**Chapter One**

**Gyekye and Contemporary Idealism**

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**Abstract**

I begin with a defence of both Gyekye’s universalist and African metaphilosophies. In light of these metaphilosophies, I discuss the contemporary Western hegemony of materialist philosophy of mind and its origins in Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* (1949), showing that the existence and nature of the traditional Akan philosophy, as elaborated by Gyekye, casts serious doubt on some influential founding motivations for materialism. I then argue that traditional Akan philosophy is best aligned with contemporary idealism. Gyekye’s endorsement of dualism is shown to have not been intended as ontologically fundamental, while panpsychism is rejected on the basis of the resistance it offers to the Akan commitment to transcendence. Contemporary idealism, however, is able to accommodate all the main components of traditional Akan philosophy, making both experiential primacy and transcendence central to a metaphysical understanding of reality. *Sunsum* (spirit) and *ōkra* (soul) are understood in terms of the distinction between the phenomenal and horizonal conceptions of experience, with consciousness always requiring a distinction between the phenomenal world within an experiential horizon and the independent being that transcends the horizon.

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**§1. Gyekye’s Metaphilosophy**

Kwame Gyekye (1939-2019) was a Ghanaian philosopher with a programmatic vision for the development of African philosophy, which he set out in his main work, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Gyekye 1987). As far as Gyekye’s general metaphilosophy, his view on the nature of philosophy, is concerned, it is perfectly simple and no different from my own, namely that philosophy is a universal discipline which deals with a distinctive subject-matter consisting of related topics of natural human interest (ibid.: xiv-xv, 9-10). We all come to self-awareness in a reality that exists for no apparent reason, possessed of minds and bodies, and live a temporal life that requires us to make choices, some moral, some political – around that basic constellation of facts, philosophical inquiry was bound to spring up, as indeed it has, all around the world. This is only worth saying because it has been denied so often. Some have doubted whether philosophy ever emerged in Africa, but, as Gyekye shows, these doubts depend on dubious criteria for what counts as philosophy, as well as misunderstanding of what traditional African views have amounted to. African philosophy is not unique in having attracted deniers. Richard Rorty doubted whether philosophy ever emerged in India (Tartaglia 2014). Perhaps the underlying reasons for this kind of suspicion, at a time when awareness of non-Western philosophical traditions was spreading in the West, are that some wanted to think of philosophy as a distinctively European achievement, while others remained under the dismal shadow of the 19th century positivist view that philosophy is a more or less random collection of issues which have yet to yield to scientific investigation, or else do not deserve to be taken seriously because they are dubious. (More accurately, I think, those of a positivistic mind-set consider the issues dubious *because* they cannot be approached scientifically.) In any case, Gyekye is surely right that it is ‘given to humanity to philosophize’ (Gyekye 1987: 9) and the facts bear him out. Growing awareness of non-Western philosophical traditions, and the resulting denial, was only possible because the concerns of those traditions were recognisably philosophical.

Gyekye’s universalist metaphilosophy ought to be uncontroversial, then, but his African metaphilosophy is original, programmatic and visionary. As Gyekye sees it, African philosophy needs to draw upon the sayings, anecdotes and stories that were passed down as an oral tradition within African cultures, in order to provide the foundations for a distinctive new discourse. Traditional African philosophy, as embodied in these oral traditions, should be the basis for building a new one. Gyekye’s method for getting clear about what this traditional philosophy consisted in, at least among the Akan, was to travel around villages to ask questions; and as soon as the philosophical character of his interests was clear, he tells us, he would invariably be directed to the local expert in such matters. The philosophy within these sayings passed the test of time, Gyekye thinks, because they survived centuries of philosophical debate within a preliterate society.[[1]](#footnote-1) We do not know the names of the people who originated them, as we know it was Heraclitus who said ‘we step and do not step into the same rivers’, but to be accepted as a philosopher in Akan society, a young man would surely not be able to start making philosophical pronouncements and have them automatically taken seriously. They would have to prove their worth, just as a philosopher today must. They would meet with scepticism, have to engage in debate, explain their meaning, and for their sayings to be repeated centuries after their death, they must have earned considerable consensus. There is every reason to take this traditional philosophy seriously, then, as Gyekye sees it, and to use it as the basis of a new and distinctively African philosophy.

This situation presents a great opportunity and Gyekye showed the way to seize it. That there is no written canon of African philosophical literature stretching back over the centuries is not the disadvantage it might at first seem, because it allows traditional African philosophy to provide inspiration without excessive constraint. A framework can be better than a composition, however great that composition might be, for inspiring new ideas. Since Indian and Chinese philosophy possess canons of classic philosophical literature, largely from the ancient world, a great deal of what you hear about these philosophies today consists in commentaries on ancient philosophers and attempts to apply their views to contemporary debates – the relevance of the Buddhist doctrine of ‘no-self’ to discoveries in neuroscience, the relevance of Confucius to contemporary debates in political philosophy, etc. Seminal figures who died thousands of years ago loom large because the identity and recognisability of these philosophies depends on them. The shadows cast by the founding figures of Western philosophy, by contrast, are usually less restrictive; past philosophers do still have contemporary disciples, but the mainstream positions have acquired an independent life. David Armstrong, for example, defended a Platonic theory of universals, but nobody could mistake him for a historian of philosophy offering a new interpretation of Plato, or for trying to show Plato’s continued relevance, or that Plato was ‘right all along’. Armstrong was an Australian philosopher contributing to a contemporary debate by offering a theory Plato would no doubt have rejected, once he had struggled to make sense of it.

Gyekye says that, ‘if a philosophy produced by a modern African has no basis in the culture and experience of African peoples, then it cannot appropriately claim to be an African philosophy’ (ibid.: 33), and that African philosophy ‘needs to be the results of the reflective exertions of an African thinker, aimed at giving analytical attention to the intellectual foundations of African culture and experience. That is all’ (ibid.: 211). I think he was right about that. Schopenhauer incorporated Indian philosophy into his metaphysical system, but it would be odd to say he contributed to Indian philosophy – rather, he made a contribution to German (or European, or Western) philosophy which incorporated ideas from Indian philosophy. Similarly, an African philosopher can make a contribution to the debates in the major philosophy journals today, but unless it draws on a distinctively African philosophy – an African solution to a universal philosophical problem – it is not African philosophy, in Gyekye’s view; and he chides African philosophers for being in too much of a ‘hurry’ to do exactly this (ibid: 212). The 18th century Ghanaian philosopher, Anton Wilhelm Amo, produced German, not African philosophy, says Gyekye (ibid.: 34).

At the end of his book, Gyekye notes that, ‘It is never too late in human history to start from where one should start’ (ibid.: 212). Imagine what the Greek philosophers of Plato’s generation might have done, equipped only with the fragments of the pre-Socratics we now have (with the names of the authors redacted), but surrounded by non-Greek philosophical traditions to learn from. African philosophers today will find themselves in a similar situation by attending to Gyekye’s metaphilosophy – a situation of massive potential. The result of traditional African musical forms starting to develop in North America and the Caribbean in the late 19th century was that 20th century music was transformed the world over. The same kind of positive transformation might yet be enacted by African philosophy in the 21st century. Gyekye showed the way to make it happen.

Now in order to enact this programme, the first step is to elucidate the traditional foundations, which is what Gyekye spends the bulk of the book doing. In the process of bringing out an Akan perspective on the nature of mind, freedom, causality, ethics, etc., it is sometimes difficult to discern Gyekye’s voice: does he agree with the views he is presenting? This is not a problem in his writings generally; if you look to his later essay on the relationship between religion and science (Gyekye 2009), for instance, his view is quite clear, namely that religion and science are not in conflict, it being a dogma of Western philosophy that they are. His own position also comes across unambiguously in the metaphilosophy that frames *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*. The reason his voice is less defined when recounting the Akan views is explained by this metaphilosophy. He is laying the foundations for a new African philosophy, not building one of his own; although he does acknowledge that ‘the interpreter’s own insight’ is bound to be involved to some extent (Gyekye 1987: 11). His aim is to analyse and elucidate Akan views so that it becomes possible to determine which ‘should be salvaged and which should be jettisoned’ (ibid.: 41). As such, it is enough for his purposes to bring out and sharpen up some distinctive and interesting positions and themes, without explicitly committing himself on any of them.

Nevertheless, I doubt any reader of the book could fail to sense that Gyekye is highly sympathetic to the Akan views; on one occasion, when he discusses ESP (ibid.: 201-3), rather too sympathetic. I very much doubt there is need for more scientific investigation into telepathy in case it turns out to be genuine, as Gyekye says, not least because the idea of it is philosophically dubious – the only thoughts I can have are my own, so ‘reading’ somebody else’s thoughts could only amount to thinking that my own have the same content, which raises the question of what could justify my believing this. But even here, a ‘salvage’ rather than ‘jettison’ might be possible, if something scientifically and philosophically credible can be said which relates to this notion in an extenuated fashion, in accordance with the suggestion above that the traditional views might be most fruitfully viewed as a framework of inspiration. For example, when jazz musicians improvise, their interactions are sometimes said to be ‘almost telepathic’; I would stress the ‘almost’, but not rule out there being something philosophically interesting to say here. Still, as sympathetic as Gyekye is to the Akan views, he is never uncritical. To take just one example, he rejects the suggestion that the Problem of Evil does not arise for Akan philosophy, as it does for Christian philosophy, despite this having been seen as to the credit of former; the problem just arises in a different form, he argues (ibid.: 123-8).

Gyekye never claims to provide a definitive account of *the* Akan philosophy, only a ‘reconstruction’ based on ‘the philosophical ideas held by *some* individual Akan thinkers’ (ibid.: 54-5). This might seem to clash with the suggestion that these ideas are representative of *African Philosophical Thought*, as per the title of the book, so he devotes his final chapter to meeting this objection, arguing that there is an underlying unity to the philosophy of traditional cultures throughout Africa, on the basis of various considerations, some historical. Whether this be accepted or not, the views he elucidates certainly present *one* concrete interpretation of *one* traditional African philosophy. Given the forward-looking nature of his project, I doubt he would want to see it held up by interminable disputes about what Akan, much less African traditional philosophy, really amounts to; he was understandably sceptical that such questions could ever be answered. Differing interpretations are always possible, but debating them for their own sake is a task for the history of philosophy.

Gyekye certainly succeeded in bringing out distinctive and interesting themes from traditional Akan philosophy. One particularly promising idea is that of a humanistic philosophy free from antipathy to religion (ibid.: 143-6); Western humanism has, from its origins, been driven by such antipathy, and this has not served it well. Perhaps Akan philosophy can inspire a fresh and more socially useful take on this idea. The topic I shall be pursuing, however, is Gyekye’s philosophy of mind, or soul. The main reason for my interest is that it is resolutely anti-materialistic, as indeed is traditional African philosophy generally, according to Gyekye. I think, and have argued at length, that materialist philosophy of mind is a failed experiment, one which has dragged on for nearly 70 years now – too long (Tartaglia 2020, esp. chapters 2 and 3). There are signs this era is drawing to a close, and this presents an opportunity for African philosophy, devised along Gyekyean lines, to enter the mix within our collective efforts to build something better.

**§2. Soulless Materialism**

The failed experiment with materialism began with Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind*. Despite its formative influence, Ryle rejects materialism in that book, and, contrary to the popular image of Ryle as the main representative of behaviourism in philosophy, he rejects behaviourism too; the latter is hard to dispute when Ryle ends the book with a section entitled ‘Behaviourism’, which begins with his prediction that the book ‘will undoubtedly, and harmlessly be stigmatised as “behaviourist”’ (Ryle 1949: 300), before proceeding to explain why it should not be so stigmatised.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is perhaps unsurprising that such misunderstandings have sprung up, because the book has not aged well. It is long, circuitous, and packed full of examples of fine-grained distinctions to be observed within ordinary discourse about people’s minds and mental habits, which are rarely interesting to consider in and of themselves, and even more rarely lead anywhere that clarifies Ryle’s overall position.[[3]](#footnote-3) The main thing today’s readers are likely to notice is Ryle’s scorn for Cartesian dualism, repeated *ad nauseam*, on the grounds that it advocates ‘occult’, ‘queer’ or ‘ghostly’ entities.

The negative message of the book is that the concept of mind does not commit us to the existence of an inner life of consciousness pitted against an external world of physical objects, and that this belief results from a specifically philosophical error. The positive message is much more elusive, but does eventually show its face in the chapter on imagination, I think. Up until this point, Ryle has repeatedly denied that the mind is an inner experiential arena, but without showing any tendency to deny that we can think silently, have tunes running ‘through our heads’, conjure up visual images, etc. – which is a puzzling combination. But in this chapter he says,

a person picturing his nursery is, in a certain way, like that person seeing his nursery, but the similarity does not consist in his really looking at a real likeness of his nursery, but in his really seeming to see his nursery itself, when he is not really seeing it. (ibid.: 225)

So if you have a tune running through your head, to take another of his examples, there is no tune and no act of listening, there only seems to be. In other words, since Ryle is clear that seeming to hear the tune is not having a conscious experience of a certain type, it is making a false judgement that you are hearing the tune. This is the account of experiential seeming held by Ryle’s student, Daniel Dennett (Dennett 1991: 364), probably the most influential philosopher of the materialist era, and it is generally regarded as a form of eliminativism. Having a tune run through your head which nobody else can hear is a real episode, for Ryle, but not an episode of conscious experience. It is an episode of making a false judgement, akin to judging that 2+2=5. With the idea of judgement stripped of any connection to consciousness, a robot could do this.

Ryle maintains that experience does not take place in ‘my own private theatre’ (Ryle 1949: 44; see also 137, 140, 149, 154, 187, 200, 222, 291) and is continually hostile to Descartes, while Dennett’s best-known idea is that consciousness should not be thought of as a ‘Cartesian Theater’ (Dennett 1991); so it is Ryle’s idea really, as well as his terminology. Ryle’s suspicion of consciousness was rooted in the Ordinary Language Philosophy movement, which saw all philosophical problems as arising from abuses of language by philosophers, with the remedy (not solution – there is nothing to solve) being to pay more attention to how we ordinarily talk, so that the artificial and falsifying language that professional philosophers devised can be forgotten. Perhaps, then, Dennett simply inherited this suspicion and found it confirmed by what he learned from cognitive science and neuroscience, since these sciences provide the basis of his own criticisms of the ‘Cartesian Theater’. And perhaps Ryle is best understood as an eliminativist too, albeit not a materialist one, since materialism is a metaphysical position, and he thinks all such positions are ailments to be cured by closer attention to ordinary language. That would certainly subvert the usual history: eliminativism is generally regarded as an excessive and implausible development within 1960s materialism, which took place after Ryle’s ‘behaviourism’ had already been abandoned in favour of reductive materialism.

The association between believing in ghosts and Cartesian dualism was probably the greatest influence Ryle’s book had, and is to be found in all the pioneers of 20th century materialism. It led to a forgetting of the history of philosophy, in which Cartesian dualism was always controversial, even within Descartes’ lifetime, and in which it was amended alongside other alternatives to materialism. It disguised the lack of any argumentative basis for materialism, by tempting its advocates to set up a false dichotomy: the only alternatives are materialism or Cartesian dualism, nobody in their right mind believes in ghosts, so materialism is the only credible option (see Tartaglia 2020: chapter 3). Once this dichotomy began to exert its influence, the long history of strong political connotations to materialism, beginning in ancient Greece, was easily overlooked, and replaced by an exclusive focus on the metaphysic. To English-language philosophy, materialism started to seem like nothing more than a bastion of sanity to protect us from belief in ghosts, as well as an expression of respect for modern science owed by any educated person – rather than as the intellectual foundations of an ancient crusade against organised religion which was, at that time, being enacted on a vast scale in the communist world.

The Identity Theory of Mind, according to which mental states are brain states, was pioneered by two English philosophers in the 1950s, Ullin Place and Jack Smart, who were initially attracted to behaviourism by Ryle, but went on to reject it. The first appearance of that theory was in the context of a 1954 paper by Place, criticising Ryle’s analysis of the concept of ‘heed’ (Place 1954). Place and Smart were concerned that a behaviourist analysis of a sensation – a severe pain understood as just screaming and the flailing of arms, perhaps, or just a disposition to this behaviour – would miss out the current reality, the actual feeling being responded to. Place and Smart thought this reality must be something physical, and the best physical candidates, they thought, were brain states.

Ryle warned against this kind of reaction (Ryle 1949: 12; see also 63-8, 300-303). His target was *any* kind of reification of sensations, thoughts and other mental episodes, as well as of the mind itself; this was the cardinal sin of Cartesian dualism, and to try to find physical replacements, as Place and Smart did, was to repeat that mistake. In responding to his criticism of the Cartesian ‘ghost in the machine’, his followers missed the fact that he was just as critical of the ‘machine’ as of the ‘ghost’. If he was an eliminativist, as suggested above, then this attitude makes sense: there is nothing to account for except the nature of our false judgements. Ryle says that minds and bodies exist ‘in two different senses’ (ibid.: 12), and although he never adequately clarifies this, I think he meant that while physical processes ‘exist’ in the sense that they can be the objects of true or false judgements, mental processes ‘exist’ in the sense that we make false judgements about seeing or hearing things we are not really seeing or hearing; the distinction, for Ryle, is to be found, and understood exclusively, within the logic of ordinary language. Any kind of mechanistic understanding of mind, then, would make the mistake of reification, since mechanical explanations require ‘things’ to connect, whether they be immaterial, material, or behavioural patterns. 20th century materialism did not heed Ryle’s advice. The language of mental ‘states’ became firmly entrenched, and when materialists moved from the reductionism of the Identity Theorists to non-reductive accounts, most notably functionalism, a brain state was still required to ‘realise’ the functional / mental states – philosophically, because something concrete and thing-like was needed to make the experience happen, and practically, to enact the mechanistic theories in machines that mimic our intelligent behaviour.

In this context, it is very interesting to consider Akan philosophy of mind. The language the Akan philosophise in is materialistic, unlike English and other related European languages, and yet Akan philosophy of mind is anti-materialistic. So, for example, if you say, in English, ‘I am tall’ or ‘I am ugly’, then the ‘I’ can be substituted for ‘my body’: ‘my body is tall’, ‘my body is ugly’ – awkward, but basically what we mean. When we refer to types of conscious awareness, however, the situation is different. If you say ‘I am happy’ or ‘I am hopeful’, you are not saying ‘my body is happy’ or ‘my body is hopeful’ – to the extent that we can make sense of these statements, it is only through familiarity with materialism; it is not what we instinctively mean, but loyalty to that theory might make you think it must be what we mean in the final analysis.

When you switch to Akan, however, the etymological meaning of ‘I am happy’ is ‘my eyes are brightened’, and for ‘I am hopeful’, it is ‘my eyes are on it’ (Gyekye 1987: 166). Of course, we do not ordinarily attend to the etymology of our words, so when an Akan says ‘M’ani agye’, they do not mean ‘my eyes are brightened’, but rather ‘I am happy’. The latter is the correct translation; if, while gazing into a mirror, an Akan person were to witness their eyes suddenly becoming brighter as the result of an unwanted medical intervention, then they would presumably say something quite different to report the result. But the point is that Akan, as opposed to English, erects no barrier to substituting ‘my body’ for ‘I’ in mentalistic statements like ‘I am happy’ , because the ‘I’ is already making reference to a part of the body, the eyes. Consequently, the Akan language offered no encouragement to Akan philosophers to conceive their minds as distinct from their bodies, quite the contrary, and so any temptation to think that opposition to materialism is encouraged by, or even largely explained by, the quirks of European languages is immediately rendered dubious. The Akan philosophised with the language they had, which is naturally conducive to materialism, but they rejected materialism. Others have philosophised with languages resistant to materialism, and by and large, despite the institutional hegemony of materialism in Anglophone academia since the 1960s, they have rejected it also (Tartaglia 2020: chapter 2). This suggests that belief in immaterial minds is not the result of being misled by language, of not attending carefully enough to its logic, but rather the result of giving a plausible description of the basic existential situation human beings occupy, then reasoning on its basis.

Ryle thought that dualism is the result of a specifically philosophical mistake, one that was made by European philosophers. He makes some sketchy speculations about the historical roots of this mistake, saying that, ‘Descartes was reformulating already prevalent theological doctrines of the soul in the new syntax of Galileo’ (Ryle 1949: 13) and that the resulting conception of consciousness was ‘in part a transformed application of the Protestant notion of conscience’ (ibid.: 141). Rorty, who applauded Ryle for initiating a tradition that taught us how *not* to take consciousness seriously (Rorty 1982), told a more detailed story along these lines in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty 1979: chapter 1), as part of his attempt to deconstruct the mind-body problem. Very roughly: it all began when Plato conceived the human intellect as transcendent to the physical world, able to ‘see’ the forms which grant knowledge of universal truth, since Plato considered this the crucial ability which raises humans above the level of animals; then Descartes united conscious experience to Plato’s transcendent intellect to salvage the secondary qualities excluded from the world by Galileo’s mechanistic science – with the unification justified on the grounds that both intellectual truths and sensations can be indubitable.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Given that the Akan came up with an immaterialist conception of mind in isolation from European intellectual history, the best that can be said for the above stories is that they might contain some truths about the particular route European philosophers took to arrive at the same place. The intellectual pressures Ryle and Rorty thought were decisive, however, seem very unlikely to have been anything of the kind, in light of the existence of an Akan equivalent. Of course Descartes and Plato were influenced by their intellectual environments and histories. The traditional Akan philosophers would have been influenced by intellectual pressures of which we are ignorant. Plato, Descartes, and the nameless Akan philosophers, however, could all grasp universal truths whether their eyes were open or closed, and when they closed their eyes, they could hardly have failed to notice that the visual experiences previously informing them of objects in their immediate vicinity were no longer doing that, but rather presenting a dark and inconstant pattern that others were not aware of. It is no miracle that they arrived in the same place, because they were reasoning on the basis of the same facts (Gyekye 1987: 186).

The mere fact of the existence and anti-materialist nature of Akan philosophy of mind provides an immediate antidote to the fanciful but influential notion that dualism, and perhaps even believing that we are conscious, is explained by intellectual errors in our history. This is just one strand in the wider trend of hostility to consciousness in the materialist era, and indeed, to anything else the metaphysic cannot accommodate. Philosophy has been set on a warpath against the natural ways of seeing things, with this naturalness coming to be seen as a sure sign of naivety, religious longing, superstition, scientific ignorance, being in the grip of a historical error, insufficient attention to the logic of language, etc. The automatic assumption became that anything awkward for materialism must be an illusion; and as accusations of illusion were cast all over our lives, few stopped to wonder if the problem might not actually be this ancient metaphysical theory, which, in its current incarnation, provides the intellectual foundations for an artificial intelligence revolution set to transform our world in a yet to be determined manner. It would be nice to instead have a philosophy which resonates with our experience, as a prelude to enriching it with new insight, rather than one that clashes with it at every turn. Then philosophy might become more publicly visible, and the intellectual foundations for meaningfully debating our future might be developed.

**§3. Traditional Akan Philosophy and Contemporary Idealism**

‘Soul’ is the original English translation for the Greek word *psychē*, but we have come to favour ‘mind’ instead, for historical reasons that are fairly inconsequential; originally, because ‘soul’ seemed too physical, which is rather ironic with hindsight (Tartaglia 2020: chapter 7). These days, I think ‘soul’ is preferable, because it distances us from the materialists’ (and their opponents’) talk of ‘mental states’. The language of ‘states’ is problematic in this area. If I talk about the current state of the economy, my statement is ontologically empty – nobody would suppose that this state is something with its own nature, irrespective of human classificatory practices, akin to a tree, planet or sensation. It is just a loose way of talking about an unspecifiable number of things; mainly, these days, people interacting with each other on computers. States need to be ontologically filled-in, which suits the materialist project of filling them in with grey matter, but not the project of trying to experientially account for our identities. Think of a person’s mind as a series of mental states and you are immediately distanced from the idea of the mind as a substantial unity. But ‘soul’ retains this connotation, and has the added bonus that it is more natural to think of a person as essentially a soul than a mind, since the latter, in everyday discourse, suggests pure intellect.

Now Gyekye tells us that the Akan have a tripartite conception of a person, consisting of soul, spirit and body, which he thinks is best reduced to a combination of a body and a bipartite soul (Gyekye 1987: 98). Spirit and soul are not really distinct, he argues, because spirit is simply the active part of the soul. So a person is a unity of body and soul, which is a kind of dualism, albeit not necessarily a fundamental metaphysical one. When we reach the fundamental level, then given the wider ontological commitments of Akan philosophy which Gyekye tells us about, it seems to me that a further reduction is required, thereby allowing us to simply say that a person is a soul. Then we are able to understand the Akan philosophy as offering an idealist account of personhood.

There are two problems with attributing a metaphysically dualist conception of personhood to traditional Akan philosophy. The first is that this philosophy is committed to ‘disembodied survival’ (ibid.: 100). In that case, if a person is a combination of body and soul, and only the soul survives death, then the person does not survive death – only their soul does. But if *you* can survive the demise of your body, this means *you* were never essentially a person in the first place. If you were, you would need your body to carry on existing. A part of you will continue to exist, but since the same could be said of your body, in that it will continue to exist as a corpse, a commitment to disembodied survival requires that the continued existence of your soul is the crucial factor in your survival, and hence that having a body was never essential to you in the first place.

So to combine a metaphysically dualist conception of a person with disembodied survival, you have to deny that we are essentially people. This can easily be avoided by saying that a person is essentially a soul and only contingently has a body. When Locke distinguished a ‘person’ from a human being, and thereby initiated the personal identity debate in Western philosophy, he was also motivated by considerations of life after death (Tartaglia 2020: 144). He was trying to find criteria for continued survival that were accessible to us, given the limitations of human understanding that are the focus of his philosophy, and since he thought we cannot know substances, such as souls, he thought the best we could do was to make judgements on the basis of psychological continuity – retention of memory, etc. What he wanted to be able to track, but thought of as constitutionally hidden from us, was the continuation of our essential natures, required for us to carry on existing rather than cease to exist. Subsequent debates have retained this motivation, despite gravitating to the currently popular negationist psychological continuity position – which I consider absurd – according to which, for example, if ten computers can accurately mimic my personality after my death, then I will survive as ten people.[[5]](#footnote-5) The other focus of interest in personal identity, apart from survival, is in the normative aspects of personhood. This interest is also present in Locke, who saw the main value of his epistemically modest conception of personhood in jurisprudence; to ensure that people were not punished for crimes they could not remember, for instance. Normative applications of personhood are not emphasised in Gyekye’s discussion of Akan moral theory, however, which he argues is ‘not religiously grounded’ (Gyekye 1987: 143), but rather focused on the welfare of communities, and which requires the moral development of *sunsum* (*spirit*) (ibid.: 152). So given that the issue of survival is integral to the Akan notion of a person, and metaphysical dualism has no clear role to play in supporting the normative uses of personhood in Akan moral philosophy, it seems unnecessarily problematic to hold that a person dies with their body, with only the soul surviving – since that just raises the question of whether *you* survive.

The second problem is that Akan philosophy is one in which, ‘ontological primacy, in my view,’ says Gyekye, ‘is given to the invisible’; where ‘invisible’ is glossed as ‘immaterial, unperceivable, spiritual’ (ibid.: 166). If that is right, then we can immediately conclude that Akan philosophy is either metaphysically idealist or panpsychist. If souls and their experiences have ontological primacy, then they have the independent existence which everything else relies upon, just as materialists believe that the particles and forces discovered by contemporary physics (or a future one) possess the independent existence. This would make natural sense of an Akan saying Gyekye discusses: ‘Could God die, I will die’ (ibid.: 100). Since our souls are considered an ‘indwelling spark of God’, and God (Onyame) is a spiritual being which is ‘the ultimate ground of being’ (ibid.: 69), God’s death would entail my own.

It is not clear that Gyekye would disagree with this further reduction – from body and soul, to just soul – despite his never making it. When he attributes ‘interactionist psychophysical dualism’ to traditional Akan philosophy, saying he considers it a ‘realistic doctrine’ (ibid.: 103), it certainly looks as if he is advocating dualism as usually understood, namely as a fundamental ontological division between distinct but interacting substances. But viewed in the context of the book, that cannot be right. Gyekye repeatedly says that Akan ontology is pluralistic, but also makes claims of ontological primacy, sometimes within close proximity, and this is because he thinks, ‘African ontology is neither wholly pluralistic nor wholly monistic, but possesses attributes of both’ (ibid.: 197). He says that Akan ontology is ‘hierarchical’ (ibid.: 69); as, indeed, most ontologies are. So all he can mean by ‘pluralism’, I think, is that in addition to fundamental, independent existence, which for the Akan is ‘essentially spiritualistic’ (ibid.: 197), there are other types of entity to be credited with non-independent existence; rather as a moderate, non-eliminativist materialist might say that experience is real, but has a dependent, or supervenient, existence, one which depends upon brain states. Gyekye’s endorsement of dualism should be considered in the same light, then. He has ontological hierarchy in mind, such that an ontologically non-fundamental body interacts with an ontologically fundamental soul – otherwise, the claims about ontological primacy would make no sense. Such distinctions of level have precedent; Armstrong’s commitment to mind-brain identity theory, for instance, was meant to be considered at a non-fundamental level, since at the fundamental level he was a Platonic realist (Armstrong 1980).[[6]](#footnote-6)

It seems clear that Gyekye is describing either an idealist or a panpsychist metaphysic, then. Gyekye opts for panpsychism. He rejects idealism on the grounds that idealists hold that ‘what is real is only spirit’, materialists hold that ‘what is real is only matter’, but Akan ontology holds that reality ‘possesses attributes of both’ (Gyekye 1987: 197). I do not think this reasoning bears much scrutiny. Gyekye seems to be equating idealism with one exceptionally controversial form of it, namely Berkeley’s 18th century empirical idealism, which did indeed deny the reality of matter.[[7]](#footnote-7) But an idealist need only argue that matter exists in a less fundamental manner than mind, in accordance with a hierarchical ontology, such as that of the Akan. Gyekye provides no reason to rule out idealism in general, then.

The context in which he endorses panpychism is provided by his rejection of the idea that Akan philosophy is pantheistic, on the grounds that God is held to transcend his creation in Akan philosophy, rather than encompass or pervade it. He then goes on to say that, a ‘more appropriate description of the Akan system might be panpsychism: Everything is or contains *sunsum* (spirit)’ (ibid.: 75). Since he also tells us that Akan philosophy holds that spirit can exist apart from the soul, as the ‘activating principle’ of natural objects (ibid.: 98), and that ‘spirit’ is used to describe both God and other purely spiritual beings, as well as ‘mystical powers’ that ‘constitute the inner essences or intrinsic properties of natural objects’ (ibid.: 73), that does seem to be right – those are stereotypically panpsychist commitments.

But this attribution depends on Gyekye having his facts right, of course – which, given his modest and realistic ambition, only requires that it is based on some views held within traditional Akan philosophy. Kwasi Wiredu doubted even this, saying that, ‘Among the Akans a piece of dead wood, for example, is regarded as notoriously dead and is the humorous paradigm of absolute lifelessness’ (Wiredu 1998: 31). In defence of Gyekye, Ada Agada suggests that Wiredu’s resistance results from thinking of panpsychism as a form of superstition; but, as he points out, panpsychism has undergone a major renaissance in recent philosophy, through the likes of David Chalmers, Galen Strawson and Philip Goff. Agada, who thinks that belief in spirit pervading the physical world is deeply rooted in traditional African philosophy, advocates panpsychism as the best means to reconcile spiritual monism with the transcendence of God – he thinks it creates affinity between the material world and the God said to transcend it, allowing transcendence and immanence to be reconciled through the idea that God is the ‘transcendent principle whose effects are yet distributed throughout the universe’ (Agada 2017: 33). This leads him to disagree with Gyekye’s dismissal of pantheism, and move more towards Wiredu’s view of a God unified with the material world, on the grounds that a ‘complete rejection of pantheism renders the reconciliation of immanence and transcendence impossible’ (ibid.: 33).

It seems to me, however, that idealism provides a more natural, theoretically coherent, and independently credible way to combine a commitment to both experiential (or spiritual) primacy and transcendence. Panpsychism is a naturally immanentist philosophy with no obvious use for transcendence, and if you look to the most influential traditional metaphysic with panpsychist implications, namely Spinoza’s, you do not find it; just as you do not find it in the contemporary theories. The standard contemporary motivation for panpsychism is to account for the existence of conscious experience: experience exists as the intrinsic nature of physical reality, thereby explaining human consciousness as self-awareness of our intrinsic natures, and also why the materialist picture misses out experience, namely because physics only extrinsically characterises the world (Goff 2019). There is no need for transcendence to accomplish either of these explanatory tasks. Panpsychism and transcendence can be combined, but it starts to look as if the latter has simply been tacked-on because traditional Akan philosophy is committed to it – and that is not to do the best we can to develop that philosophy, as per Gyekye’s project. Agada does provide independent motivation, but it is immediately problematic: if God is transcendent, then how could we ever know that his nature has an affinity with the physical world? And how could an effect in the physical world have a transcendent cause? Panpsychism and transcendence do not mix well, I would suggest.

For the contemporary idealist, however, transcendence is absolutely integral to understanding experience, and experience is ontologically primary. To understand this account, in broadest outline, we first need to distinguish between the phenomenal and horizonal conceptions of consciousness.[[8]](#footnote-8) The phenomenal conception is the familiar one employed by dualists, materialists and panpsychists, according to which experience is something you are aware of – it is a phenomenon, like a pain or tickle, something which subjectively appears to you. It is *that* feeling or visual experience, etc. The horizonal conception, on the other hand, is of the unified field of an individual’s consciousness, within which there are appearances of both sensations, like pains and tickles, and physical objects, like trees and rocks. The horizon is not one of these appearances, nor all of them put together, but rather the field in which appearance happens. We are never aware of the horizon, and yet the unified experience we have of other things, like sensations and physical objects, presupposes its existence. It is what appearance occurs *within*, for each and every one of us – the individual, unified opening onto reality which a piece of dead wood lacks.

Where there is a horizon, there must be transcendence; experience requires transcendence. To see this, consider what Gyekye tells us about the Akan view of dreaming: ‘in dreaming it is the *sunsum* [spirit], not the *ōkra*, that leaves the body. The departure of the *ōkra* (soul) from the body means the death of the person, whereas the *sunsum* can leave the body, as in dreaming, without causing the death of the person.’ (Gyekye 1987: 97) Experience cannot literally leave the body because it is not spatial, so it was never inside the body in the first place – this needs to be interpreted, then. What happens in dreaming, on the idealist model, is that experiences – considered phenomenally, as appearances you are aware of – no longer inform you about the physical world, but rather close you off from that world; in that sense, then, they ‘leave the body’. The physical world is transcendent to the conscious horizon of the dreamer. Even if you were to dream about your sleeping body, seeing it in perfect detail, perhaps, it would not actually be your body but rather an illusory dream-body, because your actual body transcends the dream. But although *sunsum* can leave the body, in this sense, nevertheless your horizon – which I take to be the idea behind *ōkra* – cannot permanently leave the body without death resulting. Again, it is never literally in the body, but in ordinary waking life it situates your body at the centre of reality. Your body is at the phenomenological centre of your horizon, as the thing to which sensations and physical objects appear. So *ōkra* cannot ‘leave the body’ in the sense that it cannot cease to present your body as being at the centre of reality.

Within the idealist model, independent reality is always deferred to a context that transcends the horizon of consciousness. Consciousness encloses us within a phenomenal reality, from the perspective of which reality is always transcendent – as is seen in the case of dreaming, where whatever reality there is to the illusory experience being had within the dreamer’s horizon must be found in a context that transcends that horizon. The ontologically fundamental, independent nature cannot be found within the horizon of waking life either, however, which is to say that it cannot be found within the horizon which contains the physical world. This is attested to by the failure of materialism to account for experience, and the constant pressure its advocates feel to deny its existence. On the idealist model, independent existence transcends the horizon of waking life, just as physical existence transcends the horizon of a dream. This would explain many things that have puzzled philosophers from all traditions, not least why our ordinary pattern of causal explanation is obviously inapplicable to explaining the existence of the whole of reality – to explaining why there is something rather than nothing. The reason is that the independent reality we are trying to account for is transcendent, and hence transcends the horizons in which our standard patterns of explanation apply.

Idealism preserves and explains all the main commitments of traditional Akan philosophy. It gives central place to both *sunsum* and *ōkra*, understood, respectively, as experience conceived phenomenally and horizionally. It requires transcendent existence as a condition of there being any experience at all; and once a transcendent context is accepted, the possibility is open for the Akan God to reside there. The transcendent reality is the independent nature of experience, so the ontological primacy of experience is affirmed, but the physical world also appears within horizons of consciousness, and idealism provides no reason to deny anything science tells us about it, so long as this is not interpreted in accordance with the metaphysics of materialism. Experience and the physical world do appear to interact, in accordance with Gyekye’s dualism, but this is not to be interpreted ontologically since these are types of appearance within a horizon transcended by independent reality. *Sunsum* is indeed the active part of the soul, in the sense that free decisions and actions are phenomena within a horizon. The Akan belief in disembodied survival is accommodated, since the soul could survive the death of the body if there is a horizon of experience which transcends the horizon of the physical world; I do not think there is, personally, but the idealist metaphysic accommodates people with and without faith. The only element of the Akan philosophy I cannot see a way to preserve is the idea that *sunsum* can exist without *ōkra* in inanimate objects, which sounds paradigmatically panpsychist; but Gykeye does not dwell on this, Wiredu strongly disputed it, so perhaps, as Gyekeye might put it, we can ‘jettison’ that bit.

Could this kind of idealist picture really be what traditional Akan philosophy was driving at? Well, if Gyekye was right that philosophers of all times and traditions reflect on ‘a common ground of shared human experiences’ (ibid.: 9), as he surely was, and if idealism provides a good philosophical account of that common ground, as I think it does, then I cannot see why not.

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1. Gyekye uses the term ‘preliterate’ throughout the book; initially, in the preface, to make the point that although traditional Akan philosophy was not written down, it was still, in his view, the product of the individual intellects of individual philosophers, and hence should not be characterised as an ‘ethnophilosophy’ (ibid.: xix). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This point is emphasised in Julia Tanney’s introduction to the new edition I cite from, as well as in her online *Stanford Encyclodedia of Philosophy* article on Ryle. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ernest Gellner, in his 1959 attack on linguistic philosophy, *Words and Things* (the word ‘attack’ is in the subtitle), observed that, ‘Evasiveness is implicit in the ideas and in the practice of Linguistic Philosophy’ (Gellner 1959: 50). Ryle, as editor of the journal *Mind*, refused to allow Gellner’s book to be reviewed on the grounds that it was malicious; as indeed it was (Czeglédy 2003: 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ryle was not the first to think this way; Rorty’s historical deconstruction was mainly influenced by Dewey (1930). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. These kinds of position originate with Parfit (1984) and are often aligned with Buddhist views; Parfit himself made this connection. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ada Agada also points out that Gyekye’s dualism should not be considered an ‘ontological distinction’ (Agada 2017: 31). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gyekye also seems to be equating materialism with eliminative materialism in this passage; but not elsewhere in the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I adopt this terminology from J.J. Valberg (2007), although the distinction itself is firmly rooted in the history of philosophy. For a fuller exposition and defence of the idealism I am outlining here, see Tartaglia 2020: chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)