

**Understanding Social Freedom and Humanism in Odera
Oruka's Philosophy**

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Abstract

H. Odera Oruka's philosophy, as can be discerned from his various works, revolves around the issue of social justice. In this paper I seek to show how Oruka's idea of social justice is inextricably bound up with his conceptions of human rights and humanism, and his contention that one of the fundamental principles of social justice is the recognition and realization of the human minimum as the most basic universal human right.

Key Words

Freedom, human rights, human minimum, humanism, social justice

Introduction

H. Odera Oruka's philosophy, as can be discerned from his various works, revolves around the issue of social justice. He had a passion for the establishment of socio-economic structures that would guarantee that all human beings live in dignity, and are thus able to be part of the community of moral agents. In this paper I seek to show how Oruka's idea of social justice is inextricably bound up with his conceptions of human rights and humanism, and his contention that one of the fundamental principles of social justice is the recognition and realization of the human minimum as the most basic universal human right.

The paper sets out with an examination of Oruka's conception of freedom and liberty, after which it focuses on his assessment of the state of freedom in Africa, his evaluation of freedom at the global level, and his contention for the need of a clear conceptualization of the human minimum.

Oruka's Conception of Freedom and Liberty

Oruka's view of liberty is well articulated in his book, *The Philosophy of Liberty* (1991/1996). In that work, he sets out by presenting a brief survey of the historical understanding of liberty from classical Greece to modern Europe. He observes that the most common conception of freedom among the thinkers of these two historical periods made a distinction between mental and social freedom. Mental freedom emerges from that literature as a state that pertains to an individual's unconstrained exercise of intellectual activities either as a rational pursuit of truth or as an

exercise of one's will, and is considered to be primary to social freedom. But Oruka does not agree with this view. He sees the two as necessarily related such that they cannot be separated in the practical world. He argues that because one must exist before one can think, social liberty cannot be secondary to mental freedom. What is more, since social liberty is viewed primarily as the enjoyment of civil or political rights, it is the condition under which the exercise of mental freedom becomes possible. Moreover, thinking is hardly about anything other than things that pertain to life (Oruka 1996, 9-10). Thus to emphasize mental freedom at the expense of social freedom amounts to emphasis on the individual at the expense of society, a mode of thinking which Oruka does not agree with. He also points out that placing emphasis on mental freedom seems to ignore the fact that freedom is considered a fundamental right in virtue of its role as a possession by which one makes demands on others. Without this social role freedom would lose its thrust as a value (Oruka 1996, 59-60, 81).

Oruka further contends that like other values considered as rights, liberty is relational. As such, it cannot logically be sought outside the social context, nor can it be sought for its own sake, but to fulfill ends whose necessity or goodness are easily encumbered or endangered by actions of other people (Oruka 1996, 51). Consequently, he gives a stipulative definition that takes into account those aspects of liberty that he deems to be lacking in both classical Greek and later European conceptions. He proposes that an adequate definition of liberty should be expressed thus: "*liberty for X in S*", where X may represent any individual and S represents some particular society or community (Oruka 1996, 50-52). Therefore he writes, "*liberty for X in S*' means that 'X has, with respect to S and with equality with others in S, ability and opportunity to obtain or satisfy X's primary and secondary needs in S'" (Oruka 1996, 52).

In the light of this definition, one would not have liberty if one had some needs but lacked either the ability or opportunity to fulfill those needs, or if the needs are not fulfillable at all on grounds that lack of opportunity to fulfill them is the result of either direct or indirect actions of others that make meeting one's needs impossible (Oruka 1996, 55-57). One is directly prevented from fulfilling one's needs if another person acts in a manner that is explicitly intended to prevent one's needs from being fulfilled, for instance, if there is some law that prohibits certain persons from admission into certain schools, hospitals or restaurants. But one may also be indirectly prevented from fulfilling one's needs if, for instance, one is subjected to some condition in which one is unable to financially afford to meet the needs. Therefore, poverty is an indirect hindrance to the meeting of such important needs as education and healthcare. This is why it does not make much sense to defend the idea of freedom in such cases by arguing that a

poor person is free to access such services when he or she is not in a condition that would make having such services a matter of election on his or her part.

Human needs can be either primary or secondary (Oruka 1996, 60-63). Primary needs are those requirements that make human life possible: without them the kind of life that is understood to be specifically human would not be possible. We can assume, for example, that having livelihood at the biological level is essential for the sustenance of any life at all. But having humans foraging from landfills or dumpsters for survival is not exactly what anyone expects of humans as their regular mode of living, as this does not distinguish such practice from what, say, beasts do in the wild. The difference between humans and wild beasts, then, must be sought in the *mode* of procuring the materials that the body needs for its survival, that is, in the organization of such procurement that might include not only the regularity, but also the quality of the procurement to meet the standards required for the good of the specifically human life.

However, the *modes* of meeting the needs that pertain to specifically human life are not limited to the procurement of food, although this is fundamental. We know, for example, that human life is built around the acquisition and use of organized knowledge. Like food, acquisition and use of organized knowledge guarantees human survival in an incremental scale commensurate with the changing complexity of threats to human survival from both nature and other humans. Creation and delivery of knowledge in an organized manner in incremental levels commensurate with human ability to comprehend and successfully apply such acquired knowledge is therefore a primary human need and right. In addition, we can say, reasonably, that the need for food and education is in service of the guarantee that we are secure from threats to our lives that would result from not being able to feed ourselves, and not being able to have the knowledge for countering threats from our surroundings (Oruka 1996, 60-62). It follows that there must be something greater than the specific provisions *per se*. It is our need once we are alive that we continue to meet these needs, in the very least, at the levels minimally required for a properly human life. Security or protection from threats is therefore also a primary human need (Oruka 1997, 85; Shue 1980, 20-22).

Finally, on this list, one must address the question of how the meeting of these needs becomes a reality for every human person whose natural interests they define. It would be an oxymoron to argue that the needs are primary to human life unless humans possessed the freedom to acquire or realize them.

Primary needs are fundamental and universal and, on that basis, are rights. This means that there cannot possibly be any other needs that override them. Secondary needs, on the other hand, are those requirements that enrich life. Although life would still be possible without them, such life would probably be only of low quality (Oruka 1996, 51). In Oruka's view, primary needs are physical security, food, shelter, clothing, knowledge, freedom (of action and movement), health, and sex. Sex gets onto the list as a biological necessity for the survival of human community, but can be viewed as a primary need only if it is granted that humans cannot survive as individuals without community. Secondary needs are some specific requirements that are contingent upon the primary needs, such as, for example, the freedom to express oneself, to assemble with others, to have an opinion, to be religious or areligious, to have culture, and to have sex for pleasure (Oruka 1996, 60-63).

The classification of human needs into primary and secondary is very important in two significant ways. First, the fulfillment of primary needs is a priority for all human beings and human societies, and, secondly, when there is conflict between the fulfillment of the primary and secondary needs, the fulfillment of primary needs must take precedence over that of secondary needs. Thus for Oruka, liberty can be primary or secondary depending on the needs for which it is sought. This idea also entails the fact that liberty, or lack of it, is a matter of degree depending on the extent to which one's needs are fulfilled. Oruka outlines and explains the freedoms that correspond to such needs. These are economic freedom, political freedom, intellectual freedom, cultural freedom, religious freedom, and sexual freedom (Oruka 1996, 64-83), each of which comprises subordinate freedoms for very specific ends. Of them all, economic freedom is the most basic because, as Oruka explains, it is a complex freedom comprising, among other things, the freedom relating to the fulfillment of most of the basic human needs such as freedom from hunger, freedom to find shelter, freedom from disease and ill health, freedom to find work and earn income, and freedom to use one's earning as one wishes.

Political freedom comprises other freedoms some of which relate to the fulfillment of basic needs, such as freedom of action (that is, the freedom to act according to one's conscience) and freedom to have education (or, freedom from ignorance). Due to its broadness, political freedom enables the fulfillment of several other subordinate freedoms which are entailed by our membership in communities, such as the freedom to have an opinion (also called freedom of thought), freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom to get the right information, freedom to seek power, freedom to vote, and freedom to form or belong to a political party. And since most of these freedoms relate to the fulfillment of secondary needs, political freedom can

be considered a secondary freedom. Most of the constituents of political freedom define or articulate our civil rights. But it is also secondary to economic freedom because its effective enjoyment is a function of economic freedom. The human need for the freedom to engage in economic activities for the provision of livelihood is what leads to the need to have the appropriate regulatory arrangements that guarantee and protect such pursuits for all, thus making economic and political freedoms to be complementary. But because it is more basic, economic dependency is always likely to threaten and, as history has shown, often compromise political freedoms. Across the globe, economic dependency is a major hindrance to the effective enjoyment of political freedom (Oruka 1996, 67-71).

Cultural freedom means the ability and opportunity to elect to live according to one's own preferences perceived as the best ways to reasonably live their lives, whether in accordance with or differently from the ways prescribed by one's culture, while still fulfilling both primary and secondary human needs. It involves seeking what one may consider a satisfying, gratifying, or happy life. And being a secondary freedom, its value lies primarily in the enrichment of human life for the practitioner, and cannot therefore rationally involve seeking a decadent or worse mode of life, or life which is in total disregard of other people's feelings and cultural choices. As such, this is freedom to meet such needs as what it is or they are that one can enjoy privately as fulfilling to one without interference or pressure from others whose similar or comparable freedoms such choices do not directly affect. And since the practice of culture takes place in communal settings, it presupposes political freedom and demands political protection (Oruka 1996, 79-80).

Intellectual freedom, which refers to the unconstrained ability to seek and practice one's knowledge or express one's thought, comprises other related freedoms such as the freedom to read and write, the freedom to conduct experiments and research, and the freedom to practice critique as an inherent part of participating in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. These freedoms have been curtailed in a variety of ways by oppressive ideological governments and movements. Across the globe, the emergence of totalitarianism in the post-WW I years led to the prescription of content of knowledge by selectively banning learning resources and herding humans into repetitive and uncreative cognitive torture. Thus, both conceptually and historically, this complex freedom implies and springs from political freedom (Oruka 1996, 71-74, 80).

Religious freedom means the unconstrained ability of individuals and groups to live according to their own choice of religious faith driven by a belief in a supernatural being or beings; or to live without any such belief at all as their own rational determination or cultural allegiance may lead them. Since most religions claim to guide their adherents towards a good life, religious freedom entails the pursuit of the good life as may be directed by one's religious belief. This necessarily means that religious freedom presupposes several of the freedoms already discussed above, as religious belief and practice involves freedom of thought, political freedom that provides the conducive political atmosphere for having and practicing the beliefs that one's choice of religion prescribes and, finally, cultural freedom from discrimination by those whose beliefs one may choose not to share (Oruka 1996, 76-77).

Relatively less widespread and sometimes more controversial than the aforementioned freedoms is sexual freedom, or the unconstrained ability, at the right age as determined by law and reason, to engage in sex either as a means of perpetuating and preserving the human species, or for pleasure. As a drive that comes directly from biological make-up, the ability to satisfy one's sexual desire in a manner not biologically harmful to oneself or to the person with whom one chooses to have the union, sexual freedom is a primary freedom regardless of whether those who engage in it want to procreate or to have pleasure. Although it is separate from others by virtue of its specificity, it is entangled with other freedoms, especially cultural and religious freedoms. Given the controversy it bears in our time, it is also dependent upon political freedom as a civil right. This means that effective enjoyment of sexual freedom would not be possible where cultural freedom is lacking or severely suppressed (Oruka 1996, 78-80).

Oruka argues that of all the freedoms listed above, economic freedom is the most fundamental. In his view, one needs economic freedom (*Fe*) in order to enjoy political freedom (*Fp*), which in turn provides the general umbrella protection for the enjoyment of cultural freedom (*Fc*). The three freedoms are related and collectively contain the other three freedoms, namely intellectual freedom (*Fi*), religious freedom (*Fr*), and sexual freedom (*Fs*):

... *Fe* is the most fundamental liberty and it remains a necessary condition for *Fp* which in turn becomes a condition for *Fc* and *Fc* in turn is necessary for the three liberties, *Fi*, *Fr* and *Fs*. These three liberties are independent of one another. One does not, for example, need sexual freedom in order to exercise intellectual freedom and vice versa. Similarly, no intellectual or sexual freedom is necessary for those seeking religious freedom; religious monks and nuns are, for example, often freer and happier living in exclusion from circles that encourage intellectual or sexual tastes (Oruka 1996, 80).

Thus the issue of freedom is a central theme in Oruka's philosophical reflections. He did not believe that making a distinction between mental freedom and social freedom was of much help. For him, mental freedom is only an aspect of social freedom, because it can never be exercised independently of certain social conditions that make its execution possible. Such social conditions necessarily affect intellectual practice, and vice versa. In other words, freedom is never sought for its own sake but for ends other than itself such as to fulfill certain human needs. One is free only to the extent to which the needs for which freedom is sought are fulfilled. But given that human needs are either basic or secondary, so is freedom basic or secondary. Freedoms sought to fulfill basic needs are basic freedoms, while freedoms sought to fulfill secondary needs are secondary freedoms. Oruka therefore conceives freedom as necessarily social, that is, relational. Its enjoyment entails rights and obligations (Oruka 1996, 9-10, 59-63, 88).

The State of Freedom in Africa

Although the above list and description of freedoms have a tinge of a critique of the colonial universe to them, Oruka's preoccupation with freedom was probably even more motivated by what he regarded as the deplorable state of freedom in postcolonial Africa. It was his view that there was not much use of talking about freedom unless people - ordinary citizens - were conscious of being free. Awareness of one's freedoms or rights is pivotal, because doing must always begin with one's self awareness as an agent, that is, an unconstrained actor. Secondly, this consciousness must entail one's awareness of several things: of the conceptual and practical needs for which freedom is sought; of the prioritization of these needs; of those factors that hinder freedom; and, finally, of the need to remove them:

To be conscious of freedom is to be conceptually and practically aware of those elements, physical and social, that deny one freedom. It is to be conscious of the need to remove such elements as a necessity for the realisation of freedom. Hence, to be fully conscious of freedom is to be conscious of all those factors that hinder freedom (Oruka 1996, 87).

One will then not be sufficiently conscious of freedom when one mixes up primary and secondary freedoms: when one opts for a secondary freedom instead of opting for a primary freedom. On the basis of this confusion one demands, say, a television set instead of a sanitation gadget, a car instead of a house, the opportunity to excel in the culture of a "master race" instead of the indigenous ability to remove the social-cultural base that perpetuates racism, one demands the removal of a colonial governor while leaving untouched the removal of the colonial medal decoration - one demands *political* independence but leaves out

economic or cultural independence. One is inspired by now half truth Nkrumahian maxim, 'seek ye first political kingdom and all else will be added unto thee' (Oruka 1996, 88).

The fundamental question raised in the passages above is whether African nationalists who led the struggle against colonialism were sufficiently conscious of the implications of the freedom for which they struggled. It seemed to Oruka that most of them had not developed an adequate consciousness of freedom, namely, that the political and cultural freedoms that they so loudly advocated entailed the other freedoms as listed and described above, or that the political and cultural freedoms would themselves not be viable or sensible enough without an effective economic freedom. Without economic freedom, pioneer African leaders had not won any real freedom to bring home or to be proud of, thus largely leaving African peoples as illustrations of the old adage that "you are what you eat". African countries are yet to realize that failure to control their economic resources is one single obstacle to having genuine freedom and independence (Oruka 1996, 87-89; 1997, 106-107).

Political freedom cannot be an end in itself. As important as it may be, it is merely a gate to other freedoms which describe practical self-determination in the lives of the citizens of a nation, including their freedom to put in place a political order and leadership of their preference. It is obvious that Oruka drafted the notes for these views in the period of great political upheaval in Africa, probably in the years in which the last of the draconian African rulers were trying their best to cling to power by ruthlessly suppressing citizens' freedoms and violating human rights with impunity. In his own country, Kenya, academicians had become a politically endangered species in the last decade of Daniel arap Moi's dictatorship, academic innovativeness had been dealt a death blow, and choice of academic profession was increasingly equatable with a suicidal tendency. As discontent with Moi's dictatorship grew, his (Moi's) removal was widely viewed as Kenya's second liberation, and the view that there was need for the removal of similar regimes in Africa spread through the continent. In the light of these developments, especially where the suppression of academic freedom symbolized the highest political achievement of the dictators, Oruka's reflections were inevitably directed at reassessing whether political freedom from colonial control had meant anything to anyone in the new nations. Oruka himself puts it thus:

There is no doubt that many of the people involved in the liberation struggles see the end of those struggles simply as a matter of driving away the colonial or racist administration and taking over the offices vacated by the colonial regime. When they take over they expect to run the countries in the same style as the former colonial regime except, however, where they expect that the benefits will

be to themselves and to the fellow Africans. If these types of people are persuaded that national liberation is something more than the mere removal of a colonial regime, they must need to know the end of a national liberation - they must need to know and practice the ideology on the basis of which their post-colonial nation will be organised.... Otherwise the people will, when the colonial regime is removed, find themselves unable to know what to do with the “liberated” country. They will also find that, they have no need and reason to unite. The consequences are neo-colonialism, tribalism, sectionalism, corruption, inefficiency and power struggles (Oruka 1996, 109).

Pervasive neo-colonialism, tribalism, corruption and persistent internal conflicts and wars are real hindrances to the enjoyment of greater freedom in Africa. Without seriously addressing the issue of freedom, Oruka argued, real social development would most likely continue to elude African people. Oruka explains: “This ‘complete lack of idealism’ on the part of leaders makes them have little concern for their state and its future and they become poor representatives of the masses. They are representatives of the people but not for the people” (Oruka 1996, 102). An ideology is very important in showing people the social values and ideals by and for which they should live. Yet, at independence, many African states lacked explicit ideological frameworks to guide their politics. Leaders who advocated and practiced the so-called African socialism were often incoherent or inconsistent (Oruka 1996, 101-102).

To undercut Africans’ yearning for freedom, colonial regimes in Africa propagated the myth that colonialism did not underdevelop Africa through exploitation, but that Africa was already long underdeveloped before colonialism arrived, which is why, in their view, it fell easily and quickly to colonialism. On the contrary, therefore, they would argue, colonialism was meant to develop Africa (Oruka 1996, 89). The resulting ideology of domination based on the practice of Africans’ economic dependency further led, as well explicated by the leading scholars of the new analytical–critical framework of political economy, to the polarization between the countries of the north and the so-called “underdeveloped countries”. The misleading impression one gets from these economic theorizations of history is that the colonial countries were already fully developed themselves and needed no more development, while the so-called “underdeveloped” countries were the ones that needed development at the behest of those already developed. As a result, the colonial countries were purportedly benefactors rather than exploiters. Yet, as Oruka explains, no country is ever fully developed such that it needs no further improvements in the lives of its people or in the kind of knowledge from which these improvements accrue. On the contrary, the so-called “developed” countries have continued to depend on their former colonies for material supplies to their industries as well as for the local knowledge that accompany the preparation of these materials (Oruka 1997, 108-113).

Oruka further explains that development cannot be equated with material well-being to the exclusion of other forms of freedom. Rather, a country is fully developed if and only if all the freedoms are fully enjoyed by every citizen: "If N is a nation, the concept '*N is developed*' means that in N the people have their economic and socio-cultural needs fully satisfied, i.e., that in N one has all the social freedoms such as economic, political, cultural, intellectual, religious and sexual freedoms"(Oruka 1997, 95). But "If N is a nation, the concept '*N is underdeveloped*' means that in N the people have their economic and socio-cultural needs inadequately satisfied, i.e., that in N, the people do not sufficiently have all the social freedoms such as economic, political, cultural, intellectual, religious and sexual freedoms" (Oruka 1997, 113). Thus according to Oruka's conception of development, no country is or can be fully developed, as development is a complex and ever continuing process.

Oruka explains that due to lack of economic freedom, the postcolonial condition remains one that is defined by a relationship of persistent patronage. Instead of acting free, African countries have continued to look up to their former colonial masters for advice and direction, a condition that greatly undermines any chance of autonomy and self-determination (Oruka 1996, 96-99). In Oruka's words, "African nationalists and leaders were thus made to see the necessity of adapting all their needs to those of the metropolitan centres. Their economies, cultures, political constitutions, etc. were allowed to be the satellites of the metropolitan centres" (Oruka 1996, 97). Thus it was Oruka's view that even after political independence Africa continues to suffer pervasive abject poverty and persistent civil conflicts with their attendant untold suffering and unnecessary loss of human life. This raises the issue of the very meaning of freedom and independence, and the extent to which such values are currently enjoyed in Africa.

According to Oruka, there are in the current African political experience two ways in which the philosophical truth that "the independent" is free meets its antithesis. One is the now widespread realisation that most of the African republics (though regarded as independent states) are, with respect to the former colonial powers, sovereign but not free. The other is that the post-independence awareness, among many African peoples, that for them independence has not eradicated the economic and cultural servitude brought by the colonialists; and they further observe that even the colonial political servitude which independence did destroy had been replaced by another form of political servitude (Oruka 1996, 99-100).

Oruka thought that the need for attention to the human good was more acute in Africa where, due to rampant human rights abuses, most countries deserved to be called African Republics of Inhumanity and Death (ARID):

The value of human life in ARID is below the minimum demanded by humanity, and intolerable to any normal human conscience. Life is hard and godless; it is “brutish, nasty and short.” Thus ARID is completely arid when the question of humanism is raised. There is no single humanist ideal in it. And worse still, there is no philosophy or ideology coming to it either from within or without that would help liberate the people. Frantz Fanon saw this a long time ago - the great danger to Africa is the absence of ideology (Oruka 1997, 143).

A look at Africa today confirms that the situation represented by the acronym invented by Oruka, ARID, continues to characterize life in many African countries. Many people are still being maimed, killed or turned into refugees within or across the borders of their countries by interstate or intrastate wars, while many others are rendered destitute by famine and preventable diseases. In some cases, these problems are the direct result of actions by governments or arise from government-sponsored violence on their own people, while in others they have resulted from the apathy of people in government. It is morally unacceptable that some individuals and institutions should be allowed to cause death and suffering, either directly or indirectly by deliberately declining to prevent the causal conditions of the plight of the very people they are supposed to protect and lead.

The State of Freedom: A Global Perspective

According to Oruka, lack of true freedom is not an African peculiarity. Because poverty remains a crucial cause of loss of true freedom, the spread of poverty across the globe carries unfreedom with it, making poor people everywhere the subjects of manipulation by the nations on whose finances their economies depend. Despite the different degrees of dependency, much of the so-called global South, where most of the world’s poor live, suffers from inadequacy of freedom, or limited freedom, if you wish. And of them all, Africans have the least amount of freedom despite supplying the highest percentage of the natural resources and raw materials that drive the economies of the rich nations. In his article, “Achievements of Philosophy and One Current Practical Necessity for Mankind” (1987/1988), Oruka had argued that the enjoyment of the basic freedoms, as we outlined earlier in this paper (Oruka 1996), is one of the practical necessities of human life. This article appears as chapter 9 in his book, *Practical Philosophy: In Search of an Ethical Minimum* (1997) under a slightly different title. There he writes:

In human life there are certain needs whose fulfilment is a condition for the survival of the human species and for any meaningful creative action. Such needs have basic socio-eco-biotic characteristics. And they are what I wish to refer to here as the practical necessities of human life. In actual life they have to do with the necessities for (i) biological/physical human survival, (ii) freedom from abject ignorance and (iii) a certain minimum of dignity for persons and races. The fulfilment of such necessities is a priority that precedes all thought and all philosophy (Oruka 1997, 99).

The necessity to have these needs met cannot be subject to any debate, and denying them to anyone or any group would amount to threatening their very survival (Oruka 1997, 100-102). Therefore, he argued, eradication of world poverty (abject or absolute poverty) is the obligation of all capable human beings, and hence a concern of humanity as a whole. He believed that philosophers had a special moral mission to articulate this basic duty of all to each other and to the human race. To complete its mission, philosophy has to extend its functions to the ethics of human life and the conditions for the improvement of the world for human existence. This concern calls for philosophers to help reorganise and rationalise the available knowledge in order to improve human understanding and the welfare of mankind. And here lies the moral mission of philosophy. In our times it is more urgent than the concern, say, to develop new methods for solving classical metaphysical paradoxes (Oruka 1997, 99).

It is the search for such principles that Oruka partly attempts in the article "Parental Earth Ethics", which later appears as book chapters (Oruka 1996, 111-121; Oruka 1997, 146-151). The article was first published in 1993 in the Journal *Quest* (Vol. VII, No. 1 June) as a response to an article by Garrett Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor" (Sterba 1997, 78-8). In arguing against the rich helping the poor, Oruka countered, Hardin fails to explain the dependency of the richer countries of the global North on the so-called "poor countries" of the South for the sources of their wealth. The amassing of wealth by the North has not been a unilateral venture, and the deliberate obscuring of the contributions of the South leads to the false impression that the North owes nothing to those countries from which they have sucked the resources on which Northern economies depend. The issue is, therefore in Oruka's view, not just one of recognition, but indeed of fair distribution of the end products. Oruka aptly points out this shortcoming in Hardin's argument among others.

In "Parental Earth Ethics", Oruka observes that the living conditions of most African populations, and the populations of the global South, are not only in deplorable states, but are also likely to worsen. Most of the people in these regions live below the poverty line that inhibits them from living at the level of minimum requirements commensurate with human

dignity as per the definition of freedom outlined above. To rectify these anomalies, Oruka proposes an ethical principle for distributing world resources that would guarantee the enjoyment of the fundamental human rights as a minimum requirement of universal justice. He referred to this principle as the ethics of the right to a human minimum. This is the right to which every human being is entitled because it defines those conditions upon which human life separates from the lives of brutes: it gives everyone the basis for demanding the fulfillment of those needs upon which this difference depends. In this sense, the principle goes beyond merely requiring the recognition and respect for the fundamental rights of other human beings. The right to a human minimum refers to those needs that a human being must fulfill to live as a person, that is, with the basic freedoms we described earlier as entitlements (Oruka 1997, 83-88, 146-150).

The Human Minimum

Most theorists of rights agree that demanding the items under specific rights is rationally defensible. For example, according to Henry Shue, “A right provides a basis for a justified demand. If a person has a particular right, the demand that the enjoyment of the substance of the right be socially guaranteed is justified by good reasons, and the guarantees ought, therefore, to be provided” (Shue 1980, 13).

Human rights are moral rights, thus they may not be enforceable by law. Their appeal is however not weakened by that fact. They acquire their appeal from the prevailing moral principles and beliefs, and are promoted as the basis and goal of social and political orders. Thus, according to some philosophers, Oruka included, they are neither the function of nor the basis for benevolence or charity (Edwards 1967, 198; Shue 1980, 14; Oruka 1997, 89). They are tied to an understanding of the basic requirements of a specifically human life that must attend to its dignity (Kucuradi 1982, 47-48). Therefore, a violation of a human right is a threat either to human survival or dignity. To have a right is to have an adequate justification why the substance of the right ought to be granted (Shue 1980, 13). Edwards writes:

A man with a right has no reason to be grateful to the benefactors; he has ground for grievance when it is denied. The concept presupposes a standard below which it is intolerable that a human being should fall –not just in the way that cruelty to an animal is not to be tolerated but, rather, that human deprivations affront some ideal conception of what a human life ought to be like, a conception of human excellence. It is on the face of it unjust that some men enjoy luxuries while others are short of necessities, and to call some interest luxuries and others necessities is

implicitly to place them in an order of priorities as claims. Upsetting that order then demands to be justified (Edwards 1967, 199).

It is Edwards' view that except under justifiable circumstances, the pursuit of basic human needs ought to take precedence over that of secondary ones that are merely sources of enrichment. This ought to be the case at both the individual and societal levels, because basic rights define the lower limit of a decent human life. Oruka calls this limit the human minimum (Oruka 1997, 87), while Shue calls it the moral minimum. This minimum, in Shue's words, "concerns the least that every person can demand and the least that every person, every government, and every corporation must be made to do" (Shue 1980, p.ix). To have a right is to have or enjoy the substance of the right (Oruka 1997, 86). But when it is not within one's ability to provide for the substance of a right, one is justified to demand that some other person or persons make some arrangements so that one will still be able to enjoy the substance of the right (Shue 1980, 16).

As earlier noted, basic human needs include physical security and subsistence (Shue 1980, 20-24). Physical security includes such needs as protection from harm or threats of it in any form, including subjection to death, mayhem, rape or assault. Subsistence includes needs for adequate food, adequate shelter, adequate clothing, unpolluted air, unpolluted water, basic healthcare, freedom of movement, and access to knowledge (Oruka 1996, 60-61; Sterba 1991, 113). It was Oruka's view that everyone needs these goods as a *sine qua non* for human survival (Oruka 1996, 62-63). Basic needs are therefore those requirements that must be satisfied in order not to seriously endanger one's health and sanity (Sterba 1991, 108). They form the necessary content of the right to life, in agreement with Sterba's view that one's right to life "would most plausibly be interpreted as a right to receive those goods and resources that are necessary for satisfying her basic needs" (Sterba 1991, 108). The right to life is therefore analytically equivalent to what Oruka calls the right to a human minimum (Oruka 1997, 87-88). Being basic, this right is absolute, and therefore an inherent necessity for the enjoyment of other rights. According to Shue (1980, 26-27), the enjoyment of any other right presupposes this right to life. This also means that the right to life, or the human minimum, cannot be limited (restricted), compromised or overridden by any other consideration, nor by the enjoyment of any other right (Oruka 1997, 88; Savci 1982, 61).

Any attempt to limit, compromise or override one's right to life to a level below the human minimum becomes a threat to one's health or sanity, and therefore a threat to one's natural rights, namely, the rights that are inextricable from what it means to be human. If this happened, one would be unable to exercise one's reason and conduct oneself as a moral agent (human

person). In such a situation, one would be forced to act on one's instinct. Such a person is not reasonably and morally expected to respect any right of any other person (Shue 1980, 29-30). But even if such a person wanted to respect the rights of other people, that is, to behave morally, he or she would not be able to do so because his or her only preoccupation would be his or her own survival.

Thus according to Oruka, the right to a human minimum is the basis for a justified demand by anybody that the world (not just his society) has the duty to guarantee that he is not denied the chance to live a life of minimum good health; and should he or she find himself or herself in a situation where this right is denied, he or she is likely to be tempted to disregard his or her own moral obligations toward others, and society as a whole will have no adequate moral ground for expecting him or her to respect anybody else's right to anything, including those rights that are protected by the principles of territorial sovereignty and national supererogation (Oruka 1997, 88). Being universal, the right to a human minimum imposes obligations that transcend territorial, national, racial, or religious boundaries (Oruka 1997, 87). As Shue aptly put it, "Basic rights, ..., are everyone's minimum reasonable demands upon the rest of humanity. They are the rational basis for justified demands the denial of which no self-respecting person can reasonably be expected to accept" (Shue 1980, 19). The right to a human minimum is therefore a universal right possessed by every person as a human being (Sterba 1991, 108).

We can reinforce the rationale for the universal obligation to promote the human minimum by appealing to Singer's moral argument for assisting the absolutely poor. In so doing, we would be assuming that living in absolute or abject poverty is analytically equivalent to living a human life that is below the human minimum, unless there is evidence to the contrary. Singer's argument runs as follows: If one can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of greater or equal comparable moral significance then one ought to do it. Absolute poverty is a bad thing. And there is some absolute poverty that one can prevent without sacrificing anything of greater or equal comparable moral significance. Therefore, such a person ought to prevent some absolute poverty. Singer argues that when the rich people allow the poor to suffer and die when they themselves can prevent such suffering and death, they actually engage in reckless homicide for which they are morally blameable (Singer 1997, 90-91).

Humanism and the Right to a Human Minimum

Given the moral nature of human rights, Oruka thought that philosophers had the primary duty to concern themselves with their promotion, especially to define and explain them as the

ultimate goal of any social and political order. He believed that moral approaches to solving current problems in the world are superior, and would be far more effective than military options. All scholars, but philosophers especially, ought to take it as their duty to help in the search for the moral solutions to world problems - the most urgent of which he identified as abject poverty and conflict, particularly the prospects of a nuclear war. Philosophers, he believed, can help in the search for permanent solutions to the threats to humanity that emanate from these problems by giving both descriptive and prescriptive attention to the content of human good. In other words, moral good, not military might, will guarantee security for mankind (Oruka 1997, 132-133).

The right to a human minimum is therefore the benchmark for humanism. In "Philosophy and humanism in Africa", a paper first published in 1978, and reprinted as a chapter in his book, *Practical Philosophy: In Search of an Ethical Minimum* (1997), Oruka defines humanism as the positive quality, security and well-being of human existence as either individual or collective life (Oruka 1997,139). He thought of humanism as an ideal which is attainable through, yet greater than, the sum of the contents of a human minimum. It is the ultimate end toward which the endeavors defined in the human minimum should aim. Oruka argued that humanism is the ultimate moral good that is served by the attainment of the subservient goods like happiness, freedom, duty, power, perfection, self-realization, knowledge, and faith in God:

Take for example, the standard of happiness. Happiness is not real unless it is a result or a symbol of the good and true quality and security of one's life. Happiness derived for instance, from stolen goods or a sweet poison cannot be real happiness. Like happiness, freedom is not real –it is meaningless and dangerous– if it is not in line with the quality and security of one's life. Freedom of destitute, slave or madman cannot be real freedom. Likewise, the possession of power is futile and undesirable unless it guarantees the security of he who has it and those on behalf of whom it is possessed and exercised ... (Oruka 1997, 139-140).

Although "Philosophy and Humanism in Africa" was written in 1978, the ideas articulated therein, such as collective responsibility for the promotion of the human good in Africa and the world in general, have only recently moved to the center of philosophical reflections worldwide. The solution to the rampant lack of social justice is to make respect for human rights as defined in the idea of the human minimum a globally enforceable objective of all governments, organizations, and individuals. All governments of the world, and all organizations and individuals of good moral reason should recognize, respect, and act at all times to promote for all the right to a human minimum as an absolute and universal right. Ensuring its universal enjoyment should be an obligation of all governments, organizations, or individual persons who

have the means, and its beneficiaries should be everyone regardless of national, ideological, racial or religious affiliations.

It should be pointed out that Oruka's discontent with ethnophilosophy, a dominant feature of philosophical practice by African scholars during the first few decades of political independence, was due to his belief that the movement was not capable of rising to the challenges of the new realities in Africa. He therefore frequently talked with disappointment about the lack in Africa of philosophical thought and practice that could help liberate its people from the prevailing political acts of inhumanity. By contrast, he believed, a critical tradition of philosophy would help by first analyzing the present, deplorable conditions of human existence in Africa, and then prescribing the minimum moral good that ought to be met by all African governments and states as a condition of their legitimacy (Oruka 1997, 138-140, 144). What is more, Oruka's inception of the "Sage philosophy movement" and his insistence that the ordinary person had important critical ideas worthy of philosophical consideration by professional philosophers was meant first and foremost to erase the academics' imaginary and self-imposed bifurcation of human experience in which they think that they tread a world removed from that of the people with whom they share the same political, economic, linguistic, and other important cultural factors that promote thought (see Oruka 1991).

In addition, Oruka proposed the formation of an organization for the promotion of humanism in Africa (OPHA) by African and Afro-Asian philosophers (Oruka 1997, 144). He considered the need to address the poor state of humanism in Africa to be so urgent that the formation of OPHA to promote critical philosophy necessary for its initiation and nurturing could not wait only for long-term solutions (Oruka 1997, 144). OPHA would have the function, among others, of promoting critical philosophical thinking and evaluation of the social and moral order in the various African states. It would also define the minimum moral good below which no state could go without meeting with continental and global condemnation and excommunication (Oruka 1997, 144).

Furthermore, Oruka proposed the formation of a world government - the government of humanity - to check on the conditions that not only threaten human survival but also limit human freedom (Oruka 1997, 126-133), akin to what Louis P. Pojman later called for (Pojman 2006, chapter 2). Such a world government ought to have the mandate and ability to oversee and enforce the right to a human minimum, even if doing so requires that it overrides the sovereignty of some nations (Oruka 1997, 133; Pojman 2006, 56-57).

Obstacles to the Enjoyment of the Right to a Human Minimum

Among the obstacles on the path to universal human happiness is the mismanagement of world resources. Experts tend to agree that there is more than enough wealth in the world to support every human being currently existing to live above the human minimum. For example, in the 1990s a number of scholars asserted that the world produces sufficient goods and other resources to meet the cost of satisfying the human minimum of every existing person in their respective societies (see for examples Sterba 1991, 114-115; Singer 1997, 86-87). According to Sterba, "it has been projected that if all the arable lands were optimally utilized a population of between 38 and 48 billion people could be supported" (Sterba 1991, 115). On his part, Singer observed that "The world does produce enough food. Moreover the poor nations themselves could produce far more if they made use of improved agricultural techniques" (Singer 1997, 87). In Singer's view, the fundamental problem is with the distribution of wealth. There is need, he observed, to transfer some wealth from the rich (affluent) nations and individuals to the poor ones (Singer 1997, 87). If this were to happen, there would also be need to transfer improved technologies to the poor nations to enable them to optimally utilize their resources.

According to Oruka, however, there are at least two major obstacles to the worldwide distribution of wealth and enjoyment of the right to a human minimum that need urgent attention and international cooperation. They are:

- (i) The principle and current practice of international justice.
- (ii) Ignorance of the nature of the basic rights and the corresponding universal obligations (Oruka 1997, 83-85).

Oruka explains that the principle of national supererogation states that a people having territorial sovereignty have a right over its resources and may do whatever it wishes with its possessions. As a corollary of the principle of territorial sovereignty, this principle exonerates a state from any moral blame if "it remains indifferent to the needs of those outside its borders, however needy and starving such people may be" (Oruka 1997, 82). If a state decides to help those outside its borders, it will be understood, on the basis of this principle, that such an act is purely an act of charity and it has absolute right to set the conditions of the help and to demand praise for such help.

It is therefore evident that the current practice of international justice is inconsistent with the demands of the right to a human minimum that imposes obligation on all people who are

capable, regardless of their race or country, to ensure the enjoyment of the right for those unable to ensure it for themselves. It seems, therefore, that there is need to formulate an adequate ethical rationale and blueprint for the just distribution of global resources among earth's inhabitants, and by which the demands of global justice may override those of international justice in case the two are in conflict (Oruka 1997, 83-90, 130-132, 147-150).

The other obstacle to humanism is ignorance of the nature of human rights as occupying a place of priority above all other interests. An understanding of the nature of basic rights would lead to an appreciation of their universal corresponding obligations. Such appreciation would cause people to become aware of their duties to humanity as a whole. The presence of this obstacle also explains the persistence of certain barriers, especially those serving political purposes, such as the failure of some governments to give priority to the allocation of their resources to the provision of basic human needs, or their unwillingness to intervene where other, errant governments blatantly violate the fundamental rights of their citizens, which inhibit the realization of the right to a human minimum and humanism in the world. Criticism of the failure of European and American governments to intervene to prevent the now infamous genocidal outbreak in Rwanda until it was far too late to prevent the death of more than eight hundred thousand people is a case in point. Similar failures in Central Europe and in the Darfur Region of Sudan have also been recorded as grave moral and political shortcomings that have led to unnecessary loss of human lives.

Oruka observed that people need to be educated on the dangers of fear, greed and irrational pride (Oruka 1997, 133-134) as the breeders of antagonism and conflict in the world. He argued that fear is perhaps the leading cause of wars based on perceived differences of class, tribe, race, and gender. For him, class ideology, tribalism, racism, and sexism are not only impediments to human freedom, but also the cause of much of human suffering and loss of life in our time, and their origin is traceable to lack of sound moral education.

Furthermore, Oruka pointed out that greed, as distinct from ambition, is also a threat to human freedom and survival. Greed motivates one to amass possessions regardless of, and at the expense of, other people's well-being. Any person who bears this character trait hardly appreciates the moral imperative to help those in need. If it is not checked, or if it is allowed to pass as ambition, greed becomes a definite obstacle to the discharge of responsibility towards the realization of the right to a human minimum. On this account, greed is evidently unjust (Oruka 1997, 134).

Irrational pride, in Oruka's view, is also a vice. It prevents people from developing moral empathy and therefore blinds them from recognizing duty toward other people. Oruka believed that it is irrational pride that sustains misuse of power of any kind and the quest for dominance of one nation over another, as happened in the case of Europe's colonial conquest of most of the rest of the world and her subsequent ideological, economic and military domination thereof (Oruka 1997, 134).

Conclusion

In both life and profession, Oruka was a champion of those who were marginalized from what contemporary academic opinion deemed to be worthy of theoretical consideration. His humanism is therefore not limited to the claim that we should all take suffering seriously, but also includes the realisation that there must be something wrong with our sense of honesty if on the one hand we want to recognize our indebtedness to each other for all those matters that define us as members of a community while, at the same time, also claiming that it is a just society which leaves everyone to his or her own fate because each one has only himself or herself, or its own people in the case of a state, as the primary objects of their social and moral responsibility. Oruka in fact believed, as I have tried to show, that it is the latter attitude that is to blame for contemporary global conflicts. His position can therefore be viewed as a warning to the world that the dictatorship of the elite, whether by education, political position, wealth, and other assumed positions of privilege over the marginalized and suffering majority, cannot sustain world peace for long. As such, "promoting peace by fighting poverty" can no longer be a mere slogan. Building community by taking care of each other must be the surer way (Oruka 1997, 100-101). Moreover, Oruka believed that democracy is one of the means for overcoming conflict and other threats to human survival and freedom. He saw the enhancement of democracy as part of the moral duty of all toward the promotion of the human good in the context of the human minimum:

Perhaps by the turn of the century there will be a new rebirth of the global democratic spirit. It is now a moral duty for philosophers and the scholars of humanity the world over to study the state of the world and suggest how a new and sustaining global democratic spirit can be born (Oruka 1997, 136).

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