

AFRICAN PHILOSOPHERS ON GLOBAL WEALTH REDISTRIBUTION

Gail M. Presbey, University of Detroit Mercy, U.S.A.

A Needed Dialogue Between Philosophers and Economists

Philosophers in Africa have been on the defensive for quite some time. They have been told that philosophy is irrelevant, or a luxury, on the continent. Within academia, philosophy departments are cut or never emphasized in the first place. Some of this criticism, I think, is just another version of cutting out the humanities in favor of the sciences and other fields more directly related to jobs, a reductive move that is also on the rise in the U.S., Canada and Europe as well as Africa.

Such stereotypes of the dreaming, do-nothing philosopher can be found thousands of years ago, in Aristophanes' satire of Socrates in *The Clouds*. Such perceptions continue. In a second-year student paper here at University of Nairobi, a student compares John Muir's environmental philosophy with that of H. Odera Oruka. The student explains, "Compared to John Muir, Odera Oruka is seen to have fallen short where it mattered most. Ethical thought without corresponding political action is of no avail." Muir's love of nature was translated into the founding of the Sierra Club, which actively works to protect the environment. In contrast, what has Odera Oruka done? Held a few conferences, wrote and edited a few books – all words, of course.¹ This is the kind of argument that can lay low the most accomplished of academics, including ourselves, probably.

Odera Oruka seems an unlikely target for criticisms of irrelevance. Certainly he did not indulge in ivory-towerism; he felt passionately about the plight of common people and the poor, and was ready to challenge global systems that perpetuated such mistreatment. Philosophers like Odera Oruka have responded, not only because they were challenged by skeptics to do so, but because living in this world with one's eyes opened to reality, one cannot help to see suffering and injustice, and feel compelled to do something about it.² But the question is always, how best to respond? We can imagine that philosophers, like so many others, can engage themselves in causes in their spare time, as do any jobholders. But the challenge is, how to do so fruitfully as a philosopher, not just as a citizen? What special skills can the philosopher bring to this situation?

Lansana Keita wrote an essay, which Odera Oruka included in his Sage Philosophy book that could be interpreted as a challenge to the Sage Philosophy project. Keita states, "If the pursuit of research in traditional African thought is to serve the narrow purpose of proving to others that 'Africans knew how to think consistently before colonial times,' and that 'African world views were not inherently irrational,' then it is difficult to see how this debate could have any great impact on the current transformations taking place in African society."³ Keita suggests that while academic debates such as this can be afforded in affluent European universities, African universities should ideally be pursuing a more practical goal. It is a mark

of Odera Oruka's open-mindedness that he takes his critics seriously. In fact while founding the study of Sage Philosophy, he himself has not omitted his own critics. I think that the reason he includes Keita in his collection is because he thinks that Keita has a valid criticism.

So, what does Keita think that philosophers should do instead? As he explains, "The theoreticians of philosophy in an African context must attempt to construct a modern African philosophy with the notion that its formulation would be geared towards helping in the development of a modern African civilization."⁴ Keita is already convinced that Africa must become modern and technological, and not turn "backward" to looking at traditions unless it is to help one to go forward. Such presuppositions permeate most literature on development and was the reigning ideology in the development field for many decades, especially the 1950s to the 1970s. But Keita thinks that technology alone is not neutral and not always helpful. Instead there is a need for philosophers to, "assist in the constant discussion of the optimal set of value judgments and cultural assumptions that social individuals must make to take the fullest advantage of the sum of scientific knowledge available."⁵

Keita saw the philosopher as someone engaged in critical analysis, and therefore "less paradigm-bound than colleagues in the social sciences, more inclined to see how the particular fits into the universal – to see the whole picture." For these reasons Keita thought of the philosopher as not bound to one narrow discipline, but instead engaged in studying "economic theory, political theory, historiography, anthropology and the other sciences of human behavior."⁶

That Odera Oruka takes Keita's challenge to heart is seen in his essay first published

in 1989, "The Philosophy of Foreign Aid: A Question of the Right to a Human Minimum." Seeing the philosopher as an ombudsman of sorts, he agrees that economic theories should not be left to the economists. As he explains at the beginning of his essay,

A few cautionary remarks are necessary if this paper is to limit the severe censure that it is likely to attract. These remarks are particularly aimed at specialists in the field of economics. In modern times it appears that mainstream professional economists treat their subject as a special aspect of 'positive science.' Taken in this sense, economics as a subject becomes what John Keynes described as 'a body of systematized knowledge concerning what is' – i.e. economics becomes one of the pure objective empirical sciences. And as a pure empirical science economics is seen as a subject which philosophers are too innocent to discuss.⁷

But Odera Oruka goes on to note that some economists also admit the normative aspect of their discipline. It is not only about "what is," but also "what should be." Indeed, in other works, Keita has argued that economics can never be as strict as the natural sciences, because there is always a normative aspect to human economic choices which makes accurate prediction impossible.⁸ This is where Odera Oruka foresees his niche in the discussions regarding development. He will leave the discussion of 'positive economics' to the economists, but will himself utilize the findings of positive economics "for recommending ethically appropriate actions and the rational reorganization and redistribution of resources."⁹ In the essay, he says he will concentrate on the issue of foreign aid,

something he considers in the realm of normative economics. And here he argues that “experts in economics should not close the door to the non-experts, for the subject is too important in the everyday life of everybody to be left simply to the monopoly of the experts.”¹⁰

Odera Oruka’s Arguments of the 1970s Challenged and Changed in the 1980s and 90s

But Oruka’s 1989 essay “The Philosophy of Foreign Aid: A Question of the Right to a Human Minimum,” is not the first and only time that Oruka has addressed economic issues, and he is also not the first philosopher to do so. John Rawls’ famous book, *A Theory of Justice*, while ostensibly about justice, is also very much about income distribution, and therefore about economics. Odera Oruka was one of many philosophers worldwide who wanted to follow the implications of the theory for the continued colonial (and post-colonial) legacy of income accumulation for northern industrialized countries, and further impoverishment of southern countries.

Charles Beitz was one of the first to use Rawls’ ideas to argue for international income redistribution. According to Beitz, Rawls was wrong to think that economic redistribution could be done on a national level. Rawls imagined that uneven distribution of natural resources over the planet was like uneven distribution of talents among individuals, and so not subject to redistribution. Beitz rejected this comparison and argued that Rawls’ experiment (of rational agents choosing behind a veil of ignorance) must take place on an international level.¹¹ Would one let Ethiopians starve, for example, if one realized that one might be an Ethiopian oneself?

Odera Oruka’s approach was different. He argued that Rawls’ set-up allowed for too large a gap between the rich and the poor. Even if all people’s basic physical needs were met (a requirement for the Rawlsian set-up), the continued existence of riches amidst humble mediocrity would have two negative effects. First, disparities of wealth would carry over into other rights such as political rights. Illustrating his point with a futuristic reverie, he wonders if people on a certain planet who lived a simple but comfortable life, would have the same rights as the super-rich among them who could afford life-extending technology, living several times as long as those of humbler means. Certainly, since their lives were longer, they could practice free speech, run for office, and practice other rights to a greater extent than those with shorter lives.¹²

Here, Odera Oruka’s criticisms of Rawls follow those of Joel Feinberg, who also argues that the rich can more easily practice rights such as right to a fair trial, since they could afford good lawyers.¹³ But Odera Oruka applies the same insights to the international scene, arguing that his futuristic scenario was in fact very close to the current set-up, where lack of basic medical facilities and sanitation for the poor reduces their lives drastically, while even the middle classes of many industrialized northern nations can get the basic care that will ensure they survive more routine ailments. Indeed, many of the current rich can afford to fly abroad for expert care, increasing their lives dramatically over the average age of Africans.

But Odera Oruka’s second point was that, in a world of class distinctions, the poor, even when having basic needs met, will not be given the same respect as those with larger funds. He later gives Kenyan examples of how “little people” (with little

money) are abused by public servants who make way for the rich in need of assistance.¹⁴ Therefore, continuing disparities that Rawls imagines are harmless, are not to be tolerated, due to the harm done to personal dignity.

Despite Odera Oruka and others' calls during the seventies for a closer economic equity of all people globally, the opposite resulted. The gap between rich and poor grew larger. Not only was the socialistic call for greater economic equality ignored, but even the duty to fill people's basic needs was questioned in theory and practice. Philosophers like Ayn Rand and Garrett Hardin provided the ideology for the actions of Reagan-Thatcher economists, who suggested that the poor must rather starve and die than become perennial charity cases for those who have riches. Years of Cold War military spending caused the U.S.S.R. to collapse, and the world lost a key example (despite its many shortcomings) of actually existing socialism. Economists argued that governments had to cut social spending on education, health and welfare, destroying an already precarious social safety net. By the late 1980s and 90s, we find Oruka battling against the free market capitalists, arguing that there is a moral argument for ensuring that all the world's peoples have their most basic needs met (a "moral minimum"). Gone are the early days of idealism when basic needs were not enough; no longer does he appeal for equality of economics and social status. The fight is more dire now, it is between survival or starvation. Oruka will now consider himself lucky to get a basic minimum – exactly what he argued was inadequate in the seventies.

The Context of the 1980s - 90s Debate

Ayn Rand, the philosopher of capitalism and defender of selfishness as a virtue,

argues that we have a necessity only to help others in an emergency, and only for a short while. When the ship sinks, yes, we should try to save drowning passengers. But once the person is ashore, what if they now tell you of their chronic illness, their underemployment? Rand suggests that once to shore, your duty to that person is finished. Poverty is a misfortune, but not an emergency, she states. She thinks that everyone would agree to this limited moral obligation. After all, we all have busy lives. We can't put our own life plans permanently on hold, as we cater to others' needs.¹⁵ But of course this explanation is too narrow. Poverty can kill as can any emergency. Poverty, since it is deep-seated, needs sustained effort to be turned around. Rand's temporary sacrifice, a "quick fix" based on temporary individual effort, will not do the job. And the ways in which others are enriched at the expense of the poor shows that work to alleviate poverty is not optional: failing to do so means complicity with injustice.

Odera Oruka personally tackled the arguments of Garrett Hardin, who was opposed to food banks which would serve as emergency food sources during famines. He wanted food banks replaced, not with a more in-depth poverty alleviation plan, but rather, with starvation. Those who live in arid regions, with poor soil, or overtaxed fertile land, Hardin suggested, should die off now; because if they were artificially saved by the arrival of food aid, they would only multiply, to exacerbate the problem a generation later. In his essay, "Parental Earth Ethics," Odera Oruka charges that "One problem with Hardin's thesis is that it is given as if there are no debts or common wealth between the boaters and the swimming millions."¹⁶ The possibility that those about to starve are actually owed something by those unwilling to help them is not imagined by either Rand or Hardin. But in reality, many of the poor die because the rich were so stingy that they did not

give the poor their due. The poor die in slums because their landlords refuse to invest in bringing the buildings up to safety codes. Workers die in accidents because employers will not spend the needed funds for safety devices. Odera Oruka tries to prove the existence of a debt like this between the rich and the poor in his essay on the moral minimum. If people of the rich northern nations owe the fulfillment of basic needs to those of the poor south, then choosing not to help them is not a moral option.

Such an important topic as moral obligation to all living persons has been addressed by several philosophers in addition to Odera Oruka. Perhaps the most well-known is Peter Singer, who claims that we must all stop and help others in dire need as long as it does not greatly inconvenience ourselves. For example, who would deny the obligation to save a stranger from drowning if the only inconveniences are taking a few minutes of one's time and getting one's clothes wet? Since there are no geographical boundaries to this moral obligation as long as our actions can be effective at a distance, those of us in the rich northern countries have no choice but to adopt a simple lifestyle and devote all excess funds to poverty alleviation. After all, people in the world are greatly suffering due to starvation, and lack of education and medical services. In the meantime, those well-off use the funds that could alleviate these dire problems on trifles for amusement.¹⁷ This utilitarian argument that aims at the greatest good for the greatest number has inspired other philosophers, such as Carlo Filice, who argues that all educated persons with access to information on political conditions in the world, have the moral obligation to try to prevent atrocities, or to stop them once they have begun.¹⁸

The problem with the utilitarian approach is that it is considered a philosophy of altruism by philosophers such as Ayn Rand. For her, forced sacrifice of self for the greater good of the whole violates the individual, and eliminates freedom. So, the other side of the debate will remain unconvinced of the duty to help others.

From a different, Lockean perspective, Hillel Steiner has argued that just distribution of wealth entails egalitarian allocation of natural resource values amongst all people of the globe. He notes that Locke stated that we have "duties to acquire no more than an equal portion of such [raw natural] resources, leaving (as Locke put it) 'enough and as good for others.' " If this was followed, there could be no such thing as homeless or resourceless people. The position of the proletarian, being born into this world with nothing but its labor power to sell, goes against Lockean notions of property.¹⁹ Steiner cites several philosophers working on ideas of a global resources tax that would carry out the implications of this understanding of limited property rights.²⁰

Similar arguments on limited property rights were made by Catholic popes. For example, in 1931, in *Quadragesimo Anno*, when Pope Pius XI argued against socialism and in favor of the private ownership of property, he added an emphasis on the social purpose of property that emphasized the right of all people to use the goods of the earth. By 1961, Pope John XXIII had realized that one could not rely upon individual property owners to carry out the redistribution of their own property according to social need, and so he supported state intervention which would, through taxation, provide necessities for the poor. In 1967, Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio* criticized an international neocolonial situation brought about by so-called "free trade."

He emphasized the “duty of solidarity” between rich and poor, saying that every person is a part of the global problem of “unequal distribution of the means of subsistence originally intended for everybody to use and enjoy,” and recommended “expropriation by governments of unused or poorly used estates or those which brought hardship to peoples or countries.”²¹

Odera Oruka himself was a practicing Catholic, and was schooled by Catholics in his youth. But, like many other philosophers, he did not choose to base his arguments on papal authority. As Fred Kammer explains, the message of Catholic documents on social teachings have been largely ignored, among other reasons, because “in general, authoritative statements – whether from church or government – have less attraction today...” which is “convenient,” because, their message may be disturbing or uncomfortable.²² Despite the Church’s proclamations that private property must be shared, this often ends up as nothing more than an appeal to individual conscience, and acts of charity interpreted as voluntary supererogation. National programs for the benefit of the poor are dismantled, perhaps in part due to Catholic voters and other Christians unaware of any obligations their faith may make on them. Since socialism is denounced, many remain unaware that their property rights might be considered anything less than absolute. The transition from “great documents” to action is further hampered by the same church’s prohibition of its clergy’s involvement in concrete political movements.²³

Odera Oruka and fellow African philosopher Segun Gbadegesin chose not to follow the above lines or arguments. In

his essay “Philosophy and Humanism in Africa,” Oruka claims that what Africa needs is critical and dialectical philosophy, which would arrive at tentative conclusions, and experimental projects to improve Africa. He argues that Africa does not need ethno-religious solutions which tend toward dogmatism. He sees the main function of moral and social philosophy as applying rigorous analytical and synthetic reasoning to the moral problems of the day, by postulating alternatives “to the current prevailing and dehumanizing ethics of political might.”²⁴ Odera Oruka and Gbadegesin will both argue in favor of the moral obligation for the rich to provide basic assistance to all the world’s poor from the U.N. Charter, emphasizing the human rights aspect, a decidedly deontological approach.

We could say, in Oruka’s case, that he chooses to not become involved with church groups advocating social change, or to highlight and advocate political parties on the domestic scene. Instead, his emphasis on philosophy and international politics means that he aims his message at students (in the university context) and educated Kenyans (though his many commentaries in Kenyan newspapers) and persons and institutions abroad. According to Alamin Mazrui and Willy Mutunga, under Moi and KANU’s rule in Kenya, victims of the dreaded Preservation of Public Security Act (who are imprisoned without charges or trial) have mostly been “members of the middle class, (academics and university students, lawyers, journalists).”²⁵ They take this to be a sign that it is the middle class that is the most involved in the struggle for change in the country; if that is so, we can understand why Odera Oruka thinks a battle of ideas can have results both in Kenya and abroad.

Odera Oruka and the Human Right to Life

That there is a need for a redistribution of the earth's resources is a fact for which Odera Oruka finds copious evidence. As he commented when he wrote in the mid 1990s, the richest twenty per cent of people in the world make 66 times as much money as the poorest twenty per cent. Now the figure has grown to 77 to 1.²⁶ But on what grounds shall redistribution take place? Odera Oruka looks at the arguments that redistribution should be seen as retribution for past wrongs, but he rejects that approach, for not all poverty in the world can be directly linked to a colonial legacy. Indeed, the latest UNDP statistics show Ethiopia to be one of the poorest countries in the world, and yet it has a proud history of successfully fighting colonialism, being occupied by Italy for only five years. How could it demand rectification from the colonial powers in amounts large enough to cure its poverty problem? Likewise, there are some rich countries, Odera Oruka notes, that did not take part in colonialism. Should they then be exempt from income redistribution?

Odera Oruka rejects the use of international aid as an adequate basis for redistribution. Firstly, he is suspicious of much aid. It ends up helping the donor country's economy more than the recipient. Indeed, much of the recent literature critical of development projects has exposed how development aid can be manipulative or harmful. But the worst thing about development aid, according to Odera Oruka, is that the donor country considers itself to be involved in an act of supererogation. He is concerned that the nations which receive aid or loans "often feel (or are made to feel) a sense of self-pity."²⁷ He describes feelings of humiliation that come from receiving aid. He therefore concludes that rich countries

must pay, but not as an act of supererogation, but as an obligation. Only if they are obliged to pay out of a sense of duty can the recipient gain self-respect. He then puts forward his argument that since human beings have a right to life, then humans are within their rights to demand that others who have a surplus must fill their minimum needs. He explains how this obligation transcends national borders. Those who live in another country cannot argue that their obligation to fill the minimum needs of others stops at their national borders, because the right to live belongs to all humans.

If a basic minimum were guaranteed for all people, then poor countries would not feel pressured to accept unfair business arrangements. Odera Oruka asks us to imagine a billionaire who finds mineral deposits in Chad. The billionaire asks the starving villagers if they will sign over mineral rights in exchange for food and water. Of course they will accept the deal, how could they not? As Odera Oruka states, "in actual practice there are affluent nations which use their wealth and power to make deals with small starving nations, deals which are grossly unfair to the latter."²⁸

Odera Oruka concludes his essay by defending himself against those who might think that his demand for a human minimum, funded by rich countries, is impracticable. His rejoinder is that his plan is indeed possible. He argues that the "wasted consumption" in the rich countries alone could alleviate much of the poverty in other nations. He ends by supporting the movement in development which focuses on "basic needs." Indeed this is an important direction. The basic needs approach insists that development means not only growth but also "persistent and measurable progress and social

improvements for the poor and resource-weak groups.”²⁹ Basic needs are in three basic categories: 1) food, shelter, clothes and daily necessities; 2) access to public services like drinking water, sanitation, health and education; 3) ability to participate in, and influence, local community and national politics. The approach also explains that the poor are stuck in a poverty circle, because they don’t have the resources to change the mechanisms that keep them in poverty. Also, they are often divided among themselves, and up to ten per cent are chronically ill, so it is difficult to act collectively. The conditions that produce poverty interact with each other.

In this context, what can be done to alleviate poverty? Those who advocate the Basic Needs approach suggest that inexpensive productivity improvements would increase the buying power of the poor. The effects of their increased buying power, and therefore demand, would then stimulate the economy. Unfortunately, many development analysts are suspicious of this approach; perhaps it doesn’t fit their usual grand-scale and modernizing plans. However, John Martinussen thinks that such an approach might not be as marginalized as one might think. For example the World Bank, in 1990, called for productive use of the poor’s labor (labor-intensive technologies), access to basic social services, and direct aid to those worst off.³⁰

I find Odera Oruka’s insistence on filling basic needs a good approach. I only wish that he would emphasize, in his brief allusion to the basic needs approach, that it focuses on encouraging employment opportunities in small scale businesses and the informal sector. It is perhaps this experience of employment that could bring about the self-respect with which Odera Oruka is concerned. Also, the Basic Needs

Approach emphasizes not only that “aid” (or as Odera Oruka would prefer it. necessary filling of people’s rights) is given, but that the “aid” is used in a certain way to reach goals which are much differently posited than the earlier development plans which emphasized heavy industrialization.

However, would calling the funds needed for the Basic Needs Approach something like “required response to human rights” rather than “aid” at all change the effect the funds would have on the economy? It could be argued that many African countries’ economies already mainly operate by “the acquisition of resources outside the country for redistribution inside,” as Senegalese economist M.L. Diallo suggests.³¹ While this redistribution is according to Odera Oruka’s suggestion, it doesn’t result in any self-reliance but only continued dependence, and the redistribution never makes it to those who need it most within the African country. Chabal and Daloz argue that certain people within African countries gather their riches from the dependency situation between their countries and those which give aid, resulting in a reluctance to stop the dependency situation.³² Gbadegesin’s argument that focuses on providing job opportunities provides a link missing in Odera Oruka’s account regarding how redistribution will make lasting changes.

Gbadegesin and the “Right to Work”

I would like now to look at a second philosopher who has felt the need to bring philosophy, especially African philosophy, away from the lofty plains of metaphysics, or annals of history, to the contemporary problems facing his country. Segun Gbadegesin, in his book *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Concepts and Contemporary African Realities* (1991), tries to create a bridge between the

past and the present, suggesting that we can only understand the problems facing Nigeria today if we look into the beliefs, values and perspectives of people in the society. Interestingly, he was writing around the same time that Odera Oruka wrote his essay on foreign aid. In the second part of the book he turns his attention to Nigeria's political, social, economic and cultural problems. His main concern is that Nigerian capitalists are raping the economy. They lack initiative and enterprise, and so they live off of the work of others. He sees solutions to the problem as being: self reliance; true political and economic freedom; and the downplaying of the significance of ethnicity. Since Gbadegesin has clarified that the problem he sees is on a national level, it makes sense that the poverty he sees in Nigeria can be solved on a national level. He doesn't speak here of looking for international sources of wealth, but rather of sharing the existing national wealth more equitably. This is certainly feasible because Nigeria's oil gives it the potential to be one of the richest countries in the world. However, his main emphasis is not on redistribution of wealth, but rather on redistribution of employment opportunities, and pay based on one's worth. Since his complaint about the ruling bourgeoisie in Nigeria is that they don't work, his solution deals with giving people the opportunity to work.

In Nigeria, Gbadegesin notes various versions of the attitude that work is a curse. Some people are frustrated because despite hard work, they do not get out of poverty. Yoruba songs consider work as a cure for poverty. They assert that loitering and idleness are not helpful and not to be tolerated. But back then, the context was not exploitative. Now the system favors parasitism over useful labour. Gbadegesin is sympathetic to the notion of work as a "curse" due to an unjust social-economic

system. Because of this, it would be unreasonable to think that poverty can be alleviated by individual work-effort. How, in this larger context, is one supposed to be able to continue to have a positive attitude toward working hard?

Like Odera Oruka, Gbadegesin notes that poverty involves not just low remunerations, but also low respect. One is not taken seriously as a person.³³ But as if these problems with work are not enough, there is the further problem of unemployment. No matter how bad it might be to have a crummy job, it's worse to have no job at all. These concerns bring Gbadegesin to discuss unemployment and the right to work. Gbadegesin states, "Work is the respectable means to meeting the basic needs of life; therefore, there should be a guaranteed right to it for all those who wish to work."³⁴ The UN Declaration of Human Rights says: "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment."

How shall we interpret this right? Does this mean that the State must provide means of employment for people? Gbadegesin thinks so. A is entitled to X, which means X is due to A. Who can provide the jobs, other than the State? As he explains, "The right is held against the society in its corporate existence as represented by the government."³⁵ Or, does it merely mean that the State cannot interfere with a person's right to work? He thinks this version of the right would be too weak. Nozick argues that all rights entail is the giving of permission. Gbadegesin thinks this is insufficient. There will be no obligation on the part of the grantor. But then the right would be pointless. It would leave people helpless. However Gbadegesin agrees that there is a problem, in that the meaning of the right to work, if

pressed fully, would conflict with the right to property.

How could the right to work be filled? There are four ways to help the unemployed, with varying degrees of state involvement:

- a) making land and capital available to them to engage in farming;
- b) making capital and other factors of production available to them for self-employment in other productive sectors;
- c) giving them a job in paid employment requiring no formal education and training; and
- d) giving them formal education and training to prepare them for, and absorb them into, paid employment in skill-requiring jobs.³⁶

Here, Gbadegesin admits that there is a feasibility problem. Nigeria has a labor force of 80 million, and so the government can't supply capital for them all. Still he insists that the state must provide the capital, based on its function, which is to assist the full development of persons. To say that workers have no choice but to work for capitalists who own capital is to continue class divisions.³⁷ He thinks that the government can fulfill its obligation in three different ways: 1) nationalize the means of production and become the sole supplier of jobs; 2) create conditions for jobs in the private sector by deregulation; or 3) offer jobs to those who can't find them in the private sector.

But what about the problem of countries where there is a right to work, which have low productivity because of low worker motivation?

Gbadegesin states that just because one has a right doesn't make it absolute. Because one has a right to freedom does not mean that one cannot be put in jail.

The right to work would not mean one could not be fired.³⁸

Gbadegesin concludes by insisting that development must focus on the social, economic, and political. He is worried that accepting the "invisible hand" of the West will result in traditional African values being swept aside. He insists that we must find a way to coordinate feelings of human welfare and fellow-feeling with development goals of productivity. We need "development with a human face."

Evaluation and Conclusion

I find it interesting that both Odera Oruka and Gbadegesin, when looking at the problems of their countries, turn to the *UN Declaration of Human Rights* for their solutions. Their concrete suggestions follow the deductive conclusions based on the definition of a human being and the human rights that follow from that description. They do not begin in the economic realm, with economic feasibility as their first goal. They start with what "ought" to be, and then try to figure out how to make that "ought" happen. It is therefore still a question as to whether economists and philosophers will ever be able to see eye to eye on these issues. Will one learn from the other? Or will they continue to not be able to understand each other?

Problems with Gbadegesin's project have to do with the contrast between the ideal role of the state, and its actual condition. Certainly, if we could count on states to make decisions with the common good at heart, then we could trust the state with a larger role in development. However, what's happened to many development economists in the last twenty to thirty years is that they have become more skeptical of the state's ability to administer development programs fairly and

effectively. Gunnar Myrdal has criticized the “soft State,” one that cannot implement policies that go against the interest of the bureaucracies or powerful groups in society. While the state “as it should be” could perhaps be an engine of development and/or redistribution, the state as it is (in so many countries), Myrdal suggests, is not capable of doing so.³⁹

Of course in focusing on the state the daunting problem of corruption cannot be avoided. But many have suggested it can be effectively tackled. Larry Diamond explains that in Nigeria, it is a mistake to assume that corruption problems are due to a political culture which accepts the practice. Indeed, among politicians there is a disjunction between word and deed. Politicians and public servants know all too well the norms of democracy and “incant them like a mantra.” Yet they do otherwise. The people, likewise, know they have been betrayed, but are only too glad to join in the scramble for something for themselves. The recurring problem, according to Diamond, has to do with “perverse incentives.” There are many opportunities to low-risk riches through corruption (especially in a government run with oil money), while entrepreneurial opportunities are limited and chancy. Since “ethical revolutions and social mobilizations will not change these underlying realities,” these incentives to wrongdoing must be changed by the introduction of punishments for corrupt dealings, overseen by a council independent of government influence. Considering that Nigeria has an active associational life, a pluralistic society and an inquisitive press, there is hope for improvement.⁴⁰

The fact that both Odera Oruka and Gbadegesin put forward solutions that depend on the Human Rights Charter, and therefore the ability of the U.N. or the

individual governments to uphold and implement them, means that like-minded philosophers must tackle this larger feasibility issue regarding the capacity of actually existing states. Only by addressing feasibility issues as well as moral issues can philosophers make practical contributions to issues of poverty alleviation.

The inability of corrupt states to implement job creation as well as fill basic needs is complemented by recent economic ideology which emphasizes privatization and the reduction of the state role in the economy. This trend is part of the background of why job creation and basic needs projects suddenly seem so radical and almost impractical, when they were more routinely accepted as feasible and desirable in the 1970s. Arguments that increased spending on the poor leads to inflation show that the poor bear a disproportionate burden in the stabilization of the economy. Why must the poor have needed funds denied them, just to ensure the value of a currency that the rich possess?

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) are, of course, notorious for harming the poor by instituting their structural adjustment programs (SAP's) to save the economy while harming the most vulnerable. Nigerians popularly referred to SAP's as a “death pill.”⁴¹ But even in countries like South Africa, where IMF and WB pressures have been much less than for other African countries, there has been a neoliberal shift in the African National Congress (ANC), according to Franco Barchiesi. This shift, being led by a previously exiled leadership which is technocratic, market-oriented, and led by President Thabo Mbeki, has displaced those who were part of the internal militant opposition to apartheid. It has resulted in

setbacks for the labor movement and lessened welfare policies, while the state engages in liberalization, privatization, and economic restructuring.⁴² Recently, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has threatened a general strike to protest the government's privatization policies. The COSATU position paper said "It is inherently difficult if not impossible to compel private interests to serve the poor or intervene strategically to restructure the economy."⁴³ They argue that market forces should not govern the delivery of basic services (including water, sewage, housing, health, transport, electricity and telecommunications). The ANC government at this point has said that it will not shift or compromise from their privatization position. So the major trends throughout Africa, whether directly enforced by the IMF and World Bank, or indirectly dictated by the need to compete in a cut-throat global economy, are going in the opposite direction of the calls of Odera Oruka and Gbadegesin.

Of course, to point out that the conclusions from one's moral philosophy goes against the grain of current societal practices is not in itself a criticism of one's moral conclusions. Indeed, it could easily be the case that society is wrong, and that the philosopher is right. Kant, considered the father of deontological arguments in general and human rights arguments in particular, claimed that any statement of moral duty must be attempted in real life, even if difficult; there could not be such a thing as a moral duty which no one had the duty to implement.⁴⁴ I myself think the appeal to human rights is an excellent strategy, but it leaves a yawning chasm between what should be done, and what the contemporary economic powers that be are willing to do. To bridge that chasm will take several actors, acting from different angles. I would like to see contemporary philosophers engaged in exploring ideas

which attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice. And I am encouraged to see activists continuing to challenge the economic organizations of the rich countries to exercise responsibility toward the poor, unemployed, and working poor around the globe. Certainly the emphasis on human rights must also come in to play to protect activists protesting against the IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO), and other powerful economic organizations. When governments use brutal force to torture, arrest, or kill those who protest the prevailing world economy, it is certainly an issue of human rights.

Both Odera Oruka and Gbadegesin emphasize issues of redistribution. This is partly the legacy of Rawls. But philosophers must also look at production. Odera Oruka sounds as if he would rely on the positive economists to provide the funds, which he will then divide according to moral principles. It is a kind of division of labor: the economists make, the philosophers take (on behalf of humanity and the common good, of course). However, distribution affects production. Certain forms of distribution discourage production. For example, when agriculturalists are underpaid for their produce, they may not be motivated to increase production. Peasants often drop out of the cash crop economy when they realize the prices of their produce are set artificially low so that the government can take a large share of the profits (this was a practice during colonial times in Africa, which was continued in many countries by the newly independent governments).⁴⁵ When workers are exploited, they may refuse to work hard. The rich companies are also affected by what may seem as minor cuts in their profits. If taxes or wages become too high, they relocate, or shut down to reinvest elsewhere. In this context, how can governments which would

follow the counsel of Odera Oruka count on a steady supply of cash to redistribute? In nations like Nigeria which gains much of its government's budget from majority shares in oil companies, the model of redistribution seems close to reality. As long as global oil prices remain stable, one can imagine enough oil production to fund various job creation programs as well as other welfare programs. But it has been precisely in the resource-endowed countries of Africa where poverty has been the worst, and where political instability, repression, and wars have flourished. Where resources have been greatest, there has been the most foreign interference, as businesses from other countries chase profits. Chasing after petro-dollars and diamonds has led to wars in Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo; the presence of so much oil money in Nigerian government has made rampant corruption easy, as individuals take public funds for their private use. While it is a blessing to have large funds available for redistribution, it also brings these added dangers, and practical solutions to redistribution (especially those that insist on greatly increasing funds to be redistributed) must address these menacing trends.⁴⁶

Perhaps there is a need to radically re-think and re-structure economic relations, something that could not be achieved by a redistribution alone. It is problematic for Odera Oruka to go along with an overly simple dichotomy between positive, "scientific," "objective" economics and normative economics, and insist that he will leave positive economics in the hands of the economic experts. Is there such a thing as an ideologically neutral science of economics? Is not all economics ideological? As Marx noted, capitalism as an economy revolves around commodity fetishism – acting as if the product is the most important value, whereas people are

reduced to producers or consumers of the product. Is this scientifically objective, or is it rather a weird and distorted perception of the world? Does not such a perception have consequences in people's daily lives? People become expendable or even nuisances if their labor is not needed, or if they do not have the funds to purchase products.

Perhaps what Odera Oruka means is that the statistics that economists can provide can be the subject matter for reflection by philosophers. But even statistics are not necessarily objective and neutral. Take for example the role of measuring poverty or development by the use of GDP (Gross Domestic Product). It was taken for granted to be a reliable indicator of prosperity; but by the 1970s it was realized that even countries with growing GDP could be experiencing increasing poverty. Today the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) uses indicators that measure not only GDP but also life expectancy and adult literacy, among other factors. Certain statistics reveal or mask real conditions; so one must carefully pick and choose the "evidence" presented by "positive" economics.⁴⁷

As is the case with so many of the physical sciences, people may surround scientists with an aura of truth and objectivity above and beyond what they rightly deserve. Economists are also dealing in the realms of theory, and many have advanced their theories before adequately testing them on the real world, or before realizing various conditions and contingencies which would affect the outcomes of their predictions. For example, W.W. Rostow became popular in the 1960s for his "anti-communist manifesto" which suggested that traditional societies had to prepare for an economic "take-off" that would lead them to "high mass consumption." This transformation would be made possible by

having the government make large investments. Rostow's theories were only loosely substantiated from examples from some industrialized countries. Yet his model was taken seriously, and many developing countries invested heavily along the lines of his suggestions, only to be harmed later by the failure of such investments and an inability to pay back the loans on which they were based.⁴⁸ As Martinussen notes, early development economists made many mistakes, based on the presumption that economics alone can solve problems. These early dominant and grand theories often produced incorrect predictions and strategies that ended with little or no results.⁴⁹

Perhaps instead of seeing economists as scientists, we should see them as indulging in a kind of religious faith – nowadays, faith in the market. As commentator Michael Kinsley, explains in a recent *Time* magazine editorial, the workings of the market are a mystery to economists as well as laypeople. However, the author exhorts us to continue to believe in the market, because although we may not understand how it works, it “really does.” Therefore we must not interfere with its spontaneous workings.⁵⁰ Such descriptions make economists sound more like true believers in the “invisible hand” than scientists. And in fact, much success in economics seems due more to the “gambler’s hunch” than rational planning – a fact which leads Samir Amin to refer to the capitalist global economy as an “Empire of Chaos.”⁵¹ But there is no need for humanity to imagine itself the humble footservant of an autonomous economic system, or engage in awestruck wonder at the mystery of the market. Humans make economies, so they also can change them. (This last point is reiterated by Amin, when his critics charge his socialist reforms with being too far afield of current practices.) Granted, when economies are so globally intertwined, it

becomes difficult for any one nation to divert to its own path. But globalization activists point to concrete successes in repealing at least some of the nastier economic practices and abuses.⁵² All this means that philosophers should not restrict their normative reflections to issues of redistribution alone, but should explore all aspects of economics, including issues of production.

Finally, I would like to turn to an issue that both Odera Oruka and Gbadegesin have addressed, the issue of recognition and self-respect. The importance of recognition is outlined in the insights of authors such as Frantz Fanon and, more recently, Axel Honneth.⁵³ Odera Oruka insists that the most humiliating aspect of receiving aid is in being made to feel badly about oneself. This aspect needs closer scrutiny. Just what is it that causes the humiliation? Odera Oruka suggests that it is knowing that the other party is involved in an act of supererogation. For if the other party did the exact same action (giving funds), but the giving of funds were seen as an obligation, then the recipient would not feel self-pity or humiliation. For these reasons, giving what is needed to fill one’s basic needs must be considered obligatory.

I think this interpretation is problematic. Will these perceptions and feelings change if the “aid” becomes obligatory? As a parallel, think of welfare and charity in the U.S. context. Money to fund welfare is compulsorily taken from people’s paychecks in the form of taxes, and those who qualify for welfare receive it as an entitlement. Does this lessen the resentment from those who give, and does it lessen the humiliation of those who receive? Does one who goes to the welfare office to collect one’s entitlement feel better about themselves than the person who goes to the charity-run soup kitchen

for a meal, or the church-run shelter staffed by volunteers? This is not meant to discourage the argument in favor of compulsory welfare. In fact it could be argued that it is needed because if left to charity, people could lose interest in helping others, succumbing to apathy. This analogy is only used to point out that making something compulsory does not automatically lift the burden of self-pity or humiliation.

However, it could be argued that accepting welfare is accompanied by such humiliation because the American public has not been fully convinced of its necessity. The idea of rights and entitlements that serves as the basis for the welfare system was not properly internalized by a broad base of the public, or, it has been eroded by many years of Reaganomics. Skepticism regarding obligations of those with money toward the unemployed and poor in their own country has grown to such an extent in the U.S. that badly needed welfare programs have

been cut, replaced with “workfare” programs which are punitive in their intent. Rather than sharing Gbadegesin’s concern that all who want work should be able to find it, “workfare” programs have as their primary intent assuring the taxpayers that nobody is getting a “free ride.” Many Americans are in denial of the systemic production of poverty in the country, so enamored are they with the “you can make it” ideology. In order for respect to be restored to the nation’s poor (as a first step to understanding the world’s poor), education is needed to highlight how institutionalized racism and sexism create poverty at home.⁵⁴ Only through increased understanding can we expect that people will shrug off the rugged individualist ideology and see the poor as those with valid needs that must be addressed. Of course, when it comes to education and to seeing through ideology, philosophers have a big role to play. Further works like Odera Oruka’s and Gbadegesin’s which explore solutions to our planet’s rich–poor dichotomy should be encouraged.

Notes and References

1. The student probably did not know that Odera Oruka was the founder of the International Institute of Environmental Studies, along with Calistas Juma of ACTS, Nairobi.
2. In another paper, I explained that Oruka was greatly influenced by an elderly sage near his rural home area, Nyando Ayoo of Sega. Ayoo holds an altruistic philosophy which argues that it is good to help people in need. Ayoo's father helped feed people during a terrible famine. In the paper are copious examples of Kenyans caring about strangers in need. I therefore disagree with E.D. Hecht's paper in this volume which argues that a universal altruism is not present in Africa but only in Europe and Christianity. See G. Presbey, "H. Odera Oruka on Compassion and Justice," unpublished paper presented at the Fourth Annual H. Odera Oruka Memorial Symposium, Nairobi, Kenya, December (1999).
3. Keita, Lansana., *The Search for a Method in Contemporary African Philosophy*, in H. Odera Oruka, (ed.), *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy*. Nairobi: ACTS Press, pp 204-213, quote pp 211.
4. *Ibid.*, pp 208.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Keita, in *Sage Philosophy*, pp 210.
7. Odera Oruka, H., (1997) *The Philosophy of Foreign Aid: A Question of the Right to a Human Minimum*. In Kai Kresse and Anke Graness, (eds.), *Sagacious Reasoning: Henry Odera Oruka in memoriam*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, pp 47.
8. Keita, Lansana., (1982) *Economic Theory, Ideal Types, and Rationality*, *Analyse und Kritik*. Ausgabe 1/82.
9. Oruka, *The Philosophy of Foreign Aid*, pp 47.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Beitz, Charles., (1979) *Political Theory and International Relations*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Pr.
12. Odera Oruka, H., (1997) *John Rawls' Ideology: Justice as Egalitarian Fairness*, in *Practical Philosophy: In Search of An Ethical Minimum*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, pp 115-125.
13. Feinberg, Joel., (1975) *Justice as Fairness*, in Struhl, K. and Struhl, P., eds, *Ethics in Perspective*. New York: Random House, pp 420-429.
14. Odera Oruka, H., (1994) *Why the Future will Judge us Harshly*, *Sunday Nation*, 11 December, pp 7.
15. Rand, Ayn., (1964) *The Virtue of Selfishness*. New York: Dutton/Signet, Penguin Putnam.
16. Odera Oruka, H., (1997) *Parental Earth Ethics*, in *Practical Philosophy: In Search of an Ethical Minimum*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, pp 147.
17. Singer, Peter., (1994) *Rich Countries Should Aid Poor Countries*, in *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Moral Issues*, Stephen Satris, 4th ed., Dushkin Publishers, chapter 20.
18. Filice, Carlo., (1990) *On the Obligation to Keep Informed about Distant Atrocities*, *Human Rights Quarterly* 12, pp 397-414.
19. Steiner, Hillel., (1999) "Just Taxation and International Redistribution," in *Global Justice*. eds. Ian Shapiro and Lea Brilmayer. New York: New York University Press, pp 171-191.
20. Steiner, pp 182.

21. Fred Kammer, S.J., (1991) *Doing Faithjustice: An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought*. New York: Paulist Press, pp 81, 83, 91-2 (quote pp 92).
22. *Ibid.*, pp 63.
23. *Ibid.*, pp 137, 235, No. 89
24. *Ibid.*, p 144.
25. Mazrui, Alamin and Mutunga, Willy. (2000) *The State Versus the Academic Unions in Postcolonial Kenya*, in *A Thousand Flowers: Social Struggles against Structural Adjustment in African Universities*, eds. Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis, and Ousseina Alidou, Trenton New Jersey: Africa World Press, pp 197-206, quote pp 202.
26. United Nations Development Program (eds.), (2000) *Human Development Report*. New York: Oxford University Press.
27. Oruka, *Philosophy of Foreign Aid*, pp 50.
28. *Ibid.*, pp 53.
29. Martinussen, John., (1997) *Society, State, and Market: A Guide to Competing Theories of Development*. London: Zed Books, pp 299.
30. Martinussen, pp 301- 02.
31. Chabal, Patrick and Daloz, Jean-Pascal., (1999) *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, pp 129. The authors paraphrase M.L. Diallo, (1996) *Les Africains sauveront-ils l'Afrique?*, Paris: Karthala, pp 26.
32. Chabal and Daloz, *Africa Works*, pp 110-123.
33. Gbadegesin, Segun., (1991) *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Concepts and Contemporary African Realities*. Peter Lang, pp 231.
34. *Ibid.*, pp 241.
35. *Ibid.*, pp 238.
36. *Ibid.*, pp 239.
37. *Ibid.*, pp 249.
38. *Ibid.*, pp 253.
39. Martinussen, pp 227.
40. Diamond, Larry., (1993) *Nigeria's Perennial Struggle*, in *Globalization and Democracy*, ed. Diamond, Larry. Quotes pp 223, 225. Note that Diamond's position (and my own) on corruption diverges from that of Nyarwath, Oriare included in this volume.
41. Caffentzis, George., *The World Bank and Education in Africa*, in *A Thousand Flowers: Social Struggles against Structural Adjustment in African Universities*, eds. Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis, and Ousseina Alidou, pp 3-18, quote pp 14.
42. Barchiesi, Franco., *South Africa: Between Repression and 'Home-Grown Structural Adjustment'*. In *A Thousand Flowers: Social Struggles against Structural Adjustment in African Universities*, eds. Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis, and Ousseina Alidou, Trenton New Jersey: Africa World Press, pp 165-170.
43. Daniels, Glenda., (2001) *National Strike Against the State*, Mail and Guardian August 3-9, pp 3.
44. Kant, Immanuel., (1983) *On the proverb: 'That may be true in theory, but is of no practical use,'* in *Perpetual Peace and other Essays*, Hackett Publishers, pp 61-92.
45. Davidson, Basil. *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation State*. London: James Currey, pp 190-92, pp 210-13.

46. Diamond, Larry., *Nigeria's Perennial Struggle*.
47. UNDP, *Human Development Report*
48. Martinussen, pp 63-5.
49. *Ibid.*, pp 8.
50. Kinsley, Michael., (1999) *Time* December 13, pp 52.
51. Amin, Samir., (1992) *Empire of Chaos*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
52. Brecher, Jeremy and Costello, Tim., (1998) *Global Village or Global Pillage*. Boston MA: South End Press.
53. Fanon, Frantz., (1967) *Black Skins, White Masks*. Tr. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, pp 211-229. Honneth, Axel., (1995) *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Translation by Anderson, Joel. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press. See Presbey, G., *The Struggle for Recognition in the Philosophy of Axel Honneth applied to the African Renaissance*, forthcoming, Philosophy and Social Criticism.
54. Albelda, Randy and Tilly, Chris., (1997) *Glass Ceilings and Bottomless Pits: Women's Work, Women's Poverty*. Boston, MA: South End Press.