The question of identity has occupied a prominent place in the post-colonial discourse of African philosophy during the final third of the twentieth century. Discussions about identity invariably raised the question whether African philosophy should be construed primarily along particularist or universalist lines. Advocates of particularism emphasized its quality as "African," while proponents of universalism wanted to focus on its characteristic as "philosophy," that is, in practice at least, as it measured up to the dominant traditions of Western philosophy in which they themselves had been trained. It is now generally acknowledged, I believe, that it is time to move beyond the question of African philosophy's identity (and, indeed, many African philosophers have already moved beyond it) and also beyond the universalism-particularism debate. While I agree that it is time to move beyond these issues and debates, I now want to revisit that debate in order to learn from it, and thus perhaps identify and encourage a new direction for African philosophy in the new millennium.

In my article "African Philosophy and the Universalist Thesis," [1997, 385-396], I argued that the universalist thesis about the nature of philosophy, adopted by a wide variety of African philosophers, is best abandoned. Since that article was written, however, two books by distinguished Ghanaian philosophers, Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu, have been published which renew the universalism-particularism discussion. These have convinced me that the particularist thesis should also be abandoned, but not before learning an important lesson from it. Both books, Gyekye's "Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience" [1997] and Wiredu's "Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective" [1996] defend at least a moderate version of the universalist thesis.

In the first part of his book, Gyekye discusses and attributes important insights to what he calls the particularist thesis; but he leans more heavily towards universalism, while at the same time seeking a compromise between the two positions. Wiredu, for the most part, is dealing with another issue. His main concern is to demonstrate the thesis that there are cultural universals. His primary focus is not on a universalist view of philosophy as such; but his cultural universalism clearly points in that direction, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly.

In this paper I shall do the following: first, I shall discuss Gyekye's attempt to do justice to both universalism and particularism. Then I shall examine Wiredu's position on cultural universals, particularly as it touches on the issue of the nature of philosophy in general, and
African philosophy in particular. Finally, I will attempt to offer some suggestions aimed at moving African philosophy, as it seeks an identity for the new millennium, beyond this questionable dichotomy.

**Gyekye on the Particularist Thesis**

Whether one takes a particularist or a universalist position on the nature of philosophy, Gyekye observes, depends on whether one sees philosophical ideas and doctrines as relative to the cultures from which they originate or whether one views them as transcending those cultures. Gyekye defines the “particularist thesis” as the view that:

the historical-cultural moorings of philosophical ideas and proposals are sufficient evidence of their particularity and of the inappropriateness of applying them universally to other cultures or societies, that those ideas — and the problems that gave rise to them — derive from experiences that are specific to cultures or historical situations, and that, consequently, philosophers unavoidably focus attention on issues and problems that interest them or relate to the experiences of their particular cultures and histories, unconcerned seriously to engage reflectively on the problems and issues of other peoples and cultures. [1997, 28]

The first thing to note about this rather cumbersome definition is that Gyekye construes the particularist thesis as one about “ideas” or “doctrines,” and perhaps also about the “problems” to which these doctrines are put forth as solutions or answers. I have observed elsewhere [1997, 389-390] that both the universalist and particularist theses may be taken as theses about either content or method or activity or even all three of these. Further, taken as theses about content, one could mean either that the truths or doctrines, or the problems themselves are universal or particular. Now it is clear that Gyekye interprets the particularist thesis as claiming that philosophical doctrines and the problems they are supposed to solve are culturally and historically particular. Put another way, Gyekye claims that the particularist thesis is about the product of philosophizing. This is evident in his reference to K.C. Anyanwu’s remark that “African philosophy is a particular instance of philosophy as a cultural product” and that “different assumptions and models of experienced reality lead to different philosophical doctrines.” [28-29] Finally, Gyekye claims that it is unfair to the particularist thesis to construe it as holding that critical rationality is not essential to philosophy, an interpretation he claims to find in Oruka. But Gyekye insists, “Neither Anyanwu nor any advocate of the particularist thesis would deny the place of rationality in human thought, African or non-African. The point of the particularist thesis is that the concept of rationality as understood in philosophy is a product of Western culture and that the way it is understood in that culture may not (necessarily) apply to other cultures, such as the African. But to say this is not, by any means, to imply a denial of the rational or logical character of African philosophy. . . .” [29]

As a thesis confined to content or product, Gyekye contends, particularism does not negate the rational and logical aspect of philosophy; and he expresses some support for it. He is also clear, however, that on the whole, he is more attracted to universalism. On the universalist thesis, Gyekye quotes Peter Bodunrin’s remark that philosophy “must have the same meaning in all cultures. . . . African philosophy is the philosophy done by
African philosophers. . . .” [29-30] Like Bodunrin, Gyekye allows that the particular issues emphasized may be culturally and historically influenced. Hence, the universalist thesis “does not deny the historical or cultural specificity of philosophical ideas or insights; but it maintains that this fact does not detract from the relevance of those ideas or insights to other cultures and times, and that they can therefore be considered universal.” [30]

While supporting the universalist thesis, however, Gyekye claims that it cannot be true without qualification. While the universalist is correct that human problems as human are universal, particularism properly recognizes “that human problems can invariably be contextualized, for they arise in, or out of, certain historical or cultural situations.” [30] The essential point of the particularist thesis, one which cannot be dismissed, according to Gyekye, is that since “the subject matter of philosophy is human experience, and human experiences differ in some respects,” we may expect that philosophies produced by those with different experiences will also differ to some degree. [31] As discussed so far, Gyekye’s position seems to me both insightful and substantially correct.

Having conceded this much to particularism, however, Gyekye chides the particularist thesis for denying “the possibility — and sometimes the necessity — of exploiting the ideas, values, and institutions of other peoples and cultures, where necessary, relevant, beneficial, and practicable, for dealing with the problems of a people.” [31] Particularism, he contends, ignores the historical importance of “cultural borrowing.” If this accusation were correct, it would be a serious flaw in particularism — but it is not obvious that particularism excludes cultural borrowing and Gyekye produces no specific documentation to support his claim.

So in what does the universality of philosophy consist, for Gyekye? What is the conflict really about? If I read Gyekye correctly, his disagreement with particularism seems to center around two issues. The first is the issue of cultural borrowing just mentioned. The second is Gyekye’s idea that contextualization presupposes a universal human nature which can be contextualized. But again it is not clear that a philosophical particularist necessarily rejects the universality of a human nature. What the particularist opposes, as Lucius Outlaw has so eloquently argued, is the presumption that the particularity of Western logocentrism is universal and therefore normative for African philosophy. [Outlaw, 1987, 9-14]

My initial response to Gyekye, then, is that neither a commitment to a universal human nature nor an acceptance of the importance of cultural borrowing entail the universality of philosophy. Lucius Outlaw is correct, I believe, in his contention that there never has been a universal philosophy if by “universal” is meant anything more than “thinking” (which certainly is not unique to philosophy). [Outlaw, 1987, 32-36].

What we have instead is various particulars proclaiming their own philosophical doctrines and methods as universal. With this I turn now to a consideration of the relevance of Wiredu’s cultural universals to a universalist view of philosophy.

**Wiredu on Cultural Universals**

Wiredu’s book is concerned first of all to argue for the existence of cultural universals. At the very beginning he bemoans the fact that during this time of unprecedented cultural interaction, there
is "increasing skepticism regarding the very foundation of this discourse; namely, the possibility of universal canons of thought and action." He attributes this to the influence of such intellectual movements as postmodernism together with the need of people who have been marginalized, "in seeking to redefine their self-identity, to insist on particulars — their own previously unrespected or neglected particularities — rather than universals." [1986, 11]

In a chapter "Are There Cultural Universals?" he presents a disarmingly simple reductio ad absurdum proof for an affirmative answer to that question. It goes like this: "Suppose there were no cultural universals. Then intercultural communication would be impossible. But there is intercultural communication. Therefore, there are cultural universals." [21] Wiredu goes on to elaborate various areas of cultural universals: biological, epistemic, and moral. One might concede all of this, however, without adopting a universalist conception of philosophy.

While not the primary theme of the book, Wiredu does state his conception of and support for the universality of philosophy. In speaking of the controversy between particularists and universalists, he notes that both sides want to take African culture and its philosophical heritage seriously; but he credits the universalists with insisting that African philosophy must be "critical and reconstructive" and use modern philosophical resources from foreign sources. The universality of philosophy means, he says, that in dealing with some issue one can "shift tactically from the traditional African framework to that of Western philosophy, appropriating whatever I find of worth in it." [36] So like Gyekye, Wiredu is primarily concerned with the issue of cultural borrowing. He claims that on the basis of human and cultural universals, the same philosophical problems occur in different cultures and that one can move back and forth between various cultures in order to arrive at the best solutions to these problems. To return to my earlier typology of various kinds of universalist views, Wiredu's position seems to be that it is the problems of philosophy that are universal. But even if there are some universal philosophical problems, surely not all or even most would seem to be of this sort.

But where Wiredu goes seriously wrong, in my view, is in his further contention that universality and with it cultural borrowing are possible because there is such a thing as "truth" in the discipline of philosophy. At any rate, Wiredu's conception of truth is both inconsistent and confusing. His well known claim that "truth" is nothing but "opinion," (a claim which occasioned dialogue between him and Oruka) as well as his attempt to link his view to the pragmatism of John Dewey, is inconsistent with his yearning for objective truth in philosophy. The possibility of cultural borrowing may indeed be related to the existence of cultural commonalities, but it is not because there is such a thing as "objective truth" in philosophy. The claims to truth in philosophy are usually attempts to universalize particulars. As John Caputo has put it so well, when anyone claims to speak for Truth, it's time for the rest of us to run for the exits. [Caputo, 1993, 145]

It must be conceded, I think, that Wiredu is by no means unaware of the danger of false universalization, that is, of the tendency to claim as universal what in reality is merely a cultural particular. Throughout the book, he cites instances of the Western tendency to proclaim its values as universal. Nowhere is this more clear than in his chapter on "Universalism and Particularism in Religion." Here he accuses Europeans coming to Africa, and
especially missionaries of a “facile
universalism” both in their negative
judgment of African religion as immature
and in their positive universalizing of the
Judaean-Christian conception of God. Here,
it seems to me, Wiredu’s rather transparent
hostility to Western Christianity blinds him
to the exact parallel in Western philosophy.
The Western missionaries he so deplores
were part and parcel of the whole
enterprise of exploiting Africa in the name
of the universalized particular of Western
civilization, including philosophy. The
outrageous remarks about Africa and
Africans made by the West’s most
“enlightened” philosophers like Hume,
Kant, and Hegel provided the
rationalization for this exploitation. And
one might add that Western missionaries
have for the most part made more progress
in recognizing the value of African culture
than have Western philosophers. It was,
after all, the Western missionary Placide
Tempels who first acknowledged that
Africans were rational and had philosophy.
Ironically, when discussing Hume and
Kant in his book, Wiredu sticks to the
issues on the canonical list of Western
philosophical problems, ignoring their
views about Africa.

In summary, I agree with both Gyekye and
Wiredu that cultural borrowing is both
necessary and desirable and that all human
beings and cultures share much in
common, but none of this requires a non-
trivial universalist view of philosophy. This
does not mean that there are no philosophical problems which cross
cultural boundaries. Just as Wittgenstein
argued that language games have no single
essence but instead exhibit family
resemblances, my view is that philosophies
are expressions of particular cultures but
also exhibit family resemblances which
allow for philosophical discussion and
even borrowing across cultures. And that
leads me to another Wittgensteinian
observation. It seems to me that both
Gyekye and Wiredu are both held captive
by a particular Western philosophical
picture, namely, that of essentialism. They
are both enamored with the notion of a
philosophia perennis, and in reading their
work one finds oneself strangely pulled
between the Middle Ages and modern
Africa. Again, it was Wittgenstein who
taught some of us to stop looking for
essences, to stop assuming that words point
to a single meaning in all the diversity of
their uses.

So if what is important for African
philosophy in the new millennium is a
recognition of the importance of “cultural
borrowing,” it would seem that neither the
universalist nor the particularist thesis will
be of particular use to African philosophy.
Before finally abandoning particularism,
however, I want to comment on what I take
as its greatest significance.

A recent article by Nicholas Wolterstorff
of Yale University has the fetching sub-
title: “The Revenge of the Particular.” In
this paper, Wolterstorff discusses what he
calls philosophy’s “Grand Project.” That
project, the dream of the mainstream of
Western philosophy from Plato to the
present, has been to grasp objective truth,
a goal incompatible with particularist
perspectives; for one must transcend the
particular in order to attain what is
universal and objective. Objectivity,
Wolterstorff notes, means being in touch
with “what’s out there” and also “being
impartial, not reflecting one or another
particular perspective on what’s out there.”

But now, and commenting only on Western
philosophy, he notes a growing “revenge
of the particular” manifested in such things
as feminist epistemology, gay literary
studies, and liberation theology. Even in
the West there is a growing protest of
various particulars against the objectivist
and universalist claims of the traditional
power centers. [Wolterstorff, 1997, 81-85]. How much more then, is such a revenge of the particular understandable as a feature of African philosophy.

I would like to suggest that much of twentieth century African philosophy has understandably, properly, and necessarily been deconstructive. African philosophy had not merely been marginalized, it was off the page entirely. By deconstruction I mean the de-centering of what is the central text (in this case a Western philosophy which denied reason to Africans) in order to re-center, to bring into the text the “other” who has been ignored. For the deconstructive phase of African philosophy, particularism has been very important. For it was particularism above all which challenged the alleged universalism of the Western particular. If Outlaw is correct, as I believe he is, in saying that the first moment in African philosophy was necessarily deconstructive — a de-centering of Western logocentrism, then he is also correct in suggesting that reconstruction is the next moment. I do not mean to suggest that the deconstructive process is complete. Deconstruction, I think, is an ongoing task. But I think it is also fair to say that if the dominant motif in the old millennium was the deconstructive task for African philosophy, then it may also be the case that in the new millennium, African philosophy will move more forcefully into a reconstructive phase. And for that reconstruction, the cultural borrowing advocated by Gyekye and Wiredu will be one important feature.

So what direction for African philosophy in the new millennium? A first answer, I think, is that African philosophy would do well to replace both universalism and particularism with pluralism. To the extent that African philosophy is prepared to move beyond deconstruction, it should feel free to draw from its own varied traditions and from whatever other philosophical traditions may prove useful in particular cases. In other words, and in a very general sense, African philosophy might well cash in its essentialist framework for an existentialist one — not in the sense of mimicking Kierkegaard, Sartre, or Heidegger, but in the basic sense of attending to the existential situation(s) in which African communities find themselves. The present conference has been a good example, I think, of this pluralism and existentialism. African philosophy need not go out of its way either to be different, to be wholly other, or to conform itself to Western norms merely to gain respectability. My recommendation leaves plenty of room for cultural borrowing. But be true to yourself; and learn also from the errors of the West, one of which has been over-professionalization. A recurrent theme in discussions among Western philosophers is that the profession has become irrelevant to the general society, that philosophers can only talk to each other.

I am fully aware that it was my friend and a great philosopher of Kenya, the late Odera Oruka, who liked to talk about professional philosophy; but it was also Oruka who went to the villages to find the sages who were not professionals. In keeping with the spirit of Professor Oruka’s legacy, African philosophy would do well to continue his effort to combine the academy with the village. The common critique in the West today is that academic philosophy has lost all touch with the village. May African philosophy not make the same mistake.
Notes and References


