Knowledge/Wisdom Distinction: Implications for Development Oriented Education.

Lawrence O. Bamikole

When people on the political right talk about education, they immediately start talking about truth...When people on the political left talk about education, they talk first about freedom (Richard Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope*).

Introduction

Rorty’s assertion distinguishes two ideological ways of conceiving education which are contrary to one another, and this is why the concept of education may be described as essentially contestable. In other words, the meaning one gives to the concept depends on where we stand on the social, political and educational spectra. The present essay does not aim at exposing the basis of this distinction as an end in itself; rather we shall focus attention on the philosophical background to this distinction with the aim of unravelling its basis and suggesting that there shouldn't be a rigid difference between the political right and political left about the meaning of education. What will be argued in this essay is that although education aims at discovering the truth, this is only an aspect of education—its epistemic aspect—but that education becomes more meaningful and enriched when the epistemic aspect is applied to social and cultural life. The arguments that will be used to establish this thesis is the consideration of the age long distinction between knowledge and wisdom, which has parallels in the distinction between formal and informal education respectively. It will be suggested that these distinctions are spurious and that if education should be seen beyond the process of schooling then there is the need to blur the distinction between knowledge and wisdom on one hand, and formal and informal education on the other. The paper argues that as there is a dialectical relationship between knowledge and wisdom, there is also the same relationship between formal and informal education and that such relationships have positive implications for a development oriented education, in which education is seen as a process of the development of all the aspects of an individual who is a cultural being with the aim of making her a responsible person who is able to make use of her natural endowments to develop her local, national and international environments.

Knowledge/wisdom distinction

The concepts of knowledge and wisdom are philosophically related. This is because both have cognitive, ethical and cultural connotations and one can also ask the same set of questions about them. For instance, one can ask: What is wisdom? What are the features of wisdom? Who is wise? Of what use is wisdom? By the same token, one can also ask: What is knowledge? What are the features of knowledge? Who is knowledgeable? Of what use is knowledge? In the history of Western philosophy, a group of thinkers who Kaufman (2006) labelled as those belonging to ‘mainline philosophy’ (Plato, Descartes,
and analytic tradition in philosophy) have advocated for a rigid distinction between knowledge and wisdom. For this group of thinkers, the responses to these questions are diametrically opposed. The other group, which Kaufman regarded as ‘conservative’ (Aristotle was named as an example) believed that although knowledge and wisdom are distinct from one another, nevertheless they are related in view of the fact that a person who possesses them could be said to be an educated person in as much as she uses this education (which is admixture of knowledge and wisdom) for the betterment of her life and the development of the environment around her.

In this paper, we shall argue that wisdom, knowledge and education are human goods but that they are not ends in themselves. They are significant in as much as their possessors are able to use the skills engendered by them to develop themselves and their environment in a world wide sense. In other words, what we shall argue in the paper is that for a person to be said to be educated, she should not only possess both knowledge and wisdom but she should be able to apply the skills garnered from these human goods for the betterment of her life, the life of others and her environment. But first, what is knowledge and wisdom?

What is wisdom?

According to Kaufman (2006:130) wisdom is a synthesis of intelligence and sound judgment. The wise person according to Kaufman, is one whose intelligence is prudentially applied to life, in all its many, varying dimensions. To claim that one’s intelligence is prudentially applied to life is to acknowledge the fact that whatever skills one possesses, their relevance lie with their application to real life in order for one to effect positive changes in one’s environment. It follows then that acquisition of any skill is not an end in itself; rather it is a means to achieving particular goals. These goals are not only defined by the individual but also by the society or culture in which the individual finds herself.

It could be said that wisdom is closely associated with experience. The meaning of experience here has something to do with longevity. This is the reason for the Yoruba saying that bi omodo be laso bi agba, ko le ni akisa bi agba. (Granted that a child has as much clothes as the elderly, she cannot have as much as old clothes as the elderly) This suggests that wisdom is an index of age. Although this is true in a general sense, it is equally true that a young person can possess wisdom, for it is sometimes believed that wisdom is a natural endowment. Thus the Yoruba also opine that omodo gbon agba gbon la fi da ile Ife. (Ife was founded on the wisdom of both the young and the old.)

Wisdom cannot be understood in isolation from the common beliefs and practices which constitute the framework within which one’s experience is interpreted. This is what is essentially correct about Kant’s (1965) notion of categories. According to Kant, categories are conceptual schemes through which one’s experience is moulded. Categories are given and they represent the foundational blocks from which experiences are constructed.
Wisdom is usually associated with traditional practice of the predecessors of a given culture. The term “traditional” is not used solely in the anthropological sense, rather the term is used to indicate the sense in which a current event or phenomenon could be said to have an antecedent in a historical past. Consequently, wisdom is not limited to current or future opinions. The historical element in wisdom is exemplified in J.L. Austin’s as quoted in Hamlyn (1970:48) observation that “we cannot close our eyes to the inherited experience and acumen of many generations of men”.

Wisdom could be said to be conservative in at least two senses. The first is that it is essentially linked to common experience and common sense, and the second is that though wisdom undergoes changes, the changes are gradual and not revolutionary. This suggests that no matter the degree of change in a traditional society, there are still relics of the past upon which new experiences are built. The sense in which the word “conservative” is used here is akin to Popper’s (1991) notion of tradition. According to Popper, a tradition is a situation in which a mode of doing things is accepted on non-rational evidence. Popper says this of tradition: “You cannot rationalize it; it plays an important role in society, and you can only understand its significance and accept it” (120).

Popper identifies the rationalist, as a fierce critic of tradition. According to him, the rationalists are inclined to adopt this attitude to tradition: “I am not interested in tradition. I want to judge everything on its own merits; I want to find out its merits and demerits, and I want to do this quite independently of any tradition. I want to judge it with my own brain, and not with the brains of other people who lived long ago” (120-121). Popper responded to this rationalist critic by claiming that it is an instance of self referential paradox in the sense that the rationalist’s position is itself an example of a rationalist tradition. For Popper, there is nothing that is morally or epistemically wrong with the notion of tradition; for tradition can be accepted critically or uncritically.

The Popperian notion of tradition may be connected to the notion of wisdom in the sense that what counts as wisdom changes, but always slowly and deliberately. It is like what Kaufman says, “a great ship turning in the sea”. Kaufman observes that there is no sudden revolution in wisdom; rather wisdom changes gradually without breaking totally with the past.

What is Knowledge?

Traditionally, in philosophy, what counts as knowledge is a product of rigorous and analytical search for what is true independently of time and space. Plato, who could be regarded as the father of epistemology, equated knowledge with the intellectual ability to grasp the Forms. Descartes was another philosopher in the modern era in Western philosophy who identified knowledge with a rigorous attitude of attaining the truth. For Descartes, knowledge is identified with certitude, which can only be attained by the method of rigorous questioning of received beliefs. The concern of these philosophers was to ground knowledge on purely intellectual criterion thereby jettisoning common beliefs and practices and the history and traditions that underlie them. In other words,
their attitude toward knowledge was a rationalist one in the Popperian understanding of the term. The rationalist attitude was an attitude of a total revolution from received beliefs and opinions of the past. It is an attitude where every belief is questioned in order to ascertain the basis of holding such beliefs. Coherence and consistency are the trademarks of the rationalist conception of knowledge.

The rationalist attitude was the one which saw knowledge as a good in itself independently of its social importance. The carry over of the rationalist attitude to the conception of education is reflected in the position that “while the school certainly does have non-academic aims, the focus is clearly on academic work...the social and moral dimensions of the curriculum will tend to look after themselves and emerge as by-products of a properly conducted academic study” (O’Hear 2000:135). What is being averred here is that education is essentially a formal process where the focus is on learning the contents of subjects and that the practical application of these contents is a different matter.

Wisdom and Knowledge Distinction: Towards a Synthesis.

We shall argue in this section that although knowledge and wisdom are distinct entities, they do not constitute an incompatible dualism, to the extent that both do not have anything to do with one another. This position is contrary to mainline philosophy which has insisted on the separation of the two. Our position here is that knowledge and wisdom constitute a compatible peer and the combination of the two is a supreme human good. The implications of this position for a development oriented education shall be brought out in a subsequent section.

In the history of Western philosophy, Aristotle, Bacon and Marx could be regarded as synthesizers of knowledge and wisdom. This was borne out of their various arguments which stressed the need to synthesize the two notions. According to Aristotle (1984) human excellence is a combination of the contemplative life and the life of practical concerns. Bacon was credited with the saying that ‘knowledge is power’, while Marx (1975) in the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach opined that ‘philosophy has interpreted the world in different ways, but the point is to change it’. The Yoruba notion of imodoye, literarily, (knowledge becomes wisdom) also buttresses the fact that knowledge (imo) and wisdom (oye) are closely related. All these positions are exemplifications of the fact that knowledge and wisdom do not constitute an incompatible pair.

In order to substantiate this view, there is the need to further investigate the relationship between knowledge and wisdom by focusing on the nature of the human person who is said to possess these human goods. It is often believed that the human person is a rational being meaning that she possesses reason as an essential attribute which distinguishes her from other lower animals. However, reason has been conceived as both theoretical and practical. According to Kant (1965) theoretical reason is the kind of reason employed in the so called pure sciences where the concern of the thinker is on pure thought. Here, the object of thought is truth. On the other hand, practical reason pertains to subjects like ethics, religion and some other humanistic disciplines. The counsel of Kant in relation to
this distinction is that theoretical reason has its own limitation in the sense that it cannot transcend experience to deal with objects in themselves. When human beings are concerned with common experience, it is practical reason that is essential. In such an instance, the lesson to be learnt is that as human beings we cannot transcend experience, which may be defined as social and cultural to know some things in our lives. It appears that this is a basic fact of life and it does not imply any relativism. When a knowledgeable person realises this fact about human nature she is described as being wise in that she will be able to ‘prudentially’ apply her knowledge to real life. In one sense, she can be called educated, for as Nduka (1974:102) claimed ‘education is the transmission of knowledge, skills and values’.

Another dimension to the argument is to suggest along with thinkers like Kuhn (1970) and Rorty (1982) that the idea of science for science sake does not make sense. Science makes sense only when the truth it seeks is made relevant to the human community. This is not trying to suggest that science cannot be studied in its own right, but that such a study is not complete until the outcome of scientific research is applied to life in such a way that life is made better and more meaningful.

Another area of synthesizing knowledge and wisdom is to critique the position of mainline philosophy which suggests that knowledge is usually forward looking and that one has knowledge when she is able to jettison the past and move forward as it were. Our suggestion here is that moving forward in any area of life requires the experience of the past. It is the knowledge of the past that will enable us to know what has gone before and what are those things we require in order to correct the mistakes, if indeed that are mistakes in the past. In this connection, the educated person, that is the person who possesses knowledge and wisdom, is an embodiment of tradition and modernity; she uses one to shape the other in such a way that her experience is more meaningful and enriched. In the next section of the paper, we shall attempt to apply our analysis about the distinction between knowledge and wisdom to the notion of a development oriented education.

The Knowledge and Wisdom Distinction: Implications for Development Oriented Education

We shall argue in this section that just as knowledge is not knowledge for its own sake, education cannot be education for its own sake and that education should aim at the development of the learner who is a cultural being with the objective at developing her and her immediate environment in a world wide sense. However, before we examine this application, there is the need to clarify our meaning of development in relation to education.

In the literature on development theories, there are different dimensions and conceptions of development. Martinussen (1997) identified these theories as: development as economic growth, development as human development, development as modernisation process, development as elimination of dependency, development as dialectical transformation and development as history. Development theorists have applied these
theories to specific interpretations of human experience. However, the one that is of immediate relevance to our thesis in this paper is development as dialectical transformation.

According to Martinussen, the idea of development as dialectical transformation relates to the division of social phenomena into two categories: traditional and modern. This theory retains the basic notion of development as a process whereby society adopts more and more modern elements. However, like Popper’s notion of tradition, tradition need not be development impeding or in opposition to development at all. Conversely, the theory stresses the fact that modern institutions, for instance, educational institutions, can at times obstruct development and perhaps not function properly in view of the fact that they are not compatible with the traditions of the society concerned. This theory of development recognizes the fact that both the traditional and the modern aspects of society’s life are usually in tandem with one another and in order to fully appreciate the significance of the positive elements in development, both have to be related to one another. The essential lesson to be learnt in development as dialectical transformation is that development cannot be seen in a narrow and universalist terms (Bamikole 2007). Instead, an open conception of development is more germane. An open conception of development relates to changes in the each individual’s and society’s particular circumstances and their preferences.

What then is Development oriented Education?

According to our chosen notion of development, a development oriented education makes sense in any society, in view of the fact that all societies have their traditional and modern aspects. However, for the purpose of this essay our attention will be focused on the developing nations of Africa.

One fact to be recognized is that most of the countries that make the Third World have their traditional and modern aspects. The traditional aspects represent those ideas, beliefs and practices that have been handed down from one generation to the next before the advent of European colonialism. This is what constitutes tradition in the Popperian and the anthropological senses and this is an aspect of wisdom in the sense that it is related to the past history of such society and that it is not necessarily opened to formal way of educating like reading and writing. The modern aspect represents situation in which the traditional aspect of society tends to give way to the modern as a result of contact with industrialised society. However, in doing this, the understanding is that the relationship between the two aspects has to be dialectical in the sense that the past is used to construct the present and the future. This is how Dillon (1963) conceived of intellectual inquiry in developing nations. According to him, there are three main categories of intellectual activity in new nations, especially in Africa. The first relates to gathering knowledge about the past, the second, finding out how well things are working in the present and third, anticipating the future. This kind of integrated and unified experience has a lot of advantages, foremost of which is that it promotes the ideal of identity. It makes the learner or the recipient of education to know where she is coming from, where she is, and where she is going. It has to be noted here that the type of education which can make the
learner to appreciate her identity is not the one that is limited to memorising the contents of taught subjects under a controlled and formal school situation, what Freire (2000) called the “banking” concept of education. Rather, it is the one which is a product of the acquisition of book knowledge and the experience garnered from the immediate environments of the learner outside the school situation. Consequently, a person can be described as educated when she ‘prudentially’ applied to life the skills acquired from both wisdom and knowledge.

Development oriented education is the type of education which takes into cognizance the history of the developing nations, which was characterized by slavery and colonialism. Such education should be directed to addressing the historical situations of the learner in order to make her understand the past so that she can fashion out ways to deal with the present and project for the future. A development oriented education will make the learner a free citizen, who is able to make choices among competing alternatives. The type of education that will perform this function should be a far cry from the received Western formal education. It has often been remarked that Western formal education, the type of education associated with gathering information from the teacher, only relates to how to read and write and to speak the Queen’s English. Experience has shown that this notion of education has not led to development of all the aspects of the learner’s life. In Nigeria, for example, Goody and Watt (1963:336) had observed that “the relative failure of Universal compulsory education to bring about rapid intellectual, social, political and economic changes is the gap between the public literate tradition of the school and the very different and often directly contradictory private oral traditions of the pupils’ family.” In order to avoid this kind of failure, it has been suggested that educational policies that aimed at unifying the informal and formal experiences of the learner should be developed. The way to develop these two kinds of education is to specifically integrate into the school curriculum subjects that relate to the past and immediate cultural experiences of the learner.

In traditional societies, informal education usually took the form of socialising the child into the norm of the community. Such socialisation does not take the form of formal learning and it was not only individual oriented but also communal oriented. For example, in the Yoruba society, a child does not only belong to the biological parents; she is also a ‘gift’ of the community. The education of the child is consequently the duty of all elders in the community. The type of training received from this kind of setting is the one that is capable of moulding the child into omoluwabi, the best acronym that can be used to describe a person in a Yoruba society. The ideals of omoluwabi entail the dictates of moral and social obligations. Every person requires the kind of training that will promote these ideals in order to be a useful member of the society. In the words of Gbadegesin (1998: 139) “There is need for character training from the beginning so that the cosmetic of iwa (character) may have time to sink into the core of iwa (existence) very early in life.” What is being said here is that the being of a person is inextricably linked to her character. In other words, no matter how learned a person is if she lacks good character, she is not going to be regarded as a complete person. The Yoruba word eniyankeniyan (worthless person) aptly describes this kind of person.
Within the Yoruba society, the being/existence (iwa) of a person is not only determined by the wealth of material property and intellectual endowments but also by her character (iwa). Thus for the Yoruba, a person can be learned and yet be described as alakori (foolish person) if her knowledge is not accompanied with wisdom which is manifested in such things as behaving like omoluwabi. Although like Gbadegesin pointed out, the limits of the socialisation process of the child to become omoluwabi is appreciated in the pragmatic approach of the people to moral education.

That a development oriented education is aligned to development as dialectical transformation is exemplified in Nkrumah’s (1998: 81) saying that “Practice without thought is blind; thought without practice is empty.” The essential ingredient in Nkrumah’s position is that in order for African society to develop, our thought pattern should be directed towards the unification of the elevated ideals underlying the traditional African society with the modern tradition bequeathed to us by our erstwhile colonial masters. This modern tradition is made up of christian and islamic religions and the type of education they engender. In other words, a development oriented education will take the form of synthesizing knowledge with wisdom. The product of this synthesis is, according to Nkrumah, the emancipation of the African continent which is also the emancipation of man (and woman). In other words, a development oriented education is also an education for freedom, not only in the individual sense but also in the social sense.

**Curriculum Implications of a Development Oriented Education**

Given the fact that education has moved beyond the traditional and informal type and has taken the form of formal acquisition of knowledge, where recipients are brought under controlled instructional procedures, one question that needs be asked is that what type of curriculum would accommodate and enhance a development oriented education? What should be the content of this curriculum?

Before we address the question about content, there is the need to realize that the curriculum of a development oriented education should take the form of a dialectical pedagogy. What is meant by this is that education is an ongoing process of effecting change in oneself and the environment. Consequently, there is nothing that is stagnant and permanent about the process. Here, there is a resemblance in the object of knowledge and wisdom in the sense that in both, change is acknowledged as one of the essential ingredients. The difference, however, is that when wisdom advocates a gradual change, a change in which the past is accommodated into the present, knowledge prescribes a revolutionary change, a change which does not take into consideration what has gone before. The element of change in the concepts of knowledge and wisdom brings out the consequences of Plato’s account of education, which relates to the fact that inquiry is an unending task. Rorty (1998:165) observes that this view of education is the one which sees education as the process of preparing a person for the “patient reflective work of bringing opinions and practices into a consistent, well-reasoned whole”. In other words, education is a synthesis of knowledge and wisdom in the sense that a person who is
educated is the one who is able to bring about a unity between her formal learning and her informal common experiences of life.

Another aspect of the dialectical nature of a development oriented education relates to Plato’s position in the *Republic*, to the effect that the beginning of an inquiry is culturally specific, but its aims go beyond the contingencies of time and space. What has to be noted about this position is that of a conception of education that is understood both in context and in form. This means that education has both cultural aim and universal aim. In as much as this position has some merits, we need to acknowledge the fact that whatever universality a concept enjoys, it has to be made relevant to the cultural life of the individual in such a way that the concept’s significance is appreciated. This is what Wiredu (1996) has referred to as “universality in particularity”. Consequently, rather than interpreting the Platonic position as that which prescribes universal aim for education, we should interpret it as that which relates the cultural aims of education to its universal aims in a dialectical manner. What we have been urging in this paper is that development oriented education is that notion of education which sees the importance of education as the application of knowledge skills to the realities of the life of the individuals and the different spaces occupied by such individuals. It is only when this is made possible that we can describe the knowledgeable person as both educated and wise.

In terms of content, the curriculum of a development oriented education should be laced with such subjects that can make the recipients of education knowledgeable and wise. Granted the fact that we live in the age of science and technology, we need to recognize that science and technology in the hands of a vicious person will spell doom for humanity. In other words, truth seeking aim of knowledge should be contextualized. In addition to science and technology, the learner should be introduced to such subjects that deal with how human relationships are constructed from the initial modes of socialization of individuals. In this regard, Dillon’s (1963:86) position is instructive: “A conceptual framework is needed to emphasise the importance of non-reason and sentiment in human affairs, especially, those aspects... which will be destroyed by logicians and pleaders of consistency.”

The essential lesson to be learnt in this position is that it is not at all times that one expects to strive for perfection in the manner of the seekers of knowledge. There are times when one has to be pragmatic and practical, especially when one is dealing with different persons with different interests. Consequently, such subjects like history- both oral and written, cultural studies, religion and fictional books should be given a pride of place in the school curriculum from the primary to the tertiary levels of education. In Nigeria, for example, the teaching of civics has been made compulsory in primary schools and it is being strongly advocated that moral philosophy should be thought at the secondary level. In the same vein, all undergraduates of Nigeria’s higher institutions have to take compulsory course in African history and culture. Although it is yet to be seen how the inclusion of these subjects in the school curricular works out in practice, nevertheless it is a good conception of what a development oriented education entails and given strong commitment on the parts of all stakeholders in the educational process, it is hoped that the goal of development oriented education will be attained.
Conclusion

The state of affairs of education, especially in developing countries of Africa and the Caribbean, is such that its recipients at all levels of formal education are mainly concerned about the dividends of education in terms of securing employments. Employers of labour are also concerned about the academic grades of potential job seekers. However, it has been reported that organizations have had cause to complain about the low level of performance of graduates on the job despite the fact that they made very good grades in their degree examinations. One of the major complaints of these organizations is that their employees lack initiative and originality and in some cases they lack morals. Originality, initiative and good morals are some of the ideals which formal schooling alone does not provide. The only kind of education that can provide for these attributes is a development oriented education, which combines the elements of informal training with that of formal instructions. A development oriented education should not only make the educated skilful in her areas of study, but must also be able to apply such skills to real life in its various dimensions.

A development oriented education recognizes the truth seeking aim of knowledge. It also, for instance, recognizes the function of a university as that of teaching and research. These are universal norms of knowledge and education. However, the peculiar nature of the cultural terrain of each society will determine the use to which these universal norms are put. Teaching and research that do not affect the cultural realities of the people will seem to be empty. Hence recognition of the application of knowledge to the understanding of individual and cultural realities is the beginning of wisdom.

References


