

**A REACTION TO PROFESSOR OLOKO ON THE CAUSE OF AND
REMEDY FOR THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF MODERNISATION**

by

Tan Tai Wei
Professor of Philosophy
Institute of Education
SINGAPORE

DISCUSSION PAPER

on

Olatunde Oloko's

**MORAL, SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL
VALUES IN MODERNISATION**

No one can dispute the belief of Professor Oloko and many sociologists that the modern bureaucratic machinery, that tends to depersonalise people into lubricated units within it, has been a major factor resulting in the widespread neglect or abandoning of traditional morality and faiths, and in the loss of a sense of meaning in life evidenced by contemporary social problems. So much of a person's life has been dominated by large-scale bureaucratic organisation that blaming it for the loss of traditional values that are incompatible with it must to a significant extent be right. However, it remains debatable and important whether the effect on people has merely been a causal one bypassing any conscious acknowledgement and choice, or whether there has, or could have been a rational rejection by individual persons of traditional values in favour of the values presupposed in present-day bureaucratic organisations and the science and technology they incorporate.

Professor Oloko finds the natural home of traditional morality and beliefs to be within societies that preserve their 'kinship-based traditional task performance units' among which socialisation has been possible, which perpetuates 'the values of familism' manifested in the members seeing themselves 'as extensions of one another', in their putting 'collective interests above their individual interests', their taking 'pride in collective achievement' and their accepting 'relatively unlimited obligation for the fellow-members of the same kinship unit'. (p. 21) Within and among such units 'they were required to extend to themselves the degree of hospitality, helpfulness and solicitude that one extends to the members of one's own natural/nuclear families'. While it is true that such familial ties, with

their value presuppositions, are easier knotted within smaller social units, it is clearly not just the structure and largeness of bureaucracy that has been responsible for the facelessness and alienation experienced by the people it dominates. More fundamental must be the disruption of traditional loyalties, whether they be familial, sectional or regional, that any artificial re-organisation and uprooting of people would effect. Gone are the unconscious bonds which held together people whose assumed values and beliefs enabled them emotionally and cognitively to 'take off' rather than having to begin at square one in their mutual relations and communications. In a drastically re-organised society, instead of family-type relationships, people meet more as in committees, as T.S. Eliot so succinctly put it in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture.

For reasons which will become clear, it is significant that Professor Oloko further notes that the values of familism were in their natural home regarded as 'intrinsically or inherently rewarding' and not accepted 'for extrinsic or expedient reasons'. Also significant is the observation that the values were taken as categorical imperatives 'in accord with the injunctions and wishes of religious, supernatural, or other charismatic authorities'. (p. 22)

How is the modern bureaucracy and scientific culture incompatible with traditional familial bonds and beliefs? We noted above that any artificial re-organisation of peoples would uproot them. Also, the largeness and extreme specialisation of roles of modern bureaucracies would render it easier for people to lose their bearing of their significance and worth. We can readily agree that all this exemplifies one sort of way traditional

familial values can be lost, i.e. through an unconscious process of neglect owing to an uncondusive environment, or through unconscious assimilation of the ethos of the new environment. Thus Professor Oloko says that the 'many social problems in modern societies are due less to the conflict between the values of familism and those of science, technology and bureaucracy ... but more to saturation of the many aspects of life in those societies with the latter sets of values almost to the utter neglect of the former'. (p. 41)

But Professor Oloko implies that there has been another way of losing traditional values when he refers to the 'conflict' between the values of science and bureaucracy on the one hand, and familial values on the other. This is a self-conscious process of assenting to the values of science and those presupposed in the instrumentalism and pragmatism of modern industry and bureaucracy. The values are being transmitted through deliberate training in schools, vocational institutions or in the work-place. And confronted with the conflict of such values with traditional familial morality, the rejection of the latter is a matter of conscious choice.

Now, whether or not such a choice has in fact played a dominant role in the contemporary widespread rejection of traditional values, it cannot be doubted that it has had a significant role. The enhancement of universal education in the form of large-scale bureaucratically organised systems of education, emphasising pragmatic science and technology and advocating the scientific spirit of questioning and testing any belief or procedure, must have taken its toll. That a training in science, especially through an instrumental approach to science as used in technology and industry, can undermine traditional morality and religious beliefs is widely recognised.

The emphasis on science and its exclusive deployment of empirical testing and demonstration has resulted in our times in the identification of all knowledge and truths with the empirically verified. Logical Positivism may have had its heyday among professional philosophers, but the dogma it has attempted to substitute traditional religions with has lived on in the minds and practice of its converts among lay people. That dogma, we all know, would rule out the distinctive claims of morality and religion, which do not even purport to be empirically verifiable. This undermining of traditional values and beliefs has been aggravated by the exclusive instrumental use of science in modern technology and industry. The disinterested pursuit of truth, with its presuppositions of the ultimate worth of virtues such as humility, sincerity, truth-keeping and justice, has been replaced by a pragmatism that would define the ultimately worthy and good only in terms of usefulness, committing what Bertrand Russell called 'cosmic impiety'. We are therefore hardly surprised by Professor Oloko's observation that whilst in the traditional kinship-based societies values were revered as being of intrinsic worth, this reverence for moral worth is absent in modernised societies. For where all truth and worth is measured only in terms of practical utility, men become impious as regards morality, among other things.

What does Professor Oloko propose as a remedy for the moral decadence of the times? He quotes with approval a suggestion of a British sociologist that we 'must return to religion and religious values' but thinks it important to add that 'the bureaucracies in which the vast majority of members of

modern societies live and have their being should be restructured in such a way that huge doses of the values of familism are injected into them'. (p. 41) He does not elaborate, but indications are that he is a sociologist who believes in the dominance of the influence of social structure on people's behaviour such that a causal explanation in terms of the effects of social structuring is to him sufficient to explain their change of beliefs or value-orientation. Accordingly, he talks of merely 'injecting' huge doses of familial values back into circulation. This cannot be done without connecting together again in some viable pattern the blood-stream that has been severed by the dislocations caused by modern bureaucratic re-organisation, an operation which calls for some social re-structuring. Professor Oloko is clearly thinking of a remedy conceived in terms of turning the clock backwards along the line of the unconscious assimilation of new beliefs in place of old ones resulting from changes in social structure which conduce to the new beliefs -- the first process of change of values and beliefs we distinguished above. His remedy is therefore not conceived in terms of re-education in order to enable conscious and rational choice to accept demonstrably valid moral and religious beliefs. Indeed, because of the conception of morality he subscribes to (which we will presently explain), it is probable that he believes it is impossible to have such an objectively valid morality. He recommends a causal process of value-reorientation, the assumption being that once the dominant causal factors are re-set, the effects of desirable environmental re-conditioning will inevitably take place.

Since we have just mentioned Professor Oloko's conception of morality, let us explain it now before going on to discuss his remedy. It will be seen that our dissatisfaction with his approach has much to do with

misgivings over his account of morality. His account of morality plays down the importance of the question of objective truth and validity in moral appraisals. Moreover, morality and religion are presumed in his account to have merely instrumental value relative to their usefulness in holding the social groups in which they occur. Thus, in explaining 'the concept of value', Professor Oloko quotes non-committal, neutral definitions by other sociologists such as 'a conception or standard ... held to be relatively desirable or undesirable ...', and 'an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable ...' (p. 19) In these definitions, it is implied that no commitment is demanded of us to one value or another, their truth or validity being a matter for the social groups concerned. So the social scientist can afford to stand at a safe distance uninvolved in the stream of actual living. And values being only of relative worth, the ends justify the means no matter what these may happen to be, as long as they have the effect the social group concerned deem to be desirable. Professor Oloko offers no improvement over these definitions of morality in his own formulation in terms of 'a cultural conception or standard by which the relationship of members of social systems are compared and approved relative to one another'. (p. 20)

Let us now consider Professor Oloko's proposal to remedy the social problems of modernisation. Now, it seems to me that together with those of social scientists who share similar presuppositions with him about the deterministic nature of human actions and beliefs but who nevertheless want to help us solve the moral problems that arise with modernisation, Professor Oloko's proposed remedy will fail precisely because of its being itself a

victim of the bureaucratic and scientific orientation that has caused the problems.

First, assuming his proposal to re-condition people by 'injecting' familial values into modern bureaucracies through appropriate social restructuring is feasible, the desirability of social conditioning should still have been considered. A humane treatment of the issue that is itself unconditioned by the dehumanising effects of modern scientific culture and its institutionalisation in contemporary social science, would be to deal with rather than evade philosophical considerations of the concept of man and mind. The deterministic assumptions made so rampantly in that social science that models its explanations of human behaviour on the causal explanations of the physical sciences should at least have been recognised as an issue deserving consideration. That this fundamental and highly debatable question has been merely presumed in favour of causal determinism by social scientists who are nonetheless interested in the moral revival of modern man is telling. For the alienation and dehumanisation of modern man with its attendant moral problems are just what should have been expected, given the physicalist and fatalistic conception of man.

However, the proposed means of salvation for modern man, which would by-pass and undermine human rationality and choice, is hardly feasible. Paradoxically, this is because science and technology and their institutionalisation within large-scale bureaucracies, notwithstanding their general dehumanising effects have brought with them an enhanced universal education emphasising scientific test and rational verification of any belief. In this respect, modernisation has brought with it a humane rational individualism, or at least an enhanced potential for this, despite the loss

of traditional values. Any proposed solution of our social ills should not have the effect of undermining this precious advantage of modernisation. However, precisely because of this awakening, or potential for awakening of rationality on a scale and scope unprecedented in history, a mere tampering with social structure for the injecting of traditional and unargued values could not have its intended results. Unless the rational validity of the values can be and is demonstrated to modern self-conscious minds, they will not find acceptance, at least not in the long run. And a mere instrumental and relativist morality, as implied in Professor Oloko's conception of values, wouldn't do either for precisely a reason given by him which we quoted earlier on. An instrumental and relativist morality would lack the capacity to inspire awe and reverence, and would of course not be valued for its intrinsic worth. It would lack the power and hold the traditional morality of familism had exerted over traditional societies.

The indications therefore are that any acceptable and feasible remedy for contemporary social problems would have to conceive of a moral re-orientation effected along the path of the second sort of influence distinguished above, which do not by-pass human rationality and choice. There may also be the further need to discover a rational morality universal and compelling enough to evoke the sort of commitment and awe members of traditional societies had for their moral law. For this to be possible, it may well be that social scientists and other equally concerned academics would have to cultivate and exercise their own humanity and moral and religious sensitivities, in addition to the abstract display of their academic specialisations. To do this, they may first have to free themselves from the power and grip of their respective academic bureaucracies, so

that they may engage in real living with its demands not only for thinking but also for making commitments risky though these may be.