

PHILOSOPHY COLLOQUIUM

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"Concepts of Mind and Spirit in African Thought"

Friday, March 23, 2007

Paper: 3:30 P.M.; Memorial Building, Room 115
Refreshments: 5:30 P.M.; Ashe Building, Room 735

Dr. Kwasi Wiredu is Distinguished University Professor at the University of South Florida. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Oxford. His publications range across African philosophy, philosophy of logic, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and ethics.

Abstract

I distinguish between two concepts of spirit: spirit in the sense of an immaterial, non-spatial, entity or in the sense of an entity conceived of in physical imagery but exempted from the ordinary laws of optics and dynamics. I call the first the Cartesian sense and the second the quasi-material sense. Belief in spirits in the quasi-material sense is widespread in African thought. But the same is true of some important systems of Western belief such as orthodox Christianity. In Western thought, and, in particular, in Christianity, there is belief in both quasi-material and Cartesian spirits, whereas in African thought there is belief in the first class of spirits but not the second. In fact, the notion of the second does not even make sense therein, because in African thought to exist is to be in space. Abstract entities, when legitimately postulated, are, indeed, said to exist. But their ontological status is that of metaphorical entities and they are accommodated in metaphorical space. What of mind? Even at a pre-philosophical level of discourse mind (*adwene*) in Akan thought is not a kind of entity or substance but rather the capacity to think, a capacity which results from the brain (*amene*). This linguistic fact, in itself, of course, proves nothing philosophical. But I shall explain that the separation of the problems of mind and spirit, which is evident here, has some advantages for the philosophy of mind.



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