From Socrates to Odera Oruka: Wisdom and Ethical Commitment

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Special Issue

Odera Oruka Seventeen Years On

Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)

New Series, Vol.4 No.2, December 2012, pp.1-22

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http://ajol.info/index.php/tp/index

Abstract

Odera Oruka's Sage philosophy project, his definition of philosophy, the method of interviewing sages, and the differentiation between folk and philosophic sages, have been discussed and criticised at length. Unfortunately, less known is Odera Oruka's work on Ethics. This is especially regrettable, as his philosophical work had two main objectives:

- The liberation of philosophy in Africa from ethnological and racist prejudices (Sage philosophy).
- The reconstruction of the dimension of sagacity in philosophy which got lost in technical and analytic language during the last decades. Philosophy became a kind of expert knowledge with specialized terminology, thereby losing its holistic outlook and practical relevance.

For Odera Oruka, who situates himself in the Socratic tradition of philosophy, philosophy is not a science in the ivory tower, but has to contribute to the betterment of the life of the people - it has to be made practical. Philosophers have to deploy the results of their thinking to the well-being of their communities. This is what he considers, following Socrates, the sagacious dimension of philosophy.

The aim of the present article is to highlight the ethical dimension of Odera Oruka's work, and to show the inseparable relationship of the Sage Philosophy project and his works on ethics, with a special focus on his concept of global justice. At the same time, the article attempts to show the relevance of Odera Oruka's work to the world philosophical discourse.

Key Words

Henry Odera Oruka, Socrates, sage philosophy, global justice, human minimum, poverty, intercultural philosophy.

"... and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting anyone whom I meet after my manner, and convincing him, saying: 'O my friend, why do you who are a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens, care so much about laying up the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation, and so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all?'"
(Socrates' Defense)[1]

Introduction

For Odera Oruka, who situates himself in the Socratic tradition of philosophy (see various references to Socrates in Odera Oruka 1990), philosophy is not a science in the ivory tower, but has to contribute to the betterment of the life of the people. The aim of the present article is to show the inseparable relationship of his Sage philosophy project and his works on ethics, with a special focus on his concept of global justice. I will try to show the importance of questions related to Sage philosophy (wisdom research) for the world philosophical discourse – as well as Odera Oruka's (still widely neglected) contribution to the debate on global justice. My over-arching objective is to open the debate on global justice to an intercultural discourse.

The article is divided into three sections. The first surveys the Socratic approach to the search for wisdom and its importance for the history of philosophy. The second introduces Odera Oruka's way to wisdom: first, in his project of Sage philosophy, where I draw parallels to the Socratic understanding of wisdom, especially under the focus of wisdom as ethical commitment; and second, in his concept of global justice as an example of ethical commitment. In my conclusion I try to open both of Odera Oruka's concepts to an intercultural approach to philosophy.

[1] Plato: *Apology*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Provided by The Internet Classics Archive. Available online at http://classics.mit.edu//Plato/apology.html

1. The Wisdom of Socrates

The virtue of wisdom has been appreciated since antiquity all over the world, and enjoys a long history as a topic in the humanities. However, during the past few centuries, as a consequence of modernity, wisdom has ceased to play a major role in academic discourse, due to a higher appreciation of technical, specialist or expert knowledge. Only recently has wisdom received renewed attention, both in several sciences and in the public sphere in general, due to various factors. Demographic and social developments (e.g. the increased life expectancy and the growing importance of old age to our societies), and the increasing disorientation in a world which is becoming more and more complex and confusing, not least as an effect of globalization, have brought wisdom back into focus. In a context in which neither traditional institutions such as family or religion, nor ideologies can offer safety and orientation any more, the experiential pattern of wisdom promises to provide the lacking guide posts.

The etymology of philosophy (ancient Greek: 'love for wisdom') is evidence that wisdom is constitutive for the very establishing of philosophy as an academic discipline in Europe. The search for wisdom and the dispute on what wisdom is or might be accompanied the self-definition of philosophy for centuries in Europe, beginning with the controversy between the sophists and Socrates/Plato. In contrast to other disciplines (like psychology), the quest for wisdom and its definition across the history of philosophy is not simply one topic among others, but reflects how philosophy understands itself at a meta-philosophical level (Ritter and Gründer 2004, 371).

The roots of the ancient Greek and occidental concept of wisdom can be traced back to the ancient civilisations of Egypt and Mesopotamia (Assmann 1991). One of the first written records on wisdom can be attributed to the Egyptian writer, Pthahotep, around 2200 B.C. But only in ancient Greece did reflection on wisdom give birth to a new academic discipline: philosophy. While the sophists claim to possess knowledge and wisdom, the philosophers - Socrates being the most outstanding example - consider themselves only as friends or lovers of wisdom. With Socrates, wisdom attains the meaning of knowledge about the limits of our knowledge, in contrast to the

sophists' pseudo-knowledge. Moreover, Socrates mentions the practical dimension of wisdom, and formulates the ethical imperative to use our knowledge for the sake of the common good.

Since (European) antiquity, wisdom has been understood to have both an epistemological and a practical dimension: to act wisely means to be able to apply the right knowledge, in order to live a good and virtuous life in harmony with the community. Furthermore, Socrates represents a fundamental shift in the main interests of ancient philosophy, a shift which is commonly called "the Socratic turn": while the Ionian natural philosophers before Socrates were mainly devoted to observations of nature and questions about the source of all beings, Socrates focused on the practical-moral behavior of his fellow men and on questions of the moral foundation of human life. While examining traditional concepts of morally correct behavior and maintaining a critical distance vis-a-vis his contemporaries, the Sophists, Socrates was searching for the universal in ethical matters. For him, no action can be evaluated as brave, just, or good as long as it has no universally accepted concept of bravery, justice and the good. For him, the primary task of philosophy is to find these concepts.

However, Socrates never claimed that he already possessed these universal concepts. On the contrary, he always assured his interlocutors that he did not have solutions, but rather knew that he did not know. But for him this kind of knowledge of one's own limits of knowledge is still higher than the predetermined pseudo-knowledge of the Sophists, who pretended to have answers, without solving the fundamental question of how a general knowledge of virtue is possible. Socrates' outlook was the beginning of a new kind of moral justification, where the cause of morality is based on human self-consciousness: a behaviour counts as virtuous only when it knows its purpose, its meaning and its target. It is a self-confident behavior, founded on knowledge. Virtue consists in the knowledge of right action and, thus, is teachable. Lack of knowledge or ignorance is the worst enemy of virtue.

But how do we define concepts or terms of universal validity? Socrates developed a method which had a major impact on the further progress of philosophy in Europe, and was named after him: the Socratic Method or maieutics (midwifery). Its basic principle is the dialogue: Socrates and his counterparts search in a dialogue of equal

partners (learners) for universal concepts. The starting point of various Socratic dialogues are traditional notions of virtues such as justice, courage, etc. In the course of the conversation, the justifiability of these notions is examined. Uncritically accepted opinions and prejudices are revealed and unmasked. The dialogue is for Socrates an indispensable condition for the development of thought in a cognitive process in which all participants are equally involved. However, results or definitions are not provided by the traditional Socratic dialogues (as they were handed down to us by Plato or Xenophon). Usually we remain doubtful and confused, like Euthydemus, who complains at the end of a conversation with Socrates, that he cannot trust his own answers any more (Xenophon 1973, IV, 2, S. 19). Socrates confines himself to sowing doubts and to promoting the birth of new ideas in an ongoing process of questioning conventional answers (like his mother, the midwife: see *Theaetetus*).

In sum, for Socrates wisdom is characterized by an awareness of the limitations or borders of human knowledge. Wisdom is the knowledge of one's own lack of knowledge. Moreover, wisdom is for Socrates practical knowledge for the betterment of the community. It is a moral-based knowledge, expressed in a virtuous and good life for the wellbeing of the community.

During the Christian late Antiquity and Middle Ages, in particular since Augustine, the meaning of wisdom undergoes profound changes and shifts from secular issues of justice, courage or good leadership, to a theological concept. The differentiation between *sapientia* and *scientia*, between an experience which is accessible only by revelation and the knowledge of secular affairs, is still influential. Later on, the Renaissance splits the concept of wisdom even further: now, each author proposes his own concept of wisdom - either as a religious phenomenon or a secular one, either as a gift of God or as a human virtue.

The progress of modern sciences in particular deepened the gap between sagacious knowledge (wisdom) and science. Locke’s famous model of the human mind as a *tabula rasa* which is gradually filled with sensory impressions implies that the *only* knowledge accessible to humans has to be a posteriori, i.e., based upon experience. This led in the long run to a strict separation between scientific knowledge and wisdom (as the “other”, “esoteric” knowledge) and banded faith and wisdom into the

realm of what cannot be verified and trusted. As a result, the typical modern equation between science and knowledge brought about the exclusion of wisdom from the canon of knowledge, and finally to its oblivion. Other forms of knowledge than the scientific approach, like mystic or religious revelations, as well as normative traditional thought, subjective life experiences, meditation practices, etc. were rejected as illegitimate sources of knowledge (Assmann 1991).

The often tense relations among philosophy, religion and sciences in the Western context is an ongoing theme of discussion in philosophy. Nevertheless, the research on wisdom is still rather marginalised in philosophy. The rare works on this topic - mostly studies on the meaning of wisdom in the history of philosophy - often include lamentations that contemporary philosophy has lost its sagacious dimension, and thereby its holistic worldview and practical relevance. In other words, Western philosophy developed in the last two centuries as a kind of expert knowledge with a specialized terminology, similar to other sciences (Waldenfels, in Oelmüller 1989, 9 ff.), and appears to be incompatible with a general representation of sagacity.

Above all, the relation wisdom-philosophy-science *in other regions of the world*, not to mention the *intercultural dimension of wisdom*, has hardly been taken into consideration. Wisdom is not only a phenomenon which is known in all human cultures, but also quite a number of cultures have even longer traditions than Europe in reflecting on sagacity. Via the reflection on myths and religion, wisdom found its way into philosophical thinking for example in Japan.

Nevertheless, in Western philosophy wisdom has a difficult standing: where philosophy is understood as an institution or discipline, i.e. as part of the system of the sciences, the ancient definition of wisdom and philosophy does not play a role any more. Modern science became the strongest challenge to wisdom, not only criticizing it, but also ultimately excluding it from the canon of knowledge and ignoring it. Other forms of knowledge, such as mystical vision, religious revelation, traditional normative knowledge, or anonymous subjective experience of life no longer apply as legitimate sources of knowledge. In Western tradition, the relationship between wisdom and knowledge, wisdom and philosophy as well as philosophy and science is

still up for debate and certainly very differently, if not contrarily defined (see Oelmüller 1989; Borsche 1995; Maxwell 2007; Gloy 2007).

It is time to reconsider the relationship between wisdom and philosophy – not only because of the unsatisfactory technical language of contemporary philosophers and the domination of expert knowledge, but, furthermore, because of a newly emerging intercultural dialogue in philosophy, which forces occidental philosophy to justify its concept of wisdom in the face of other traditions of thought.[2]

2. Wisdom and Henry Odera Oruka

One of the recent examples of a deeper exploration of the concept of wisdom, which shows a certain affinity to Socratic wisdom, is Henry Odera Oruka's *Sage Philosophy*. Henry Odera Oruka (1944-1995) was one of the most prominent representatives of African philosophy. His philosophical work is characterized by a special proximity to the reality of life of the people in his country, Kenya, and overall in Africa. The focus of his ethical works was on questions such as the following:

- What does freedom and independence mean in a postcolonial world?
- What is the situation of democracy and human rights in Africa?
- What is the moral legitimacy of development aid?

Topics such as the protection of the environment, social justice, and the quest for the relevance of philosophy today were on Oruka's agenda.

The sapiential dimension of philosophy consists for Odera Oruka mainly in the ethical commitment of the philosopher, i.e. in his or her efforts to apply concepts and theoretical tools to the benefit of the community (see Odera Oruka 1990; Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 254). The sage "... aims at the ethical betterment of the community that he lives in" (Odera Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 254). For him, philosophy as 'love for wisdom' is not a science in the ivory tower, but has to contribute to the betterment of the life of the people:

[2] See Hans Waldenfels: "Thesen zur Weisheit. Aus der Perspektive Asiens" (Oelmüller 1989, p. 9ff.) or keyword 'Wisdom' in: *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Edward Craig, London 1998, Vol. 9).

> Philosophy is an art of reasoning and provides a critical intellectual weapon and methodology for analysing and synthesising the basic problems of man, society and nature. … The main function of moral and social philosophy is to apply rigorous analytic and synthetic reason to the basic moral and social problems and help to explain or define moral good, moral evil and the requirements of a humanist social order (Odera Oruka 1997, 140).

However, the conception of contemporary philosophy in the academy is far from the Socratic understanding of philosophy, a fact that, according to Odera Oruka, has to be changed.

The Sage Philosophy project

Odera Oruka became known for his *Sage Philosophy* project (started in 1974). *Sage Philosophy*, as a reaction against the colonial prejudices of the inferiority of African cultures and the myths of African "communal thinking" (as stated for example by Placide Tempels or representatives of Ethno-philosophy like Alexis Kagame, E.A. Ruch or Leopold Sédar Senghor), attempts to identify individual philosophers in traditional African communities. Academically trained philosophers went to village communities to carry out interviews about philosophical topics (such as truth, God, and the good life) with people identified as sages by their own communities. The talks were recorded and later analyzed. According to the results of the analysis, Odera Oruka differentiates between the folk-sage (sages who uncritically report the knowledge of the ancestors) and the philosophic sage (sages who are able to evaluate the communal heritage of knowledge critically, who present their own reasonable points of view, and who are able to reject old principles on rational grounds).

Sage Philosophy's intention is set against ethno-philosophical attempts to systematize folk beliefs and present them as philosophies. *Ethnophilosophy* describes African philosophy mainly as traditional communal thinking as it can be found in proverbs, fables, special features of African languages etc. This view is reflected in expressions such as Bantu philosophy, Akan philosophy, and others. Odera Oruka himself describes the intention of his project as follows:

> The existence of the sage-philosophy refutes both the view that African Philosophy is only folk wisdom and the view that seeks to restrict philosophy only to written professional philosophy (Odera Oruka 1990, 31).

Against *Ethnophilosoph*y Odera Oruka advances the criticism in the first line that it fuses mythologies or ideologies with philosophy. So he writes in his famous article "Mythologies as African Philosophy“ (first published in 1974):[3]

> What may be a superstition is paraded as 'African religion', and the white world is expected to endorse that it is indeed a religion but an African religion. What in all cases is a mythology is paraded as 'African philosophy' and again the white culture is awaited to endorse that it is indeed a philosophy, but an African philosophy. What is in all cases a dictatorship is paraded as 'African democracy', and white culture is again expected to endorse that it is so. And what is clearly a de-development or pseudo-development is described as 'development'; and again the white world is expected to endorse that it is development - but of course 'African development'." (Odera Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 23).

For Odera Oruka, in contrast to the approach of *Ethnophilosophy*, philosophy is a critical-reflexive thought process, characterized by logical consistency and always tied to individual thinkers. The goal of his project is the liberation of African philosophy from ethnological and racial prejudices, and a clear differentiation between philosophy and myth, proverbs or folk wisdom.

Odera Oruka assumes that a large part of the pre-colonial culture and thought systems has remained intact even after the end of colonialism, and that there are people whose education and way of life is still deeply rooted in these traditions:

> … most of the ‘tribal’ cultures and thought remained intact even after colonialism. And there were people whose education and view on life were wholly or mostly rooted in this. So, I decided to select my sample from among the people considered *wise* by their own communities and who were at the same time free from the effect of Western scholarship … Such people, I believed, were genuine representatives of traditional Africa in a modern setting (Odera Oruka 1990, 6).

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[3] See H. Odera Oruka, “Mythologies as African Philosophy”. In Graness and Kresse 1997, pp.23-34. First published in *East African Journal*, Vol.9 No.10, 1972, pp.5-11.

But who is a 'wise' person? According to Odera Oruka, a person can be called wise when he or she is familiar with the cultural beliefs, norms and myths of his/her community, and if he or she is respected in this regard by the members of the said community and asked for advice. Furthermore, a wise man employs "... abstract reasoning for the understanding and solution of the basic questions of human life and nature" (Odera Oruka 1990, 36).

The men and women selected by Odera Oruka and his team were from different ethnic groups and mostly illiterate. Interviews with them were conducted on philosophically interesting questions and in their own languages. The interviews were recorded and later transliterated (see Odera Oruka 1990 and 1992). With the transfer of the conversations into the written form, the knowledge of these African wise men and women was not only accessible to a larger number of people, but was at the same time saved from being forgotten – as the famous Malian writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ warned in his speech at a UNESCO meeting in 1962: "In Africa, when an old man dies, it's a library burning."[4] Today this warning adorns the UNESCO building in Paris.

Odera Oruka's project takes an important step towards the preservation of traditional knowledge in Africa, while also contributing to an independent history of philosophy in Africa. Its reconstruction is, due to the prevailing oral tradition in large areas of Africa for centuries, facing major difficulties; or as Odera Oruka puts it,

> Given the absence of the practice of writing, it is not easy to trace who the philosophers were and what ideas they expounded. However, by talking to the living sages, it is possible to get a glimpse of what could have been the case. Besides, the thoughts of such living sages are valuable in themselves. Exposing the value of such thoughts is again one other important aim of the sage-research that we have undertaken" (Odera Oruka 1990, 36).

It is encouraging that the project of *Sage Philosophy* is not only discussed in a very lively and critical manner in Africa and beyond, but that some subsequent projects

[4] "*En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle.*" For the documentation and discussion of the famous phrase see Amadou Touré and Ntji Idriss Mariko eds. 2005. *Amadou Hampâté Bâ, Homme de science et de sagesse: mélanges pour le centième anniversaire de la naissance d'Hampâté Bâ*. Paris: Karthala, pp.56-58.

have been initiated in different regions of Africa (for example by Muyiwa Falaiye, Nigeria, see Falaiye 2006).

The objective of *Sage Philosophy*, however, goes beyond the reconstruction of pre-colonial philosophical knowledge: it also aims to make indigenous traditions fertile for the solution of today's problems in Africa, such as conflict mediation, environmental degradation, issues of democracy and social justice, or very practical issues such as family planning. The American philosopher Gail Presbey cooperated for several years with Odera Oruka at the University of Nairobi, and also conducted interviews with sages in Kenya. She writes:

> [Odera Oruka] … was interested in the philosophic sages as critical thinkers engaged in shedding light on and solving the problems of their communities, by critically drawing upon their traditions as well as practicing their own form of creative insight. A project he had just finished before his death involved interviewing sages regarding their own attitudes and the attitudes of members of their communities toward family planning (Presbey 2000, 523-524).

Presbey argues that in this regard (the practical effect of the knowledge of sages for their communities) African sages can pose a challenge to academic philosophers (Presbey 1996). This challenge is that philosophy has to be made sagacious and relevant to humanity. This is the ultimate message of Oruka's *Sage Philosophy* project. The search for the sages in our contemporary European societies would certainly be fitting for a comprehensive research project.

Odera Oruka underlines the importance of *Sage Philosophy* as follows:

> It is our conviction that both a nation and an individual can best develop only on the basis of self-generated and self-defined philosophy. This is not to discard the value of selective borrowing from other cultures and peoples. After all, borrowing is a common historical practice in all human life. But borrowing must be distinguished from ... 'apemanship'. ... We believe that the sage philosophy movement in African scholarship is best equipped to demonstrate indigenous and self-generated African philosophy" (Odera Oruka 1992, 20).

The precondition for combatting socio-economic deprivation, cultural-racial mythology and the illusion of appearances, the three obstacles of philosophy as Odera Oruka calls them (Odera Oruka 1997, 283), is an autonomous philosophical tradition,

rooted in the relevant cultural context. *Sage Philosophy* is to be seen as a part of such a liberating process. Thus whether or not Odera Oruka's project and method are similar to the Socratic way of philosophizing, (Godwin Azenabor for example opposes a comparison between the Socratic method and Sage philosophy; see Azenabor 2009, 82-83), it is undoubtedly common to both philosophers, Odera Oruka and Socrates[5], that both of them were motivated in their thinking by the strong will to contribute to the betterment of their communities.

The Concept of Global Justice

The issue of justice has a central place in the Socratic dialogues. Socrates not only analyzes justice as a personal virtue, but also points to its social and political dimensions. A comprehensive examination of what is just and what is justice takes place in the dialogue with Thrasymachus (in the first book of Plato's *Republic*). Here Socrates pursues the question of justice with three different interlocutors. Now, Odera Oruka did not make the question of justice a topic in his interviews with traditional sages in Kenya (at least as far as I know from his publications). This is very unfortunate, since the material could have provided us with an interesting basis to draw parallels to the Socratic dialogues.

Nevertheless, justice was a major topic in Odera Oruka's ethical works. However, while his *Sage Philosophy project* is well known and has been discussed quite intensely, his work on Ethics is unfortunately less known. This is especially regrettable, since, as we have already noted, his philosophical work had two main objectives: The liberation of philosophy in Africa from ethnological and racist prejudices (Sage philosophy), and the reconstruction of the dimension of sagacity in philosophy, which means the ethical commitment of philosophers, their attempts to apply the results of their thinking to the promotion of the well-being of their communities. In his own case, he dedicated a huge part of his philosophical work to ethical problems such as liberty, justice, democracy and the parental earth ethics (see especially the collected essays in Odera Oruka's *Practical Philosophy* 1990). Furthermore, he was an outspoken opponent of the Daniel Arap Moi regime. His

[5] Odera Oruka sees Socrates rather as a sage than a philosopher (Odera Oruka 1990, p.xxvii).

sudden and tragic death in December 1995 might be related to his critical articles - another possible parallel to Socrates.

While the idea of 'global justice' only started to play a role in the Euro-American debates in principle since the beginning of the new millennium, Henry Odera Oruka had already used it in 1981, about 20 years before it started to be a central topic in Europe and America. He used it in the same way as it is used in the current debates, namely, as a concept that elevates the context of the applicability of the principles of justice to a worldwide level, linking it to the responsibility of all for the enforcement of justice throughout the planet, and in doing so, for the first time, adapts the concept of justice to the current level of international linkages in all areas. As a philosopher from Kenya, and thus in a marginalized position in every respect, his work remained, unfortunately, largely unnoticed - a loss for the history of philosophy and for the current debate, as I will try to show presently.

For Odera Oruka the question of social justice is inherently one which exceeds national boundaries, a question that can only be studied and solved on a global level. Furthermore, he considered the problem of poverty not as a moral question of charity or humanitarian assistance, nor even of restitution, but as a matter of justice, and ultimately as a question of an enforceable law.

Odera Oruka's two key articles on the topic of justice are "John Rawls' Ideology: Justice as Egalitarian Fairness" (1981) and "The Philosophy of Foreign Aid: A Question of the Right to a Human Minimum" (1989).

The first article advocates for an egalitarian approach to global justice: global justice means equal distribution of the wealth of the world and the removal of all inequalities. He blames the system of capitalism itself, in particular the prevailing relations of ownership, as responsible for the emergence of extreme developmental differences in the world, and makes the interesting distinction between "socially significant personal property" and "Socially insignificant personal property":

> [Socially significant personal property] involves the sole ownership by an individual or family of such things as land factories, mines or

> capital. The possession of any of these economic means gives one an important status in productive property. (Odera Oruka 1997, 122).

Socially insignificant personal property, on the other hand, "... does not give any social power over others. It involves the possession of such things as clothes, furniture and books." (Odera Oruka 1997, 122).

Odera Oruka concludes: Socially significant personal property, which serves for the accumulation of capital, has to be restricted to an extent that the existence of all people in this world will be guaranteed.

In 1989, Odera Oruka's understanding of *Global justice* changed fundamentally. From then, he defined *Global justice* as a kind of **regulative ethical ideal,** and postulated the right to a *Human minimum* as an absolute right. The right to a human minimum is founded on the non-defeasible right to self-preservation. Since the self-preservation of a person is the first and fundamental necessity to making use of all other rights, its denial causes the loss of essential functions of a human person:

> For all human beings to function with a significant degree of rationality and self-awareness, they need a certain minimum amount of physical security, health care, and subsistence ... Below this minimum one may still be human and alive. But one cannot successfully carry out the functions of a moral agent or engage in creative activity. Access to at least the human minimum is necessary (even if not sufficient) for one to be rational and self-conscious. Without it, man is either a brute or a human vegetable. Man loses the very minimum necessary for a decent definition of human being (Odera Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 53).

A denial of the human minimum means, for the affected individual, that he or she is incapable of exercising the essential functions of a person. A 'person' is defined by Odera Oruka as a rational, self-confident, morally acting being, who is in a position to achieve a fair deal. The term 'person' includes the ability of self-determination and self-designer of one's own life. Person therefore includes qualities that go beyond the mere belonging to the species of *homo sapiens*. People who do not obtain the status of a person are no longer able to act ethically, and therefore drop out of the ethical community. They are no longer subject to the community's rules, and do not take any responsibility for their actions (Odera Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 52-53).

In his understanding of the term ‘person’, Odera Oruka apparently follows Kant, for whom the status of being a person is linked to accountability, freedom of agency and self-legislation. Persons are carriers of rights and duties (Kant 1990, 58).

A prerequisite to obtaining the status of a person is securing the human minimum. This includes according to Odera Oruka physical security, health, and subsistence. He tries to expand the definition of primary goods in his book, *The Philosophy of Liberty* (1991) to a certain degree (including knowledge), but it is still limited to life-saving factors.

Now, most of the modern ethical approaches take freedom rights as the first moral principle (see John Rawls' *Theory of Justice,* 1971; Juergen Habermas' and Karl Otto Apel's project of an Ethics of Discourse[6]). But Odera Oruka states that economic needs are always prior to political or intellectual needs! For, before somebody is able to take part in a moral or any other kind of discourse, certain basic (material) needs have to be fulfilled. Only then will a human being be able to argue and decide freely.

The right to a human minimum is, according to Odera Oruka, universally valid, that is, absolute, and every moral agent is obliged to guarantee this right to every other human being. This right is attributed to every human being by virtue of his or her being human:

> … the right to a human minimum is the basis for a justified demand by anybody that the world (not just his society) has the duty to ensure that he is not denied a chance to live a basically healthy life (Odera Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 54).

Without entrenching this basic right, every other right loses its meaning because of the loss of moral agency. But the right to a human minimum means at the same time a universal duty of every person to guarantee a certain minimum standard of living to all other human beings.

As a kind of categorical imperative, the basic principle of Odera Oruka’s ethical approach might be stated as follows:

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[6] e.g. Jürgen Habermas 1991, *Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp and Karl-Otto Apel. 1973. *Das Apriori der Kommunikationsgemeinschaft und die Grundlagen der Ethik: Zum Problem einer rationalen Begründung der Ethik im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft.* In: K.-O. Apel.: *Transformation der Philosophie*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, Vol. 2.

> Ensure that the basic needs of every human being in this world are met to the extent that he/she is able to act as a free decision maker and that he/she is able to argue for his/her interests by him/her self.

Thus for Odera Oruka, foreign Aid for economically weak nations is not a kind of charity, but a right for the poor nations to receive, and a duty for the rich nations to provide so that everybody may attain the human minimum. From the foregoing, Odera Oruka derives the following obligations at the global level:

- Property rights are rights *prima facie* and not absolute rights. There are always many matters of greater moral significance than the right to property.
- Being a *prima facie* right, it can legitimately be overridden by something of greater moral significance, e.g. by sending food to starving millions to guarantee the human minimum. Odera Oruka derives a right to development aid and suggests that rich nations must invest in a reserve pool for the poorer nations. (Odera Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 56-57).
- He proposes a principle from which external interference in the internal affairs of any nation that treats its citizens as 'subhumans' would be legitimate (Odera Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 50).

Odera Oruka suggests the redistribution of what he calls “national supererogation”.[7] It has to be redistributed in such a way that neither overconsumption damages the environment nor single individuals lose their inherent right of self-preservation. He gives three arguments to legitimize the redistribution of “national supererogation” among poor nations:

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[7] Unfortunately, Odera Oruka does not define the term "national supererogation". Supererogation (Lat. supererogatio, payment beyond what is due or asked, from super= beyond and erogare = to pay out) means the performance of work beyond what is required or expected. In ethics it indicates an act that is good but not morally required to be done. It is not an economic category, but it seems that Odera Oruka uses the term to describe 'national wealth' or the gross national product of a state, or at least that part of the GNP which goes beyond the urgent needs of a nation state. He gives a rather moral description of the term:

"The principle of national supererogation protects a state from blame if it remains indifferent to the needs of those outside its borders, however needy and starving such people may be. Yet, at the same time it inspires a nation to demand showers of praise if it decides to offer foreign aid; “supererogation” in this context is the claim that states are not obliged to aid others, but should one state decide to help another, then the donor has an absolute right to decide the terms and time of the donation" (Odera Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 48). It is a weak term which makes it difficult to apply his concept politically.

1. "National supererogation“ is based on property rights, but there are always rights that are morally more important than rights to property. Thus, “national supererogation” cannot be an absolute right.
2. No nation can prove that its territory belongs one hundred percent to it, or that it gained the territory by legitimate means only.
3. The principle of supererogation makes sense only in connection with moral agency; this means it applies only if rules of moral responsibility are respected (Odera Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 56-57).

Odera Oruka’s concept of global justice has remained sketchy, maybe due to his sudden and early death. Nevertheless, it offers some important suggestions for today's debate on global justice. With reference to the physical nature of man (bodiliness), Odera Oruka focuses on the one and only prerequisite of any other liberty. He insists that the right to a human minimum, as the basis of all other rights, has to have priority over all other rights. This is a remarkable point of view. Most of the modern ethical approaches do not take basic questions, such as that of people below the existential minimum, into consideration. Rather, they start their reflections with an individual already able to be a moral agent. The current debate on global justice revolves around the tension between freedom and equality or between particularists (nationalists) and cosmopolitans. A living wage is in the majority of the concepts already granted and not explicitly taken into consideration. But for more than one billion people, this is simply not the case. The 'oblivion of the body' might be the result of a dirth of ethical insight from industrial nations, where daily food, housing and health care are now taken for granted. From the reality and daily experience of the people in so-called developing countries, this question is necessarily raised in a different way.

Odera Orukas principle of global justice takes the bitter reality of his continent into consideration, a reality that cannot simply be forgotten in philosophical reflections. Therefore his ethical approach is characterized by a very important change of paradigm concerning the question of justice: from the paradigm of equality to the paradigm of responsibility for the other.

3. Conclusion: The relevance of Odera Oruka's Sage Philosophy and Concept of Global Justice

Africa is a continent which rarely finds attention in philosophical institutes in Europe. While Asian philosophical traditions and schools or the medieval Arabic philosophy is widely recognized and taught at universities and colleges in europe, one cannot find lectures on philosophy in Africa.

There are many reasons for this kind of ignorance. It can partly be attributed to colonial and racist prejudices that have circulated for over 200 years, such as Hegel's assertion of Africa as a continent without history (Hegel 1955, 216) or Lévy-Bruhl's assertion of a "primitive mentality" among Africans incapable of higher intellectual achievements (see Lévy-Bruhl *La mentalité primitive*, 1922), making it difficult for European scholars to pay attention to Africa and its philosophic traditions. Another reason for this dirth is the lack of knowledge about Africa and its intellectual history. The main reason, however, is the marginalization of Africa in the international arena, which also has an impact on the academy. The impact becomes obvious in a certain kind of "institutionalized ignorance" towards the work of social theorists from Africa. The fact that the views of Henry Odera Oruka remain at the periphery of the world philosophical discourse is not due to the relevance of his arguments - as I have tried to show above -, but rather to the poor material conditions for academic work in many African countries (funding, publication opportunities, participation in international conferences, scholarships and other requirements for academic work).

Philosophical concepts do not emerge in a specific historical, cultural, linguistic and political context (just to name a few factors, which contribute to the formation of the specific content and methods) alone, but also under certain financial and technical conditions, which are anything other than of philosophical nature. Nevertheless, material conditions are a relevant factor in respect to the question, whether a concept will be noticed in the international community of philosophers or not. For the value of a philosophical argument alone, it is irrelevant where it was developed. However, for its acceptance and actual implementation in the discourse, the place of its origin is unfortunately quite considerable - if not decisive. Ignorance about Odera Oruka in the debates on global justice today can mainly be explained by the fact that he

philosophized from the periphery under very limited opportunities to publish and distribute his ideas. Most of his articles and books were published in Kenya, which makes them difficult to access in Europe.

However, both *Sage Philosophy* and the global justice concept provide interesting ideas for the international discourse. Let me start with the global justice concept.

Odera Oruka underlines in his approach, that human beings need, as a precondition to obtain the status of a moral agent, first of all, the meeting of physical needs. To act as a moral agent requires more than simply staying alive: it requires a certain degree of *de facto* freedom (material resources included). Odera Oruka points out that even the right to life loses its normative force if at the same time the right to minimal conditions under which life and the use of freedom rights will be possible is not recognized! Accordingly, Kant's right to freedom (the basis of today's Euro-American discourse on justice) has to be criticized on the ground that the human rights cause of action is not expanded in terms of the material conditions to exercise freedom. This is a shortcoming, which clearly has to be overcome in favor of an extension of subsistence rights.

If people are not able to dispose of any material resources, a sufficient resource ownership moves to the rank of a freedom permitting condition. In this case, a sufficient resource ownership becomes a condition for right, freedom and human dignity, and proves to be one of the basic goods. Self-determination requires the provision of the opportunity to stay alive, and the availability of options and alternatives. In this respect, a link between the material aspect of human existence and freedom rights is essential. The human right to self-determination, to live a life according to one’s own ideas, the right to be respected as ‘an end in itself’, constitutes a legal basis for a claim to be provided with social services - even services that go beyond subsistence. A life that follows the tracks of misery and struggle to survive will take place without one's own participation in it.

What is more, if the value of the right to freedom disappears in a state of destitution, our ethical and political self-understanding loses its natural law core. Odera Oruka pointed this out early. His thoughts deserve to be integrated into the current discourse

on global justice, from which the material basis of global justice sometimes disappears from view.

The main idea of Sage Philosophy has a relevance going beyond the African context: if we refer back to Socrates and Odera Oruka - who are certainly separated by more than 2,000 years of cultural history, but, at the same time, share certain points in their approach to philosophical and social issues - the lesson from their teachings is, that it is important to make philosophy practical. One way of doing this could be to find the sages of our societies today and to give them a voice and a greater weight in our respective communities. The other way is to apply our philosophical tools to the ethical and political issues of our time – instead of dealing mainly with issues from the history of philosophy (history of philosophy is without doubt the strongest discipline in our institutes of philosophy, both in research as well as in teaching). The third measure is to open philosophical discourse to concepts from different regions of the world. Culturally, socio-economically, politically and historically different worlds lead to very different questions and problems - but also to different answers to the same questions. In this respect, a debate on ethical issues with global relevance has to be opened to an intercultural approach, and has to take the experiences of different contexts into account. With special reference to ethical norms and principles with a claim to universal validity, the following challenge of an interculturally oriented approach to philosophy has to be taken into consideration: "... do not consider a philosophical argument as well founded, which has been developed by people of a single cultural tradition only." (Wimmer 1996, 93).

Debates on global justice or on the issue of wisdom cannot and must not be conducted without the voices of authors from Africa, Latin America and other parts of the world - otherwise, the discussion remains a regional and hegemonic one.

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