fter initiation of the process of independence in Africa in the 1960s, powerful nations pursuing their ongoing interests colluded with selfish African leaders who were co-opted into neo-liberal economic policies and corrupt practices. Economic slavery propagated through covert and sophisticated guises replaced physical slavery and colonial oppression.

When the historical process of remembering past injustices is trivialised or dismissed for the sake of Western-inspired models of political and economic development, the likelihood of social-historical justice recedes in proportion to the persistence of international indifference. This state of affairs must surely make us question the wisdom of pinning Africa’s hope of recovery on neo-liberal policies of Western capitalism whose *modus operandi* is to rationalise the structural violence unleashed against the poor and the vulnerable in their struggle against HIV/AIDS, by seeking “local-cultural” explanations for Africa’s present crisis. The tendency to essentialise or ontologise the African predicament is, however, an attempt to claim Western innocence in respect of the “African condition”. In a different world order, however, Africa’s incurable diseases may indeed be curable,

and Africa's unpreventable diseases preventable. Amartya Sen (2005: xii) correctly warns against the danger of seeing human suffering as

an inescapable result of the frailty of our existence. That would be correct had these sufferings been really inescapable, but they are far from that. Preventable diseases can indeed be prevented, curable ailments can certainly be cured, and controllable maladies call out for control. Rather than lamenting the adversity of nature, we have to look for a better comprehension of the social causes of horror and also of our tolerance of societal abominations.

In a world where the comprehension of the suffering of Africa has been reduced to the statistical-technical discourse of the international agencies of foreign donor countries, we are far removed from approaching the Kantian notion of the "moral law" that enjoins us to respect the "Other" as an end, rather than as a means to an end, while claiming at the same time that respect for the "Other" is matter of duty that testifies to our autonomy as rational-moral agents (Kant 1956: 43-51). Given the devastating impact that the Western-inspired neo-liberal policies of global economic development have had on the vast majority of African people struggling to make ends meet in "informal economies", such policies must surely be seen, from a Kantian moral perspective, as a means of promoting the political end of Western hegemony, rather than as a moral duty born of respect for the African "Other" as a fellow human being.

The choice for Western capitalism is indeed a choice against the poor, the deprived and the dispossessed. This choice flies in the face of the powerful message voiced in recent decades by the movement of liberation theology in Latin America, most notably that of Leonardo Boff (1989: 23), who urges us to make a "preferential option for the poor, against their poverty", and thus duly reminds us that the poor "are those who suffer injustice. Their poverty is produced by mechanisms of impoverishment and exploitation. Their poverty is therefore also an evil and an injustice". In a similar vein, and speaking from a similar background, Gustavo Gutiérrez (1974: 289) points out that

material poverty is a subhuman situation ... to be poor means to die of hunger, to be illiterate, to be exploited by others, not to know that you are being exploited, not to know that you are a person.

Seen from the perspective of the concrete reality of everyday life of the poor, poverty is of a systemic nature, and stems from an asymmetrical system of economic power in which the scales are unevenly tipped in favour of the rich. The structures and agencies that function within the global market system are there to ensure that all profits return to the economic centres of the Western world, thereby condemning the African “Other” to a position of dependency that is not of its own making. From a moral perspective, therefore, poverty is not so much a socio-economic condition, but a brutal declaration of war against the poor of this world (Farmer 2005). The failure to understand poverty beyond mere economic terms accounts not only for the complicity of the rich in the material and moral degradation of the poor, but also for the historical amnesia that has accompanied the Western programmes of development in Africa. It is this historical amnesia that makes Western modernity such a dangerous project in “traditional” Africa.

A first step towards overcoming the historical amnesia that has overtaken the Western world in its dealings with contemporary Africa would be to acknowledge that to date Africa has not been duly acknowledged as an equal partner in the quest for a more human(e) world order. In postcolonial Africa, the struggle to alleviate poverty by means of programmes of structural adjustment and development has meant that the voices of human suffering have been silenced behind a wall of technical jargon, aimed at achieving cost-effectiveness and efficiency as the most “obvious” form of rationality for a continent struggling for integration into the global economic order.

When reason is reduced to the level of an efficient-effective form of instrumental rationality, Western modernity can only be interpreted as a project of “non-reason” in Africa, insofar as the possibility of mutual dialogue aimed at achieving a shared historical understanding of how “we got here” has in principle been ruled out.



## 2. Western modernity in perspective

### 2.1 Modernity as an historical phenomenon

Modernity has invariably been construed as a European phenomenon (Pippin 1991: 17, Tate 1997: 281). Its self-definition includes an historical self-consciousness that is inseparably connected with the achievements of modern Western science as the conqueror of all human prejudice and superstition. This all-conquering image of modern Western science has also been linked with a teleological interpretation of history as an unstoppable process of human progress and freedom, guided by the lofty principles of enlightened and enlightening reason. As Hegel (1953: 11) put it,

[t]he sole thought which philosophy brings to the treatment of history is the simple concept of *Reason*: that Reason is the law of the world and that, therefore, in world history, things have come about rationally [Hegel's emphasis].

According to David Harvey (1989: 12-3), modernity defined as the ultimate expression of the European Enlightenment,

embraced the idea of progress, and actively sought [to] break with history and tradition. It was, above all, a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organisation in order to liberate human beings from their chains [...] Doctrines of equality, liberty, faith in human intelligence [...] and universal reason abounded.

Given the privileging of scientific rationality, modernity has sought to define its role and defend its cultural status in the world on the basis of the achievements of modern science and technology. These achievements have invariably been used to demonstrate the superiority of Western culture in general, and Western modernity in particular. From this perspective, Western modernity has provided the normative framework for the construction of the African world as the "Other of reason", thus providing the conceptual tools for the invention and justification of the "colonizer's model of the world" (Blaut 1993). As the "Other of reason", Africa has accordingly been assigned an inferior status in the world, condemned to dwell either in the realm of the prerational and the prescientific (Horton 1995),

or in the realm of the mystical (Levy-Bruhl 1985). Modernity has therefore claimed for itself not only reason, but reason in its most advanced and superior form. For modernity, scientific reason presupposes the end of primitive emotions, religion, magic, prejudice, and superstition. Defined as the “kingdom of Reason and rationality”, the other forms of life were seen, accordingly as wanting in both respects. This was the first and most basic of the conceptualizations providing modernity with its self-definition (Bauman 1987: 111).

In addition to the claim of its advanced and superior cultural status in world history, modernity has defined its historical relationship with the rest of the world in terms of its own “here and now”. This implies the possibility of a disrupted and discontinued relationship with the past, on the one hand, as well as the possibility of shaping the future in accordance with the European Enlightenment ideals of human freedom, dignity and progress, on the other (Kant 1996). From this perspective, the present only makes sense in terms of the future, and the “here and now” can no longer be guided by the past which, to all intents and purposes, represents nothing more than a narrative of human failure and human limitations. The wisdom of past tradition is therefore seen as conceptually incommensurable with the “new”, as promised by modernity. As Habermas (1987: 6) puts it,

[b]ecause the new, the modern is distinguished from the old by the fact that it opens itself to the future, the epochal new beginning is rendered constant with each moment that gives birth to the new ...  
Within the horizon of the modern age, the present enjoys a prominent position as contemporary history.

Michael Featherstone (1988: 199) reinforces Habermas’ position by stating that modernity must be viewed as a

sense of the discontinuity of time, the break with tradition, the feeling of novelty and sensitivity to the ephemeral, fleeting, contingent nature of the present.

Within the context of Western modernity, Africa has yet to liberate itself from the oppressive weight of “Tradition” and enter the enlightened world of “Modernity”.

## 2.2 Modernity as a philosophical category

In the Western philosophical tradition, René Descartes (invariably identified as the “father” of modern philosophy) has been credited with the achievement of having placed modernity within the reach of the modern philosophical mind. Descartes introduced an epistemological approach aimed at achieving absolute certainty as the condition of the possibility of true knowledge. Central to the Cartesian epistemological project is an ontological dichotomy between the “mind” and the “body”, with the former accorded a privileged epistemic status as the seat of rationality, and the latter construed as an unreliable source of certainty, and hence incapable of producing true knowledge. From the perspective of the ontological distinction between “subject” and “object”, Descartes succeeded in establishing the conceptual limits within which reason was to find expression in the modern philosophical tradition. Relying on the principles of deductive reasoning, as exemplified in the disciplines of mathematics and formal logic, Descartes proceeded to privilege intuition (as opposed to empirical analysis) as the most important element of human rationality. By turning the thinking subject “inward” as it were, to seek within itself the legitimating grounds of its own rationality, Descartes felt justified in dismissing anything that did not make sense in terms of his own methodological programme of clarity and distinction, on the one hand, and systematic doubt, on the other. In terms of this programme, Descartes (1980: 10) therefore undertook

never to accept anything as true that I did not know evidently to be so [...] and to include nothing more in my judgements than what presented itself to my mind with such clarity and distinction that I have no occasion to put it in doubt.

The idea that presents itself to Descartes with a sense of “clarity and distinction” is the apparent self-evident certainty of his own existence as a subject that thinks. It is against this background that Descartes (1980: 17) announces the “first principle” of modern philosophy: I think, therefore I am. The (inward) “subjective turn” towards individual self-consciousness as the only legitimate authority for validating knowledge claims, thus represents the distinctive nature of Western modernity as philosophical category.

It is from the perspective of the “subjective turn” that Immanuel Kant was later encouraged to defend the radical nature of modern philosophy by presenting his *Critique of pure reason* as an event similar in significance to a “Copernican revolution” in modern philosophical discourse. As Kant (1965B: xvi) himself put it,

Hitherto, it has been assumed that our knowledge must conform to objects. But all our attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them a priori, by means of concepts, have on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may have more success [...] if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. This would agree better with what is desired, namely that it should be possible to have knowledge of objects a priori, determining something in regard to them prior to their being given. We should then be proceeding precisely on Copernicus' primary hypothesis.

Given his programmatic intent, it may be argued with some justification that Kant's commitment to establishing the formal structures of rationality makes him indifferent to the “reality” of what lies beyond the formal limits of his own conceptual framework. It is to the extent that we are deemed either capable or incapable of appreciating, participating or creating the formal structures of the modern philosophical tradition, that modernity claims its privileged status as the centre of rationality.

As far as Descartes' epistemological programme is concerned, one cannot doubt his intellectual integrity when he insists on “clarity and distinction” as a guiding principle in the search for truth; after all, this principle ought to inform any serious philosophical enquiry. However, when the principle of “clarity and distinction” is assumed to apply only to Western forms of reasoning, one is but one step away from equating Western modernity as a philosophical category with reason itself. This dogmatic stance ultimately leads to the false universalism that has accompanied the “project of modernity”. It also leads to the questionable conclusion that the philosophical language of Western modernity is the only appropriate medium for the articulation of “reason” and “truth”. When Descartes (1980: 17) announces human subjectivity as the philosophical cornerstone of modernity in his famous proposition, “I think, therefore I am”, he is in fact proclaiming that only like-minded thinkers, schooled in

the art of Western formalistic thinking, can truly lay claim to the privilege of human rationality. The thinking subject, conceptualised as the founding principle of modern rationality, therefore has no reason to look beyond modernity's self-proclaimed charmed circle of like-minded "subjects of reason" in order to establish the limits and possibility of reason and rationality in the world.

Western modernity as a philosophical category embraces a self-contradiction, insofar as every attempt at the self-legitimation of the claim of Western knowledge is, from the perspective of non-Western systems of knowledge, also a denial of the possibility of different systems of knowledge. The possibility of other non-Western "subjects of reason", committed to different forms of inquiry, and equally committed to an explication of the rational grounds of legitimation and validation of the knowledge claims raised within their own philosophical systems of thought, is therefore ruled out. It is the failure to consider the possibility of other non-Western forms of rational discourse that prompts Robert B Pippin (1991: 25-6) to write:

Given the self-understanding of an extreme break in the tradition, of a need for a new beginning not indebted to old assumptions, and so wholly self-grounding, the modern philosophic enterprise appears to be locked in a kind of self-created vacuum, determining by arguments or reason a method for making claims about the world, but unable to argue convincingly that what results is anything other than what the method tells us about the world, be the 'real world' as it may.

Given Pippin's comments above, the project of modernity cannot but interpret its status and legitimacy in terms of its own norms and principles. Western modernity's philosophical incapacity to acknowledge and deal with the historical-cultural possibility of other non-Western "subjects of reason" thus provides the "irrational" grounds for the emergence of racism as a structural category of modern philosophical discourse. Modernity's paradoxical sense of historical self-consciousness, philosophically defined as the only valid source of legitimation in the pursuit of knowledge, is aptly summed up by Jürgen Habermas (1987: 7) when he asserts that

[m]odernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create it normativity out of itself* (Habermas' emphasis).

From this perspective, reason is assumed to be restricted to the self-proclaimed geopolitical space of Western rationality beyond which the “Other of reason” is thought to be trapped inextricably in the prehistorical and irrational ethos of “another epoch”.

### 3. The Other of Reason

In terms of the normative assumptions of the modern Western philosophical tradition, reason is a “Western concept”. On this understanding, it is only insofar as the African “mind” is deemed capable of reflecting the formal structures of the modern Western “mind” that its intellectual products are considered to have any epistemic significance.

The formal prejudice at the root of modernity has been philosophically defended by cultural anthropologists, such as Lucien Levy-Bruhl who, in his celebrated *How natives think* assigns African thought to the level of a “prelogical (primitive) mentality”, when he writes,

It would be idle to institute any comparison between the discursive processes of prelogical mentality and those of our thought, or to look for any correspondence between the two, for we should have no grounds on which to base a hypothesis [...] The discursive operations of our rational thought [...] imply an ensemble of conditions which we do not find existing anywhere in social aggregates of a primitive type (Levy-Bruhl 1995: 52).

According to Placide Tempels (1959: 27), all thought that is “foreign” to the Western philosophical tradition should be labelled “the philosophy of magic”. But whilst Tempels is willing to assign African (Bantu) thought to the realm of “magic”, he is also willing to challenge modernity’s dismissal of the African’s humanity by acknowledging the existence of a “traditional” body of African philosophical thought. According to Tempels (1959: 16), “[a]nyone who claims that primitive peoples possess no system of thought, excludes them thereby from the category of men”. Despite making this acknowledgement, Tempels is quick to point out that he is not so much interested in reflecting upon the validity of African traditional thought because, in his considered opinion, “the Bantu are not capable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary” (Tempels 1959: 25). The primary task of the

Western thinker is therefore to help the African subject recognise itself in the language and the knowledge of the Western “mind”.

The exclusion of the African “mind” from the realm of reason implies the exclusion of the African person from the possibility of “being-human-in-the-world”. Given this perspective, the possibility of reason in Africa cannot but be separated from the struggle for human freedom, dignity and social justice (Serequeberhan 1991: 3–28). In this regard, Ramose (2002: 3) correctly points out that African philosophy is born of a “struggle for reason”, a struggle for the humanity or “human-ness” of the African, and that “[t]he struggle for reason — who is and who is not a rational animal — is the foundation of racism”. Furthermore, if Africans are assumed to be devoid of rationality, they cannot be considered to be a part of world history. This is what Hegel (1956: 99) had in mind when he claimed that Africa has

no historical part of the World [...] it has no movement or development to exhibit [...] What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature [...] on the threshold of the World's History.

When the philosophical conception of the African as the “Other of reason” is translated into the political and economic ambitions of Western imperialism and colonialism, it is racism and violence (rather than human solidarity) that greets Africa in its initial encounter with Western Europe (Ramose 2002: 3). From the European perspective, a world devoid of Western rationality exonerates the coloniser from the need to explain or justify their presence to the indigenous peoples of Africa. This allows for the possibility of claiming European innocence in the face of Africa’s colonisation by obscuring the historical roots of Africa’s present predicament. In the final analysis, Africa’s ontological difference is rooted in modernity’s conceptual and moral incapacity to acknowledge the humanity of the African as a bearer of reason. Hence modernity’s construction of the African as the “Other of reason” is on a par with the Cartesian idea of the non-rational “body”, and its relegation of Africa to the prehistorical realm of “natural” existence. This legacy of Cartesian modernity in Africa is reflected by Hannah Arendt (1958: 192) when she writes:

What made them [the Africans] different from other human beings was not at all the color of their skin, but the fact that they behaved like a part of nature, that they treated nature as the undisputed master, that they had not created a human world, a human reality, and that therefore nature had remained, in all its majesty, the only overwhelming reality — compared to which they appeared to be phantoms, unreal and ghostlike. They were, as it were, 'natural' human beings who lacked the specifically human character, the specifically human reality; so that when European men massacred them they were somehow not aware that they had committed murder.

From the perspective of Western modernity, the African voice(s) of reason is condemned to the "language" (or "non-language") of nature, an unintelligible babble devoid of rational content. It now becomes "the white man's burden" to introduce the appropriate models of rationality for understanding not only Africa's problems, but also Africa's preordained "natural", (marginalised) place in the world. From this perspective, the possibility of self-knowledge and identity for the African may be seen to be in the hands of their conqueror. As Tempels (1959: 25) once put it, "They will recognise themselves in our words, and acquiesce, saying '[y]ou understand us: you know us completely: you 'know' in the way we 'know'".

Although we are willing to concede the epistemic importance of the need for "objectivity" as exemplified in the Cartesian ontological separation of "mind" and "body", we must also acknowledge first, that "objectivity" is not the exclusive privilege of scientific thought, and secondly, that not all forms of knowledge — in order to qualify as knowledge — must necessarily fall within the field of scientific-technical rationality. Beyond this restriction, we need to accept that the sphere of moral action, and the ideal of human freedom, presupposes the existence of a form of rationality that differs categorially from that of scientific rationality. The conceptual distinction between theoretical and practical, which can be traced back to Aristotle's ethical theory, has somehow been lost in view of Western modernity's scientistic conceptualisation of rationality. As Habermas (1974: 255) points out:

The real difficulty in the relation of theory and praxis does not arise from the new function of science as a technological force, but rather from the fact that we are no longer able to distinguish between practical and technical power. Yet even a civilisation that has been rendered scientific is not granted dispensation from practical questions:



therefore a particular danger arises when the process of scientification transgresses the limit of technical questions, without, however, departing from the level of reflection of a rationality confined to the technological horizon. For then no attempt at all is made to attain a rational consensus on the part of citizens concerned with the practical control of their destiny. Its place is taken by the attempt to attain technical control over history by perfecting the administration of society, an attempt that is just as impractical as it is unhistorical.

Within the context of modernity, the need for a more profound analysis of our self-understanding as human beings is more challenging in view of the elevation of Western scientific thinking as the only validating source of reason and rationality. However, when confronted by moral challenges that question the legitimacy of Western modernity (as a project of rational enlightenment and human progress), the modern Western “mind” seems to lack the rational resources to legitimate the project of modernity in view of the honorific status accorded to the achievement of modern science and technology. This state of affairs has given rise to a philosophical situation that J-F Lyotard (1984: xxvi) has referred to as “the postmodern condition”, which he describes as “incredulity towards metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of the progress in the sciences; but that progress in turn presupposes it”. In the form of Western scientific rationality, modernity may well have cause to celebrate the birth of the new age of “universal” knowledge production and “universal” information, but it has also succeeded in undermining our confidence as human beings to act in solidarity with another in pursuit of a common cause. Too much knowledge seems to have deprived us of a common rational basis to act in concert as autonomous moral agents in the world.

#### 4. The Other Reason

From an African perspective, to be rational is to “think” in rational categories that take us beyond the racist model of conquest that has accompanied modernity in the form of colonialism. It is with this problem in mind that Kwasi Wiredu (1997: 11) speaks of “conceptual decolonisation”, by which he means

avoiding or reversing [...] the unexamined assimilation in our thought [...] of the conceptual frameworks embedded in the foreign philosophical traditions that have had an impact on African life and thought,

and

exploiting as much as is judicious the resources of our own indigenous conceptual schemes in our philosophical meditations on even the most technical problems of contemporary philosophy.

Wiredu (1997: 11) therefore believes that a first important step in overcoming the philosophical legacy of the colonial model of conquest is to deconstruct and overturn the “historical superimposition of foreign categories of thought on African thought systems through colonialism”.

If “thought and action” are co-implicative, then we need to rehabilitate the form of thinking that speaks to us in terms of our “practical” engagement with the world. In other words, the spiritual legacy of wisdom coming from past cultural traditions should form the point of departure for our cultural interaction with the “Other”. It must be emphasised that this approach does not seek to embrace a universe of cultural relativism in which difference is celebrated for its own sake. The “practical” is rooted in the universal assumption of our common humanity, in spite of difference. The acknowledgement of different cultural traditions rooted in the “practical” thus introduces the question of how to live in a world that we share with the “Other”. Given the assumption of our common humanity, as well as the historical fact of cultural difference, a postcolonial philosophy should seek to establish the conditions for the possibility of reason that is rooted in an ontological and normative context that clearly defines the dialogical nature of human rationality.

“Practical” knowledge originates within the historical realm of the contingent, the uncertain, the unknown, and it seeks to instruct us on “how to live well”, “how to live the good life”, and “how to live wisely”. Given the contingent nature of the practical form of knowledge, its “truths” cannot be defended in an epistemological model of absolute certainty. The self-consciousness at the root of the practical form of rationality has its origins in the “traditional narratives” which provide every cultural tradition with its specific sense of self-

understanding of “being human in the world”. Within the context of the African philosophical tradition, the defence of the practical form of knowledge, as the expression of a different mode of rationality, is well illustrated in the work of H Odera Oruka (1990: 41-51), especially with regard to the distinction that he makes between “sage philosophy” or “culture philosophy” on the one hand, and “philosophic sagacity” on the other.

For Oruka, “sage philosophy” is synonymous with the accumulated wisdom of a particular cultural group, and as such, it reflects a level of thinking that aims at elucidating and reinforcing the traditional or conventional wisdom that a community requires to function as a unified, meaningful and integrated cultural entity. The sage is therefore someone who plays a vital role in interpreting and defending the core values, beliefs and knowledge claims of a particular cultural tradition; his or her role is, at best, “conservative” in nature. The wisdom of the sage, however, is not on the same level as the wisdom of the philosopher. As Oruka puts it (1990: 44) sages

are *wise* within the conventional or cultural confines of their culture. But they may not be wise (rational) in understanding or solving the inconsistencies of their culture or coping with the foreign innovations that encroach on it. In other words, they are the spokesmen [and spokeswomen, MC] of their people, but they speak what after all is known to almost every average person within the culture [Oruka’s emphasis].

Oruka (1990: 45) compares and contrasts the wisdom of the sage (“first order” thinking) with the “philosophic sagacity” of the philosopher (“second order” thinking), as follows:

The first order is that of culture philosophy. It is absolute in its ideas and truth-claims, and has an ideological war with anything to the contrary. Ordinary sages (the non-philosophic sages) are specialists in explaining and maintaining this order [...]. In contrast, the second order is that of philosophic sagacity. It is a critical reflection on the first order. In many cases, it is a critical rebellion against the first order conformity and anachronism. While the first order glorifies the communal conformity, philosophic sagacity is skeptical of communal consensus, and it employs reason to assess it. While the first order is purely absolutist or ideological, the second is generally open-minded and rationalistic. Its truths are given as tentative and ratiocinative, not as God-sent messages.

In the light of the above, one may interpret Oruka's work as an example of an "authentic" African model of rationality, which may fruitfully be used, not only to address the devastating impact of Western modernity on the African "mind", but also to bring us closer to the Wireduan ideal of "conceptual decolonization" (Wiredu 1997: 11-22).

Given the above, a rational reflection on the experience of HIV/AIDS in Africa should consider the philosophical import of Oruka's (1990: 41-51) distinction between conventional wisdom, and the second level of "philosophic sagacity". Insofar as it is possible to disengage ourselves from the "immediate" concerns of everyday life, we need to seek out new ways for restoring the basic life-affirming practices and values within the African community, not in isolation, but within the broader context of a postcolonial modernity.

If the challenges of "the land question", poverty, preventable diseases of poverty, and HIV/AIDS are to be taken seriously, "philosophic sagacity" urges the negotiation of Africa's right to life in a new world order based on the guiding principle of justice, in which the historical memory of Africa's suffering is duly articulated with a view to overcoming the historical amnesia that has accompanied Western modernity in Africa. To this end, we would do well to heed the philosophic sagacity of Bénédet Bujo (1998: 189), when he writes:

The question can hardly be suppressed: why is the sub-Saharan region of Africa particularly and almost helplessly affected by the AIDS-virus, although this region is praised for its relieving approach towards the sick? One wonders if its old traditions can still save it. Evidently it cannot liberate itself alone and by merely calling upon its human tradition. The necessity for joint action [...] does not concern only human relationships within Africa. These reflections also call for a worldwide community of solidarity.

## 5. To mourn or not to mourn

HIV infection is affecting the lives of millions of Africans, but we seem to be unable to acknowledge publicly the profound effect that this deadly disease has had on the traditional value systems that not only provided us with moral courage in the face of a common adversity, but also, more importantly, made us aware of how much we have in common, in spite of our differences. Torn between more "traditional"

narratives of human suffering and compassion, and modern-scientific-technical explanations and “advice” on practising abstinence, monogamy and condom-use, the possibility of human solidarity has been severely challenged. As important as it may be to realise and to accept the facts of HIV infection, we also need to acknowledge that, although all human beings across the globe are susceptible to HIV infection, no human being or human community should be held responsible for the outbreak of HIV on the basis of some “natural” flaw in their moral-intellectual make-up. As Brooke Grunfest Schoepf (1997: 316) correctly argues,

There is no evidence that Africans are more ‘promiscuous’ than other peoples, nor can behaviour found today be considered ‘traditional’. Not everyone is at risk. Some couples have followed Christian tenets to the letter, married without prior sexual experience, and remained faithful to one another. Some men are polygamous but do not seek women other than their wives. Moreover, even among the most sexually active people, access to formally and informally transmitted information can lead to rational reflection and risk reduction. Nevertheless, numerous constraints related to sex, gender and power impede HIV prevention.

Beyond the facts of positivist scientific-medical discourse, we must allow for the cultural freedom to regard the HIV/AIDS epidemic within the interpretive horizon of a community in order to make possible a more meaningful and authentic encounter with this deadly disease. Although cultural traditions will provide different “understandings”, the difference in cultural interpretations must not be reduced to the level of a postmodern expression of difference that fails to address the universal nature of human suffering. From an African perspective, the personal-social-cultural meaning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic should draw its inspiration from African conceptions of the human being as a person inserted within particular cultural traditions, where questions of life and death, and of social responsibility and obligation simultaneously inform and transcend ties of solidarity with the “here and now”, to include the spiritual resources of the “living-dead”, as well as the “not-yet-born” (Bujo 1998). This approach offers the possibility of validating the specificity of the African’s cultural-moral “being-in-time” (past-present-future), as opposed to the modern Western philosophical conception in which the

present-future has been privileged as the historical medium for the creation of the “new”, and in which the past represents the unenlightened, irrational world of superstition and mysticism of premodern (“traditional”) culture.

The Cartesian mind-body dichotomy is squarely at odds with the African worldview in which “life” is regarded as a manifestation of the “divine” in human form. The Cartesian legacy of Western thinking, in terms of which the autonomy of the rational person ultimately finds expression in the ambitions and achievements of the “autonomous individual”, is also squarely at odds with the African philosophy of anthropology, where the “community” of the “living dead” (and those “not-yet-born”) provide the normative framework for the African understanding of the self in relation to the “Other”. As Bujo (1998: 15-6) has pointed out:

Even those who have had only a brief contact with Africa have experienced the importance of the communal dimension. The African person lives within an extended family. This togetherness is based on a common ancestor who founded the community of the clan or tribe, which is composed of the living as well as the dead. The latter are indeed not dead; the dead are not really dead but are regarded as the ‘living dead’ [...] The relationship between those living on earth and the ancestors is very close, since the living owe their existence to the ancestors from whom they receive everything necessary for life. On the other hand, the living-dead can ‘enjoy’ their being ancestors only through the living clan community. In this way, a kind of ‘interaction’ — hierarchically ordered from top to bottom and *vice versa* — is created between the two communities. The goal of this interaction is the increase of vitality within the clan. No one is allowed to keep this vitality for oneself; everyone has to share it with the other members of the family or clan. This means that every member has to behave in such a way that all that is done contributes towards the development of life.

Given the powerful role played by the Western media in producing current representations of the African experience of HIV/AIDS (Milton 2004) it seems almost inevitable that the disease has been experienced largely in terms of the “physical body” of the AIDS sufferer. This is due to the fact that the Western media still operate within a cultural and philosophical framework that lacks the conceptual and moral ability to acknowledge the African “Other” as a co-inhabitant of modernity. As a result, African experiences of HIV/

AIDS have been represented in “traditional” society’s ahistorical and acultural terms. This Western representation of HIV/AIDS in Africa is therefore a further manifestation of Western philosophical incapacity to acknowledge the humanity (“human-ness”) of the African. Furthermore, the philosophical incapacity to acknowledge the humanity of the African person within modernity perpetuates the myth of African primitiveness, as the “natural” condition of Africa’s presence in the modern world.

Insofar as the African peoples themselves have been guided by Western representations of HIV/AIDS in Africa, the African experience of HIV/AIDS has been largely restricted to the mechanistic assumptions and ideas of the Cartesian philosophical tradition of modernity. In this regard, the suffering and death associated with HIV/AIDS have been the “private” business of an alienated individual, whose family and community have been denied the spiritual and emotional benefits of freely mourning their loss and thus coming to terms with the death of their loved ones. Given the general reluctance and fear to confront the real cause of death, all kinds of rationalisation have been used to make the HIV/AIDS-related death “acceptable” in African communities. As Janet Frohlich (2005: 357) points out,

[e]ven in death, communities remain locked in denial with all sorts of euphemisms being used to refer to an AIDS-related death: *intsibolongwane* (virus); *hlengiwe ivy vilakazi* (HIV); *ugcumsula* (sexually transmitted infections, STIs); *ubhubhane* (the destroyer). It is also common for people to refer to AIDS-related deaths as the consequence of tuberculosis (TB), of ‘being weak’, of ‘losing strength’ and of ‘bewitchment’.

The failure to confront AIDS-related death not only affects the degree of freedom and honesty to mourn the loss of one’s loved ones, but also contributes significantly to the culture of silence and shame that continues to undermine the healing process of grieving. In this regard, Frohlich (2005: 357-8) speaks of a process of “disenfranchised grief” that invariably accompanies the silence imposed on AIDS-related deaths:

Disenfranchised grief can be said to occur when the loss is not socially recognized because of certain dimensions of that loss — for the griever, stigma and isolation intensify when they block public

recognition of an AIDS-related death and consequently, too, the traditional practices and customs, the mourning rituals, which would normally channel the expressions of sorrow and communal solidarity and foster the restorative process of grieving. With deaths from AIDS not socially sanctioned, they are left cloaked in a kind of 'invisibility' and the unrecognized 'hidden grief' can paradoxically intensify the loss and subvert the grieving process. Grief is in effect displaced by embarrassment and shame, and the closed circle of silence, stigma and disenfranchised loss is perpetuated and intensified.

Given Frohlich's argument, the Cartesian philosophical framework of ontological separation between body and mind seems to offer the only possibility within modernity for dealing with AIDS-related death. From the African philosophical perspective, however, "the body" is not generally construed as something ontologically "separate", but rather as a physical manifestation of "life". For the most part, African moral thinking has its pre-theoretical roots in an ethical consciousness of life as a "vital force", linked to the pursuit of the "highest good" for the community as a whole. As Bujo (2001: 22) puts it,

the vital force is a consequence and goal of ethical conduct rather than its basis — individuals live only thanks to the community. At the same time, life is the highest principle of ethical conduct.

The search for a medical solution for HIV/AIDS while disregarding the relevant moral considerations of how to deal with human suffering and death forces the person living with HIV/AIDS to suffer in silence, and ultimately, to die "alone" — the final triumph of modernity over not only the African person's right to life, but also the African person's right to die in a meaningful and dignified manner.

If Africa is to meet the challenge of overcoming HIV/AIDS on its own terms, the response to its destructive impact of HIV/AIDS must be articulated in terms of a philosophical defence of Africa's right to life as the most fundamental of all human rights. Such a philosophical defence must therefore unfold with due acknowledgement of the devastating impact of the Cartesian reduction of the African person to the level of an object, an extension of nature, a mere statistic. More importantly, it must overcome Western modernity's conceptual inability to acknowledge that modernity, as a form of rationality, is not exclusively a "Western concept".



## 6. Conclusion

Human beings interpret their experiences of life and death from a particular cultural-historical perspective. Respecting the “human-ness” of the “Other” presupposes the validity of a moral tradition that is capable of dealing with difference in non-antagonistic terms. When there is no reason to distrust, to be suspicious or fearful of the “Other”, the possibility of a “clash of civilizations” is ruled out in principle and, despite the obvious differences in physical appearance, language, customs and traditions, we might be inclined to extend the hand of friendship to the “Other”. In such circumstances, the strangeness of the stranger may be overshadowed by a mutually shared sense of “human-ness”. If the recognition and acknowledgement of a common bond of humanness with regard to the “Other” is sparked by a sense of wonder, one may even experience the first signs of what is commonly referred to as philosophy.

The question of Africa’s future is indeed a philosophical question that is inseparably linked to the possibility of raising our level of thinking to the higher order of philosophic sagacity, as suggested by Oruka (1990: 41-51). This “higher” form of practical thinking must not be interpreted as an elitist escape from the more concrete concerns of everyday life. It is a mode of reflection that comes into play only when the more conventional explanations and understandings seem to have lost their legitimacy in the face of “new” experiences. Given the apparent loss of legitimacy of the more conventional narratives of explanation and interpretation, the practical mode of reflection seeks out new possibilities within a moral context of rational dialogue aimed at achieving mutual understanding. It is from this perspective that we seek to raise the question of Africa’s right to life. A constant awareness of the contingent nature of our “being-in-the-world” may well serve to warn us against the danger of a false universalism, which denies the possibility of reason in the realm of the uncertain, the tentative, the hypothetical, and the practical.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is challenging us to find new possibilities for defending our “right to life” in the face of the inescapable life-threatening fact that, at present, there is no cure for HIV/AIDS.

Beyond the technical advice of practising safe sex lies the possibility of a postcolonial conception of modernity in which the universality of human rationality is duly acknowledged as the first step towards dealing with HIV/AIDS. Modernity is, after all, a celebration of human reason and, for this reason, it should not only be seen as the exclusive privilege of the Western “mind”.

Finally, beyond the poverty-creating mechanisms and the ensuing destructive impact of global capitalism lies the hope that a network of international relations based on ties of human solidarity may be formed in the fight against the HIV/AIDS pandemic across the world. This hope is predicated on the truism that Africa is part of the world. An economic system that benefits only the rich industrialised countries of the West is surely not conducive to the negotiation of a better world. Africa’s right to life is therefore rooted in the belief that “another world is possible”, a world in which the HIV/AIDS pandemic will finally be acknowledged as an all-too-human tragedy.

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