

Theistic humanism and a critique of Wiredu's notion of supernaturalism

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journals.sagepub.com/home/crr**Emmanuel Ifeanyi Ani**

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Abstract

In decrying the evils of supernaturalism, African philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (1931–) proposes humanism, by making concern for human well-being the basis for morality. However, the presentation of humanism as a simple replacement of supernaturalism is objectionable. Wiredu's notion of supernaturalism is too narrow, since it is only a variant of supernaturalism. His reference to humanism is too broad, since humanism is an umbrella of very conflicting worldviews, such as that between secular and theistic humanism. Although Wiredu does not specify which variant of humanism he means, and although he acknowledges that the Akan (the author's tribe in West Africa) believe in a Supreme Being, his general ontology shows that he is closer to the secular than the theistic variant. This article explores the ideological extensions of the two and argues that theistic humanism provides the compatibility needed for being religious and at the same time basing morality on humanistic/naturalistic concerns. In doing so, it distinguishes supernaturalism per se from its ethical and cosmological variants. As a corrective to Wiredu, this article blames these two variants of supernaturalism, rather than supernaturalism per se, for the evils that Wiredu adduces. The conclusion is that in theistic humanism, humanism escapes the dangers of ethical and cosmological supernaturalism without necessarily adopting the antisupernaturalist connotations currently popular with modern secular humanism.

Keywords

Theism, humanism, supernaturalism, worship, institutionalized religion, theistic humanism

Background

Kwasi Wiredu is probably the most prominent philosopher in Africa today because of his ability to raise questions on the most significant issues affecting the continent. In this article,

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I examine one such issue he has raised in the area of morality and its connection to our beliefs in the supernatural. Religious extremism and religious materialism are both on the rise. Religious extremists and exploitative religious charlatans all claim to derive their mandate-inspired behavior from supernatural moral injunctions. Against this background, Wiredu decries the evil possibilities that arise when we derive morality from a supernatural source. By supernaturalism, Wiredu (1980: 5) does not mean the belief in the existence of supernatural beings, since he does not see anything evil in the belief by itself of supernatural entities. He adds a rejoinder that whether or not there are such beings would be a factual question, but importantly, associated with such belief or system of beliefs may be an outlook potentially harmful to humanity, and this is evident in the tendency to seek the basis of morality in some supernatural source. It is this outlook that Wiredu calls supernaturalism. From this, we can see that he is not concerned with supernatural beliefs, but about basing moral principles on them. It is for this reason that he sees the opposite of supernaturalism as humanism, "the point of view according to which morality is founded exclusively on considerations of human well-being" (5). Like other human ideas, humanism is not without its limitations. Wiredu concedes that when rules, policies, and actions are based on conditions of human well-being, there is no absolute guarantee that consequences will always be in accordance with humane ideals, since human understanding is limited. But he sees this as a better alternative to basing morality on supernatural sources, which is a different standard altogether, since "it becomes quite possible for policies which lead manifestly to human suffering to be advocated or pursued with a sense of piety and rectitude" (5). Wiredu gives an example with an imaginary divine injunction that the number of human beings should multiply without control, and he hypothesizes a scenario in which it is shown (through research findings I assume) that without control, the increasing numbers of human species will lead to misery. Wiredu anticipates that such a finding will not reduce the moral force of such a divine injunction. Indeed, it will be considered pious to preach such injunction regardless (5–6).

In contrast, Wiredu notes that the Akan (of West Africa) traditional outlook was intensely humanistic. Indeed, he considers the traditional African foundation of morality to be "refreshingly non-supernaturalist." This is because, although one might not find elaborate theories of humanism, one will find "preoccupation with human welfare: what is morally good is what befits a human being," ... "what brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy," and so on. In contrast, "what is morally bad is what brings misery, misfortune and disgrace" (6). At this point Wiredu makes this crucial distinction: good conduct may have been seen as pleasing to God or bad as hateful to God, "but the thought is not that something is good because God approves it but that God approves it because it is good in the first place", and Wiredu reminds us that this is a distinction that Socrates has noted as not easily accessible to the pious mind. After a brief exploration of some other aspect of traditional African humanism, Wiredu (6) makes his point, "I believe this freedom from supernaturalism in our traditional ethic is an aspect of our culture which we ought to cherish and protect from countervailing influences from abroad."

I find the above quotation from Wiredu, written more than thirty years ago, to be an imperative that has become even more gravely needed. This is because extremist and exploitative moral theories having supernaturalist claims are on the rise with the rise of religious extremism and materialism. As will be expected, the human miseries that they are causing are also increasing (see El Fadl, 2005; Obiora, 1998; Wiktorowicz, 2005). As one may have begun to notice, the main problem with crediting moral codes with a supernatural source is

that it is vulnerable to manipulation: people can (and do) surreptitiously present their selfish agendas as divine injunctions, or subtly twist divine injunctions to suit their own selfish purposes. It has become plausible to imagine a world where clerics of different religions enjoin their followers to eliminate members of rival religions on divine injunction. Such a world would not last, since this would be a recipe for the extinction of the human species. But if no logical understanding of the attributes of a divine figure such as the Supreme Being can accommodate the possibility that He would want this to happen, then it becomes obvious where the divine agenda stopped and where the selfish agenda of the leaders of these religions begins. The reason for such malpractices is simple, and it is that the easiest way to legitimate an ideological or moral script is to give it a supernatural origin, but this also makes it the most dangerous way to influence human behavior.

The mixing of divine injunction with selfish agenda goes beyond the dangers of the imagined world above. It extends to other forms of exploitation such as “prosperity gospel,” which propagates the idea that material success is primarily tied to generosity toward the divine. In his book *Divine Deceit: Business in Religion*, Fidelis Obiora (1998: xii–xiii) certain society in Africa where religion has become a booming business of quacks and charlatans. He narrates that most abandoned garages have been turned into churches. Most streets have several churches/sects, and seeking a bank loan to open or expand a church is becoming the most attractive and “most legitimate” alternative in an economy where jobs are hard to find and survival is becoming more difficult. Ernest (1997: 16) describes religion (though exaggeratedly) as “the only flourishing (financial) industry in the country as of today.” Although the exact number of churches is unknown, Christian church denominations in Africa are said to have jumped from about five thousand in 1967 to about ten thousand by 1972 and thirty thousand by 1983, with about four thousand in Nigeria alone and about four hundred in a single Nigerian town of Abak in Akwa Ibom State. Single streets in this town (Abak) have a multitude of churches and almost every kindred has its own (Obiora, 1998: 16). Carrying the Bible has become one of the quickest means of making money (Okogie, 1988: 18).¹ Religion is now a form of trade, and the traders are many (183). A pastor charges N50, 000 for “special” prayers (156), and some barren women even agree (after extensive indoctrination) that intercourse with the pastor can cause fertility (79). All this is possible because of the grounding of, not just morals, but the entire range of life outcomes, on a supernatural sourcing.

We can thus appreciate Wiredu’s concern about basing morality on supernatural sources. But there is a problem with the shift from supernaturalism to naturalism in moral normativity, and this is that there usually arises a tension regarding what should be our attitude to the supernatural if we are to accept that moral policies and actions should be centered on human welfare rather than derived from supernatural sources. The outcome of this tension, as demonstrated in the European Renaissance, is often the tendency toward the general rejection of the supernatural. But I demonstrate in this article that this tension arises from confusion regarding the concepts of theism and supernaturalism, and the role of the supernatural in relation to human morality that such concepts would entail. I seek to clarify this. But preliminary remarks will be crucial to proceed.

First, I think that Wiredu’s depiction of the humanist and nonsupernatural character of the traditional morality of any African society is a bit exaggerated. No human society’s moral system is entirely free of alleged supernatural sources. This is because alleging that a moral rule is supernaturally based has much stronger persuasive power and commands greater conformity, and this has been the oldest way to ensure moral coherence in human

history. Evidence of the inevitability of some elements of supernaturalism (a variant I will term ethical supernaturalism) is the evidence of antihumanist practices such as human sacrifices, local slavery, and infanticide in certain precolonial African societies. Instead of discussing the simple presence or absence of supernaturalism in moral coding, we should be discussing the degree, and it is in this sense that I agree with Wiredu—that traditional African morality was considerably less supernaturalist and more humanistic prior to the arrival of organized and institutionalized religion from abroad. My support for his call for humanism will therefore not be interpreted as a call to completely eliminate the basing of moral imperatives on supernatural sources, but a call for a combating of this tendency to the barest minimum, very much similar to combating corruption to its barest minimum while acknowledging that it will never disappear completely from the world.

Second, I agree with Wiredu on the dangers of supernaturalism, but I argue that his use of the word “supernaturalism” is too broad. What he terms “supernaturalism” is really ethical supernaturalism, a variant or an aspect of supernaturalism. I will show that this is neither the only variant of supernaturalism nor is it coextensive with supernaturalism as a whole. In fact, I will demonstrate that supernaturalism can (and should) do without it. Third, I agree with Wiredu’s proposal of humanism as the viable alternative for basing morality, but I argue that his reference to “humanism” is also too broad, since “humanism” accommodates two opposing variants with conflicting ramifications. In clarifying these variants, I show with excerpts from Wiredu’s general ontology and the logical implications of simply replacing “supernaturalism” with “humanism” that he implies secular humanism. I demonstrate preference for and articulate theistic humanism as the viable alternative that Wiredu should have sought, and which we ought to seek as a foundation for basing morality. I will clarify my use of the term “theistic humanism” in terms of offering arguments for it not provided by previous scholarship. Freeing supernaturalism from being seen as simply ethical supernaturalism, and showing that supernaturalism can largely do without its ethical variant, means that I will reject Wiredu’s dismissal of religious institutionalization and worship as sources of ethical supernaturalism. Overall, my analyses will leave the notions of supernaturalism and humanism clarified, and those of theism, worship, and religious institutionalization in harmony with humanist moral concerns because of clarifications made regarding supernaturalism and humanism.

Clarifying the primary concepts

Let me begin with some conceptual clarifications. First, I have cited that Wiredu’s refers to supernaturalism as not just belief in supernatural entities but in basing morality on supernatural sources. I think that this definition of supernaturalism is too narrow. Let me broaden it to embrace all of its relevant denotations. Supernaturalism is, broadly speaking, the belief in the existence of supernatural entities. There are variants of this: the basing of morality on supernatural entities would, in my view, be called ethical supernaturalism or supernaturalist ethics. The belief that supernatural entities do not only exist but also create physical effect on the world, that is, that they interfere with natural laws, with the laws of cause and effect, is, in my opinion, cosmological supernaturalism or supernaturalist cosmology. My rendition of cosmological supernaturalism also coincides with some definitions of superstition.² All of these variants fall under the umbrella of supernaturalism. It means that Wiredu referred to ethical supernaturalism (supernaturalist ethics) rather than supernaturalism per se.

Is it possible to be supernaturalist without adopting the ethical and cosmological variants? I think yes. I can believe in the supernatural world and simultaneously make human welfare a standard for setting policies of moral behavior. The rest of my paper will clarify this foundational argument.

Let me proceed to distinguish theism from supernaturalism. Belief in a Supreme Being is what we call theism. The Supreme Being is a supernatural being, so belief in, not just a Supreme Being, but also in lower level invisible beings and every other kind of alleged supernatural entity is supernaturalism. Thus, supernaturalism accommodates theism but goes beyond it. Supernaturalism is the belief that there is, not just a Supreme Being, but a whole spiritual world existing alongside our physical world, complete with spiritual beings (possibly spiritual humans, animals, and elements, all of which are commonly seen as spirits). As I mentioned, supernaturalism becomes cosmological when we believe not just in the existence of this myriad of spiritual and lesser beings, but also that they interfere with our real world activities, and that they can meddle so much with the physical laws of natural causality that we are no longer sure of the certainty and operation of this basic natural principle.

Although supernaturalism covers the range of theism, it is possible to be a theist without being a supernaturalist in the sense of accepting the existence of the lesser supernatural entities. It is possible to accept the existence of a Supreme Being on logical grounds (such as that there must be something responsible for all this design in the universe) without giving credence to the existence of the other supernatural entities adduced. One might be reminded here that theism is the only kind of supernaturalism that is logically defensible—that, indeed, it has a force of logical necessity. It is also possible to accept that there is a Supreme Being without being attached to an organized religion, or without attaching doctrines and practices of one organized religion or another to this acceptance—a perspective called deism. But minimally speaking, since God is Himself supernatural, to be a theist is to be a supernaturalist, at least in a sense.

It is thus possible to be both a theist and a supernaturalist without being cosmologically supernaturalist. Some believe that there are spirits around us. Paranormal experiences are common. In fact, electromagnetic field detectors are used to detect and gauge the presence of spiritual entities.³ But some people can also believe that these entities are inept in relation to human beings and have no effect on us whatsoever, except the effects that come from our own self-inflicted psychology of fear, intimidation, or trepidation. One could support this view with the theory that these entities are just echoes of previous lives, just like the echo of a sound after it is long gone.

It is, on the other hand, not possible to be cosmologically supernaturalist without being a supernaturalist. I need to believe in the existence of spiritual beings before I can believe that they can interfere with the physical world. But, as just seen above, it is possible to be supernaturalistic without adopting the ethical or cosmological variants.

Is there anything problematic in being supernaturalist per se? There exists no evidence to show this. However, I would use theism as my operative tool in this article because of its force of logical necessity, and therefore, logical defensibility. This preference will not leave supernaturalism per se in a dark spot of any sort.

While theism need not translate to supernaturalist cosmologism, theism can lead to it. This happens when someone believes that the Supreme Being not only exists, but also is actively and routinely controlling physical activities through miracles and other means. One example of this is occasionalism, the theory of causation (propounded by Nicholas

Malebranche), which argues that God directly causes all events in the world. This theory argues that God intervenes on each occasion to convert a cause into an effect, and that created substances cannot be efficient causes of events in the world. If, for instance, John touches the fire (physical activity) and he experiences pain (mental activity), which makes him to scream (physical activity) and withdraw his hand from the fire (physical activity), occasionalism will explain this mind/body relationship/causation by arguing that it is God that intervenes in every causal step to produce the next event. Hence, it is God that told John to scream, not a chemical reaction from burning to pain nerves in the body. Thus, occasionalism is an example of a version of theism that denies the existence of natural laws of causation.

While supernaturalism need not translate to the cosmological variant, supernaturalism is a potent breeding ground for this variant. It is not usually easy to distinguish between the belief in the existence of spiritual beings and the belief that these beings can actually interfere with activities of human beings. Refraining from the cosmological assumption would be a matter of intellectual discipline, but it needs refraining.

I have described the tendency to base morality on a supernatural source as ethical supernaturalism. And as we have seen, to treat ethical supernaturalism as simply supernaturalism is too broad. Here is the crucial point: while ethical supernaturalism is incompatible with humanism, supernaturalism or theism per se is not necessarily incompatible. From the above, one can see that we do not need to discard supernaturalism in order to adopt humanism. As long as supernaturalism can moderate its ethical and cosmological variants, then Wiredu's discarding of supernaturalism per se is wrong.

Let me give one idea of how broad supernaturalism is. Supernaturalism is so broad that it includes bedfellows as strange to one another as cosmological supernaturalists, ethical supernaturalists, theistic humanists, and deists (people who accept the existence of God on purely academic grounds with no religious connotations). Since God is in the realm of the supernatural, accepting the plausibility of His existence, even intellectually, is to accept the existence of something supernatural.

So why do I not argue for "supernaturalist humanism"? Why "theistic humanism"? As I have already hinted, it is because supernaturalism is too broad for cogent analysis, and theism is what is logically defensible or has force of logical necessity. Let me briefly remind the reader of this logical necessity.

Theistic . . .

Supernaturalism might be supported by experiences (such as paranormal experiences) but has not been rationally defended in theory. On the other hand, theism might not be open to direct sensible experience but is logically defensible. There must, for instance, be a Supreme Designer of the universe (see Thomas Aquinas (1274: Part 1)), or a Being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist (See Anselm's *Proslogion* (1965: Ch. 2)). It would be a mistake to think that this logical dimension of theism is the private and subjective construction of St. Aquinas and St. Anselm. It seems to me that they are cultural universals, meaning that they may be as much structures of the human mind as are Kant's space and time.⁴ See, for instance, the findings of Placide Tempels (1959: 29–32) and Ikenga Metuh (1988: 62) on various (precolonial) traditional African cosmologies with particular reference to the hierarchy of being that begins at the top from the Supreme Being down to the lowest animals and plants. Wiredu (2011a: 4) writes of the Akan of Ghana: "If

you take, say the Akans, it is clear that the generality. . . believe in a Supreme Being, who is responsible for the cosmos.” It would be difficult to have convinced the traditional African that the universe is an accident, that this hierarchy is a mistake, or that the rest of the hierarchy can do without the one who is on the top of the hierarchy. African theism thus rhymes with Aquinas’s (1274: Part 1) cosmological perspective of the existence of God.

The (precolonial) traditional African would agree even more with the ontological argument raised by St. Anselm. Anselm argues that in the human mind is a necessary admission that there must be a being than which nothing greater can be conceived to exist (see Williams, 2015). Wiredu (1996: 46) makes a similar observation about the Akan of Ghana: “Onyame is one among several names for the Supreme Being in Akan. Another very frequent one is Onyankopon, which literally means The Being That Is Alone Great, in other words, That Than Which a Greater Cannot Be Conceived.” One of the best-known criticism of ontological arguments comes from Immanuel Kant in his Critique of Pure Reason. Kant (1933: 56) argues that “ontological arguments are vitiated by their reliance upon the implicit assumption that “existence” is a predicate” (see Oppy, 2016; par 6). However, as Bertrand Russell has often argued, “it is much easier to be persuaded that ontological arguments are no good than it is to say exactly what is wrong with them” (Oppy, 2016; par 6).

But here is where Wiredu’s romance with theism stops. Having settled the logicity of theism, Wiredu introduces confusion when he denies the transcendental and supernatural character of Akan thought, and argued that the Akan regard all supernaturalist entities, including the Supreme Being, as quasi-material or quasi-physical. I will proceed to engage Wiredu on this to demonstrate the empirical and secular character of his general ontology, and to argue that when Wiredu prescribes humanism, no reasonable mind would presume that he prescribes a variety with a theistic leaning. For structural appropriateness, I will locate this discussion within the discussion of humanism.

Humanism

I will begin with a verbatim quotation of Wiredu’s prescription of humanism as a replacement of supernaturalism. Wiredu (1980: 5) writes,

But associated with any such belief or system of beliefs may be an outlook potentially harmful to humanity, as is evident in the tendency to seek the basis of morality in some supernatural source.

This outlook is what I mean by supernaturalism. Its opposite is humanism, the point of view according to which morality is founded exclusively on considerations of human well-being.

What kind of humanism does he mean? He does not provide any clarification. Two broad categories of humanism exist: secular and theistic humanisms (a middle ground, such as a quasi-theistic humanism, does not make sense). I will show that the differences between these two varieties are so significant that a simple prescription of humanism does little to serve us.

There are two ways of knowing what kind of humanism Wiredu meant. The first is a simple logical deduction from his argument, and the second is a look at his general ontology. First, the logical deduction is this: if we remove the whole of supernaturalism and simply replace it with humanism, what we have is secular humanism. As I shall show, this is in fact what secular humanists are doing. (I have already argued that we need not remove the whole

of supernaturalism to practice humanism). This argument is clearer when we ask the question: if you remove supernaturalism simpliciter, can you have theistic humanism? It seems quite impossible.

If, however, in contrast to eliminating supernaturalism simpliciter, we eliminated (or, more specifically, moderated) only one or two variants of supernaturalism (ethical and cosmological supernaturalism), then it becomes possible to arrive at something like theistic humanism. This is because, when we eliminate or moderate the belief that morality should be based on supernatural sources from the more general acceptance of the supernatural, then this is an acceptance of the supernatural combined with humanist sourcing of moral imperatives. I will show that these two are not incompatible, as generally assumed.

In addition, let me look at Wiredu's general ontology to see what is his metaphysical leaning. We see that he has a distinctively secular leaning. In fact, Wiredu claims that the Akan have (or had) a thoroughly secular and empirical ontology, rather than one that is religious or transcendental. In his chapter "Universalism and Particularism in Religion from an African Perspective," in his book *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, Wiredu (1996: 49) admits that Akan ontology (like other African ontologies) recognized a hierarchy of beings beginning at the apex with the Supreme Being down through ancestors and living mortals, to animals, plants, spirits and inanimate objects at the bottom. But, Wiredu argues, "everything that exists (in this hierarchy) exists in exactly the same sense as everything else. And this sense is empirical, broadly speaking" (49). He then argues that the Akan had no word or concept for religion. He writes: "In fact, it is not at all obvious in what sense the English word "religion" is applicable to any aspect of African life and thought" (45). To support these claims, he argues that the Akan had no coherent concept of the supernatural, the transcendental, the spiritual, or even the mental. Regarding the supernatural, Wiredu (1996: 52) wrote in behalf of the Akan:

the supernatural is that which surpasses the order of nature. In other words, a supernatural event is one whose occurrence is contrary to the laws of nature. But if the event actually happens, then any law that fails to reckon with its possibility is inaccurate and is in need of some modification, at least. However, if the law is suitably amended, even if only by means of an exceptive rider, the event is no longer contrary to natural law. Hence no event can be consistently described as supernatural.

As for the transcendental, Wiredu (2011b: 27) argued that transcendental concepts— are not expressible in Akan languages "without demonstrable incoherence" [*Italics mine*]. He writes that they would see it as unintelligible because, for them, "existence is spatial" (Wiredu, 1996: 50). Since transcendence implies existence beyond space, it follows that talk of any transcendental being is "not just false but unintelligible, from an Akan point of view." Because of this, he claims that the Akan conceive of higher beings as quasi-material beings, and defines a quasi-material being as "any being or entity conceived as spatial but lacking some of the properties of material objects" (53).

What about the spiritual? Wiredu (50) remarks that spirituality is nothing more than "sensitivity to the less gross aspects of human existence," and denies that we can gain any other understanding of spirituality beyond this concession. This also affects his presentation of the Akan view of "mind." He argues that it would be a mistake for us to see mind as an entity; we should see it as "the capacity, supervenient upon brain states and processes, to do

various things” (53), a direct reminder of Donald Davidson’s (1980: 10) theory of physicalism.

In another article (Ani, 2017), I have demonstrated that these ascriptions to the Akan general ontology are not only conceptually flawed but also largely borrowed from some western ontological orientations (of course, these orientations cannot be representative of the West per se, since there is an abundance of transcendental orientations there, as in any other society). As such, I will not engage with these ascriptions here. I mention them to demonstrate that when Wiredu simply discards “supernaturalism” and replaces it with “humanism,” he by no means suggests theistic humanism. Given that there are only two humanisms, his general ontology leans more toward secular humanism. But let me show what most secular humanists say about theism and the supernatural.

Secular humanism has its origins in early Greek intellectual tradition, but arose as a pervasive orientation of revolt against religious and parochial authority in Enlightenment Europe (see Smoker, 2008: 7–30). Its orientation was to shift the focus of the human mind from an uncritical supernaturalism to a bigger preoccupation with human rationality and capability. It is therefore a general worldview that focuses on human concerns and values. What is significant about this worldview is that it does not simply focus on human rather than divine or supernatural matters; it actually sees the two as mutually exclusive. In doing this, it shifts its emphasis from one extreme (unquestioning supernaturalism) to another (humanism but no theism or supernaturalism). We can thus see this variant of humanism as secular humanism, viz, the idea that we would need to reject supernaturalism and religion in order to valorize human reason, justice, and ethics. My point is not that it rejects supernaturalism as a basis for human policy and action, but that it rejects supernaturalism in itself as a belief. Thus, it is not only ethical supernaturalism that is rejected, but supernaturalism per se. We can see that this dichotomy is not necessary, as it arises out of a conflation of supernaturalism with its ethical and cosmological variants, or an assumption that supernaturalism must imply these variants. Specifically, it arises out of the notion that the belief in the existence of the spiritual world is synonymous with the belief that this spiritual world actively influences the physical world (cosmological supernaturalism) and should be the source of moral codes (ethical supernaturalism).

It is, thus, not uncommon to find that secular humanists are likewise atheists. This is evident in Barbara Smoker (7–30), a member of the (British) South Place Ethical Society and former President of the National (British) Humanist Society. Such orientations are usually characterized by vicious denials of any theistic origin of the universe. Smoker (5), for instance, defines humanism as “an attitude of mind centred on mankind and human interests... definitely to the exclusion of gods, angels, devils, and other make-believe beings.” She argues that this is what humanism should mean, and describes it as “secular, scientific humanism... based on rationalism that is either atheistic or agnostic.” She especially complains that the interest in human welfare by Christians (let’s say those who believe in the supernatural) “has blurred the meaning of the word” (5). She argues that the idea of a supreme intelligence (without a brain) existing for all eternity, suddenly creating the world out of nothing, and keeping a fatherly interest in it, is as childish as the idea of Santa Claus making and distributing Christmas toys (33). Smoker remarks that it is only minority believers of an idea that are usually required by society to explain the reasons for their belief, which is what currently applies to atheists. Before long, according to her, the majority (of Europeans) will become atheists and it will be those who still believe in God that would be required by society to provide the reasons for their belief (31–32). In terms of cultural and

historical influence, her book is described as “written mostly from the perspective of European history” (see Smoker, 2008, back cover, par. 2).

Although Wiredu acknowledges the Akan belief in a Supreme Being as well as their deriving of moral codes from humanistic concerns, we see from his general ontology that he is still plagued by a feeling that the supernatural and the human are incompatible. In this sense, one can say that Wiredu is still influenced by the largely western assumption of a dichotomy between supernaturalism and humanism. He thought the best way to reconcile humanism with the Akan ontology is to begin by denying everything associated with the supernatural, beginning from the concept of the supernatural itself to religion, worship, the spiritual, transcendental concepts, and so on. From the foregoing, we begin to see that this route is needless.

Wiredu has argued that, because the Akans (and Africans) did not need to source their morals from supernatural sources, traditional African concept of God was not institutionalized. On the other hand, Christianity and Islam are institutionalized religions in which you have to officially join an organization, obey a set of moral codes, uncritically accept some doctrines, and manifest the kind of unquestioning obedience that often brings rival religions into conflict. The critical ingredient in this sort of unquestioning acceptance is that some of these doctrines are revealed, and therefore taken as absolutely certain (Wiredu, 2011a: 4). In other words, organized religion is a major source of ethical supernaturalism, or, as we shall see, the aggravation of it.

From the previous analysis, ethical supernaturalism is incompatible with humanism, but supernaturalism is not necessarily so, which is why traditional Africa could be supernaturalist without being pronouncedly ethically supernaturalist. We are compelled from Wiredu’s analysis to conclude that religious institutionalization tends to aggravate (ethical) supernaturalism. Although his explanation is not detailed, Wiredu reasons that with the institutionalization of any idea into an organization a set of rules must evolve, and in the case of religion, the most effective instrument for legitimizing these rules has to be “revelation.” This easily leads to absolutist conceptions of certain rules and a concomitant hostility toward nonconformity. To illustrate this, Wiredu (5) writes of the lack of institutionalization of Akan concept of God:

A non-institutional religion, on the other hand, is personal. It is an individual’s sense of her relationship with God... What is clear is that the absence of things like dogma and worship facilitates a rationally relaxed attitude that forestalls any desire to persecute non-conformity, or even to proselytize other people. So while the Akans, for instance, say that nobody teaches God to a child, they have no tendency to want to rise up in arms against anybody who does not believe that such a being exists.

Wiredu’s argument is that (ethical) supernaturalism (and the religious institutionalization which causes it) is a natural consequence of worship. This is because he sees worship as necessarily entailing unconditional veneration and unquestioning obedience of “revealed” dictates, as he elsewhere refers to “my general claim that you don’t have a religion, unless there is an unconditional veneration for the object of attention” (9). Thus he argues that the “Akans believe in a Supreme Being, who is responsible for the cosmos. They have trust in him and unconditional reverence for Him. But they do not worship him, because, I suspect, they do not think it is appropriate to do so” (4–5). Wiredu remarks that there are signs that this was the case in some other traditional African societies. He cites C. S. Momoh (1989: 87

cited in Wiredu 2011a: 5) on a saying by the Uchi people of Bendel State in Nigeria: “If God is waiting for you to praise him, he would never have created you. For example, I do not expect my sons to heap praises on me, instead of simply referring to me as ‘father.’ It is bad manners for you to praise God just as it is bad manners for my son to praise me. God is the creator.”

If we are to take Wiredu seriously, then we can conclude that religious worship leads to institutionalization, which in turn leads to (ethical) supernaturalism (doing things because of allusion to God’s Will, even if they might have disastrous human consequences) and this leads to interreligious conflicts where applicable. This juxtaposes religion against humanism. Implied in this argument are two causal movements: the first is from worship to unconditional reverence, and the second from unconditional reverence to ethical supernaturalism. My objection is that the first causality does not always hold, and even where it does, it does not necessarily entail the second. First, not everyone who worships God or gods reveres them unconditionally. Many approach them with desires and interests (which often translate into implied conditions), and would occasionally feel hurt and repulsive if those desires are not met.⁵ Second is that even where worship may lead to unconditional reverence, ethical supernaturalism is not necessarily the outcome. Indeed, unconditional reverence is not a logical outcome of worship but a logical outcome of theism (with or without worship), and its conceptual disconnection from worship most probably implies a corresponding disconnection from ethical supernaturalism. I may have had a conceptually grounded unconditional reverence for the Supreme Being all my life (unconditional reverence entailed by the logical necessity of the concept of a supreme being), and yet I would object if my pastor suggested an antihumanistic living principle. Indeed, I often find myself questioning the positions of religious leaders on moral grounds, implying that these “grounds” did not necessarily originate supernaturally. These two counterexamples demonstrate that religious worship could lead to institutionalization, but not necessarily ethical supernaturalism. Herein lies my rejection of Wiredu’s implied argument that worship and religious institutionalization are automatic pathways to (ethical) supernaturalism. I also reject Smoker’s (2008: 6) argument that “those who . . . say prayers . . . cannot be humanists.” These supernaturalism–humanism dichotomy-based positions are inaccurate.

It seems to me that ethical supernaturalism is not only unnecessary to religion but also harmful to it. I will not go into details of how people commit all sorts of evil, including killing other people, with religious conviction deriving from the expectation of religious rewards. It is pertinent to make this point: even in religion, morality is (ought to be) based on human well-being. The reason for this is that moral codes are rules that are discovered by reason from experience in interacting with other people in a community. They are logical deductions of the envisaged consequences of imagining the universalization of actions. All you need to discover a moral principle is to reflect on the consequence of the universalization of such a principle. This criterion for morality has no exceptions. Any experience with community life would reveal that people have to choose between permitting certain acts to be done by all (such as stealing, murder, adultery, etc.) or living harmoniously with one another, but not both, since one excludes the other (permitting these acts would prevent people from living harmoniously).

Given this argument, whatever supernatural or theistic origin morality may have is an indirect, not a direct, one. This is because it can be argued that in creation, God gave humans the cognitive ability to make moral rules, rather than moral rules themselves. The true source of morality must be brought back to the fore: moral intuition arises from

the discovery by reason through experience of principles that either aid or hamper human well-being. It is not only secular humanism that fails to appreciate this in creating the humanism-versus-theism dichotomies and it is not only people like Wiredu that, as we saw, are still influenced (however subtly) by these seeming dichotomies; religious leaders have to appreciate this conclusion as well, since it contains the only potential to end a growing trend of religious charlatanism, exploitation, and conflicts.

One hopes that the foregoing analysis clears these confusions regarding the relationship between theism and humanism. One reason why almost everyone shies away from theistic humanism is that it has not been accorded a sustained rational justification. While theistic humanism is not new, its proponents so far failed to demonstrate exactly what constitutes the relationship between theism and humanism. The literature seems to focus on simply emphasizing that these two are compatible without providing the premises or reasons for the compatibility. The major proponent of theistic humanism, Maduabuchi Dukor (2001: 65), for example, writes: "African culture is an example of a culture that is humanistic while at the same time holding the belief in transcendental beings like spirits, gods and so on. It is shown by this idea that though Humanism and Theism appear as contraries yet both can be true in African and Asian cultures." But how are these two compatible or related? Dukor does not tell us. He even calls for a scientific defense of theistic humanism, but he does not provide it (73). As a result, previous theories of theistic humanism have not been convincing.

The problem with basing morality on supernatural sources is its vulnerability to manipulation, particularly because we would not know what counts as revealed and what counts as the bearer's personal desires and motives. Obiora's (1998) research findings concerning religious manipulation and charlatanism demonstrate this demerit. Even worse is the tendency to base, not just morality, but the entire range of life outcomes on a supernatural source. It seems to me that these are the variants of supernaturalism that the European Renaissance intended to combat, but instead it chose to combat supernaturalism as a whole. The rest of the world need not follow this path. In fact, research shows that North America did not exactly follow this trend since many Americans seem to be very successfully combining healthy doses of theism with naturalism.⁶ The crucial factor is to distinguish between the variants of supernaturalism and hence to know which to avoid or moderate.

One may then ask, how could a process of dealing with ethical and cosmological supernaturalism lead to suspicion toward supernaturalism as a whole, and how are we sure that this process will not repeat itself in Africa? I suspect that the answer to this question is that many Europeans discarded religious institutionalization along with the aforementioned variants of supernaturalism (a phenomenon that seems to have led to the conversion of many European churches into museums). The rationalization behind this move is something like this: if I see no more need to seek divine explanations for the morality of my actions, why should I continue to be religious. In short, why should I continue to attend religious services and worship? This conclusion is very easy to make, but not only does it lead to atheism, it also happens to be logically unwarranted. It is not necessary to discard institutionalized religion and worship in a bid to combat ethical supernaturalism. I have demonstrated that they are very distinct concepts. In this connection, I find Wiredu's belief that worship must lead to unquestioning belief in "revealed" doctrines (or that worship must lead to ethical supernaturalism) to be wrong.⁷ From daily experience, it is obvious that an enlightened worshipper is capable of distinguishing when the utterances of a religious cleric arise from genuine exhortation to keep the orthodox religious doctrines (which in

many religions are close to natural moral codes) and when he is projecting a “new” moral revelation as scaffolding for some selfish interest, especially when this “new revelation” is at variance with human well-being. This is why, for instance, not every religious worshipper will accept the exhortation of a cleric who wakes up one morning and says that his latest revelation recommends a suicide-bombing mission. Reasonable worshippers are more likely to question his motives or to recommend her for psychiatric examination.

Once we can show that worship must not lead to ethical supernaturalism, it becomes clear that we must not discard worship (and even institutionalized religion) in a bid to combat ethical supernaturalism. My argument is that religious worship and institutionalization can exist without ethical supernaturalism, or that the presence of ethical supernaturalism can be controlled from rising to dangerous levels. Beyond this, you can still have worship without (attachment to) institutionalized religion, but it is not my recommendation. This is because, although religion is supposed to be in the heart, institutionalization gives it more expression. A lighter but no less crucial point is that institutionalization also fulfills the social dimensions of worship. One gets to meet people who have similar religious feelings and a lot of social endeavors result from these interactions, including ones of charity to the less privileged and so on. Several researches have shown that going to church increases one’s lifespan (churchgoing and religious people live on average longer) (see Storrs, 2016). Other research indicate that “a secure attachment to God... is associated with a decrease in distress over time”, as well as “buffers against the deleterious effects of stressful life events” (Ellison et al., 2012: 493). The same studies cite that churchgoing produced higher rates of social support, optimism, self-discipline, sense of purposeful living and meaning, and reduced the likelihood of smoking. Although I may be speculating, it seems to me that these benefits are among the reasons for the improved longevity. Lastly, institutionalization enlivens worship and gives it an enduring character. It is for these reasons that I am cautious about the decision of an individual to recline to his shell to worship without any socially interactional dimensions to this worship. It may even be argued that to throw away both worship and institutionalization is to open the gradual intellectual route to atheism, but I would not go this far, since I do not yet see enough logic in this supposition.

The only challenge that remains is how people can continue to maintain ties to institutionalized religion and simultaneously remain humanist in moral orientation by resisting the supernaturalist (or superstitious) effusions of religious leaders. To this challenge, I respond by arguing that no religious institution should lead one to go against core humanist concerns or break the Golden Rule. In fact, this should be a yardstick for courting or rejecting a religious institution. This is the only way that theism can continue to coexist with humanism.

It is possible that this challenge is being naturally resolved. It seems to me that Christianity in Africa might witness what I see as an evolution from ethical supernaturalism to theistic humanism. Let me offer two examples: first, many Christians in Africa do not accept the idea (propounded by most Christian pastors on a weekly basis) that giving 10% of our total income is a prerequisite to enjoying a “fruitful” relationship with God or even a materially successful life. Neither do most of us believe (as many pastors preach every week) that our success in life is ultimately God’s design and “beyond our power.” Indeed, moral criticism of the prescriptions of religious leaders is growing here. Yet, we are active Christians and we sit everyday listening to the same religious leaders for religious inspiration. So we are theists but do not necessarily derive many of our ethical insights from religious sources. What it means is that theistic humanism is already in practice by a

good number of people in Africa. What this article is meant to do is to encourage and embolden it by providing it with the theoretical and argumentative support, so that the widespread “ethical” pretensions of many religious leaders would hopefully die a natural death. It is thus possible for one to be theistic (even religious) without sliding into ethical supernaturalism.

The summary on theistic humanism, then, is to believe in a Supreme Creator of the universe and equally believe that He has in fact already given humans the rational powers to decide their moral issues based on human well-being and overall progress of the cosmos.

As an example, many people questioned why Pope Francis focused his 2015 encyclical on climate change. Some have argued that he should focus on religious issues.⁸ But these objections are based on ethical supernaturalist conceptions of religion. Concern for how we make the environment safe for our children is in fact a humanist sort of theistic concern. The same Pope is equally breaking ground with tradition in examining the possibility of a lot of other reforms, which suggest that he has the ingredients of a theistic humanist and is not simply an ethical supernaturalist (do something simply because God says so).

Another reason for adding theism to humanism is that stand-alone humanism is not comprehensive of the moral requirements of the universe. For instance, humanism focuses on human welfare and says nothing conceptually about the broader universe or Mother Nature. But we need the universe to continue to survive. This highlights a shortcoming: humanism on its own appears to be consistent with the high rate of pollution of the universe to satisfy human wants. Humanism also says nothing about how lesser creatures, such as animals, birds, plants, and so on ought to be treated. But the existence of these is vital both to and alongside the existence of humans. Humanism per se is thus too narrow to cater for even human well-being. But humanism combined with acknowledgment that the rest of the universe shares a common source (as well as common destiny) with human well-being would be more appropriate. It is in this light that something that goes beyond humanism, such as theistic humanism, has a potential to offer a broader platform for determining human actions. In this way, the tumultuous and confused relationship between religion and morality can hopefully be put to rest, and the religious cultivation of notoriously antihuman policies (such as murder and economic extortion) can be more productively reexamined.

Conclusion

This exercise has involved a series of clarifications of Wiredu’s diagnosis of the issue of supernaturalism and dangers associated with it. I have agreed with Wiredu’s diagnosis of dangers resulting from basing morality on supernatural sources. But I have argued that this is the definition of ethical supernaturalism rather than supernaturalism per se. I argued that ethical and cosmological supernaturalism are variants that are problematic and do not represent supernaturalism as a whole (although I clarified that they can only be combated to a minimum and can never be completely eliminated). The lack of distinction between the variants of supernaturalism (such as singling out the notorious ethical and cosmological variants) seems to be the root of the tendency to reject supernaturalism as a whole rather than these variants, and this in turn tends to lead to rejecting religious institutionalization and worship. But I demonstrated that the verdict that religious institutionalization and worship are (automatic) sources of ethical and cosmological supernaturalism is wrong. I also argued that Wiredu’s suggestion of humanism as alternative moral foundation is in the right direction but too broad, since this encompasses both secular and theistic humanism.

Matters are not helped when we see from his general ontology that he is an avowed secularist. Arguing that proponents of secular humanism confuse supernaturalism for its ethical and cosmological variants in looking for what to reject, I argue that theistic humanism saves humanism from ethical and cosmological supernaturalism without rendering it (humanism) as a secular ideology. I also do not see anything wrong with supernaturalism per se, but I choose to operate with theism due to its logical necessity. In contrast to viewing humanism as being opposed to theism or supernaturalism, I argue that they are cohabitable bedfellows. In sum, then, I agree with Wiredu that humanist rather than supernaturalist grounding ought be sought for human policy and action, but I disagree that this implies a wholesale rejection of theism, worship, institutionalized religion, or supernaturalism per se. The general argument has been that people do not derive their moral codes from supernatural entities simply because they believe in these entities. The moral codes come from moral ideas, which come from human reason. If moral ideas come from human reason, then they are humanistic. Humanism is therefore not simply a replacement of theism or supernaturalism. Nor does humanism imply the undermining of such beliefs and their associated activities.

Notes

1. Archbishop Okogie, on *Newswave*, 13 April 1988, p. 18.
2. Stuart (2000: 19) sees superstition as “a belief in supernatural causality: that one event leads to the cause of another without any physical process linking the two events.”
3. This is one of the electronic appliances officially used by the Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS) to detect (the strength of) spiritual presence.
4. It seems to me that it is not that atheists do not possess these mental categories, but that they suppress them.
5. I elaborated more on this in another paper titled “On the Non-Worshipping Character of Akan Approaches to Divinity” (Ani, 2017).
6. It has been reported that the citizens of the United States are much more demonstrably religious than their counterparts in Western Europe, and have thus avoided much of the secularizing trends that affected the latter. The Pew Forum Report on Religion and Public Life in America based on surveys of 35,556 adults between 8 May and 13 August 2007 reveals that Americans report strong religious faith: 88.5% believe in God, 60% believe in a personal God, 7% are unsure, and only 1.6% are definite atheists (The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008: 5). Compare this to the Euro-barometer Poll of 2005, which revealed that 38% (UK), 47% (Germany), 34% (France) 19% (Czech Republic), and 16% (Estonia) believe in God (Special Euro-barometer, 2005: 7).
7. See Wiredu’s (2011a: 4–5) argument that the Akans do not worship the Supreme Being.
8. Such as Republican Presidential aspirants Rick Santorum and Jeb Bush. See their objections in Hale (2015) and Page (2015). See the encyclical of Pope Francis (2015).

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