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INTRODUCTION

Moral practice may show all degrees of ethical insight, and ethical theory all degrees of metaphysical illumination. What is here maintained is that, ultimately, no ethical theory can be adequate without the explicit statement of its metaphysical beliefs (Dorothy Walsh).¹

There is a perennial issue in the history of ethics in general and meta-ethics in particular. It concerns the extent to which ethics is dependent upon ontology, what has often been referred to as the “is/ought” problem. One can easily appreciate the place of the issue in ethics when we cast our minds back to Hume’s Guillotine and Moore’s naturalistic fallacy. Hume aptly stated the problem in *A Treatise of Human Nature* thus,

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning, and establishes the

¹ Dorothy Walsh, Ethics and Metaphysics, *International Journal of Ethics*, 46.4 (1936): 472

being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when all of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. But as authors do not commonly use this precaution, I shall presume to recommend it to the readers; and am persuaded, that this small attention would subvert all the vulgar systems of morality, and let us see, that the distinction of vice and virtue is not founded merely on the relations of objects, nor is perceived by reason.²

Hume (with his friends) thus asserts that there is a gap between ethics and ontology and that there is no logical justification for any purported connection between them. He therefore trivializes any such link between ethics and ontology and any attempt to bridge the gap between the “is” and the “ought”.

² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: John Noon, 1739), p.335

The problem with the complete severing of the “is” from the “ought” is that of the validation of ethical principles found in the sphere of normative ethics, since much of what needs to be said in the validation of moral norms proceeds from statements about our being, statements about what is. In order not to fall into the trap of moral scepticism and non-cognitivism, there is the need to take the link between ethics and ontology more seriously. This has resulted in the divergent views of ethical naturalism. For these ones, the link between ethics and ontology is not merely a historical accident but a real necessity which is made palpable in the history of ethics.

Dorothy Walsh points out one of the strong reasons why the link is intrinsic: the fact of ethical relativism. Ethical diversity in the history of thought can best be understood as resulting from the diversity in metaphysical doctrines which implies the need to take such doctrines more seriously in understanding normative moral principles.³ Furthermore, if ethics is intrinsically concerned with a moral agent’s action, one cannot explain such action completely devoid of his her ontological status or metaphysical realities. In the words of Walsh,

The necessity for this lies in the fact that the moral agent, considered merely as such, is a paradoxical and contradictory being. Such a being is in actuality less than he ought to be, yet in possibility he must already be everything that he ought to be. His nature cannot be made intelligible without raising, at the very least, the question of possibility and actuality in relation to reality. This leads one to the heart of metaphysical discourse. Furthermore, there is a fact concerning the moral agent, generally admitted by all ethical theories, which requires the consideration of this abstracted aspect of the self in relation to the complete concrete self. The moral role is a requirement.⁴

A protracted debate is therefore established between those who contend that the gap between the “is” and the “ought” should be maintained and those who contend that such a gap should be bridged. However, it is fundamental that the issue of the link between ethics

³ Dorothy Walsh, *Ethics and Metaphysics*, p.462.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.471.

and ontology, be it trivial or interesting, is recognized in ethics and effort is continually made by ethicists to strengthen or weaken such a link based on the available evidences.

In the quest to understand and elucidate the moral systems of cultures, a vital aspect of the philosophy of culture, scholars are often preoccupied with the normative and applied aspects of cultures with little concern for the meta-ethics, or the basis of justification of such moral systems found within cultures. African ethics is a case in mind. Many of the literatures available on African ethics focus mainly on the normative and applied aspect of African ethics. Generally African normative ethics is commonly described as an ethics of brotherhood, a communitarian or a communalistic ethics. This is then applied to social, political, economic and health issues. However, little is said about African meta-ethics.

The present volume is thus intended to examine critically an under-theorized and often neglected meta-ethical issue in philosophical discourse with particular reference to Africa. This issue concerns the extent to which one's orientation of being, or idea of what-is – be it as an individual or a group of persons – does, or should, determine one's concept of the good. In other words, to what extent is ethics, or our idea of what is permissible or impermissible, grounded on ideas of what fundamentally exists or what it means to be? The aim of this collection of essays, with some emphasis on an African philosophical context, is to establish more firmly and vigorously whether there is an intrinsic link between ontology and morality, i.e., whether, and, if so, how, the proper norms for human actions can be explained and validated once we make lucid ideas about metaphysical topics such as human nature, community, relationality and spirituality.

Thus, we bring together this current volume, understanding well that the prevailing Western tradition of ethical discourse privileges the discrimination of the moral “ought” as the incidence of normative reasoning, arguing that there is an impossibility of generating an “ought” from an “is”, or what is often regarded in the scholarship as the fact/value dichotomy

or, in describing those who deign to derive the “ought” from the “is” as persons who commit what is known as the naturalistic fallacy; in the process there is a dichotomy created between existence, as practice, and theoretical intellectual engagements, as reflection of existence and practice. Thus there is the supposition that the rational self is superior to the physical, living, dying and memorializing self. This is a manifestation of the pernicious duo of scientism on the one hand, and its twin sister logical positivism on the other hand. Combining both in the Humean fashion, but surreptitiously sanitized as rationality glorified, the division of human being realities into the rational and the emotive is complete, at the cost of ensuring that humans then are able to do tragic things to themselves, in the process of attaining emotionless reflective rationality.

As such, the first two essays in this collection are creative in the ways in which they provide fresh perspectives for understanding the issues of morality in society. The first one looks at the attempt to ground ethics on honour, while the second undertakes a critical indictment of transcendental ethics – the pursuit of universal, purely rational or logical foundations for ethics in society, even when taking notice of the existential circumstances of actors on individual and public domains.

Since much of what we have to say about the moral system of a culture is deeply rooted in its moral tradition, it thus becomes fitting to begin this volume with Segun Gbadegesin’s essay. Gbadegesin asserts that a moral tradition as an indigenous institution of society is not self-justifying merely on the account of its longevity. Rather its justification is dependent on both internal and external factors of existence associated with it. A moral revolution can occur when such factors change or become anachronistic.

Segun Gbadegesin’s discussion (Chapter 1) attempts what may be regarded as a fresh alternative to the sterile theoretical ethics in Western scholarship, with a close examination of the effort of Antony Appiah, as he laboured in vain to suggest that what moderated human

conduct, being not reason, is honour, would fall within this category; that is, the category of moral philosophy which indulge in conflating pure reflective theory-building in science with path-making moral engagements, thereby missing the point which Kuhn had intended with his notions of paradigm shifts in science. In a highly perceptive but commendably positive appreciation, Gbadegesin suggests that Appiah not only fails in this venture of piggy-backing on the wisdom of Kuhn and his disciples, but he shows effectively that his (Appiah's) effort also antagonizes the Kuhnian prescient warning that revolutions in science differ from revolutions in other human domains, including that of morality. Especially, Gbadegesin effectively shows that revolutions in science are revolutions in theoretical explanatory models about reality (not changes in the reality), while revolutions in morality relate to revolutions in moral practices engineered to facilitate changes in moral lives of members of society, not the principles or theories behind the moral practices.

It is evident that the handicap which bestraddles analytic philosophy (in this case Appiah) does not constrain or straightjacket someone well-heeled in a different philosophical tradition – African – and as a consequence, Gbadegesin is able to see the limitation of the application the wrong tools for the solution of the problems of moral abnormalities in Western society. In the process, Gbadegesin showed that the Yoruba society does not constrict its reflective capacity by the false, inexhaustive, is/ought dichotomy which prevents Appiah from solving the inhuman moral eventualities of the honor code in the way in which the two examples of human sacrifice and the killing of the prince on the death of the king were discarded in Yoruba society. Clearly the changes to the moral desiderata was a product of reflective appreciation of the socially negative and morally bankrupt consequences of the practices in Yoruba society, regardless of who is affected – which may be one's own long lost kin – but even more significantly the appreciation of the intrinsic immorality of the actions so engaged.

In Chapter 2, Sandra McCalla provides a stimulating investigation of the limitations of universalist formulations of ethics. His discussion of Nietzsche, Kant and others show clearly that it is a tough proposition to sanitize morality from contamination of real human experiences, motives and interests. In a well-reasoned effort, she provided arguments to show that morality cannot but be relative, when we bear in mind the cultural, social, economic and other factors which inform choices, decisions and values in society.

In Chapter 3, Imafidon provides an illuminating explication of the ontological basis of ethics. This he does within the context of the trichotomy that is often foisted on African moral discourse, on the one hand suggesting that ethics is derived divine or supernaturalistic foundations, or that ethics is a product of a humanism which is anthropocentrically located as a communalistic or communitarian utilitarian phenomenon, by contrast with an ethics which is individualistic, mainly egoistic in intent and orientation. Imafidon suggests that the delimitation of the foundations of ethics as an either or between these three categories does a great disservice to African moral beliefs, and also, by implication to human moral beliefs writ large.

Exploring the concepts of person, being, existence and relation to that many facets of reality, Imafidon clearly shows in this chapter a perspective which is replicated in many African societies as well as can be found in societies of the African Diaspora. The manifestations of these ideas have been developed through ubuntu and omoluabi, and the critical articulation of this to underwrite African ethical theory is a clear attempt to provide an alternative ethical perspective which continue to attenuate the destructive forces of Western individualism on the communal ethics of African peoples.

Kevin Behrens, in Chapter 4, explores aspects of indigenous notions of moral obligations to the self, the community, the society, and to the whole of nature, which transcends mere concerns of self-interest on the part of humanity either for welfare, splendour or survival. He maintained that it was traditional for peoples of African descent to see that they have an obligation, which springs from respect, recognition and admiration, for the sustainable approach to all things in nature, even while using these things to support themselves. For this reason, maintaining an environment that is wholesome for today's humans is a prelude to respecting the rights of generations unborn to not be impoverished by our efforts to satisfy our desires for pleasure and happiness today. The cycle of existence, from our ancestors of immediate and distant past, to us in the present and continuing into the eternity of our posterity deserve respect; and by the same token nature deserves to be respected and not be consigned to ignominious extinction by our appetite for pleasure today. Even more significant is the debt of gratitude which we owe our ancestors to preserve what they have been kind enough to bequeath to us, and which we know that future generations need for their own existence. It is not a logical argument to say that because future generations have no capacity for contemporary reciprocation or sensual suffering from our actions today, therefore we deny them moral considerability.

The limitation of narrow ethics from a linguistic analytic or purely abstract normative form which has been the indulgence of Western European academy in recent times is evident in the many problems which has been overwhelming humanity. It has surfaced in various formats, ranging from the rampant distortions in notions of welfare of humanity, to the glorification of various strange belief systems, value orientations and means of pursuit of happiness. The multiplier effect of these tendencies is manifest in the paradoxical situation where the 21st Century boast of so much by way of technological, scientific, medical and communications technological advancements, yet is has proved to be the most insecure,

highly destructive and humanly obtuse age to date. The fact that this situation is not likely to change soon is manifested by the ways in which the leadership of global powers are becoming even more entrenched in the narrow determinations of parochial self-interests of themselves and their immediate constituencies, thereby compromising the foundations of our collective human being, and capacity for survival into the future as an ongoing “concern” (to use the metaphor of global capitalism). In Chapter 5, Munamoto Chemhuru engagingly discusses Shona philosophy regarding the nature of being, human being, nature and collective existence of the things in the multiverse, showing that reflective self-interest is not the only reason why the Shona appreciate the need to treat with every being responsibly, but as a consequence of the recognition of the intrinsic worth and moral nature of all that exist. But it is not only the Shona that embraces this sophisticated perspective regarding the ecosphere; similar values are replicated, according to Chemhuru, across the African indigenous intellectual ecospherical landscape. He offers this perspective as a contribution toward the task of encouraging global humanity to begin the process of developing intellectually robust agendas which will contribute to sustainability of our common existence.

Societies device various moral, legal and social traditions as a means of promoting harmony, protecting peace and enhancing the capacity of members individually and collectively to live wholesome lives of happiness and fulfillment. The business of understanding these efforts are always undertaken by members of society, internally or externally, comparatively or as a stand-alone investigation with a view to facilitating the appreciation of the factors which conduce to cohesion or discord. Ukpokolo, in Chapter 6, undertakes a close critical analysis of the moral ideas surrounding the phenomenon of adultery among the Esan people of Nigeria. The outcome of this analysis is a robust gendered appreciation of the virtues of protecting the family, made up of the male, the female and their issues, and society at large, from the odium of adultery and the negative, even

disastrous, consequences of adultery on the part of the female. Even while one may see this as being paternalistic and patronizing on the part of the male, giving the man the permission to indulge in adultery while the woman is severely punished, his argument seems to suggest that it is actually in the interest of the female that female adultery is prohibited because of the superior position the woman occupies in the welfare of the family and society at large.

It is important to understand from the foregoing that when philosophers attempt to distill from reality the effervescent and enduring abstractions of logic, streamlined of all relations to the true existential conditions that moderate choices, social expectations, responsibility allocations and community demands, then we end up with theoretical constructs which may be very difficult to reconcile with human social engagements. In the Chapter on adultery (Chapter 7) as an ethical issue among the Esan people of Nigeria, Ehiakhamen argues that ethics is not about absolute values, unconnected with the wellbeing and welfare of individual members and collective preservation of Esan society. To this end, it would seem, from the example of the practice of adultery, which would otherwise have attracted the ire of society, the overriding consideration for determining moral appraisal is the value of the act to promote the cohesion of society on the one hand, our if not properly handled, contribute to social decay on the other hand, thereby destroying the bonds of societal order. What comes out of the discussion is the fact that a singular explanatory track for the understanding of the origin and sustenance of moral values in society is often unrealistic, as moral values have personal, communal and even spiritual forces for support in order to work properly.

In Chapter 8, Jim Unah avers that morality is about real life people, engaged in the business of living with others as well as with themselves, within the universe for which they have certain obligations and responsibilities. Morality is not some abstract science in such an environment, as it deals with the principles, reasoning and evidence that is used to support

choices of behaviour and relationship within the society. In his contribution to this collection, therefore, he makes the comparison of Chinese moral precepts and theories, as found in Taoism and Confucianism with their counterparts in various African indigenous ethical situations and principles (Iwa pele and Ubuntu) to demonstrate that what drives morality – ethics – in Chinese heritage and African traditions is the welfare of the individual, who has responsibility for ensuring the welfare of the community.

In Chapter 9, Motsamai Molefe examines the suggestion by Gyekye that morality in African cultures is humanistic in origin, and not supernaturalist, because African religions are not revealed religions – hence, no revealed morality which would have supernatural origin, and argues that Gyekye is wrong in this argument. He showed that there is no evidence to say that only revealed religions can have supernaturalist ethics, especially bearing in mind that while religion may not be revealed, ethical codes in the religion may have reference to supernatural forces for justification and validation. The fact that many African societies consider the universe to be interdependent and to have forces which manifest and are capable of impacting the lives and existence of all beings is, to Molefe, evidence that there is no incongruity in a non-revealed religion having aspects, such as ethics harking to supernatural forces for validation and sustenance. In any case, the argument of Gyekye, frames as either/or invariably invalidates the conclusion that is generated from the limited options that he considered. Molefe notes the fact that in many African societies there is a continuum in the understanding of human existence; from the ancestors to the living to the unborn, and the fact that when considered fully, ethics is supported by the ancestors, the divinities and the Supreme Being, insisting that humans live according to the dictates laid out in the preferences of these categories of powerful forces and beings. Even more salient is the fact that all societies have jurisprudential traditions which are institutionalized to underwrite behaviours and actions which societies accept or reject.

There is no doubt that various belief systems, metaphysical presuppositions, and cultural ideologies underwrite the various ethical, scientific and socio-political traditions which determine action on the individual and social-corporate levels. Some of these ideologies have become universalized as what is normal, rational and logical. In Chapter 10, Imafidon discussed how these ideologies have shaped ethical responses to life writ large. He identifies and discusses three of these: a) the Christian traditions which the West inherited from the Judaic cultural heritage, enshrining theism, and which now parades itself, separated from its ancestry, in the form of second, which is, b) derobed and striped of its obvious supernaturalistic metaphysics and named secularism; while the third is, c) the African ontological and culturally determined axiology. In his overall appreciation, there is nothing saying that these three views cannot be complementary to each other, even though the first two traditions always seem to be at logger heads, with accusations and counter accusations being bandied around. While disempowered because of the history of colonialism, African ideas of life and ethics have been denied, subjugated and subverted to the total peril of Africana developmental capacities. He would request that we undertake a careful integration of this perspective into the overall effort to develop universal bioethical and axiological, globally sustaining and affirmative policies, for the development and utilization of the resources in the world for the wellbeing of humanity now and into the future.

That there are various ways in which the foundation of morality is packaged is reflected in the many theoretical explanations found in meta-ethical discourse. But even more significant is the fact that the traditions tend to be subjected to a process of abstraction which masks the original foundations. There is no doubt that much of what passes as morality is predicated on traditions, conventions, practical instances of negative results needing prevention or amelioration, and reification of some of these through critical and reflective abstraction. Kehinde, in Chapter 11, examines the role of eldership in morality and

convincingly shows that elders constitute a critical component in the moral fabric of many societies of the world, where it is supposed that by virtue of age and life experiences, one would be better seasoned in the handling of moral dilemmas and be able to serve as better guide for the youth. There is no doubt that contemporary society seems to have transcended this aspect of practical devise for preserving the balance of rights, especially given the predominance of various sources of information and guides on life by way of internet, libraries, etc, but even then we still find that there are areas in which age, such as in the US Congress, seem to be a factor and maturity seems valued over mere acquisition of qualifications and “knowledge”.

The twelfth chapter on the nature of moral values in indigenous African societies, as a bulwark for development by Osegenwune provides a good account of the sources, justification and utility of values as the template for development. In this chapter, care is taken to examine the various aspects of moral discourse in traditional Africa, linking this with the contemporary effort to rid the continent of the debilitating imported of moral ideas which glorify possessive individualism and valorizes greed at the expense of community and social cooperation. The chapter is signal in the manner in which it presents the notion of metaphysics and an instrument of moral development in African intellectual traditions.

The next two chapters (Chapters 13 and 14) in this collection attempt to buck the trend that seems popular in Africana intellectual engagements of the traditions of Africa; the first with regard to the existence of God, and the other dealing with the foundations of ethics in African societies. The trend in previous chapters of this collection of essays seem united in the view that there is a connection between being, life, reality, de facto situation and the general values which humans devise to deal with existence and relations.

In light of the above, the discussion of God, in Chapter 13, by Jim Unah, does not fit this general trend, of acceding to the usual understanding of the relationship between God

and humanity, but does not antagonize it either. Thus, in Chapter 13, Jim Unah examines the hiatus about the existence of God in Western scholarship. His view is that a careful analysis would reveal that anthropomorphic, anthropocentric and ideological theism may be the problem, as it tends to make claims which transcend what the evidence supports. He uses the works of Parmenides, Aristotle, Sartre, Nietzsche, Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, and Carr to make the point that the challenge to theism has been a consequence of the self-stultifying claims that derive from the overreaching conclusions derived from the desire to immunize deity from blame. He suggests that what we need to do is recognize that ontological commitments validated by linguistic traditions make the denial of the existence of God unnecessary. The relevance of this to the African onto-genesis of deity become immediately obvious, as we see that Africans do not feel any need to debate the existence of God, as such effort would constitute a waste of time, even though Westerners, ignorant of reasons why no elaborate argumentations are devised may use this as evidence of no God! Even more significant is the form and tenor of values which would derive from this tradition of recognition of Deity; neither supernaturalist simpliciter, nor vacuously humanistic, but one holistically derived for the edification of all beings and life.

In Chapter 14, Thaddeus Metz's discussion of moderate communitarian as a foundation of ethics helps to provide a contrarian perspective on the popular notion that African societies value community over individual liberties. He charges Gyekye and Menkiti of not fully providing validating premises for the view that individuals should act in community affirming ways, even when such actions may not be pleasurable. In a very elaborate manner, he provides missing premises in three emendations of the Gyekye perspective, but finds that they all fall short of the job they are supposed to perform: "the correct ethic for human selves is one that ascribes equal weight to individual rights and communal duties". While one may doubt if Metz has succeeded in defeating the position of

Gyekye, one can definitely see how versions of analytic philosophy remains relevant in African philosophical context. Even when it rests on the dubious claim that an “is” cannot be used simpliciter to derive an “ought”, there is no doubt that its touted validity has been a major factor in the arsenal of one version of European tradition in ethics. Readers would definitely find the chapter useful, especially if they are concerned about how the fact, say, that I am the father of a day old baby, places on me any moral responsibility of care for the baby. Even more curious would the claim be that the use of depleted uranium in Iraq is the moral responsibility of every American who constitutes the constituency of the President who ordered such use of weapons of mass destruction which then affects the prospects of thousands of pregnancies and their viability. That these considerations are often supposed to be significant in defeating duties of humanity to each other remain serious enough, and should be given serious consideration in a collection that speaks to bioethics, because that is even further from humans.

It is hoped, therefore, that the essays found in this volume would vigorously engage the reader to reconsider and take seriously the is-ought relationship in moral discourse not only within the African context but in the global context, particularly as humanity is confronted with daring, complex and challenging moral issues that are essentially concerned with the problem of justification, validation or legitimization. To be sure, the volume does not in any way exhaust the major issues or salient points needed to be raised and discussed in this regard; it how turns the wheel of ethical/moral discourse in the twenty-first century to an important direction.

MORAL TRADITIONS AND MORAL REVOLUTION: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Segun GBADEGESIN

INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this essay is Kwame Anthony Appiah's *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*.⁵ In this fascinating book, Appiah looks at past efforts to stop immoral customs and practices, and argues that in all of the cases, appeal to reason wasn't enough to win the war against immorality and success was recorded only when the practices came into conflict with honor. This was the case with the Atlantic slave trade, dueling in Britain, and foot binding in China. For Appiah, while the reform efforts demonstrate the importance of honor in the eradication of those practices, ethics can benefit from the insights which point to a new direction in moral inquiry.

In what follows, I analyze the concepts of moral tradition and moral revolution, each of which also has its constituents: moral, tradition and revolution. Since tradition appears to be central, I start with an analysis of the term. Then I argue simply that a moral tradition is not self-justifying and certainly not just on account of its longevity. My major issue however is with the concept of moral revolution and its relationship with scientific revolution. I will argue that the analogy is a little misconstrued. The lesson from Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is not easily adaptable to an understanding of moral revolutions.

THE NOTION OF TRADITION

⁵ K. A. Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010).

The standard definition of a tradition is that it is a customary system of doing things that is unique to a group; a customary way of life. Following the Latin root of the term, i.e. *traditum*, sociologist Edward Shils defines tradition as “anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present.”⁶ The emphasis here is on “anything”, but it could also be “anyhow”; meaning that there is no restriction as to the nature of what is handed down or how it has come to be what it is before its being handed down. “The decisive criterion (of its traditionalism) is that having been created through human actions, through thought and imagination, it is handed down from one generation to the next.” Of course, being handed down does not entail being accepted. A tradition is a tradition only because it is accepted by the next generation, which also passes it on.

In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*⁷ Alasdair McIntyre identifies some elements of traditions including, among others, extending over time and locatable in a persistent historical narrative; embodiment in specific social contexts; i.e. they have particular spatial locations and even when traditions share similar traits, they do not therefore become one tradition; a fundamental interpretiveness in the sense that, while traditions may share some similarities, each is unique in its fundamental understanding of such shared goods; and an embodiment of “continuities of conflict” rather than static stability.

There are two major types of tradition: traditions of enquiry or thought and traditions of conduct, and while each can be identified separately in terms of its core focus as enquiry or conduct, they are united in the fact of their being both cultural practices as well as outcomes of those practices.

⁶ E. Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 12.

⁷ A. McIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

Tradition of Enquiry/thought: A tradition of thought or discourse is a cultural practice that includes within its group a family of practices which contribute to the advancement of a specific pattern of ideas within a branch of study. Thus, there is a utilitarian tradition within ethics; just as there is a social contract tradition within political philosophy. A tradition of enquiry or discourse is not isolated from the form of life which it explains, justifies, critiques, or defends. Indeed, the form of life gives rise to, or provides an impetus for the tradition of enquiry that makes it its focus.

There is a deep sense in which, even as intellectuals, we are the offspring of our traditions. One such tradition is democracy. We tend to idolize it without paying attention to some of its fundamental flaws and how it could be improved. Is winner takes all that eternally marginalizes the minority the best we can have? It is this kind of consideration that informed Alain Locke's observations in "Pluralism and Intellectual Democracy":

What intellectuals can do for the extension of the democratic way of life is to discipline our thinking critically into some sort of realistic world-mindedness. Broadening our cultural values and tempering our orthodoxies is of infinitely more service to enlarged democracy than direct praise and advocacy of democracy itself...The democratic mind needs clarifying for the better guidance of the democratic will.⁸

McIntyre suggests, in connection with the traditions of enquiry that he analyses, that in "each of them intellectual enquiry was or is part of the elaboration of a mode of social and moral life of which the intellectual enquiry itself was an integral part..."⁹ Take for instance, the social contract tradition of inquiry. David Gauthier, in a seminal paper many years ago suggests that the social contract tradition had a special affinity to the social and political tradition of the Western world; that it sought to capture the thought pattern that was recognizable in the manner that egoistic maximizers dealt with each other; and that in the

⁸ A. Locke, Pluralism and Intellectual Democracy, in Leonard Harris (Ed.), *The Philosophy of Alain Locke* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 63.

⁹ A. McIntyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality?

end, what saves the social relation that the theory sought to project was that a segment of the same society could not be adequately represented in its light. In other words, not every member of the Western world behaved as utility maximizers or as social contractors.¹⁰

Tradition of Conduct: A tradition of conduct refers to a habit of conduct; an enduring pattern of behavior that has become institutionalized among a people, e.g. gift giving; debt payment, etc. In any civilized society, there is a tradition of borrowing and paying back, a tradition of gift giving and gift exchanges with variations from culture to culture. There is a tradition of marriage, of rule-making and of punishment for rule violation. There is also a tradition of buying and selling, and of cooperative enterprises among a people.

Michael Oakeshott makes a useful distinction between two types of traditions of conduct: enterprise association and overarching institution. Enterprise Association refers to a group of people guided by a specific purpose or goal that is common to all. As they strive to achieve their common purpose they establish a tradition of behavior which then sets up the framework in which they carry out their aims: association of profit maximisers, universities, etc. Overarching Institution refers to the moral, legal, or political institution that procures the necessary conditions for enterprise associations to continue to exist and thrive. One such institution is morality or the moral life; another is the legal system. A moral tradition of conduct belongs to this category or class of tradition.¹¹

THE INSTITUTION OF MORALITY

Before we analyze moral tradition, it is important to discuss the constituents of the institution of morality. In general, the phenomena of morality include moral beliefs, moral

¹⁰ D. Gauthier, Social Contract as Ideology, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6.2 (1977): 130-164.

¹¹ See M. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (London & New York: Methuen, 1962).

rules, moral principles and moral problems. Moral beliefs are beliefs that people have about what state of affair is good or bad, desirable or undesirable. These are beliefs about values, which we derive from various sources, including family, friends, peer, school and religious institutions. They may change from time to time and vary from place to place. Moral beliefs are a function of experiences that people have and, in many cases, of the environment that they inhabit. For instance, the typical Yoruba belief in the desirability of having many children is a function of the belief that children are useful in an agricultural environment that is labor-intensive.¹² On the other hand, belief in the undesirability of needless pain is most likely a product of the observation of the negative attitude that human beings have to the experience of pain.

Moral rules are derived from moral beliefs; they are conducts, that is, guiding propositions based on the idea that since a certain state of affair (e.g. pain, suffering, and unhappiness) is undesirable, it is necessary to provide some codes of conduct for people to avoid those actions that promote such states of affairs. Hence, rules such as do not deceive a business partner, do not take an unfair advantage of the trust of a client; and (to promote desirable state of affairs) be as helpful as you can are derived from moral beliefs.

Moral principles are abstract propositions, which specify that a class of conduct is wrong or right. Since they cover many act-tokens, we can generate specific moral rules from them. Thus, “any action that causes unnecessary suffering is wrong” is a moral principle. From this principle, we can infer the wrongness of a particular act-token e.g. torture for the sake of torture is wrong. Then, a moral rule could be formulated to deal with the act of torture for the sake of torture: do not torture anyone for fun. Moral principles are products of dispassionate reflections on the nature of human beings and the context of their inter-personal

¹² See K. Abimbola, *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account*, Birmingham (U.K. Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006).

relationships. They are predicated on the conviction that in the context of such relationships, certain kinds of conduct are to be promoted and encouraged because they are right while others are to be discouraged because they are wrong. Granted that determining the right-making and wrong-making characteristics of these acts is the task that has not yielded a desirable unanimity on the part of reflective people, the fact remains that a fundamental description of morality as an institution is that it is predicated on this conviction.

Furthermore, there is no widespread objection to a few such principles: any act that causes harm to others just for its sake is wrong; it is right to help others when one is in a position to do so; any conduct that benefits one person, while harming another person is wrong unless there is an adequate reason that justifies it. These generalized and abstract statements can then be used to generate a number of specific statements, that is, rules, which can be used to guide specific behavior. For instance, do not lie to your friend for the sake of lying; help the visually impaired senior citizen across the street; avoid racial discrimination.

From the foregoing account of the moral institution, one may suggest that its purpose is the furtherance of a harmonious relationship within a society, the control and enhancement of its other institutions and individuals, the protection of its land and the individual members and, as a result of success in that area, the survival and flourishing of that society as an entity. If this is the case, all societies certainly have the incentive to develop a vibrant moral institution for the promotion of their communal existence and individual enhancement. They may adopt different strategies and/or develop different emphasis. For some, the moral institution may emerge through the instrumentality of the state. For others, religion and spirituality may be the catalyst that shapes and confirms morality.¹³

¹³ I develop this idea in “Origins of ethical thought in African religious traditions” in William Schweiker (ed.), *Blackwell’s Companion to Religious Ethics*. Blackwell (forthcoming)

MORAL TRADITION

One way to think of a moral tradition is to identify it as a customary institution of moral beliefs, moral rules, moral principles, moral judgments, from which moral problems and moral issues develop from time to time for individuals and the group respectively. Moral tradition in the sense of a moral life is a habit of affection and conduct as Oakeshott puts it. It involves no serious reflection: we generally behave in accordance with the tradition in which we were brought up.¹⁴ Surely, moral education is important even with this customary moral life: it is the way in which the tradition sustains itself and ensures its survival into the future. But moral education in this sense is not moral theorizing, and so moral theory is not a part of the moral tradition of conduct; it is implicated rather in the tradition of moral enquiry. With the kind of education that moral tradition embraces, individuals are empowered to act within the norms of the tradition without asking questions and without a shred of doubt about the rightness of their conduct. Of course, this kind of education also does not give individuals the ability to explain their “actions in abstract terms or to defend them as emanations of moral principles.”¹⁵ Rational morality makes possible the kind of individual critique of a moral tradition. Consider Socrates or Plato as embodiments of rational morality.

Oakeshott doesn't see moral tradition as a habit of affection as a failure because it is a form of morality which gives “remarkable stability to the moral life” of either an individual or society. It will not countenance large and sudden changes in the kinds of behavior it desiderates. Even when a few parts of a moral life in this form of morality collapse, it does not readily spread to the whole because the habits of conduct which compose the moral life “are never recognized as a system.”¹⁶ But if we pay close attention to Oakeshott's view of a

¹⁴ M. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p.63

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid, pp.63-64

habit of behavior which is never at rest (as prices in a free market), how do we understand the idea of moral revolution vis-à-vis a moral tradition?

Oakeshott's point is that there isn't much of moral self-criticism going on. The internal movement (never at rest) that characterizes the moral life of a tradition is not vigorous enough and is not based on reflection or on principle. But because of this, it is easy for this moral life as habit of conduct to degenerate into superstition and as such may be unable to withstand or resist a crisis situation that eventually ensues. This is one way moral revolution occurs.

A second form of moral life is derived from a self-conscious appeal to or focus on principles and ideals—the reflective application of a moral criterion. It starts with an identification of the ideals or principle in words; then a conscious defense of them; and third, a determination to translate them into action. While this form of moral life also depends on education, it is education as knowledge of ideals, rules, and principles. The role of principles and ideals is to enable the individual to constantly use them to critique behavior. Reflection is the key here. But this is what makes this form of moral life dangerous for individuals and as folly for society, according to Oakeshott because, marred by inflexibility, it may degenerate into superstition and idol worshipping.¹⁷

Still, neither the first nor the second can be successful by itself. Both morality of habit and morality of reflection are needed in varying proportions. Oakeshott argues that a mixture in which the habit of conduct is predominant can ensure a stable moral life with a reflective capacity which assures its continuity due to rational critique, while a mixture which privileges rational critique can stifle the moral life because reflection can get in the way of action.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid, 78-79

Here is a concise account of moral tradition provided by John Kekes, who acknowledges a debt to McIntyre and Oakeshott:

A moral tradition is the network of a certain sort of customary conduct that exists in a society. A society is an association of people; it has a history; most of its members are born into it; it occupies a more or less clearly defined geographical area; its members speak the same language; and they participate in common political, legal, and moral practices.¹⁹

It is tempting to think that a moral tradition is self-justifying simply because it is a moral tradition. We can maintain reasonably that individuals stand to benefit for the existence of a moral tradition that connects them with their folks; that there is an intrinsic value to having a moral tradition. Indeed, we may go further to claim that a moral tradition is an indispensable institution of any society because of the external and internal goods that are associated with it. This of course does not guarantee that particular moral traditions will provide these goods or worse not militate against them. Where a moral tradition negates the possibilities of fulfilling human life for its members, then it lacks the basis for a justifiable existence, and a critique and repudiation of the tradition is justified.

The question then is what is the value of moral traditions? The legitimacy of this question is not in doubt. First, because of their obvious restrictions on individual human behavior, moral traditions must have and be seen to have some value to be justified even from a moral perspective. Second, in the light of the diversity of moral traditions and the potential conflicts between those traditions, the question of the value of moral traditions is an urgent one. What good are they if they lead to violent conflicts?

John Kekes suggests that the “justification of a moral tradition must include that it improves its participants’ chances of living good lives.”²⁰ From this we can assume that the

¹⁹ J. Kekes, Moral Tradition, *Philosophical Investigations*, 8.4 (1985): 255.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 5

value of a moral tradition is that it “improves the participants’ chances of living good lives”. But what is a good life? How is an adequate answer to this question to be determined? If a moral tradition determines what a good life is, can any form of life fail to be a good one under its watch? This is an especially important issue when we also pay attention to Kekes’ further view that “good lives require balancing the claims of moral tradition and individuality”, noting that “if things go well, both make essential and equally important contributions to good lives.”²¹ If a moral tradition is, by definition (rather than by practice) morally sound, then this makes a lot of sense. But this leads back to the question of what a moral tradition, really is. We can make sense of Kekes’ position in the following way. The conventions of the moral tradition of a society are important in determining what counts as good lives. Whatever those conventions are, however, there is a need to maintain a balance between moral tradition and individuality. But the balance is successfully maintained if the traditional guidance actually fosters good lives.

The fact of a diversity of moral traditions raises its own challenge concerning the attribution of value to moral traditions as such for obvious reasons that moral traditions run into conflict and cause violent interactions. In a world of isolated traditions, this won’t matter much. But we passed that world several millennia ago, and the resulting voluntary and involuntary globalization of practices leaves us with the reality of conflict without a corresponding global moral tradition to mediate. This in itself wouldn’t prove that a particular moral tradition is valueless. But it underscores the challenge of a multiplicity of moral traditions.

Moral critique of a moral tradition can come from within or without its borders. From within its borders, such a critique presupposes the existence of alternative views about

²¹ Ibid

conditions necessary for the flourishing of members. The various cases that Antony Appiah cites in his seminal book, including foot-binding, slavery, dueling, etc. are cases that negate the flourishing of human beings. Moral critique is itself a first stage of moral revolution.

MORAL REVOLUTION

But what really is a moral revolution and how analogous is it to, say, a scientific revolution? This question is relevant because Appiah opens his book with reference to Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, scholars of the 17th century Scientific Revolutions. The reference is not totally out of place if paying attention to one revolution provides an insight into elements of the other. But there are disanalogies.

Scientific revolution is pursuant to or the outcome of a crisis in thought, leading to a shift in paradigm. There is always a world out there that science seeks or attempts to capture. There are thoughts about the various attempts and outcomes of such attempts of science. For the traditional thought about the matter, there is a temporal succession of theories which follow earlier theories and are consistent with them. For Kuhn, however, changes occur in science by leaps and bounds to new paradigms and new ways of seeing the world. What is important to note here is that both of these views are views about *theoretical* attempts to capture reality. That reality is not an illusion even if it turns out that, as Kuhn alleges, the traditional views of science don't capture the path that theories of science follow.

To put it in another way, let me use the language of Appiah to describe the disanalogy that I have in mind here. According to Appiah, "historians and philosophers have discovered a great deal *about science* through the careful study of *scientific revolutions*."²² Now what

²² K. A. Appiah, *The Honor Code*, p. xi.

Appiah wants to use this insight of science to understand is something about morality. And so his question is “what can we learn about morality by exploring moral revolutions?”

The disanalogy is obvious when rendered in this way. First, reference to morality here is ambiguous between morality as theory, or principle, and morality as practice. I think Appiah has morality as practice in mind because he goes on to discuss dueling, foot-binding, slavery, and honor killing. Second, reference to moral revolution is also ambiguous between revolution in thought about morals and revolution in moral practice. Again, a careful reading of Appiah suggests that he has the latter in mind.

The issue is simple. Even though we may learn something about practical moral revolution from a focus on moral theorizing,²³ there is no guarantee of a one-to-one relationship between the two. Even if we concede the obviously trite observation of Appiah that “at the end of the moral revolution as at the end of a scientific revolution, things look new”²⁴; it seems clear that different categories of things “look new” in each case. In the case of scientific revolution, it is our thinking that looks new; in the case of moral revolution, it is our practice that appears new. When there occurs moral change, the practice of morality changes. Moral reality—what counts as moral or immoral behavior—changes. And this moral change is effected through the instrumentality of a moral revolutionary, a role model, or a combination of factors, including those that Appiah explores. On the other hand, when scientific change is effected, the world of science that changes is the theoretical world. The world of reality that science attempts to capture doesn’t change. Rather it is the approach of the scientist to that world that changes.

²³ Cf. John Locke and the American Revolution or Rousseau and the French Revolution

²⁴ K. A. Appiah, *The Honor Code*, p. xi.

Some years ago, this issue was the focus of a debate between Kathryn Parsons and David Palmer and Morton Schagrin. In her “Nietzsche and Moral Change”, Parson argues that Nietzsche was a moral revolutionary who went beyond a focus on moral reform. The latter, according to Parson, focuses on bringing “our activities into conformity with our principles, as change to dispel injustice, as change to alleviate suffering.”²⁵ But there is another form of moral change, which Nietzsche captures, and that is moral revolution:

Moral revolution has not to do with making our principles consistent, not to do with greater application of what we *now* conceive as justice. That is the task of moral reform, because its aim is the preservation of values. But the aim of moral revolution is the creation of values.²⁶

So Parson views Nietzsche’s ethics as being about moral revolution, the creation of values, while traditional ethics is about preservation of values. And just as Kuhn argues that traditional views on science misconstrue both scientific revolution and “normal science”, so Parson argues that traditional views in ethics cannot account for the behavior of the moral revolutionary as moral.”

Suppose we accept the last claim of Parsons: traditional ethics cannot account for the behavior of the moral revolutionary as moral. What does this say about the analogy with traditional views on science? I argue that it doesn’t say much because, again, the analogy is misconstrued. Whatever traditional view on science fails to understand about scientific revolution bears no resemblance to what traditional ethics fails to understand about the moral revolutionary. One is about theory, the other is about practice.

As Palmer and Schagrin also argue, for

a moral revolution to succeed, all that is required is effort and the exercise of power. When the effective agent from a single tyrant to a total society creates the new social world, the revolution succeeds. The failure of a moral

²⁵ K. Parsons, Nietzsche and Moral Change in R. C. Solomon (Ed.) *Nietzsche* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), p.168.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.169.

revolution is a failure of will. But the failure of a scientific revolution is a failure of thought”.²⁷

The authors go on to suggest that “scientific revolutions are preceded by a crisis period.” And such a crisis in science may occur when there is observed an “unexplained departure from expected regularities.”²⁸ Usually it is in the context of normal science that such “crisis-producing observations” occur and what they do is trigger “revolution” in thought. Using Kuhnian terminology, the authors aver that “a crisis in science occurs when a puzzle comes to be seen as a problem.”²⁹

On the other hand, however, a moral crisis is not provoked by the observation of an “unexplained departure from expected regularities.” Indeed, it is dissatisfaction with expected regularities (in conduct and attitude) that triggers a moral crisis when a moral revolutionary dissatisfied with the status quo practices develops a new moral paradigm and manages to covert others to it: “The adherents of the older morality are never aware of the “problems” until the moral revolutionary provokes the discontent. And this discontent can only be felt by one who has the conception of a not yet existent, alternative, social order.”³⁰

Scientific revolutions also differ from moral revolutions in the sense that the former is an outcome of the existence of different scientific communities with differing approaches, methods, training with different historical and professional connections. There are no such moral communities (except as utilitarians, Kantians, etc.) But this latter cannot trigger a revolution, except in an indirect way. Furthermore, different scientific communities can appeal to “common transcending values” (simplicity, precision, etc.) which can be accessed

²⁷ D. Palmer, and M. Schagrin, *Moral Revolutions, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 39.2 (1978), p. 265.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid pp.265-266

³⁰ Ibid, p.266

in reconciling or at least tempering their differences. Palmer and Schagrin argue that no such transcending values exist between moral communities.

Is there a moral community that has some affinity to a scientific community? We may talk of moral traditions in the sense discussed above as moral communities, and as such we can identify such moral communities among various cultural and ethnic groups. Granted, not all within such communities see the world from the same lenses. We may, for instance, speak of Yoruba, Igbo, Akan, Bantu, Fulani, Hausa, Edo, Ijaw, Efik, or Gwari traditions as harboring varieties of diverse worldviews. Yet, in almost all cases, there are more commonalities within each of these than between them and other traditions. It is also true that within these traditions, many of the members are oblivious of any problem with their tradition until one or a group of them or an external agent nudges them. Focusing on these types of communities, we may say that moral revolutions occur and are almost always progressive, as Appiah suggests.

In such communities or traditions, positive morality is the customary morality of the group. We acquire the moral outlook of our cultures. Traditions create us as Marcus Singer states in *The Ideal of a Rational Morality*.³¹ When we talk of morality as an institution, we mean this tradition of positive morality. Because it is customary, it can be unbending and cruel. But as social life becomes complex, discontent with the requirements of positive morality ensues. Through various avenues, reason, emotion, interaction with others, we engage tradition and its requirement in discourse. Sometimes changes occur this way and may be piecemeal or fundamental. When moral education is effective, it is not sheepish imitation but it involves active participation in the social life of the tradition. By itself it is capable of triggering moral reform if not moral revolution.

³¹ Marcus Singer, *The Ideal of a Rational Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.8

It is also the case that moral reforms happen because old traditions and practices turn out to be unfavorable to the wielders of social and political power. This is not quite a question of honor but an issue of a negative impact that a practice has on the powerful. Two cases—one mythical, and one historical—can be referenced in the Yoruba tradition.

Odu-Ifa is the compendium of Ifa divination poetry and has a record of the mythical case of the eradication of human sacrifice in Yorubaland.³² There used to be a practice of cleansing the land and placating the gods at times of crises and widespread chaos occasioned by famine, plague, war, and death with the sacrifice of non-native individuals captured outside the land for this specific purpose. It had happened over and over again until the capture of an individual who turned out to be a lost son of the land, specifically, the son of the chief divination priest. After his capture, the prospective sacrificial lamb asked and was permitted to sing a song. The song he chose traced the story of his ancestry which resonated with his captors including his father who was in attendance to perform the final rites. On hearing the song, the audience asked the man to tell them his story, which confirmed his paternity. The king there and then prohibited the sacrifice of human beings throughout his domain.³³

The historical case is more direct in its appeal to self-interest. It was the tradition of the Oyo Kingdom that the crown prince of Oyo must die with Alafin, his father. The excuse for this practice is that the son must have enjoyed enormous power and fame while his father is on the throne and so cannot continue after his father. It is also to checkmate the tendency toward patricide. If the son will not outlive his father, then there is no use killing his father to facilitate his own succession to the throne. This was the case until AlafinAole decided that he

³² See W. Abimbola, *Ifa Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yoruba Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora* (Roxbury, Massachusetts: Aim Books, 1997).

³³ See Lucas, J. Olumide, *The Religion of the Yorubas* (Lagos: C. M. S. Bookshop, 1948)

would like his son to succeed him and therefore decreed that his son will not die with him. Of course, this was not taken lightly by the King's cabinet who questioned the authority of the king to flout tradition. It led to the Ijaiye war, one of the brutal wars of the Oyo kingdom. Of course, the king prevailed, and the practice ended.³⁴

CONCLUSION

Normative Ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with the question of rightness or wrongness of actions and policies and the goodness or badness of character or states of affairs. There are traditional ways of going about this task, including analysis of concepts, proposal of rules and principles for the guidance of conduct, and evaluation of conduct by reference to such rules and principles. There are also non-traditional ways of practicing ethics, including the Nietzschean approach which queries traditional ethics itself as arid and boring. What Appiah tries to do in *The Honor Code* is a hybrid of both traditional and non-traditional approaches. On the one hand, Appiah is apparently concerned about the prevalence of immoral and inhuman practices in the name of honor and he chose to bring them to the light of philosophical scrutiny. But rather than evaluate those practices by reference to principles and rules which have been in the books of moral philosophers since time immemorial, Appiah chooses to ask the question: how do such practices get changed and moral revolutions happen?

“Is this still moral philosophy?” some traditionalists would ask. If the evaluation of conduct through the instrumentality of principles and rules, or the analysis of ethical concepts exhausts the preferred methods of moral philosophy, then it is not. But if Lucius Outlaw is right, and there is no eternal timelessness to what defines philosophy, then there is also no

³⁴ See S. Gbadegesin, *African Philosophy: Traditional Yoruba Philosophy and Contemporary African Realities* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

eternal timelessness to ethics and the discourse it provokes. We are enriched by Appiah's insights into the question of honor code, which as he admits, is not necessarily a moral code.

THE UNIVERSALITY OF MORALITY – MYTH OR REALITY

Sandra A. McCALLA

INTRODUCTION

There has always been a great deal of speculation regarding where moral values come from and what these values are consisted in. In this contemporary Western dominated individualistic world where the self is valued beyond the factors which make the self come into being, one has to ponder as to whether or not the nature of morality has changed to the specificity of this group or that society? In contemporary society there seems to be some pessimism as it relates to the possibility of a universal morality. If it is true that this pessimism does exist and individuals now feel the need to go beyond once acceptable morality to create new moralities for themselves it begs the question as to what transpired to bring about this change. Do cultures act based on some set of universal rules or do they always do things differently based on traditions, beliefs and attitudes?

It will be argued that universal morality never existed and cannot exist now, especially in a world that constantly changes at all levels and in all areas. Human beings are different in the way they see, interact with and comprehend the world. These differences may be the proof that universal morality does not exist or may be just a myth. If universal morality exists how can cultural diversity and integrity be respected? When it comes to matters of moral conduct there may be no fixed truths but rather, all may be relative.

The above questions will be answered by exploring philosophical theories such as cultural relativism and universalism. In order to highlight possible tenets of these theories, discussions will be focused around the ideologies of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche rejected the idea of universal morality and maintains that moral codes arise from peoples social origins. He explored the issue of morality further by discussing the tenets of

‘slave’ and ‘master’ morality. If Nietzsche’s views hold true that, “the point of morality is to enable individuals to sublimate and control their passions in order to emphasize the creativity inherent in their beings”³⁵, it may rightfully lead one to question the universality of morality. In order to offer a cohesive and comprehensive review of the main issue of morality, it is the intention to explore Nietzsche and Immanuel Kant’s views. The idea that globalization and other social factors may lead to survival moral values will also be explored. This is in the hope of presenting a more comprehensive framework of relative morality. This is integral as we seek to explore the major reasons relativism may be more accepted over universal morals in this global arena.

ETHICS AND MORALITY

If the ‘wicked’ prosper while the ‘good’ suffer, some may ask why be moral? This is a question about ethics. Although some authors have used the concept of ethics and morality interchangeably, we would like to acknowledge the difference between both terms. Ethical values may be classified as positive or negative, good or bad and refers to various likes, dislikes, interests, pleasures, needs, aversions, moral obligations as well as desires. The problem with ethical value is that it is difficult to measure, as the process that generates same is not really known. Ethics may also speak to a particular duty or an obligation.

Ethics seem to pertain to the individual character of a person or persons, whereas morality seems to point to the relationships between human beings. According to Foucault,

ethics involves an investigation not only of one’s relationship to moral codes but a tracing of those standards or norms that shape one’s actions and behaviour. This tracing provides information from which we can refuse uninformed or passive acceptance of what is “given to us as universal, necessary and obligatory.”³⁶

³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*. A New Translation by Douglas Smith. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). 12

³⁶Michel Foucault, Quoted in, Maureen Ford, “A New Sport Ethics: Taking Konig Seriously.” In, Debra Shogan. *Sport Ethics in Context*. (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2007) 126

This would imply that, through the information that persons are given over the years, along with their own personal views, they can make informed decisions in relation to the actions they choose to perform. Individuals will not feel forced to accept morals that are just thrust on them, they will feel that they have contributed to the process. We operate in an individualistic culture where blind acceptance of how one ought to act may be considered a contradiction with the individualistic ideals.

Morality on the other hand, is presumed to provide us with a guide on how to live. It is a branch of Philosophy that deals basically with humans and how they relate to other beings, both human and non-human. It deals with how humans treat other beings to promote mutual welfare, growth, creativity and meaning in a striving for what is good over what is bad and what is right over what is wrong.³⁷ It is believed that a moral person, by her very character, should know the actions that are right and act accordingly. Any action contrary to this would be considered as immoral. The word moral is said to have been derived from “the Latin *mos*, which refers to an individual’s actual custom or manners.”³⁸ It is argued that

what makes something a moral question (in the wide sense) remains a matter of some difference of opinion. The sphere of the moral can be marked off in different ways. One could attempt to distinguish moral from immoral issues by saying that if you believe an act is wrong, you are committed to believing that someone else who thinks that the same act is right not only differs from you but is mistaken.³⁹

The problem with this point though is that, sometimes as individuals, we may be classified by another individual or a group as being immoral simply because we act in a way that is contrary to those individuals or group beliefs. It may however not be the case that we are immoral, as the widely held beliefs and actions of those other groups may rest on a false

³⁷ Jacques Thiroux, *Ethics Theory and Practice 2nd Edition* USA: Glencoe Publishing Co. Inc. 1980 pg 08

³⁸ Angela Lumpkin, Sharon Kay Stoll and Jennifer M. Beller. *Sport Ethics Application for Fair play. Third Edition.* (USA: McGraw Hill Companies, 2003) 4

³⁹ John Hospers, *Human Conduct Problems of Ethics. 2nd Edition.* (USA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1982) 3

premise that is ignored. Or, there may be an already preconceived notion that a group or a person is unethical or immoral simply because they are different. Hence, anyone within this group may already be cast aside as being immoral.

Morality usually encompasses all aspects of life where moral questions can arise. Questions such as, should I cheat when I play soccer to always secure a win? How ought I to respond if my teammate decides to persuade me to use drugs? Etc. Morality is seen, by authors such as Beauchamp and Frankena, as a social institution with a code of learnable rules. Morality is then grounded in the practical affairs of social life.⁴⁰ Although morality as a social institution may serve to guide individual conduct, Frankena was quick to point out that, this does not necessarily mean that people merely act according to social norms and standards. For him, “society’s moral system does indicate what is forbidden and what is permitted in many areas.”⁴¹ These moral codes or systems exist within political as well as social organizations and are considered as guides on how to operate. It is expected that each member of these organizations should comply with those moral guidelines.

It has been argued that ‘ethical judgements contain moral components as related to conduct or values, yet morals and ethics can differ. Michel Foucault was one author who sought to make a distinction between ethics and morality. For him, “relation of one’s conduct to rules qualify as moral but not ethical conduct. Moralities are ethical only when they emphasize the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the Code.”⁴² Rather than conformity to rules, the law, or standards, the emphasis in ethics is on the relationship of the self to the code and on the methods and techniques through which this relationship is worked out.

⁴⁰Joy T. DeSensi, And Danny Rosenberg. *Ethics and Morality in Sport Management*. (USA: Fitness Information Technology Inc., 2003) 30

⁴¹ Joy T. DeSensi, And Danny Rosenberg. *Ethics and Morality* , 30

⁴² Michel Foucault, 126

Foucault outlined four ways in which someone might embrace or reject a code each of which is related to aspects of the constitution of the self as a moral subject.

First, one must ask what part of one's behaviour is concerned with moral conduct. Second, one must ask about the source of moral obligations. Is the source external or is it a response to some internal desire? Third, one must ask how one can change in order to become an ethical subject. The final inquiry is how to question what kind of being one aspires to be when one behaves in a moral way."⁴³

The moral being then faces ethical questions and how one responds to these questions may set the tone to how one is viewed as a moral subject. These questions can be directed at any rules, codes, or standards that shape action or behaviour. As moral agents, it may then be argued that our morality may be tested depending on the level of ethical problems that we are faced with. How we respond to these tests are integral to the kind of person society frames us to be. Thus, an individual who is caught cheating on an exam or who may be directly involved in the lottery scam or extortion may be classified as immoral.

RELATIVISM VS UNIVERSALISM

There are philosophers who have argued that morality is always cultural and or subjective; while there are others who believe that morality is always objective and universal. We find then that, theories on morality fall within two major groups: relativism and universalism. A relativist may hold that the rules of right conduct vary with human conventions, or with social traditions, or with political, psychological, economic, or biological needs.⁴⁴ The underlined view for relativists is that moral codes differ in relation to time, space, individual while universalists argue that there is one universal code that holds for and govern everyone and every-time irrespective of cultures, traditions, time etc.

⁴³ Foucault. Quoted in Maureen Ford *A new Sport Ethics: Taking Konig Seriously*. In, Debra Shogan. *Sport Ethics in Context*. (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2007) 126

⁴⁴ Raziel Abelson, and Marie-Louise Friquegnon. [Eds.] *Ethics for Modern Life 4th Edition*. (New York: St.Martin's Press, 1991) 07

There are however different kinds of relativism. Cultural relativism in general states firstly that,

different cultures have different beliefs about what constitutes morally right and wrong behaviour. This assumption is essentially descriptive in nature because it makes no normative judgement about either the belief systems of cultures or the behaviour of people in those cultures.⁴⁵

Secondly, the theory states that, “we should not morally evaluate the behaviour of people in cultures other than our own.”⁴⁶ Morally evaluating the behaviour of persons in a foreign culture may pose problems as persons may do so based on preconceived biases of that culture since moral principles may be different for every culture. The two above mentioned claims are said to be different but one may argue that to move from the first to the second is to move to the theory of moral relativism.

Moral relativism is said to be a normative thesis because it asserts that “one should not make moral judgements about the behaviour of people who live in cultures other than their own.”⁴⁷ Moral relativists may be right in this regard, it is difficult for one to move outside of one culture to adequately judge another without knowing the importance and significance of their way of life. If one should practice this, it would mean that there would be times when all cultures may be scrutinized as immoral since all cultures may have practices unique to them that are not carried out in another culture. For moral relativists then,

...we cannot step outside our moral world, which is only one among others, and our judgement of those inhabiting other such worlds can therefore have no special claim on them and can only appear to them as ethnocentrism or moral imperialism on our path or both.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Herman T. Tavani, *Ethics and technology: Controversies, Questions and Strategies for Ethical Computing*. (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2011) 50

⁴⁶ Herman T. Tavani, *Ethics and Technology*. 50

⁴⁷ Herman T. Tavani, *Ethics and Technology* 50

⁴⁸ Steven Lukes, *Moral Relativism*. (London: Profile books, 2008) x

Each of the above versions of relativism holds that, there are no objective moral values, and no basic moral demands that are binding on all moral agents. One may argue that although what is right or wrong may be determined by a particular culture this does not mean that the standards used to make these judgements are relative as well. Cultural relativists need to also be cognizant that within each culture there are subcultures, and there may be several practices in a subculture that members of that general culture deem as inappropriate. A subculture may refer to a distinctive group within a greater culture that possesses its own cultural values, behavioural patterns, etc., enough to distinguish it from the dominant culture.

This distinction provides them with a specific sense of identity. Example of sub-cultural groups include gang members, drug users, students etc. Members of a sub-culture identify one another in a number of ways, including generating styles, outlooks on life, and priorities in life, mannerism, clothing and language.”⁴⁹

Do we accept all of these practices since we are also a part of that culture? No, we do not, so a culture should not be stigmatized as being better or worse, good or bad, immoral or moral simply because individuals within that culture decide to deviate from the norms that are set by these groups.

Moral universalism on the other hand, [also called moral objectivism or universal morality] can be defined as a family of doctrines all sharing at least the idea that, “there is or must be some permanent, a-historical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality.”⁵⁰ From this it follows that, objectivism claims that moral validity constitutes a pre-given standard of truth which can only be discovered, not constructed by rational investigation. Moral actions do possess objective properties which

⁴⁹Tim Delaney, and Tim Madigan. *The Sociology of Sports: An Introduction*. (Jefferson, N.N. McFarland & Company, 2009) 63

⁵⁰ Claudio Corradetti, *Relativism and human rights: a theory of pluralistic universalism*. (Dordrecht): Springer, 2009. 47

define the limits of what is to count as properly moral.⁵¹ The individual would have little or no say in the formulation of objective or universal morality.

The idea of universal morality is to establish a finite set of concepts that are recognized by all human beings as morally good. Universality does not mean the imposition of one way of being on all. It may mean inclusive, shared, global, a way of being or of seeing things. Two fundamental types of universalism can be distinguished in ethics. The first is universality of subjects. This means that, “all moral subjects have the same moral; or more precisely: for all moral subjects exactly one moral holds [or is justified] in such a way that [within certain boundaries] the same objects for them always have the same moral desirability.”⁵² The second is universality of beneficiaries. This means that, “all potential beneficiaries of a moral are treated equally. More precisely: if the same states of affairs are fulfilled for two beneficiaries and those states of affairs satisfy certain conditions then these states of affairs have the same moral desirability.”⁵³ It is also argued that, some morals may be universal with respect to subjects but not with respect to beneficiaries, according to these morals; the life of slaves could have less desirability than that of freemen, but this would have to be rationally acceptable for the freemen as well as for the slaves.”⁵⁴

This is a view we do not support as it places morality in the hands of those who hold power, implying that the morality of these individuals are superior to all others. The nature of morality would be contrary to this as it seeks to initiate good and right actions in respect of persons. But either relativism or universalism may involve different general assumptions and may support different moral principles. An absolutist for example, may argue for the invariant character of particular rules of conduct on the grounds that they are divine

⁵¹ Claudio Corradetti, *Relativism and human rights*, 47

⁵² Christopher Lumer, *The Greenhouse: a welfare assessment and some morals*. (Lanham ,Md., University Press of America, 2002) 92

⁵³ Christopher Lumer, 92

⁵⁴ Christopher Lumer, 92

commands, or that they are laws of nature, or that they are deducible from the concept of reason, or that they are intuitively self-evident. Immanuel Kant supported one version of universalism which will be explored in greater detail. Nietzsche's meta-ethical views on morality will also be examined in order to create a balance in the analysis of both universalism and relativism.

IMMANUEL KANT'S VIEWS

In contrast to relativistic views on morality, Kant maintains that we can expect people to follow the same moral rules whatever their cultural backgrounds and personal needs. The single condition that qualifies a rule of conduct as a moral law is that, it be logically possible to want every rational being to follow it under any condition.⁵⁵ In this way, Kant makes logical consistency the single standard of what is morally right. In doing this, he might have undertaken to develop a moral theory along the lines of his theory of knowledge, by demonstrating that certain practical principles are embedded in the structure of human nature and hence conditionally a priori. He really admits that the mind might have been created with different forms of sensibility, and even perhaps with different categories of thought. But he utterly repudiates the suggestion that our moral judgements might be similarly conditioned upon human nature.

Morality then cannot be based on our natural states and inclinations in Kant's views.⁵⁶ What can be derived from this is that, in some way, Kant gives human beings little credit for the moral values that he or she holds. We say this because his views seem to imply that experiences should be separate and apart from morality. This cannot be the case as individuals may develop and or reject certain moral principles through experiences. We believe, unlike Kant, that it is through socialization and experiences that individuals become

⁵⁵ Immanuel. Kant, *Kant's Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott. (USA: Arc Manor LLC, 2008) 14

⁵⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*. 12

aware of how to act when faced with particular circumstances. Due to the nature of these circumstances, morality may very well be based on inclinations. Kant believes that actions could not be based on experience since actions should be viewed as good or bad in and of itself. This led to his views on the 'good will'.

With his conception of 'goodwill', Kant sought to prove that a rational will must have the obligation to adopt the highest moral law as its principle of action. He states,

...nothing in the world-indeed nothing even beyond the world-can possibly be conceived which could be called good without a good will. Intelligence, wit, judgment, and the other talents of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, resoluteness, and perseverance as qualities of temperament, are doubtless in many respects good and desirable. But they can become extremely bad and harmful if the will, which is to make use of these gifts of nature and which in its special constitution is called character, is not good. A right action is not necessarily a good action. The good will is not good because of what it affects or accomplishes or because of its adequacy to achieve some proposed end; it is good only because of its willing i.e. it is good of itself.⁵⁷

What we find is that, this 'good will' cannot be anything but universal in its operation. It is universal because it is geared to one prescribed end. It may be difficult to see how this notion of a 'goodwill' will work effectively in explaining moral actions since these actions are carried out by individuals who may act based on inclinations. This is especially difficult since the 'good will' is linked to character. Kant acknowledges that a character may be bad, so likewise may be a will that is desired from such character. One cannot expect a goodwill that is derived from a subjective individual character to be objective and universal, especially since this comes directly from the individual and since human beings may also desire different things. These desires may be good or bad depending on what is desired and how these desires are achieved. Kant correctly argued that a right action is not necessary a good action. However, we do not believe that a right action ought to achieve a particular end in order to be good since there may be different routes through which goodness may be attained.

⁵⁷ Ed. L. Miller, *Questions that Matter. An Invitation to Philosophy 4th Edition*. (USA: The McGraw Hill Companies, Inc. 1996) 477

We find that, this ‘good will’ as outlined, is considered the ultimate if compared to all goods. It is to be esteemed incomparably higher than anything which could be brought about by it in favour of any inclination or even of the sum total of all inclinations. This will, must also not be the sole and complete good but the highest good and the condition of all others, even of the desire for happiness.⁵⁸ It is not farfetched to place goods in hierarchies but we believe these would be placed these ways in respect to special inclinations, not universally as Kant imagined. It may even be so placed based on happiness. Since it is the individual that does the willing, it will be a struggle to place a ‘goodwill’ that is not as important over and above other wills. What we would like to highlight here is that, Kant’s conception of goodwill can be accomplished only if the individual sees it as priority. This however may not be displayed in all moral actions as individuals may not see a ‘good will’ as a prescribed duty. They may perform a good deed simply because they can. Because of this, moral actions may not be prioritized the way Kant envisioned them to be. Kant’s first proposition that ‘goodwill’ should always be based on duty may not be practical in all instances.

His second proposition is:

An action performed from duty does not have its moral worth in the purpose which is to be achieved through it but in the maxim by which it is determined. Its moral value, therefore, does not depend on the realization of the object of the action but merely on the principle of volition by which the action is done without any regard to the objects of the faculty of desire.⁵⁹

Kant implies then, that if the action is not done from duty, although that action may be right and good, it cannot be considered as moral. This leaves much to be desired and as a result we believe that Kant’s conception of duty is used rather loosely which may lead one to question if a ‘goodwill’ can even be attained based on the specific conditions that Kant places on it.

We believe that Kant’s conception of the ‘goodwill’ may eliminate too many things that can

⁵⁸Immanuel Kant, Trans. Lewis Whitebeck with essays edited by Robert Paul Wolff. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. (USA: The Boss Merrill Company, Inc 1969.) 11-12

⁵⁹ Kant, Immanuel, Trans. Lewis Whitebeck . 19

be considered as good, based on the notion that these should be willed for their own sake and not in relation to other goods. We can find many goods that are willed in relation to other goods and we do not see a reason to eliminate those goods. A man may save someone who is drowning simply because he loves to swim but not because he feels it is his duty to save that individual. 'Goodwill' may then be questioned because it is not based on a duty which individuals may not be willing to accept. Whether the act is performed out of duty or inclination, a moral act was done and should be given due consideration. The concept of duty may itself also be problematic as one may not readily know if the moral action she is about to perform is one that is done solely from duty.

Kant's above mentioned views also seek to imply that an individual who acts based on duty should not think about the consequences of her actions. Kant based his theory on logic and pure reason, but how logical is it to ignore consequences of our actions. Since we believe that individuals act based on situations and inclinations, thinking of the consequences of actions may be beneficial in order to make the moral decision. If one is not a swimmer, one tries to get help for the person who is drowning because the consequences for doing so may be better than to watch him drown. Focusing on consequences of actions before acting do not equate to immorality, refusing to conduct moral actions do. Kant will tell us however that, a focus on the consequences of an action does not lead to a moral action. But, what is the rightness or wrongness of racial discrimination or women's rights for example if we ignore the consequences? There are many instances where consequences will inform the actions. Our diverse cultures may be a main reason why we need to think about consequences of actions as cultures see and do things differently.

It is from the above mentioned views on duty that Kant formulated the Categorical Imperative. With this Imperative he asks one to, "act only according to that maxim by which

you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”⁶⁰ This, in Kant’s view, may be one way of reducing immorality as individuals would operate based on a preconceived notion of what is morally right for everyone. That is, when you are about to do something, ask yourself whether you can will that everyone else act in the same way. If the answer is yes, then you may be assured that you are acting out of duty or with a good will.

One can argue however that, when we think of a particular action it may be difficult for us to say whether it is universal for everyone everywhere. We believe that relativism reduces this difficulty and places morality in a framework in which all individuals and cultures should be able to understand. We are not saying here, that relativism does not have its problems since a particular culture or individual may hold on to moral value that may be negative outside that culture. We believe however that a negative relative individual or cultural moral value is easier to eliminate than a universal one. Some may believe that universal morality is always right since everyone accepts it, but If everyone believes universally that euthanasia is right, and a new culture is later formed, it does not mean that this culture will now accept that universal belief since that universal acceptance may have been incorrect. Cultures and individuals should then be at liberty to analyze, assess and formulate the moral values that they accept. Kant’s asks us to follow this Categorical Imperative which he distinguished from a Hypothetical Imperative.

An “Imperative” is really a command. As a command, the Categorical Imperative addresses and constrains our will, which it recognizes might not gladly pursue what it ought. Kant argues that,

all imperatives are either hypothetical or categorical. A hypothetical imperative would command you to do ‘X’ if you wanted Y [notice the hypothetical form of the statement, “if ... then”]. But a categorical Imperative would command you to do ‘X’ inasmuch as ‘X’ is intrinsically right, that is, right in and of itself.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ed. L. Miller, 479

⁶¹ Ed. L. Miller, 480

Individuals should seek to operate based on the categorical imperative as this action is based on what is right period. This begs the question as to what makes a moral act right in and of itself. Suffering through irreversible pain may be more inhumane than pulling the plug and let die. If this is the case then it may be difficult to measure a moral act as being right in and of itself since the act of euthanasia may itself be considered as wrong. Kant's categorical imperative did not leave room for individual assessment since moral rules are set. One can argue that, the unconditional ought [you ought to do 'X 'period] is too formalistic. It is formalistic because we have to act in a particular constraint which leaves no room for us to change our decisions. There are times when this is not only recommended but necessary as new information becomes available. It makes no sense having freedom of the will if we are not at liberty to use it.

A Hypothetical Imperative is

conditional on [if] or subject to things, circumstances, goals and desires; and these, of course, change all the time, are relative to the individual, and so on. But a categorical imperative is unconditional [no ifs] and independent of any things, circumstances, goals or desires. It is for this reason that only a categorical imperative can be a universal and binding law. That is, a moral law, valid for all rational beings at all times.⁶²

Kant is implying here that, change, goals, desires and aspirations may all be bad. It may be argued however, that it may be during this change or desire for something else than the norm, that persons may begin to understand, accept and perform moral actions that may not only benefit them, but society in general. It would then be dependent on what those changes, goals, desires and aspirations are, since changes and desires are not always associated with wrongness, badness and evil. Although we disagree with certain aspects of Kant's theory, we will acknowledge that Kant's views make logical sense to some scholars.

Lewis Whitebeck argues, for example, that,

⁶² Ed. L. Miller, 480

Kant may be right in insisting that nothing less than the categorical imperative will serve to ground moral judgments if they are to be valid in any ordinary sense. Consider what it could mean to say that man's moral obligations are conditioned upon his having a certain nature. This might mean simply that the characteristics of the persons involved determine which valid moral principles apply to a given situation."⁶³

For example, if the method of communication among men were such as to make lying impossible [such as thought transference], so that men either communicated truthfully or not at all, then his obligation to tell the truth would be irrelevant. It would not be false that rational agents should be truthful with one another; it would simply make no sense to command a human to tell the truth. If human nature should change, men's obligations would also change.⁶⁴ We do not believe that Whitebeck did much to enhance the claim already made by Kant. His example is not sufficient to show that a change in human nature would mean a change in obligation. Neither did it show that even if this change should occur, it would be a bad one. He however may be correct that, if it is left only to our inclinations, then some individuals may adopt the notion that any action is acceptable as long as it benefits them. But probably we can only know on an individual level what is good in and of itself and sometimes we learn through experiences and trial and error not to commit the same immoral acts. The universal approach would then still not stand. We would like to acknowledge that outside of our critique there are also scholars who have also critiqued Kant's views.

While Kant's view pays remarkable homage to our intuitive sense of morality- that morality is impersonal, universal, rational, and yet a product of the individual's personal judgment, we are not the only ones to argue that it is not free from logical difficulties. Raziel Abelson and Friquegnon believe that,

it seems impossible to formulate any rule of conduct that we would want everyone to follow under all circumstances. Kant's examples of such rules, which he calls 'moral duties' ['do not make false promises.' 'Do not take your own life'], seem to demand exceptions. Would it be wrong for example, to break a promise made to a vicious criminal who threatens you with death? Kant claimed that such a promise must be

⁶³ Immanuel Kant *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. xv.

⁶⁴ Immanuel Kant, Trans. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. xv

kept, but this seems contrary to the common-sense attitudes he says his theory must explain and justify.⁶⁵

What is implied here is that Kant's moral duties do not seem to convey the reality of moral duties as is practiced in societies. The practicability aspect of Kant's theory is therefore lacking. If a promise is made to a vicious criminal, this promise may not have to be kept as long as the person's life is no longer in jeopardy. It does not mean that the individual who made the promise is immoral for not keeping that promise.

We find then, that circumstances and situations may render a promise null and void which means that not all moral duties will be straight forward and adjustments will have to be made based on reason and circumstances in deciding how to act. From this, one can deduce that, no imperative is based solely on reason, and not all desires are void of reason. What is the nature of rationality and how do we know when we have attained it to know how to act? The answer to this question may be forthcoming as individuals continue to analyze situations to find the best forms of actions. What is this pure reason that Kant talks about? It can be argued that this is something we may never experience. It may also not be possible to derive the pureness that Kant envisioned from impure beings as ourselves. Impure in the sense that, sometimes our reasoning may be flawed. Reason is necessary to make informed moral decisions but desires and inclinations are also important to the decision making process as well.

NIETZSCHE

Although Nietzsche's views can be seen as relativistic, we will show where his approach was different than other philosophical views on relativism. All relativists admit that there can be more than one true moral system and there is no absolute morality. But, while cultural relativists for example focused on the morality of a particular society, Nietzsche

further divided the moralities of this society by referring to the weak and the powerful. For him, moral codes would arise more from social origins and class where 'good' morality is presumed to be vested in the individuals with the most power; and the other members of society are simply 'bad'. This however is a construct that one class uses to suppress the other. This view led him to an exploration into the main factors that could have contributed to the creation of two major moralities. He referred to these as 'master' and 'slave' moralities.

This conception of morality, in these two unusual headings, was one reason why Nietzsche was known as one of the world's most controversial philosophers. He disagreed with Kant and others who sought to argue that human beings should only operate based on a universal moral code. As Rex Welshon argues, for those of us who are steadfast in our adherence to universalizable moral codes, reading Nietzsche can be a brutally disruptive experience.⁶⁶ This is because his critique of the universalized moral code is such that persons cannot help but rethink the long-standing believe that they held to be true. Individuals may then be led to the realization that they have been living a lie. Nietzsche agrees that morality provides us with a guide on how to live. He believes however, that

we have inherited a wrong-headed guide from our moral thinkers. It is a mistake to think that moral values are disinterested or not self interested. Morals are instead self interested and are binding only on those for whom they promise to provide some relief from the suffering of life.⁶⁷

Nietzsche is implying here that we have been misguided as to what morality really is and because of this, as individuals, we then need to revisit those views as a right way to live our lives. The morality that is thrust upon us is such that it will keep us in bondage. He also implies from this that, we accept these moralities and do not seek to question same. We accept them without resistance. We may accept them because it gives us comfort from the

⁶⁶ Rex Welshon, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*. (USA: McGill Queen's University Press., 2004) 15

⁶⁷Friedrich Nietzsche. In, Rex.Welshon, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*. (USA: McGill Queen's University Press., 2004) 16 and 17

insecurities of life. It is this comfort that makes us complacent with and trustworthy of those who bring those moralities to us. One implication of blindly accepting a universal morality is that, this mainstream morality may not fit the real circumstances of particular individuals and cultures, but they struggle with it nonetheless as it is believed to be the ultimate. What Nietzsche is simply asking us to do is not to accept the mainstream moral values as all there is. Nietzsche viewed our acceptance of universal moral values in a similar way slaves accept all the orders and request of their masters.

In the first essay, in the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche outlined that, the masters are of the view that they are good because they form the upper class and slaves believe they are bad because they possess no power. For Nietzsche,

the dominant values controlling the morality of late nineteenth century Europe—equality, justice, and compassion—are not the time-less absolutes they purport to be but the outcome of a violent struggle between two opposed systems of value—what he calls the aristocratic morality and the slave morality.⁶⁸

The above seeks to imply that there are always going to be some individuals in society who think themselves as superior than others. In light of this, these individuals believe that it is always right to impose value system on others since ‘the other’ is not capable of deciding which actions are right or wrong for themselves. The ‘other’ is not good enough, never educated enough nor rational enough to make suitable moral choices. It then would rest on the educated, more rational individuals to dictate how and when to act in what capacity. Nietzsche is then implying that this is the kind of morality that the universal moral system brings to us. Although we would not necessarily view the universal moral system in respect to a master and slave morality, we do agree with Nietzsche that human beings should not be forced to accept a particular system as being better simply because certain other members of society say it is. Human beings may be similar but they are also different in many respects.

⁶⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. xvi

Difference does not equate to badness and these differences, ought to be respected. In light of all this, universal morality should not be seen as the ideal, while relativism shunned.

We would have acknowledged by now that the masters, based on Nietzsche's assessment, would be those among us who create the rules, those who have the power, those who are from the high social classes, those who consider themselves to exude goodness because of their standings in society. The slave would be those over which those with the power control. Each master would then have a set of moral values that the slaves should comply with. Arising from this separation, Nietzsche argued that, "moral values are only valuable for some since these are an historical product, contingent creations of particular groups of people designed to serve their interests."⁶⁹

From this, one can argue that, slave moralities are designed to benefit the group that holds the power. It does not benefit the slave. If morality does not have value to those who seek to practice it, then it would be wrong to accept such morality. In light of what Nietzsche argued so far, this is exactly what individuals do on a daily basis as they seek to accept the moralities of denominations and social and political groups without realizing that some of these moral value systems are not directly useful to them as individuals. Nietzsche believes that this problem of master and slave morality stems from traditional philosophical ideologies.

It is believed for example that, Aristocratic morality is historically the earlier of the two systems [master and slave] and is characterized by,

...an ethic of active and ruthless self affirmation, whereas the slave morality is the reactive and resentful response of the weak to their domination by the self-affirming strong. The former is driven by a will to power which seeks always to expend its available energy, even to the point of death, while the latter is motivated by resentment and is obsessed with conservation and self-preservation. He holds that the two moralities and their accompanying principles are incommensurable, separated by what he calls the 'pathos of distance.'⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Nietzsche, In Welshon, 18

⁷⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. xvi

The slaves then believe that they need to accept the master's teachings in order to survive. Acceptance of moral beliefs would then be done out of fear. As Nietzsche implies, the master and slave morality cannot be seen as equal in any way, the slave should not consider herself equal to the master. Nietzsche may then be correct in arguing that the two principles are separated by distance; one being good and the other evil. This conception is however distorted in favour of the masters. Nietzsche believes that, with this conception of master and slave morality, morality is inverted so that what is called morally good is not really good and what is called morally evil is not really bad. He is careful to point out how this reversal came about in part through the activities of a priestly caste within the aristocracy itself. For Nietzsche, "the struggle between the opposing value systems is not definitely over- it has been fought out again and again across the generations and has even been internalized in the psychology of the best of his contemporaries."⁷¹ The slaves have been socialized to believe that their morality is evil, which is not the case. The separation of good and bad moralities is however necessary as slaves begin to reclaim what the master have taken away from them for so long. If individuals and groups continue to accept morals that are not in keeping with their own values and beliefs, then the struggle will definitely not be over. The psychological scars might become even greater as a fight for scarce goods become more predominant and even necessary to survival. One group or individual should not be pressured to feel 'less than' because they refuse to confirm to the generally accepted beliefs that may themselves not be correct.

According to Welshon, the core of Nietzsche's thinking about morality is that,

all of us seek to be powerful individuals, strong, intelligent, goal-directed, creative, rich in contradictions – but only few ever achieve it, for it is difficult and causes a considerable amount of suffering. The rest of us are failures, know it and are

⁷¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. xvii

miserable as a result... We hate ourselves for our weakness, uselessness and redundancy, and we hate those who are demonstrably better.”⁷²

It is this insecurity that may continue to allow individuals to accept without questioning. We can argue that this kind of thinking still exists today and the power struggle becomes greater as social groups widen in scope. We also see great inequality and injustice not only in the political realm within societies but also in the workplace, schools, churches etc. The ‘weak’ however has held their grounds in many respects and are no longer seeing themselves through the lenses of their masters. If this is true it means that there might have been a shift in self awareness and understanding which would trigger a spiral effect on how they view themselves as moral agents regardless of class. This inversion of morals that Nietzsche talks about, though still exists, may not be as evident today.

Although the above mentioned aspect of Nietzsche’s views may not be evident today, his views were useful in explaining how universal moralities can be thrust on individuals without them at times even being consciously aware of them. His views are critical as we begin to seek answers to the question of universal morality with a realization that, moralities are valuable and important the more individuals are a part of the process. Universal morality does not do this, which makes one to assume that, in contemporary society, relativism takes precedence over universalism in the quest to find the moral truths that are relevant and adequately applies to cultures and individuals. We believe that morality is not valuable without a valuer which makes the individual an integral part of creating and changing moral rules. Within each group we will find that moralities may be revised overtime based on self and societal needs. Moral Universalism does not allow for revision and change. But, in a globalized world where greater and different moral challenges are arising, we need to be

⁷² Rex. Welshon, 18

flexible to deal with these challenges. These are challenges that Nietzsche implicitly acknowledged.

The moralities that Nietzsche addressed seemed to be fixed in respect to either the slave or the master with the slaves believing those are the only moral truths. He wants to take us out of this mindset where values reflect on the interests of those who subscribe to them. The slave needs to be able to subscribe to some form of morality, a morality that is individually based and not dependent on much outside influence. An influence, that may have instilled the wrong ways to act and deal with moral issues for too long. We believe that, although one may still view themselves as being in bondage in the respect of societal rules and so on, the individual may be able to determine how much of the masters rule to obey and live by. If this is true self proclaimed moral truths would be the end result. The slave may be driven by the power of the will as the need for survival becomes greater and the historical moral system does not provide answers in relation to how to cope within the confines of positive moral principles. What is clear for Nietzsche is that morality, if it exists at all, cannot be universal. We agree, as we acknowledge that, we live in a dynamic world where universal morality does not seem possible. This is not only due to the fact that things change as time goes by but human beings are also different in their attitudes and beliefs.

UNIVERSAL MORALS – A MYTH

It can be argued that, since human beings tend to internalize the custom of the groups that they are associated with, moral beliefs seem to be largely a product of our upbringing. However, as the need to be appreciated as individuals and not as groups deepen, one can argue, that it may be left to the human being to fully and finally shape the moral beliefs that they hold outside of group interference. There is then diversity in morality. This is exactly what J.L Mackie argues in his argument from relativity. He believes that, “the best

explanation for actual moral diversity is the absence of universal moral truths, rather than the distorted perceptions of objective principles.”⁷³ This view is similar to that offered by Nietzsche, but Mackie articulated it differently. If we should seek to apply Mackie’s view to our daily experiences we find that it seems logical since, objective principles do not readily fit into the diversities that we experience. To say that we operate on the one hand as diverse subjective beings and on the other as objective beings would be a contradiction in turn. We would like to argue like Mackie, that, specific moral rules that we adopt will vary depending on the circumstances of societies and individuals. We would also like to explore the notion that, the vast diversities have cause individuals to seek survival measures and these cannot be universal.

With the quest to find survival moral values in this changing world, one cannot help but to wonder whether the notion of a universal morality is a myth. The question may be asked as to how universal morality can exist in a world that is so culturally diverse and individualistic in its operation. As the international community becomes increasingly integrated it is interesting to ask: how can cultural diversity and integrity be respected? Can a global culture emerge based on and guided by dignity and tolerance [the capacity for or the practice of recognizing and respecting the beliefs or practices of others]? These are some of the issues, concerns and questions underlying the debate over universal morals and relativism. France and the United Kingdom are facing these issues in more critical ways as a consequence of the aftermath of 9-11 and the war on terror, whereby differences in cultures and religions call for some sensitive understanding of divergences in perspectives on life in general and moral engagements in particular. We cannot ignore these questions as we seek to analyze the concept of morality. As we seek to contemplate these questions we realize that

⁷³ J. L. Mackie. Quoted in, Louis P Pojman; James Fieser. *Ethics: discovering right and wrong*. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2007) 211

cultural diversity needs to be respected as no culture should feel that it is superior to any other. We also find that tolerance is a moral virtue that individuals across cultures ought to develop to help cope with some of the challenges that accompanies the spiralling changes. Some persons may claim however, that certain moral conducts are ‘unnatural’ and this may be used to justify unwillingness to tolerate certain groups. We believe that the need for toleration would not be such a great issue, if it is true that everyone operated on set universal moral principles.

Moral issues will arise in respect to oppression, extortion, abortion, euthanasia and so on daily, and we can argue that individuals have been responding to these outside a universal moral framework. We believe that this is the case, since these issues have affected individuals and groups in different ways. The measures implemented to deal with those issues will also be different. We cannot then rightfully argue that morality is a universal concept in the way Kant envisions since individuals are making moral decisions that may not conform to universal moral laws. With the universalizability principle, Kant argues that, we should only do something if one is prepared for everyone else to do it as well.⁷⁴ One should never lie for example, unless one is prepared to accept that everyone should be free to lie whenever they choose. We do not believe that Kant recognized the implications that, if everyone prepares to accept the lie, it would still not make it right. In light of this, we can argue that Kant was too concerned with showing that morality ought to be universal without specifically addressing the beings [humans] needed to bring morality into the world. We acknowledge here that since morality asks what is the right thing to do in a particular situation, it cannot be achieved without a subjective being. If humans interact with the world on a subjective basis, they may not be compelled to think of the universal connotation of the action before it is carried out.

⁷⁴Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Quoted in, Ruth J. Sample et al. *Philosophy the Big Questions*. (USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004) 405

From what have been discussed so far, we can argue that, we have experienced cultural diversities in ways that we are yet to comprehend. Why then would we expect moral rules and laws to remain the same or to apply to everyone everywhere? If it is true that morality is really a guide to how humans relate to other beings, then universality would have no place in morality as these interactions are dynamic. We react to similar situations in different ways which would not necessarily be the case if there were really specific, universal ways in which we should act. This does not mean that a good moral action should be such that it can change but that the need or desire or circumstance would shift to accommodate new, equally good moral actions. If we should really accept morality as a response to ethical issues, we have to acknowledge that, the more problems arising, the greater the need will be to shift and review morals. Universal morality may then very well be a myth.

SURVIVAL MORAL VALUES

We view survival morals as those positive moral values that may be created to deal with social issues from an individual or cultural perspective. A person who uses survival moral values may act contrary to given norms in order to achieve an end. According to J.L Mackie, “our ‘gut’ reactions whenever we are confronted with moral questions no doubt have survival value from a socio-biological perspective; but the belief that we are discriminating real properties, with criteria independent of our de facto reactions is an illusion. We may hold on to these moral reactions, fine tune them, and alter them, to make life more bearable.”⁷⁵ We react based on how a situation may present itself to us. The actions will be based on the need to survive that particular situation. At times, certain promises and obligations may have to be broken in order to fulfil the mandate of survival. It may very well mean then that certain moral acts may take priority over others. This however makes none lesser in value.

⁷⁵ J. L. Mackie. Quoted in, Ruth Abbey. *Charles Taylor*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 94

We have established that, the universality debate is based on the notion that the principles underlying all the various rules and standards regarding values are the same for everyone everywhere. For example, most moral principles concern the preservation of life, prohibiting lying and the need to survive. Also, there may be many similarities in the areas of sentiment, emotion, and attitudes such as jealousy, love and the need for respect. This may all be true, but what should be understood is that, although all cultures may share the need for survival, for example, the route to secure survival may vary among members of the same culture and with different cultures. There are many social dilemmas in our daily lives that may require us to gravitate to survival morals. That is, the way how we view exploitation, extortion and so on may change as levels of these social issues increase. We also live in an era of Globalization which brings with it all aspects of social issues. Globalization refers to the complex series of economic, social, technological, cultural and political relations as increasing interdependence, integration and interaction occur between people and countries in disparate locations.⁷⁶

Globalization has many dimensions. It can be seen as socio-political, economic, industrial, religious, technological and cultural, among other things. Some view it as a process that is beneficial, a key to future world economic development and also inevitable and irreversible. Others regard it with hostility, even fear; believing that it increases inequality within and between nations, threatening employment and living standard and thwarting social progress. I have argued elsewhere that, although globalization offers extensive opportunities for worldwide development it is not progressing evenly. This can be detrimental to developing countries who do not have the capital of the ‘know how’ to

⁷⁶ Lawrence O. Bamikole, “Globalization and Terrorism Discourse” in *Journal of Humanities*. Vol. 4. 2005. 159

compete with developed countries.⁷⁷ This is due to the nature of globalization which is driven by profit. One of the key components of globalization is that, it should have a social dimension. That is, it should sustain human moral values and enhance the well being of individuals, while striving to provide work for everyone in a particular society and satisfy all their basic needs. This has not happened however; hence it is a new version of earlier forms of domination and exploitation. Leading from this, we will find that tremendous profit will flow into certain pockets while poor subsistence wages will flow into others. All of these issues may lead individuals to adopt a survival mechanism in order to remain alive. We may then find long- standing moral values being replaced with survival ones. Survival morals are relative as these vary across cultures and according to individual needs. This gradual need for survival moral values would imply that morals are not universal, they are not objective but relative, as human beings, adopt and change to suit environmental needs.

According to Abraham Maslow, “the ultimate validation of moral values is survival, so a fundamental value system must fit the society which hopes to live and survive by it.”⁷⁸ Thus, globalization would fail in its aim of having an overall social dimension globally where the needs of individuals are met in all spheres of life. Given the profit motive, it seems clear that developing nations cannot survive under the auspice of globalization, so value systems would have to differ as not all would be appropriate for these societies. This is true, as under globalization, economically powerful actors can have a stronger role over state policies of these nations. These nations are therefore more vulnerable to repercussions of other states’ actions which are directly felt by the citizenry. We acknowledge as well, that although there may be this general need for survival as a moral value, some may struggle in using sound

⁷⁷ Sandra McCalla, “A Critical Evaluation of the Foundations of Human Values.” MA Dissertation, 2006. 82

⁷⁸ Abraham Maslow, *New Knowledge in Human Values*. (USA: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc. 1959) 202

moral actions to maintain this survival. There may be times, for example when persons may be hurt, but not maliciously, in order to save a life. We can only hope however that as individuals adapt to these changes the need for survival will be less demanding.

We would then like to put forward survival moral value as one of the best indications that universal morality is myth. We say this, since these moral values are relative to individuals, and we believe only relative moral values can change in such a way as to keep pace with the growing social and environmental needs. Nietzsche used survival moral values to refer to the acceptance of the master's morality by the slave in order to survive. We do not use survival values in that way. We see survival values as a way of finding a release from forms of domination, oppression and exploitation that may accompany globalization and any increase in social issues. We find then, that these survival morals may be freely or unconsciously chosen in a quest to conquer these issues in a positive way. Individuals do not often voluntarily opt to use survival values as it is often times thrust on them unconsciously, or they tend to choose these based on the circumstances that they are faced with. Some may refute the term 'survival values' based on the argument that the significance of moral values are lost, thus these morals are void. But it is important to note that, survival morals do not equate to negative moral values and thus should be given great significance in discussions on morality as a relative construct.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, one can argue that morality can be universal in so far that everyone across cultures understand what the concept of morality means in general. However, as far as the practice of morality this would incorporate not only societies but each individual as agents of morality. Individual views may differ in relation to what stance should be taken on ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia and so on, but this does not mean that the difference imply immorality. From this, one can argue that, each individual also has a

will but it is important to note that not all wills are the same. Each will, may be relativistic in its operation. Similarly, each society may have moral rules that are not necessarily universal and does not reflect all the moral beliefs of other existing societies. This speaks to a kind of uniqueness that may not only be said of individuals, and cultures but also moralities. We found that relativism sought to support this uniqueness in a way that universalism did not.

Because of this, it may not be farfetched to conclude that, conceptions of universal moralities seek to threaten the very independence and freedom that human beings and cultures cherish. We say this because, a universal morality implies acceptance of values and beliefs that are thrust on individuals with the expectation that they should conform and not question. Taking all of this into consideration, universality may just be a myth and it is difficult for a moral agent to know what is good for them on a universal whole even in relation to cultural universals. Do we know as a universal whole what actions are good in the non-moral sense? Probably not, since there may be conflicts as to what may be good or bad in any respect. It is for this reason why we are more inclined to accept that morality is relative as individuals and cultures access what is good and bad in relation to their respective situations.

We conclude that, Kant's view on morality did little to convince us that a universal moral code is necessary and practical to this dynamic world. Every moral act may also not be based on duty as some of them are done on impulse. If an individual does a right action when faced with a moral decision, one would like to believe that particular individual is moral irrespective of duty. He may not believe that it is his duty to perform that particular action but he may perform it because he was so inclined. We indicated that duties may be difficult to establish, so a good moral deed should not go unnoticed simply because one does not accept it as a duty. Human beings make moral decisions on a daily basis and these should not be

classified as better or worse based on intentions. We believe that what is important is that a good, right, moral deed is done.

ON THE ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF A SOCIAL ETHICS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONS

Elvis IMAFIDON

INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps fitting to describe normative ethics in African traditions as social and humanistic in nature, owing to the emphasis that African communities place on togetherness, communalistic behaviour and co-operation. The African traditional way of speaking about morality reflects intensely a co-dependency ethos that is humanistic in outlook, since its primary focus is communal and human wellbeing.

I intend in this chapter to show that although this is arguably true about African ethics, it is, however, the resultant-effect of an all-inclusive notion of being, one that serves as a meta-ethical and hermeneutical explanation of African social/humanistic ethics. It is argued, therefore, that the bid to establish and sustain the moral equilibrium and social harmony among human beings and other aspects of existence in the cosmos invariably necessitates a social ethics that places emphasis on togetherness for communal and human well-being.

ON AN AFRICAN ONTOLOGY

A number of scholars have offered a number of theories in explaining what it means to be, or the notion of being prevalent in many African cultures. Of particular interest here is the 'force thesis'.⁷⁹ Like any other ontological theory, the force thesis is meant to engage a people's conception of being with the aim of elucidating the general structures of being as

⁷⁹ See D. N. Kaphagawani, African Conceptions of a Person: A Critical Survey, K. Wiredu, (Ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing), 2004, pp.335-337. The force thesis has been popularized by P Tempels in his classic *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africaine), 1959 and by A. Kagame in his *La Philosophie Bantu Comparee* (Paris, 1976).

well the substratum, that is, what remains present and enduring within the structure of being; it presents a metaphysics of enduring presence of the dual realms of beings as found in various African people's thought systems.

In a typical African ontology, there exists a universe of two realms of existence, the visible and invisible; independently real but intrinsically linked to form a whole.⁸⁰ The beings or entities existing in these two realms of existence are lively and active in varying degrees because they are vitalized, animated, or energized by an ontological principle or essence or *force*, given them by the Supreme Being. Perhaps a good starting point in understanding this ontological principle in a typical African culture is by borrowing a clue from Placide Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*. Tempels' project in this work is laudable for his analysis of "vital force" as the "Inmost Nature of being"⁸¹ in Bantu ontology. The key to Bantu thought, he says, is the idea of vital force. In his words,

The key principle of Bantu philosophy is that of vital force. The activating and final aim of all Bantu effort is only the intensification of vital force. To protect it or to increase vital force, that is the motive or profound meaning in all their practices. It is the ideal which animates the life of the '*muntu*', the only thing for which he is ready to suffer and to sacrifice himself.⁸²

Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* is thus primarily concerned with making the following points:

- a. The nature of the universe to the Bantu African is nothing if not the "universe of forces".
- b. These forces can weaken or strengthen the life of a person who stands as the centre of the universe.

⁸⁰ Cf. C. E. Ukhun, Metaphysical Authoritarianism and the Moral Agent in Esan Traditional Thought. *Uma: Journal of Philosophy and Religious Studies*, 1-1 (2006):.145-46.

⁸¹ P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, p.175.

⁸² S: O: Okafor, Bantu Philosophy: Placide Tempels Revisited. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 13-2 (1982): 84-85.

- c. In the face of the fact that one's life force can be dangerously diminished or beneficially enhanced and strengthened, the best course of action for one is to take care to avoid the diminution of one's life force.⁸³

The last point (c) is crucial to the proper understanding of what he describes as “Bantu wisdom”, “Bantu psychology” and “Bantu ethics” respectively. For Tempels, every aspect of Bantu thought, action and practice is causally interpreted with regard to the diminution or strengthening of life force, as is evidenced in the treatment of witchcraft, sorcery, the medicine man, ancestorship, the king and the chief. The point made in this context is that some of these actors diminish life force, while some enhance it. As a consequence the person is cast in a web of manipulations; they manipulate the situation towards maintaining and strengthening their life force.⁸⁴

From the foregoing, for Tempels, an African ontology essentially entails an

energy of cosmic origin that permeates and lives within all that is – human beings, animals, plants, minerals, and objects, as well as events. This common energy shared by all confers a common essence to everything in the world, and thus ensures the fundamental unity of all that exists ... This energy constitute the active, dynamic principle that animates creation, and which can be identified as life itself.⁸⁵

Polycarp Ikuenobe aptly describes an African ontology thus:

In the traditional African view, reality or nature is a continuum and a harmonious composite of various elements and forces. Human beings are a harmonious part of this composite reality, which is fundamentally, a set of mobile life forces. Natural objects and reality are interlocking forces. Reality always seeks to maintain an equilibrium among the network of elements and life forces ... Because reality or nature is a continuum, there is no conceptual or interactive gap between the human self, community, the dead, spiritual or metaphysical entities and the phenomenal world; they are interrelated, they interact, and in some sense, one is an extension of the other.⁸⁶

⁸³ S: O: Okafor, *Bantu Philosophy* p.85.

⁸⁴ S: O: Okafor, *Bantu Philosophy*, p.85

⁸⁵ M. A. Mazama, Afrocentricity and African Spirituality, *Journal of Black Studies* 33-2 (2002): 219–20.

⁸⁶ P. Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspective on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions* (London: Lexington Books, 2006), pp.63-64.

Force as a principle of ontological unity therefore has at least two immediate and explicit implications:

- a. It implies a principle of the connectedness of all entities based on common essence, and
- b. It also implies a principle of harmony based on the organic solidarity and complementarities of all forms.⁸⁷

S. O. Okafor thus describes force as used within the context of a Bantu African ontology as “phenomenon-aura”.⁸⁸ A phenomenon is anything which appeared or is observed, especially if having scientific interests. An aura is a subtle invisible essence or fluid said to emanate from human and animal bodies as well as from things. Phenomenon-aura, therefore, is the emission of energy or force from an existent. Viewing the conception of force in an African ontology in this sense, we realize that beings or entities are not only animated with force, they also emit an essence or force peculiar to each one of them in their causal relations, operations and interactions in the universe. Phenomenon-aura, according to Okafor accounts for the following points concerning the concept of being in African cultures:

- a. In a world of varying entities emitting varying degrees of force into the universe, they (the emitted forces) causally account for the experiences of joy, pain, death, illness, health, calamities, orderliness, and other events or phenomenal experience in a sphere of being.
- b. An entity possesses either a neutral aura, an active harmful aura, or an active beneficial aura. Again, an entity, by its very position in a given place, atmosphere of

⁸⁷ S. O. Okafor, *Bantu Philosophy*, p.94.

⁸⁸ S. O. Okafor, *Bantu Philosophy*, p.95.

event or mixture, may thereby be subject to a crossing and interaction of forces which, in turn, create a new effect or aura.

- c. Actors such as the medicine man, the witch doctor and the herbalist are manipulators of “the realm of invisible auras”, bringing either order or chaos to the community.

And those who manipulate entities and their auras are expected or supposed to have some form of accurate knowledge of their natures and how to manipulate them to produce good or bad effects on individuals or the community of beings.⁸⁹

Thus, entities within an African community are continually in an interlocking web of interaction based on a common essence which is emitted and absorbed within a causal web of relationship.

A COMMUNITY OF INTERACTING FORCES

Force as a common essence is present in varying degrees in the different entities, visible or invisible, existing within the community. The degree of force that an entity possesses determines the position that such an entity occupies within the structure of being. It is for this reason that there is a hierarchy of being within an African thought system. The Supreme Being who created and sustained the universe is seen as the epitome of force. He dispenses this energy of ontological unity at will to other entities. He is therefore at the apex of the hierarchy of being.

Just below the Supreme Being in the hierarchy of beings are the divinities, primordial and deified. These divinities are ministers of the Supreme Being having different portfolios assigned to them. Primordial divinities are spiritual forces brought into being with regard to the divine ordering of the universe and with derived powers. The Supreme Being assigns

⁸⁹ S. O. Okafor, *Bantu Philosophy*, p.95.

each of them a portfolio. They act as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the human being. They are largely nature or object-inhabiting spirits by having temporary dwelling objects in nature like rivers, lakes, lagoons, streams, trees, forests, mountains, groves, hills, and so on. From here they emit their powers, energies, or forces for the benefit of the community. Deified divinities, on the other hand, are heroes and founding fathers of African communities who contributed immensely to the founding of a people and are believed, in death, to be in a position to influence the community positively by relating their problems to the Supreme Being. A man who sacrificed himself to save his village, a man who started a settlement or a woman who performed great feats for her village was, at her death, deified and venerated and became the primary deity for the respective community. Shrines and statues are erected for them and either once, or some instances more than once, in a year festivals are held to commemorate their lives and feats.

Ancestors are next in line. According to Lee M. Brown, ancestors are

individuals who were once [physically] alive, but are nonetheless still capable of agency. Having agency is to be understood as having a capacity to initiate, on one's own accord, actions that have intended consequences for oneself or for others. It is believed that the awareness of the intention of ancestral spirits provides grounds for understanding physical occurrences."⁹⁰

Ancestors are intrinsic members of an African community who have *properly* departed the physical realm of existence to the non-physical realm. They are those who have completed their course here in the land of the physically living and have gone to the spiritual abode of the physically dead. However, an essential point to note is that not all who die become ancestors in African traditions. For one to become an ancestor, he must have lived a community-accepted or culturally accepted life-style, must have lived to a ripe old age, must

⁹⁰ L. M. Brown, *Understanding and Ontology in African Traditional Thought*, L. M. Brown (Ed.), *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 158.

have children to honour his death, and must have died a good death.⁹¹ Thus, according to Kwasi Wiredu, “living a full and meaningful life is a condition for becoming an ancestor.”⁹²

In an African community, the ancestor is intrinsically intertwined with the living. Their consent is sought regarding family decisions and they are appeased when a family member errs. An African man’s prestige increases with his age, positive values exuded while alive in the forms of generosity, courage in warfare and hunting wisdom, and respect for elders and ancestors. The daily flux of existence in traditional African communities affirms and reaffirms the ancestral presence and an impossibility of its absence. This is attested to by the shrines found at every turn and the utterances in the offering of kola nuts and palm wine that punctuates the daily flow of life.⁹³ Benezet Bujo aptly captures this point in the following lines.

The relationship between those living on earth and the ancestors is very close, since the living owe their existence to the ancestors from whom they receive everything necessary for life. On the other hand, the living dead can “enjoy” their being ancestors only through the living clan community. In this way, a kind of “interaction” – hierarchically organised from top to bottom and vice versa – is created... The goal of this interaction is the increase of vitality within the clan⁹⁴

Thus ancestors are themselves still continuing persons, still very much a part of the living community.⁹⁵

⁹¹ This is distinct from bad death where the person’s death comes mysteriously either being caused by an anti-wickedness divinity or under some questionable circumstances.

⁹² Kwasi Wiredu, *Death and After Life in African Culture*, Kwasi Wiredu, and Kwame Gyekye (Eds.), *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies* (Washington D.C: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy), p.143.

⁹³ J. C. McCall, *Rethinking Ancestors in Africa*, *African Journal of the International African Institute* 65-2 (1996): 258.

⁹⁴ B. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1998), p.16.

⁹⁵ I. A. Menkiti, On the Normative Conception of a Person, K. Wiredu (Ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) p.327.

Just below the ancestor in the hierarchy are manipulable natural and supernatural forces of nature or beyond nature. These are forces that are neither divinities nor ancestors but either manipulate or are manipulated in such a way that they become beneficial or harmful to the physically living. They are manipulated in sorcery, divination, herbalism, witchcraft and magic for certain ends. They include roaming spirits (particularly the spirits of the improperly dead) and evil supernatural forces.

Following these categories of being is the human person. The human person, to the African, is a being having both physical and non-physical features such as the head, heart, mind, and other physiological parts as well as possessing a destiny and destiny guardian, and the soul. But all of these are alive because the person is animated by force. The person occupies a central place in an African thought system because entities find meaning in his/her being

It is clear from the above that any rigorous articulation of an African concept of a person will show that a human being is usually projected into an ontological progression and this implies that the force or energy possessed by a person can be diminished and increased within an African existential structure; and this is based on his actions and inactions, reverences, awe or disregard for higher forces in the hierarchy of being. These factors are also responsible for his/her after death existential experience.

Last on the hierarchy are things. They are basically animals, plants, the earth, things in the cosmos and minerals. These things either have a low degree of vitality (like in animals) or are inactive forces (like in plants or minerals) until acted upon either by a person or by other spiritual beings. A leaf, for example, lies inactive in the bush until someone gets it, acts on it and it emits its aura of healing. One thing is strikingly interesting about these things: their energy or force is hardly fixed or stable. This is because spiritual forces, good or evil, can easily inhabit them, due to their inactive nature – they can hardly resist such passive

habitation – and control or direct their behaviour or disposition. Things, therefore, can at a time be inactive and at another time become active. However, they remain at the lowest rank of being no matter the amount of energy they possess because, unlike the person, their demise marks their end of existence.

Having examined the ontological principle that operates in an African thought system and the beings or entities involved within the structure of being, what becomes obvious is that these forces are in a web of interaction. As Polycarp Ikuenobe says, “Forces may differ in their essences; thus we have divine, celestial, terrestrial, human, animal, vegetative, and material or mineral forces. These forces exist and interact in harmony”.⁹⁶ But, why is the harmony among beings in the community so much desired?

THE EMPHASIS ON, AND NECESSITY OF, COMMUNAL HARMONY

Since the African community is an aggregate of interacting cosmic forces, it would imply that such a community, conscious of the nature of its being, would establish structures to foster and sustain the much needed interaction among entities. Such structures that will foster communal harmony become more imperative since forces find meaning only in their space of dwelling, the community of beings.

An example that readily comes to mind is that of the ancestor in a traditional African community. It is impossible to conceive an ancestor as separate from his kin. This is because it is within his kin that he is venerated. It is because of him that the whole kin come together, at least once a year, to pay him homage. He is called on issues of morality, conflict, social problems, health matters, joys, sorrows, etc, confronting the kin. This is where his existence finds meaning and where his force becomes useful.

⁹⁶ P. Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspective*, p. 63.

In the same vein, the kin does not conceive itself at any point as independent of its ancestors. On social, religious, moral, spiritual, health, political matters or otherwise, they seek the decision or consent of their ancestors, they appease him/her when any family member does wrong in order to calm his/her temper and reaffirm their loyalty to him/her, they thank him/her for the birth of a child, for good harvest, for protection from enemies, etc. It is a reciprocal relationship. Benezet Bujo says, for example, regarding the relationship between a person and his/her ancestor, on health matters that,

The community of the diseased is also not forgotten since a disease might be caused by the disturbed relationship of the patient with the world of those who have passed away... Health, therefore, implies safe integration into the bi-dimensional community as the place where life grows... [For] If interpersonal relationships are not well maintained, sickness can affect the members.⁹⁷

Hence interpersonal relationship is necessary for survival of any being in the ontological structure. This is one reason why emphasis is placed on communal harmony. It is what Stephen O. Okafor captures as *commensality*. Commensality, in practice, means “the act of eating together or sharing in a common meal”.

However, from what has been said above, it becomes necessary to note the primary and secondary senses of this mode of existence. In its primary sense, it is the philosophical or ideological criterion for all forms of social or political relationships; it is a mechanism which militates against social excommunication and tension ridden rivalries. This surely has enormous benefits for the development of any community or society. It makes for peace and social harmony. In its secondary sense, it is the possibility and practice of sharing in all forms of common and conventional meals on family, communal or national levels; or between individuals; between the living and the ancestors, between the community and their divinities

⁹⁷ B. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community*, pp.182-183.

or Supreme Being.⁹⁸ Therefore all cosmic forces interact and relate in the established structures of the community to promote peace, order, and tranquillity and to checkmate negativebehaviour. Mbiti words readily come to mind here.

Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and relatives whether dead or alive. Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.⁹⁹

Another important reason for placing emphasis on, and the need for, a sustained relationship and interaction among entities in an African community is vividly seen in the idea of causality or causal agency. As Polycarp Ikuenobe says,

The proper or harmonious interaction among forces and lack thereof, provide the basis for explaining causal phenomena with respect to various events or occurrences. Harmony in interaction among forces brings about good events and lack of harmony in interaction among forces brings about bad events such as death and disease. Human actions in relation to community and nature are central to the ability to create harmony.¹⁰⁰

Every event, happening, or phenomenon experienced in the community is caused by a causal agent – physical or non-physical. All beings in an African community are capable of being regarded as causal agencies, and events in the community are attributed to them. Beings and their interaction are therefore the basis for the explanation, predication, and control of events in the community.

⁹⁸ S. O. Okafor, *Bantu Philosophy*, p.93.

⁹⁹ J. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Publisher, 1969), pp.108–109.

¹⁰⁰ P. Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspective*, p.63.

One point must be stressed here. Spiritual forces are not the only causes of events in an African community. Indeed, all beings are involved—physical and non-physical. G. Sogolo says, for example, about the Azande, that,

They provide descriptions of objects and explanations of events in theoretical categories not tied to magical or religious beliefs. The Azande have principles and beliefs about how to hunt for animals... the kind of soil that would produce harvest... knowledge of nutritional techniques, the food that nourishes and that which does not; that which is poisonous and that which is not; it would therefore be a mistake to suggest that in these areas of their daily activities the Azande always resort to magical or religious explanations.¹⁰¹

Causality in an African community reflects the interaction between the physical and non-physical in human existence. The African operates with the idea that every event has a cause but not every event has a scientifically explainable or verifiable cause in a positivistic sense. Chinua Achebe also depicts this about Igbo metaphysics in his classic *Things fall Apart*. This is typified in Okoli's death. The only thing we know about Okoli is that he joined the new religion, that he "brought the church into serious conflict with the clan... by killing the sacred python, the emanation of the god of water... The royal python was the most revered animal in Mbanta and all the surrounding clans. It was addressed as "Our Father" and was allowed to go wherever it chose".¹⁰² When the people learned that Okoli had killed the python on account of the new religion, they were infuriated; yet, they believed the gods would fend for themselves: "It is not our custom to fight for our gods... Let us not presume to do so now. If a man kills the sacred python in the secrecy of his hut, the matter lies between

¹⁰¹ G. Sogolo, *Foundations of African Philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual Issues in African Thought* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1993), pp.72-73.

¹⁰² C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Ballantine Press. 1969), p.147

him and the god”.¹⁰³ And surely enough, Okoli fell ill and died, showing that “... the gods were still able to fight their own battles”.¹⁰⁴

In sum, the two main reasons why communal harmony is very essential in the community are: (i) to guarantee survival, and (ii) to provide causal explanations. This emphasis on communal harmony is no doubt reflected in the African concept of the good.

AN AFRICAN MORAL THEORY AND ITS ONTOLOGICAL BASIS

Thaddeus Metz in his paper “Toward an African Moral Theory”¹⁰⁵ asserts, that in the many available literatures dwelling on ethics in African traditions, there is very little that consist of a conscious effort to develop a normative theorization with regard to right action; that is, not much effort is devoted to the purely theoretical articulation of a comprehensive, basic norm that is intended to account for what all permissible acts have in common as distinct from impermissible ones within an African tradition without direct reference to human existence within the context of society. According to him, what is often available in extant scholarship is something akin to moral anthropology or cultural studies, where some of these scholars seem content with recounting the moral practices or norms of a certain African people.¹⁰⁶ While this particular situation may be a function of the issues discussed, and the limitations of the knowledge that single authors can have of African ethical traditions, there is a sense in which this claim is a function of this limitation, as well as a function of passiveness on the part of scholars who jump on the bandwagon of African orality and preliterate traditions. What Gbadegesin did in the first chapter in this volume reflects theoretical and

¹⁰³ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* p. 148.

¹⁰⁴ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* p. 150.

¹⁰⁵ See T. Metz, Toward an African Moral Theory, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 15-3 (2007): 321-341.

¹⁰⁶ T. Metz, Toward an African Moral Theory, p.321

critical effort by an African indigenous moral intellectual transcendence of received values, as clear departures are made to chart more up-to-date and evolved ethical ideas and beliefs more defensible for contemporary society,

In this section, therefore, we pick up the strand as laid down by Gbadegesin, thereby indicating to the reader that have two primary tasks to accomplish: (i) to go beyond a mere descriptive approach to African ethics to articulating, in line with Metz, a normative moral principle that accounts for what makes an action good or otherwise in an African tradition; that is, show instances of an African moral theory; and (ii) to consciously articulate a meta-ethical theory that serves as a hermeneutic basis and justification of an African moral theory. This second task constitutes the primary goal of this chapter in particular and of the present book in general.

Metz offers six possible ways that the moral theory of an African community can be formulated. He terms an African moral theory ‘*Ubuntu*’ (U) because of the stress for communality in African morality. *Ubuntu* is a word used by the Zulu people of South Africa; though it is difficult to translate into English, it roughly means humanness, and it features in the maxim that “a person is a person through other persons”, meaning that one’s identity as a human being causally and even metaphysically depends on a community.¹⁰⁷ The six possible ways of formulating an African moral theory as offered by Metz are:

- U1: *An action is right just insofar as it respects a person’s dignity; an act is wrong to the extent that it degrades humanity.*
- U2: *An action is right just insofar as it promotes the well-being of others; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to enhance the welfare of one’s fellows*
- U3: *An action is right just insofar as it promotes the well-being of others without violating their rights; an act is wrong to the extent that it either violates rights or fails to enhance the welfare of one’s fellows without violating rights.*

¹⁰⁷T. Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory*, p.322

- U4: *An action is right just insofar as it positively relates to others and thereby realizes oneself; an act is wrong to the extent that it does not perfect one's valuable nature as a social being.*
- U5: *An action is right just insofar as it is in solidarity with groups whose survival is threatened; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to support a vulnerable community.*
- U6: *An action is right just insofar as it produces harmony and reduces discord; an act is wrong to the extent that it fails to develop community.¹⁰⁸*

This is hardly the place to elaborate and discuss these normative principles comprehensively. However, worth noting here is the fact that U4 is the most dominant interpretation of an African ethics available in many literatures.¹⁰⁹ This is because most scholars see the maxim “to be a person through other persons” to be a call for an agent to develop his/her personhood.¹¹⁰

However, there are a number of issues with U4 as identified by Metz. Instead of others' welfare being the relevant good for a moral agent to promote, here it is the realization of one's distinctively human and valuable nature; specifically, one's special ability to engage in communal relationships. It lays too much emphasis on self-realization and this has counter-intuitive implications.

Suppose that you need a new kidney to survive and that no one will give one to you. Then, to maximize your self-realization, you would need to kill another innocent person so as to acquire his organs. Of course, in killing you would not be realizing yourself, for the theory says that to realize yourself you must do so by positively supporting other persons in some way. However, since you can positively support other persons *in the long-term* only by

¹⁰⁸ For a detailed analysis of U1 to U6, see T. Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory*, pp.328-334

¹⁰⁹ T. Metz cites a number of such scholarly literatures including B. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic* (Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2003) and K. Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹¹⁰ T. Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory*, p.331.

remaining alive, which in this case requires killing another person, the theory counter-intuitively seems to permit murder for one's own benefit. A straightforward way to resolve this problem would be to build constraints into the theory, so that an act is right if and only if it develops one's social nature without violating the rights of others. That manoeuvre avoids the counterexample.¹¹¹

However, this version of the self-realization theory still faces the problem that it can never permit, let alone require, giving up one's life for others, even for one's children since one's self-realization would thereby end. One can obviously question whether killing oneself when necessary to help others is invariably a way to maximize the realization of one's communal nature. Even if it is granted that sacrificing one's life for another person is such a high "spike" in the expression of one's communal nature that one could not express more of it if one were instead to stay alive, U4 still suffers from an inherently egoistic factor. If one asks why one should help others, for example, this theory says that the basic justificatory reason to do so is that it will help *me* by making *me* more of a *mensch* or a better person. This will obviously be antithetical to the whole idea of communal harmony stressed as a necessity in African traditions.¹¹²

Hence, Metz offers U6 as a more promising theoretical formulation of an African moral theory. This is because as opposed to well-being or self-realization, this account of *Ubuntu* (U) posits certain relationships as constitutive of the good that a moral agent ought to promote. "What is right is what connects people together; what separates people is wrong."¹¹³ We can therefore elaborate U6 to mean that an African ought to act, as a matter of duty, only

¹¹¹ T. Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory*, pp.331-332.

¹¹² T. Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory*, pp.332.

¹¹³ T. Metz, *Toward an African Moral Theory*, p.334. It is also interesting to note the original effort of Mogobe B. Ramose, the way this has been considered by Binsbergen and the subsequent discussion of *Ubuntu* by Ramos and John A. I. Bewaji.

in ways that will establish, promote and sustain peaceful coexistence, harmony and equilibrium between him/her and other beings – visible and invisible – in the community. Thus, actions that ensure communal harmony are permissible while actions that cause discord are impermissible.

If there is anything inferable from our discourse so far, it is that first, there is an all-inclusive metaphysical notion of being in African traditions and, second, there is, by implication, an emphasis placed on communal harmony among beings in the community as a necessary and sufficient factor for survival. As expected, therefore, the primary goal of existence is to establish, maintain and sustain this communal harmony for the interest and welfare of both the community as a collective whole and individuals within the community as reflected in an African moral theory. Herein lies the justification of the concept of the good in African traditions: an all-inclusive notion of being invariably necessitates an ethic that places emphasis on togetherness and communalism. Ikuenobe puts it aptly,

This idea of harmony or the goal of maintaining harmony for the human good and well-being is the foundation for communalism, which implies the need to impose social {and moral} responsibilities on people in order to rationally perpetuate the relevant traditions and maintain harmony. So, maintaining harmony with the aid of the community is an essential human interest. The idea of pursuing and maintaining human welfare and interests is at the moral centre of communalism and the moral conception of personhood in African traditions. ...

As such, communalism prescribes that people should act in a way that would enhance their own interest within the framework of pursuing the goal of human well-being and welfare in the context of natural harmony in their communities.¹¹⁴

As Setiloane explains, if we have understood community in African traditions as inclusive of all lives, and that the success of life is found in the ability to maintain a healthy relationship with all, then, the moral imperative and contract, by implication, will be to

¹¹⁴ P. Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspective*, p.65.

maintain harmony in the community and to ensure its continuance. The cycle of ritual life is to sustain the wholeness of the community of human beings, nature and the elements.¹¹⁵

Thus, an African normative ethics is justifiable on the basis of the extent to which it allows for equilibrium and harmony among beings within the community. This is why acts such as violence, selfishness revenge, hatred, individualistic tendencies, and unhealthy competitiveness are regarded as impermissible because rather than promote a common essence among beings and fosters the ontological equilibrium, they disturb the equilibrium of the community. In this regard, Nel says,

An indecent act which destroys community life... will not be left unpunished in this world; retribution is not retained for the hereafter only. The moral imperative is co-habitual in the sense that it is part of the entire concept of being, part of a comprehensive community.¹¹⁶

In the words of Desmond Tutu,

Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague. Anger, resentment, lust for revenge, even success through aggressive competitiveness, are corrosive of this good.¹¹⁷

Thus, an all-inclusive metaphysical notion of being permeates the notion of the good in African traditions. The validity, interpretation and justification of the good is intrinsically linked to the extent to which such a good sustains and promotes unity in the structure of being.

One can thus state an African meta-ethics thus:

Every valid norm would by all means promote and sustain equilibrium and stability in the all-inclusive structure of beings united by a common essence, force. Norms that do not meet with this condition cannot be justified as moral.

¹¹⁵ G. Setiloane, Towards a Biocentric Theology and Ethics – via Africa, C. W. Du-Toit (Ed.), *Faith, Science, and African Culture: African Cosmology and Africa's Contribution to Science* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1998), p.79.

¹¹⁶ P. J. Nel, Morality and Religion in African Thought, *Acta Theologica* 2(2008): 46.

¹¹⁷ D. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), p.35.

African normative ethics, therefore, invariably places emphasis on a co-dependency ethos which, according to J. A. Aigbodioh, means that

communal life in Africa serves the purpose of inculcating in the minds of African persons the strong moral feeling of togetherness, mutual interdependence of individuals in the society and the realistic sense of confidence that the co-operation and sympathetic understanding of, and from, brothers and sisters are always at the disposal of everyone. This ethos, which defines the African human nature, is generally considered to be a source and a mark of strength, potency, might and unity rather than of weakness.¹¹⁸

Perhaps, this accounts for the reason why African ethics has been most aptly defined by a number of scholars as a social ethics with a humanistic undertone. However, accepting such a description of African ethics without any critical interrogation would mean being unfair to another group of scholars who view it as a religious ethics. It is important that we now turn to this debate.

BETWEEN A SOCIAL AND A RELIGIOUS ETHICS

Kwame Gyekye chants a predominant view of the nature of African ethics in these lines:

In the light of the relentless concern among the African people for the welfare of each member of the communal society, it would be appropriate to expect the ethics espoused in African societies to be a social ethics... A moral system that emphasizes concern for the well-being of every member of the society and should be distinguished from a system that emphasizes the interest and welfare of the individual to the (almost) total disregard of the interests of the others... [Thus] A list of moral values equated with the good in African societies will include kindness, compassion, generosity, hospitality, faithfulness, truthfulness, concern for others, and the action that brings peace, justice, dignity, respect and happiness.¹¹⁹

He adds that,

It would be more correct to say that African moral values derive from the experience of the people in living together or in trying to evolve a common and harmonious social life. That is, the moral values of the African people have a social and humanistic basis rather than a religious basis and are fashioned according to the people's own understanding of the nature of

¹¹⁸ J. A. Aigbodioh, *Stigmatization in African Communalistic Societies and Habermas' Theory of Rationality*, *Cultura: International Journal of the Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, 8-1 (2011): 30.

¹¹⁹ K. Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra, Ghana: Sankafa Publishers, 1996), pp.58-59.

human society, human relations, human goals and the meaning of human life.¹²⁰

In supports of this view, Kwasi Wiredu asserts that,

It has often been said that our traditional outlook was intensely humanistic. It seems to me that, as far as the basis of the traditional ethic is concerned, this claim is abundantly justified. Traditional thinking about the foundations of morality is refreshingly non-super naturalistic. Not that one can find in traditional sources elaborated theories of humanism. But anyone who reflects on our traditional ways of speaking about morality is bound to be struck by the pre-occupation with human welfare.¹²¹

The point made by these scholars and their friends is that there is nothing super-naturalistic about African ethics. It is rather humanistic, since it focuses primarily on human or communal welfare. The African moral system places a very strong emphasis on the good and well-being of every member of the community and therefore encourages and endorses moral norms that reflect communalistic values. And the obvious hermeneutical justification for this is that such a moral system ensures a much needed equilibrium and harmony among beings.

However, some scholars disagree with the above characterisation of the nature of African ethics as primordially social or humanistic. This camp of scholars argue that African moral system is rather one hinged on religion. The argument can be stated thus: If God or the Supreme Being is the origin and source of life, if he is the creator of all beings and energizes them with the force of life, then it follows logically that he is not only the source of man's conscience, but also the source of his sense of right and wrong.¹²² Based on this argument, these scholars have defended the view that religion is the source of morality in African traditions.

¹²⁰K. Gyekye, *African Cultural Values* p.57.

¹²¹ K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p.6.

¹²² S. Gbadagesin, *Yoruba Philosophy: Individuality, Community and the Moral Order*. E. C. Eze, (Ed.) *African Philosophy: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), pp.130-141.

It is easy to locate John Mbiti in this camp. Mbiti states it clearly that “God gave the moral order to people so that they might live happily and in harmony with one another.”¹²³ This is because Mbiti believes strongly that African life is religious in all spheres of living and ethics is only a special case of this religious orientation to life; all moral norms come from God. Bolaji Idowu has been in the forefront of advocating this religious view of morality. As he says,

Our own view is that morality is basically the fruit of religion and that, to begin with, it was dependent upon it. Man’s conception of deity has everything to do with what is taken to be the norm of morality... The sense of right and wrong by degree of God has always been part of human nature... Morality is the fruit of religion.¹²⁴

Although the claim that African ethics is social in nature can be argued out quite convincingly, it is yet difficult to deny the fact that traditional African communities were highly religious, due to an ontology that favours the presence of, and relationship with, supernatural/paranormal entities. The influence that such forces as the ancestors, divinities and the Supreme Being have on the existence of a person makes it difficult to ignore the arguments presented by those who conceive of the African moral system as religious. Thus, there is a heated and protracted debate between both camps on whether African ethics is social or religious. And the obvious route of this heated debate is the level of existence emphasised by each camp in the African structure of being. While the former group places gives primacy to the communalistic lifestyle in the visible social realm of existence, the later places emphasis on the influence of the paranormal on the life of the physically living.

¹²³ J. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Publishers, 1969), p.36. V. Y. Mudimbe, has accused Mbiti of over-Christianizing the issue of the effect of religion on morality in Africa in his: *The Invention of Africa: Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (London: James Currey, 1988)

¹²⁴ B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Press, 1966), pp.144-146. This view is also shared by A. Makinde, *African Philosophy, Culture and Traditional Medicine* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1988)

The debate is however resolvable once we take a holistic approach towards an African structure of being, rather than placing emphasis on one aspect rather than the other. In this way, the interplay of religion and humanism in the issue of morality becomes explicit. This is because even though it is arguable that the evidences generally point to a social ethics in an African tradition, we cannot at the same time disprove the fact that religion served as an effective means for *enforcing* such socially motivated moral norms. Elechi Amadi puts it aptly that in African cultures, religious beliefs helped,

... to enforce a moral standard acceptable to a particular society. A secular interpretation leads to the conclusion that moral precepts have always had their origin in the mind of man. Even when deities are said to have laid them down, they have had to do so through the mind of man. It would appear, then, that while man formulates the moral code, he enlists the influence of religion for its enforcement. In other words, *in ethics man proposes, god enforces*.¹²⁵

The structure of being within an African culture inevitably encourages a social ethics that emphasises communal well-being, and moral norms meant to ensure such well-being are enforced by means of supernatural forces which occupy a vital place in the community of beings. Religious consciousness in an African serves to ensure strict adherence to moral norms that will promote peaceful coexistence among beings in the community. Thus, while African moral system is social and humanistic, religion – the need to establish and sustain a harmonious relationship with supernatural forces – helped to promote a strict adherence by community members to such a system.

There is the even more significant, though less trodden, route of imputing to African ethics an individualistic foundation. The basis of such argument is the fact that contemporary African societies mirror largely extremes of individualism that has undermined the collectivist ethos that those who pontificate on African communalism or communitarianism

¹²⁵ E. Amadi, *Ethics in Nigerian Culture* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1982), p.6. The emphasis is mine.

would be able to wriggle out of, if there were to be a better way of understanding why African societies are underdeveloped. While this argument is not very popular, it is not without some justification, and Taiwo has been the advocate of this trend.¹²⁶

The argument advanced by followers of this light of thought is often construed by them as negating the humanistic, social or communalistic foundation of African ethics. But this would, on careful reflection, be shown not to have this kind of force, because, the fact that some members of a society are egotistical and individualistic in orientation does not mean that such leaning predominates or subsumes the collective way of understanding relationships. In fact, as argued here, neither this view, nor the view that religion is important in the construction of the moral fabric of African peoples, constitute enough ground to deny the communitarian or humanistic foundations of morality or social relations in African societies.

Indeed, it would seem to be clear from our reflections above that while African societies undertake reflective engagement of issues relating to interpersonal and social relations, they would not do so like idlers who suppose that such engagements are mere ends in themselves. It is this component of the reflection that constitutes the point of departure of ethical reflection in Africa. And emphasizing this critical point is the ontological basis of moral reflection that must make all philosophers question that basis of their detachment from the realities of their human predicament while pandering to the false notion of abstract objectivity or rationality, which supposes that there is the possibility of having a view from nowhere moderating the existence of human beings situated in various geo-cultural locations across the world¹²⁷.

¹²⁶ Olufemi Taiwo, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press. 2010.

¹²⁷ J. A. I. Bewaji, *Narratives of Struggle*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press. 2012.

CONCLUSION

It is not satisfactory enough to have a comprehensive account of a people's normative principles of morality. It is also very important that we keep abreast with the grounds of explanation and justification for such moral principles. This is the relationship between normative ethics and meta-ethics. The former presents us with prescriptive principles of actions while the later provides explanations and justifications for such principles. So far, we have examined the nature and structure of being obtainable in African cultures; we have also analysed the nature of African moral standards. What becomes evident from the foregoing is that African normative ethics with its emphasis on a co-dependency ethos can only be fully appreciated once we become conversant with the ontological principle that operates within an African community. The link between ethics and ontology in an African culture is thus not trivial but an intrinsic one. The African notion of the good cannot be conceived as separate from or independent of her notion of being. The African notion of being, due to its emphasis on a harmonious relationship and equilibrium among entities in the community, cannot help but invoke a normative ethics that emphasises a co-dependency ethos. A contrary normative ethics would certainly not be in consonance with such a notion of what it means to be.

TOWARDS AN AFRICAN RELATIONAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

Kevin Gary BEHRENS

INTRODUCTION

Many claim that African thought is essentially anthropocentric and is concerned only with moral obligations between persons and/or groups of persons.¹²⁸ On such a view, the only concern that African ethics would have for non-human nature or the environment would be to ensure that it is able to fulfil the needs of humans. Nature would seemingly have no value apart from its instrumental value for persons.

I question the assumption that African thought is inherently anthropocentric. In accounts of an African worldview, a strong, repeated theme is a belief that everything in nature is inter-related. Persons are seen as part of nature, not distinct from it. All living things are conceived of as being part of a single web or fabric of life. They are all mutually inter-dependent and share the common characteristic of being bearers of a vital or life force. This can plausibly be taken to entail that non-human natural objects are morally considerable.

On many accounts of African ethics, true personhood, or authentic being, is only achieved by promoting harmonious communal relationships, identifying with others, sharing their way of life, through mutual care and solidarity. I argue that this essentially relational ethic can be taken to extend beyond persons and include other entities that form part of the web of life. Given the sense in which the African moral community is typically understood to include ancestors, the living and future generations, I claim that these notions entail a African Relational Environmental Ethic, which I elicit in this chapter.

¹²⁸ See for instance J. B. Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), and K. Horsthemke (n.d.). *Animals, Ubuntu and Environmental Justice in South Africa*. Unpublished paper.

SCEPTICISM ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF AN AFRICAN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC

Environmental ethicists have often drawn on non-Western traditions in an attempt to enrich the discourse about environmental values and ecophilosophy. Yet, Kelbessa claims that, whilst the indigenous environmental ethics of many of the world's peoples has been given significant attention, relatively little has been made of African thought with respect to the environment.

Those who have studied non-Western religions and philosophies... have overlooked the contribution of Africa to environmental ethics. They have either kept quiet or what they said about Africa was rather thin compared to what they said about Native Americans, Asians and Australian Aborigines¹²⁹.

It is likely true that this can—in part, at least—be put down to a general scepticism about, and possibly even contempt for, the very possibility of the existence of African philosophy.¹³⁰ However, in addition to this general and unfair disregard for African philosophy, there has been a strong presumption that African thought is inherently

¹²⁹ W. Kelbessa, *The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Africa*, *Diogenes* 52 (2005): 19-20. It is also true that, until quite recently, very few sub-Saharan African theorists, themselves, had seriously addressed the implications of indigenous African thought and values for environmental ethics

¹³⁰ See G. W. Burnett, and K. waKang'ethe, *Wilderness and the Bantu Mind*, *Environmental Ethics* 16 (1994): 146; M. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Press, 1999), p. 2; and W. Kelbessa, *The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Africa*, p.21.

anthropocentric – fundamentally, if not completely, focussed on human interests. Since environmental ethics has been characterised by a fairly comprehensive rejection of strong anthropocentrism¹³¹, it is understandable that this presumption would lead to commentators concluding that African thought has little to contribute to environmental ethics.

This presumption of anthropocentrism is well-illustrated by Callicott's judgment about the potential for an African ecophilosophy. In his book surveying the ecological ethical traditions of various communities around the world, *Earth's Insights*, he claims that '...mention of African culture evokes no thoughts of indigenous environmental ethics'¹³²and

Apparently... Africa looms as a big blank spot on the world map of indigenous environmental ethics for a very good reason. African thought orbits, seemingly, around human interests. Hence one might expect to distil from it no more than a weak and indirect environmental ethic, similar to [a] type of ecologically enlightened utilitarianism, focused on long-range human welfare.¹³³

Callicott's suggestion that African thought is essentially concerned with human interests can seem *prima facie* plausible, because many accounts of African morality do place a great deal of emphasis on human and community relationships. Onah, for example, explicitly describes the morality of African traditional religion as anthropocentric:

Two things can therefore be said of the traditional world-view of the Africans, namely, that it is permeated by the spirit and that it is anthropocentric... It is anthropocentric because the actions of God and the other spiritual beings are

¹³¹ See Andrew Light, Contemporary Environmental Ethics, *Metaphilosophy* 33 (2002): 429.

¹³² J. B. Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 156.

¹³³ *Ibid*, p.158

generally directed towards humans for their sustenance and well-being; and infra-human realities are thought to be ordered towards the promotion of human life.¹³⁴

Bujo also describes African ethics as ‘primarily anthropocentric’.¹³⁵ Mbiti claims: “It is as if the whole world exists for man’s sake. Therefore African people look for the usefulness (or otherwise) of the universe to man. This means both what the world can do for man, and how man can use the world for his own good”.¹³⁶

Taken alone and at face value these descriptions of African thought appear to justify Callicott’s judgement. However, I want to defend the claim that it would be wrong to conclude that African thought is inherently anthropocentric, too hastily. I will argue that there are many sub-Saharan themes and conceptions that regard non-human nature as morally considerable and that emphasise a moral obligation to treat nature with respect, as well as to promote harmonious relationships between humans and other natural entities.

There can be little doubt that traditional expressions of African ethics do place a great deal of emphasis on human well-being and relationships, but, this should not be taken to be an exclusive focus on anthropocentric concerns. In addition to these seemingly anthropocentric claims, there is also a very strong emphasis on the idea that all of nature is inter-related, and that we ought to live in harmony with the rest of nature. These notions would clearly be able to ground an African ethic of environmental concern.

¹³⁴ G. Onah (n. d.), *The Meaning of Peace in African Traditional Religion and Culture*. Available from <http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/goddionah.htm> (Accessed 12 April 2009). Section 1.

¹³⁵ B. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1998), p. 25

¹³⁶ J. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 38.

Before seeking to justify my claim that there are prominent African conceptions that are non-anthropocentric and require respect for nature, I need to provide more of an explanation for why African thought has so often been assumed to be strongly anthropocentric. There are a number of possible reasons for this. I have already alluded to an historical prejudice with respect to African philosophy in general. But, in addition to this, it is likely that some confusion has arisen because the term ‘anthropocentrism’ can be used in different senses. Many of the earlier accounts of African belief, written by Westerners and their African protégés, many of whom were Christian apologists, mistook a seeming lack of evidence of overt worship of a monotheistic God by indigenous groups as an indication that Africans were godless.¹³⁷ Because these early commentators regarded African religion as ‘primitive’ animism, they were inclined to hastily conclude that Africans did not believe in a supreme deity.

These conclusions have subsequently been shown to have been erroneous¹³⁸. But, in an age in which anthropocentrism was understood as essentially the opposite of theo-centrism or theism, African thought was labelled as being essentially anthropocentric. In environmental ethical discourse today, anthropocentrism is not contrasted with theism. It is a term that is used to describe worldviews in which only humans are taken to be morally considerable, in which only human interests count or in which human interests always trump those of other natural entities. This is not what early Christian commentators meant when they argued that African thought was anthropocentric. It is possible that the label of

¹³⁷ G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*. (London: Hutchinson’s University Library, 1975), p. 214.

¹³⁸ J. A. I. Bewaji, “Olodumare, God – God in Yoruba belief and the concept of Evil”, *African Studies Quarterly*. 1998 and *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Hope Publications. 2007..

anthropocentrism has stuck to African thought, even though the term itself is used in a very different sense by environmental ethicists today.

Another reason that African thought has been assumed to be inherently anthropocentric might be attributable to commentators' simply not being aware of certain aspects of African worldviews. There is little doubt that there is a very strong emphasis on human interests and well-being in African thought. But this would only constitute strong anthropocentrism if it were the only emphasis. Western theorists, such as Callicott, might simply not have had access to evidence of non-anthropocentric values in African cultures in the sources available to them at the time. Many of the sources I use to defend my claim that there are strong traditions in African thought that stress the fundamental inter-relatedness of nature and the necessity to treat nature with respect have been published relatively recently. It is possible that this is an aspect of indigenous African belief that has only begun to make its way into the written account in more recent times.

AN AFRICAN ENVIRONMENTALISM GROUNDED IN INTER-RELATEDNESS

Having given an account of some of the reasons why various African thought systems have often been assumed to be anthropocentric and lacking in an ecophilosophy, I now turn to the literature to defend my claim that there are indigenous African theoretical notions which can underpin an environmental ethic, because these have been based on traditional views which intrinsically respect all things in nature.

One very strong notion that recurs in the writings of African theorists is a claim that all of nature is inter-connected. When discussing how traditional Africans understand nature, this notion of a fundamental inter-relatedness of all parts of the natural and the supernatural worlds almost invariably comes to the fore. Sindima writes that Africans

emphasise ‘...the bondedness, the interconnectedness, of all living beings’.¹³⁹ Tangwa speaks of a ‘...recognition and acceptance of interdependence and peaceful coexistence between earth, plants, animals and humans’.¹⁴⁰ Bujo claims: ‘The African is convinced that all things in the cosmos are interconnected’.¹⁴¹ Murove asserts that ‘...human well-being is indispensable from our dependence on and interdependence with all that exists, and particularly with the immediate environment on which all humanity depends’.¹⁴²

This may seem to be little more than a basic observation of fact; that nature is a system, the parts of which are mutually interdependent in various ways. Indeed, this would be consistent with the conclusions of modern ecologists. But, this African notion of interdependence is more than just a statement of how things are in the world. It is frequently cited as the reason for caring for nature. Nonetheless, going by the proponents of the view we are repudiating, it could also be nothing more than a weakly anthropocentric, that is, selfish human interested, basis for preserving nature for the gratification of human needs, not out of intrinsic respect for nature itself. Since the claim suggests that human well-being is directly affected by the condition of other parts of nature, there would be obvious grounds for treating other parts of the natural environment well, even if only, ultimately, for the good of humans.

There is no doubt that this is part of what is understood to be implied by this basic sense of inter-relatedness. Bujo writes that ‘...people should become aware of the fragile

¹³⁹ H. Sindima, *Community of Life*, in Charles Birch, William Eaken and Jay McDaniel (Eds.), *Liberating Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), p. 137.

¹⁴⁰ G. Tangwa, *Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics*, in Kwasi Wiredu (Ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), p. 389.

¹⁴¹ B. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1998), p. 22-23.

¹⁴² M. F. Murove, *An African Commitment to Ecological Conservation: The Shona Concepts of Ukama and Ubuntu*, *Mankind Quarterly* XLV (2004): 195-6.

nature of their human existence.... [H]uman existence could break down if the cosmos is neglected'.¹⁴³ But, this still does not fully explain how interdependence is understood. There is also a strong emphasis on the need to *treat nature with respect*, because we are so interconnected with it. Bujo claims that humankind has '...the task of showing *respect* for creation and liberating it from slavery and "corruptibility"'.¹⁴⁴ Opoku says, 'There is community with nature since man is part of nature and is expected to cooperate with it; and this sense of community with nature is often expressed in terms of identity and kinship, friendliness and *respect*'.¹⁴⁵ Kelbessa writes that African thought

..does not allow irresponsible and unlimited exploitation of resources and human beings... It reflects deep *respect* and balance between various things.... [J]ustice, integrity and *respect* as human virtues [are not only] applicable to human beings but they extend them to nonhuman species and mother Earth.¹⁴⁶

The language used by these African authors suggests the necessity of having an attitude of respect towards nature as a good of its own, not just preserving nature for the ultimate good of persons. This is not merely a matter of respecting the processes of nature, instrumentally, as a means of ensuring human well-being. The notion of the interrelatedness of all natural things is taken as providing grounds for a moral obligation to treat nature with respect.

¹⁴³ B. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community* p. 212.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 214.

¹⁴⁵ K. Opoku, African Traditional Religion: An Enduring Heritage, in Jacob Olupona and Sulayman Nyang (Eds.), *Religious Plurality in Africa* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993), p. 77.

¹⁴⁶ W. Kelbessa, *The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Africa*, p. 24. Italics in the last four quotations are mine

What is particularly significant is that this notion of inter-relatedness or inter-dependence is often taken to ground a particular kind of moral obligation. What at first might be thought to be an ontological or even metaphysical claim about the inter-relatedness of all natural things is frequently presented as having a normative thrust. It is not easy to explain how the fact of inter-dependence is meant to do the work of entailing a moral obligation to respect nature. But, the key to understanding this can be found by considering how African theorists often, in a similar way, ground human moral obligations towards other humans in inter-dependence. In his classical account of *Ubuntu*, Tutu writes:

[*Ubuntu*] speaks to the very essence of being human.... It ... means my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life.... Harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us... the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought after good is to be avoided like the plague.¹⁴⁷

The essence of this moral system, in which harmony, friendliness and a sense of community are prized, is a sense that we are all in this business of living together. Any individual's well-being is intimately tied up with the well-being of others. Because we are all in this together, because our good cannot be achieved without achieving the good of others, we should seek the good not just of ourselves, but always also of others too. Since the greatest good is harmony, we ought to behave in ways that promote harmony and eschew disharmony. Masolo, who understands personhood as the degree to which individuals are morally virtuous, suggests that it is only through co-operation with others that we become

¹⁴⁷ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 34-5.

moral beings. Indeed the very essence of morality is co-operation, based on the recognition that our well-being is tied up with the well-being of others. As Masolo explains,

This process of depending on others for the tools that enable us to associate with them on a growing scale of competence is the process that makes us into persons. In other words, we become persons through acquiring and participating in the socially generated knowledge of norms and actions we learn to live by in order to impose humaneness on our humanness.¹⁴⁸

The notion that we are inter-dependent, that our well-being is tied up with the well-being of others and that we are obliged to co-operate and seek harmonious and friendly relationships with others is often expressed as being analogous to family relationships. Wiredu writes that ‘African societies are founded on kinship relations...’,¹⁴⁹ and Shutte claims that the family is the best model of community in African thought. ‘The family has no function outside of itself. It is a means of growth for its members, and the interaction, the companionship and conversation, between the growing and fully grown members is also an end in itself’.¹⁵⁰ Oruka and Juma claim that family members look after one another because they acknowledge that their security and welfare is bound up with that of the rest of the family. For this reason, Africans believe that they ought to help other members of their family when they are in need. The ‘...life conditions of any member of the family affect all the others materially and emotionally, so no member can be proud of his or her situation

¹⁴⁸ D. A. Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 155.

¹⁴⁹ K. Wiredu, Social Philosophy in Postcolonial Africa. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 27 (2008): 333.

¹⁵⁰ A. Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa*. (Rondebosch: UCT Press, 1993), p. 50.

however “happy”, if any member of the family tree lives in squalor’.¹⁵¹ This entails sharing possessions and wealth: ‘Why, for example, would we not see it as senseless that an individual member of a family would want to do anything she wishes with her possessions, while a member of her kith and kin may be in desperate need of help?’.¹⁵² The model of the family works to provide grounds for why the fact of inter-dependence is understood as imposing obligations on us to care for one another, look out for the good of others and promote relationships of harmony, friendliness and mutual care.

In the end it comes down to a claim that our well-being is tied up with that of others. So, we are all in this together, and because we are, we are required to consider the needs of others and co-operate with them. Indeed, the claim might be taken to be that the very basis of any sense of morality whatsoever lies in the realisation that what any one of us does affects others, just as what others do affects us, individually. On this basis, I cannot act merely in my own interests: others are entitled to expect me to take them into account, just as I am entitled to expect them to take me into account. This is the essence of co-operation, and the basis of morality. This explains why it is harmony that is the greatest good for many Africans. What is most important is that we act in ways that promote the good of us all, through seeing ourselves as part of community, or as part of an extended family.

I have already argued that many African philosophers speak of a fundamental sense of inter-relatedness not just between persons, but also between humans and the rest of nature. Just as inter-dependence is taken to entail a moral obligation to seek harmonious relationships of solidarity, friendliness and mutual co-operation with other humans, it is similarly taken to

¹⁵¹ H. O. Oruka, and C. Juma, *Ecophilosophy and Parental Earth Ethics*, in Henry Odera Oruka (Ed.), *Philosophy, Humanity and Ecology* (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1994), p. 124.

¹⁵²*Ibid.* p. 125

entail that we have obligations to seek harmony with the rest of nature. Oruka and Juma speak of a 'Parental Earth Ethics', in which they extend the model of a family to include the whole of nature: 'We hope it is clear that the earth or the world is a kind of family unit in which the members have kith and kin relationship with one another'.¹⁵³ Opoku specifically speaks in terms of harmony with nature, claiming that Africans regard it as important to remain '...on harmonious terms with nature instead of living in isolation from nature or treating nature as a mere object of exploitation for the satisfaction of human needs. Remaining in harmony with nature also means preserving nature'.¹⁵⁴ Kelbessa also claims that we should seek harmonious relationships with the rest of nature, arguing '...that human beings should live in harmony with all other creatures in the natural environment' and seek a '...positive relation between individuals, humans and the natural environment'.¹⁵⁵

What I have sought to achieve so far is to counter the presumption that African intellectual heritage is so strongly anthropocentric that it cannot have anything to contribute to environmental ethics. I have highlighted a strong, recurrent claim made by African theorists that all of nature is inter-related and, that because of this, we have a moral obligation to treat nature with respect and to seek harmonious relationships with nature. I have explained how the fact of inter-relatedness is understood to have normative content: since we are all in the business of life together, since our well-being is tied up with that of others (including that of non-human nature), we need to take into account the interests of other parts of nature, because we rely on them for our well-being, and we have an impact on their well-being. I have argued that analogously to a family, in which the members recognise their inter-dependence and seek

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 125-6

¹⁵⁴ K. Opoku, *African Traditional Religion: An Enduring Heritage*, p. 77.

¹⁵⁵ W. Kelbessa, *The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Africa*, p. 25.

the good of one another, as a result, so should we recognise our inter-dependence with nature, and seek to treat nature respectfully and promote harmonious relationships with nature. What ought to be clear by now, is that this African notion of ethics is essentially relational. What counts is harmony, solidarity, friendliness and a sense of being bound up together, mutually interdependent and mutually responsible for our collective well-being. Given the essentially relational nature of an ethic grounded in these African themes, I refer to this position as African relational environmentalism.

MORAL CONSIDERABILITY AND AFRICAN RELATIONAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

Having defended the claim that African thought has a contribution to make to environmental ethics, and that there are prominent African conceptions that entail treating nature with respect and living in harmony with the rest of nature, I now need to address the question of exactly which sorts of entities are included in the ‘family’ or community of nature. If we are required to seek harmonious relationships with other natural entities, which entities are we talking about? Would an African environmentalism include only other sentient beings? Or would it include all living beings, such as Western biocentrism does? Or would an African approach to the environment focus more on wholes, such as species and ecosystems, and the whole biosphere, such as Western holism does? The question I wish to answer is: what kinds of entities can be said to be morally considerable? What kinds of things can we include in the circle of entities towards which have direct moral obligations?

All I am trying to establish is what sorts of things an African environmentalism would likely consider as being morally considerable, at all. This is a distinct project from that of trying to establish the relative degree of moral status various morally considerable entities have with respect to each other. Y. S. Lo distinguishes between these concepts as follows:

In the literature of environmental philosophy, the notion moral considerability is quite often used interchangeably with the notion of moral value. But the two notions are *not* exactly the same. Moral value is something that ought to be protected and/or promoted. But to say that something has moral considerability is to say that its existence, well-being, interest, preference, and/or some other aspect of it ought to be directly (rather than derivatively) given positive weight in our moral deliberation about actions that are likely to affect it. Hence, while things of moral value are morally considerable, it is not necessarily the other way round.¹⁵⁶

Following Lo, I use the phrase ‘moral considerability’ simply to denote that an entity is something we need to take into account morally, setting aside the more complex issue of differing degrees of moral status or moral value amongst morally considerable things.

I turn now to African authors, themselves, to see what their work suggests about what sorts of entities are morally considerable. I begin by simply trying to identify the various entities that African theorists regard as morally considerable. Sindima claims that the African way of seeing the world is ‘...a life-centred way, since it stresses the bondedness, the interconnectedness, of all living beings’.¹⁵⁷ This would seem to suggest that African thought might be similar to Western biocentrism, regarding all living beings as morally considerable. But, this does not go far enough. Bujo claims: ‘All beings in the universe possess vital force of their own: human, animal, vegetable, or inanimate’.¹⁵⁸ This notion of life force or vital

¹⁵⁶ Y. Lo, *The Land Ethic and Callicott’s Ethical System (1980–2001): An Overview and Critique.*” *Inquiry* 44 (2001): 355.

¹⁵⁷ H. Sindima, *Community of Life*, p. 137.

¹⁵⁸ B. Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community* p. 209.

force is appealed to by many African theorists, although it is a rather contentious and disputed conception.

Without needing to go into the debate about this, it is sufficient for my argument merely to highlight that the idea that all of these beings or entities can be said to have some kind of life force can be understood as a metaphysical expression of the idea that they are morally considerable. If so, then perhaps an African environmental ethic would regard not only all living beings as morally considerable, but would also include some inanimate entities. Indeed this notion is backed up by Shutte:

The African conception of life includes both the physical and the spiritual. And it applies to everything. Stones are alive as well as animals. The difference is that animals have more life-force than stones, and we have more than animals... So the universe can be seen as a graded system of life-force, emanating from the source of all force, God, and then going from the strongest, the ancestors who have died and the heads of clans and families, to the weakest, animals and material objects.¹⁵⁹

Now, it appears as if we might need to include in the ambit of the morally considerable not only all living things, but also some inanimate natural things, as well as spiritual beings.

Since the focus of my enquiry into African thought relates to environmental ethics, and the contribution African conceptions can make to ecophilosophy, I can set aside claims about spiritual entities such as God and ancestors being morally considerable. Whether they are valid claims or not is not particularly relevant here – the supernatural is outside of the scope of my concern. Setting the supernatural aside, then, these African theorists I have been

¹⁵⁹A. Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa*, p. 22.

referring to still suggest that it is not only all living beings (plants and animals) that are morally considerable - there are also inanimate natural objects, such as stones and other material objects that we should consider as morally significant. Indeed just as certain animals, identified as totems, may be treated with special reverence by a community, so too certain rivers, trees, mountains and forests may be revered, or thought of as being inhabited by a spirit.¹⁶⁰ So, it would seem that an African understanding of moral considerability could include not just all living things, but even certain inanimate natural things (rivers, rocks, mountains) in the scope of what is morally considerable.

So far, it could seem as though African thought is essentially an individualist approach, ascribing moral considerability only to individual entities or beings. This would then distinguish it from holist positions, in which wholes such as ecosystems, species, natural habitats, and the biosphere itself are regarded as morally considerable. However, given the strong communitarian emphasis in much African thought, and the value placed on belonging to a family, a clan, a tribe or community, it hardly seems likely that African thought would not recognise the moral considerability of other species, as species, or ecosystems as ecosystems, and the like. Just as humans recognise their own interests in perpetuating their own family line, so they should recognise the interests of other species in perpetuating their own. Kelbessa hints at this when he discusses some of the beliefs of the Oromo people with respect to the value of species:

The Oromo do not merely focus on creatures that have economic importance but they also pay attention to other species as valuable in and of themselves.

Sacred groves have symbolic meanings. Similarly, certain wild animals are looked upon as symbols of unity and have religious significance... The

¹⁶⁰ M. F. Murove, *An African Commitment to Ecological Conservation*, p. 201-2.

important principle arising from Oromo wildlife management is that it is morally wrong to totally destroy a species and that humans should live in harmony with other creatures.¹⁶¹

Given the fundamental importance the Oromo people, as shown above, place on community, it is reasonable to assume that African's would regard wholes such as species and ecosystems as morally considerable, just as they would regard a clan or community of persons as morally considerable as a collective entity.

Once again setting aside supernatural entities, African thought suggests that we should regard as morally considerable all living entities, some inanimate natural entities (such as rivers and mountain ranges) as well as groups of natural entities such as species and ecosystems. But, how plausible is it to do so? Western biocentrists have provided strong defences of why all living things should be regarded as morally considerable. Their holist counterparts have equally strongly defended the moral considerability of species and other natural wholes. Since there is a significant body of literature devoted to this, I will not seek to justify the plausibility of including all of these entities as morally considerable here. What is far more contentious, because it is not obvious as such, is the notion that, somehow, certain inanimate natural objects are also morally considerable. It is often thought that only things that can be harmed can be morally considerable. And since it is difficult to see how a river or a mountain can be harmed, it is reasonable to wonder how these entities can be morally considerable. Yet, it is not unusual for us to use phrases such as 'the mining operation will

¹⁶¹W. Kelbessa, *The Rehabilitation of Indigenous Environmental Ethics in Africa*, p. 24.

scar the landscape’, or ‘pollution from the factory has harmed the river’ or even that ‘emissions have damaged the atmosphere’.

We do quite often ascribe something akin to organism status to certain kinds of inanimate natural objects. What we really mean, of course, is that other entities dependent upon the river or the atmosphere will ultimately be harmed as a result of what we have done to the river or atmosphere etc. Nonetheless, there is something attractive about the notion that inanimate natural things upon which many other living things depend for their survival ought to be morally considerable, too. Although it makes no difference to a river whether it is polluted or pristine, it makes a significant difference to many other morally considerable entities. On these grounds, we might as well regard the river itself as morally considerable because of the important systemic role it plays in the well-being of so many other morally considerable entities.

Assuming then that it is plausible enough to include all living entities, natural wholes such as ecosystems, habitats and species, as well as inanimate natural entities (such as rivers and mountains) with the ambit of moral considerability, we still need to ask what the basis is for granting such status to all of these entities. As I have claimed before, many African theorists come back to the notion of the inter-relatedness or inter-connectedness of all things in nature as the fundamental reason for treating them with respect. Sindima associates the notion of inter-dependence with life-centredness:

...the African understanding of the world is life-centred. For the African, life is the primary category for self-understanding and provides the basic framework for any interpretation of the world, persons, nature or divinity.... Part of the very process of life involves a tendency toward self-transcendence, which itself aims for *umunthu*, or the fullness of life. In the human sphere the

process of life achieves fullness when humans are richly connected to other people, other creatures and to the earth itself. Humans realize their own fullness by realizing the bondedness of life.¹⁶²

The claim here seems to be that it is life that is the basis for moral considerability, but life is not something each individual thing possesses so much as something that is somehow shared through our bondedness. Western individualist biocentrists also claim that it is life that grants an entity moral considerability. But, their understanding of life is more atomistic, something possessed by individual living things.

Sindima provides a clue to how Africans see life as something shared rather than possessed by individuals when he explains the ‘African vision of inter-relatedness and bondedness with nature’,¹⁶³ as follows, ‘...nature and persons are one, woven by creation into one texture or fabric of life, a fabric or web characterized by an interdependence between all creatures’.¹⁶⁴ Similarly, Oruka and Juma

...postulate pan-organism as the basic truth underlying all nature... [This] means that all aspects of nature are interconnected, so that the ecological activities are a network. So a break or imbalance in one aspect has serious consequences in other aspects of the domain.¹⁶⁵

This notion of life as a single texture, a web or a fabric of inter-dependent, inter-related entities provides an attractive construct for understanding moral considerability. It is not just each individual living organism that counts morally, it is the web of life itself, with

¹⁶²H. Sindima, *Community of Life*, p. 143.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵H. O. Oruka, and C. Juma, *Ecophilosophy and Parental Earth Ethics*, p. 122.

all of its complex interactions. What is morally considerable is anything that is part of this complex web of life. Thus, it is possible to include communities, families, species and ecosystems as morally considerable. It is also possible to include rivers, mountains, forests, ocean currents, winds and even the atmosphere as morally considerable because they are natural things that play a systemically important role in the flourishing of other (inanimate) natural objects.

THE MORAL CONSIDERABILITY OF FUTURE GENERATIONS

A web of life criterion for moral considerability holds much promise for environmental ethics, because it is able to include within the circle of moral considerability entities entailed by both individualist and holist perspectives. It is also able to grant moral considerability to inanimate natural entities that play a systemically important role in the thriving of other living things. Yet, the picture remains incomplete, because I have not yet addressed the question of the moral considerability of future generations.

A characteristic of many environmental issues is that they span generations. Much of the harm the present generation may cause to the environment will have an impact on the lives of members of future generations. When our actions cause the extinction of species, future generations are robbed of those species; when our lifestyles cause watercourses to be polluted, or cause the destruction of forests, or turn wilderness into cityscapes, the effects of our actions may be felt by many generations to come.

Nowhere is this more obviously the case than with the problem of global climate change. Assuming that a significant degree of the recent warming of the earth has been caused by greenhouse gas emissions, and assuming that the global climate models are correct in predicting major changes in weather patterns, rainfall distribution, rising sea levels, etc. our current action or inaction in terms of reducing the causes of global climate change could

have drastic consequences for future generations of people. This realisation has been at the bottom of a recent surge of interest in the question of inter-generational environmental justice. Since our actions in the present will have such a profound effect on the lives of many generations in the future, what, if any, moral obligations do we have towards them? Is it at all reasonable to think that we might need to take potential future people into account in our moral deliberations?¹⁶⁶

Western theorists have begun to engage with these issues earnestly in recent years, especially in the light of growing concerns about the implications of climate change. Thus, environmental ethics is no longer only concerned about whether species other than humans and other natural entities are morally considerable, it has now also been forced to address the temporal issue of moral obligations towards future generations. Are they morally considerable, too?

Philosophers have pointed out that the notion of moral obligations to future generations is fraught with many theoretical problems. For instance, future persons do not actually exist yet. Is it at all meaningful to think that we have duties to things that don't exist? Since we cannot know exactly who future people will be, or what exactly their needs will be, how can we know how to properly take them into consideration? Future people also cannot reciprocate any provisions we might make on their behalf. Is it fair to expect this generation to take future generations into account, if they cannot do the same for us? These

¹⁶⁶ Of course, it is possible that not only future persons are morally considerable, and that future generations of non-human organisms might also need to be taken into account in our moral reasoning. However, for my purposes in this paper it will suffice to defend a claim that future persons are morally considerable.

and a number of related theoretical concerns are still being debated by theorists in the West¹⁶⁷.

It is interesting that whilst Western thinkers have struggled to make sense of moral obligations to future generations, some African writers suggest that it is almost a non-question in African thought, as the perspective of African traditions which privilege our interconnectedness demand that we respect the existence of generations unborn and do all that is necessary to ensure their capacity for successful realization of their wellbeing and potential. Murove expresses a sense of inter-generational moral obligation, associating it with the widespread belief in the continued presence of the ancestors, or recent dead:

The ethical aspiration of doing good beyond the grave is... an ethical ideal [that] can be discerned in the... notion of ancestorhood – a notion that is mainly based on the conviction that there is solidarity between the past, present and the future.¹⁶⁸

For Murove, this entails taking future generations into account as ‘...an investment in the future.... This observation implies that future existence is basically an extension of the present because that which will happen in the future is partly happening in the present...’¹⁶⁹

Amuluche Nnamani suggests that future people are part of the ‘moral community’, which he describes as ‘...all those who have the world as their common patrimony, with duties to preserve it and rights to be sustained by it’¹⁷⁰ The earth is shared in common with ancestors,

¹⁶⁷ For a comprehensive discussion of these theoretical problems associated with moral obligations towards future generations, see Ernest Partridge. *Future Generations*, in Daniel VanDeVeer and Christine Pierce (Eds.), *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003), p. 429.

¹⁶⁸ M. F. Murove, *An African Commitment to Ecological Conservation*, p. 184.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ A. Nnamani, *Ethics of the Environment*. in Pantaleon Iroegbu and Anthony Echekwube (Eds.), *Kpim of Morality: Ethics* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 2005), p.396

the current generations and future generations ‘...bonded together with duties and rights in the mother earth’.¹⁷¹ And Wiredu writes:

Of all the duties owed to the ancestors none is more imperious than that of husbanding the resources of the land so as to leave it in good shape for posterity. In this moral scheme the rights of the unborn play such a cardinal role that any traditional African would be nonplussed by the debate in Western philosophy as to the existence of such rights. In upshot there is a two-sided concept of stewardship in the management of the environment involving obligations to both ancestors and descendants which motivates environmental carefulness, all things being equal.¹⁷²

Although this sense of inter-generational moral obligation is closely associated with belief in the ancestors for these writers, it is not necessary to take on the metaphysical beliefs in the continued presence of ancestors for the moral claim to be plausible. The two fundamental notions at work here are simply that, firstly, the environment is an inheritance that is shared across generations, and should therefore be preserved as far as possible, and, secondly, that we ought to honour the memory of those who left us an environment capable of preserving our lives by ensuring that we do the same for our descendants. Both of these conceptions can make sense even to those who do not hold some of the metaphysical beliefs about ancestors held by many Africans. I turn now to trying to show that these are, in fact, quite plausible grounds for thinking that we do have moral obligations to future people.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² K. Wiredu, *Philosophy, Humankind and the Environment*, in Henry Odera Orika (Ed.), *Philosophy, Humanity and Ecology* (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1994), p. 46.

The first of the notions entails a direct obligation towards future generations. The essential claim is that the environment is not the possession of the current generation, allowing the living to treat it in any way they choose. Rather, it is an inheritance held in common between generations. Matthew Izibili suggests that we ought to conceive of the natural environment as a kind of mortgage. It is not owned by any generation, but more like something on loan. Thus, we ought to ensure that we pass on a natural environment to our descendants; that is, in at least as good a condition as it was when we received it.¹⁷³

This correlates well with traditional African notions of communal land ownership. Land belongs not to individuals but rather to groups, to a clan or community. In much the same way, the natural environment belongs to the community, not individuals. And, the community is understood as including past and future generations, not just the living. The environment, then, is a resource shared across generations. As with any shared resource, we have moral responsibilities towards those who share the resource with us with respect to our use and treatment of the resource.

The second notion entails an indirect moral obligation to future generations. It is notable that Wiredu understands the obligation to preserve the environment for the future as an obligation to the ancestors or previous generations. What seems to be at work here is an obligation based on gratitude to those who have preserved the environment for us. In gratefully recognising that our predecessors took care of the environment on our behalf, we ought to express that gratitude by doing the same on behalf of posterity. This might best be understood in terms of developing an attitude of gratefulness, or a virtue of gratitude, which compels us to seek to be as considerate to the next generation as the previous generation has

¹⁷³ M. A. Izibili, *Environmental Ethics: An Urgent Imperative*, in Pantaleon Iroegbu and Anthony Echekwube (Eds.), *Kpim of Morality: Ethics* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 2005), p. 383.

been towards us. This idea is interestingly supported by at least one Western philosopher, Daniel Callahan, who writes:

That we exist at all puts us in debt to those who conceived us – our parents – and in debt to the society in which we were born, without which we might have been conceived but could not have survived (for our parents were not sufficient unto themselves). We could not exist had not someone and some society taken some responsibility for our welfare¹⁷⁴.

He goes on to suggest that this debt to our predecessors entails an obligation to ensure that future generations also inherit a world capable of providing for their needs.¹⁷⁵

Western thought has been characterised by John O’Neill as suffering from a ...temporal myopia that infects modern society. The question of obligations to future generations is posed in terms of abstract obligations to possible future people who are strangers to us. The argument is premised on the lack of a sense of continuity of the present with both the past and the future¹⁷⁶.

No such myopia seems to exist in African thought. A moral obligation to preserve the natural environment for future generations is regarded as obvious, with clear moral implications regarding environmental harms that will affect future generations of people.

¹⁷⁴ D. Callahan What Obligations do We have to Future Generations? In Ernest Partridge (Ed.), *Responsibilities to Future Generations* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1981), p. 77.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ J. O’Neill, Future Generations: Present Harms, *Philosophy* 68 (1993): 46.

CONCLUSION

There are rich resources to be found in African intellectual traditions and philosophy which can deepen and enrich our ethical thinking about the environment. The focus on inter-relatedness grounds a moral obligation to take other natural entities into account, to respect them and to promote harmonious relationships with them. What distinguishes this approach from more familiar Western views is the focus on relationality and solidarity. It is because our well-being is so tied up with the well-being of other living and non-living things that we are obliged to take them into consideration. Furthermore, because life is not just something each individual organism possesses, but is a fabric or web of inter-connected life, all things that form part of this web, including individual living organisms, natural groups such as ecosystems and species, and even inanimate natural entities that play an important systemic role in the well-being of other living things (such as rivers and forests), can be said to be morally considerable.

Finally, moral considerability is not confined to the present generation. Because the environment is a resource shared across generations, and because we ought to honour our ancestors who preserved the environment on our behalf, we are morally obliged to take future generations into consideration too. Contrary to the view that African thought has little to contribute to environmental ethics, an African relational environmentalism could provide a very plausible and attractive alternative to existing Western ecophilosophies.

THE ETHICAL IMPORT IN AFRICAN METAPHYSICS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE IN SHONA ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Munamoto CHEMHURU

INTRODUCTION

The Shona people, who are within the southern African region, are a dominant cultural group who occupy the greater part of Zimbabwe and the central western part of Mozambique.¹⁷⁷ According to Gwaravanda and Masaka, the term ‘Shona’ denotes a conglomeration of a number of linguistic dialect groups, namely Korekore, Karanga, Zezuru, Ndau and the Manyika, and these make up around three quarters of Zimbabwe’s total population.¹⁷⁸ Although dividing into these linguistic dialects that are in different geographical locations, the Shona have a shared fundamental cultural belief, ideas and philosophy in general. They also have a common way of life that is akin to that which can be found in most sub-Saharan African communities. Chivaura for one admits that “indigenous peoples of Africa share a common religion, philosophy of life and culture. They have the same concept of god and view of the universe. Their understanding of the meaning of life and death is the same. They structure their societies in similar ways.”¹⁷⁹ Hence the Shona, as part of the native civilisations of Africa, are not an exception with regard to

¹⁷⁷ Munyaradzi Mawere, On Pursuit of the Purpose of Life: The Shona metaphysical Perspective. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2010: 272.

¹⁷⁸ Ephraim T. Gwaravanda and Dennis Masaka, *Epistemological Implications of Selected Shona Proverbs*. CASAS, 2008: 02.

¹⁷⁹ Vimbai G. Chivaura, Hunhu/Ubuntu: A Sustainable Approach to Endogenous Development, Bio-cultural Diversity and Protection of the Environment in Africa. Geneva: *Papers International Conference*, Geneva, 2006: 229.

their philosophy or way of life as well as their conception of the world beyond the physical reality.

While most African communities like the Shona, Ndebele, Zulu, Venda, Changani, Xosa, and the Ashanti among others, are inherently communitarian and sharing common linguistic ancestry, to conclude that they all have a uniform universally binding moral code would amount to committing the fallacy of ‘unanimism’. At the same time, that these societies share common ideas on most fundamental issues is plain to see, such that the focus on Shona ontology is justifiable as a representative instance of most sub-Saharan communities. The chapter is thus situated within the Shona meta-ethical cosmogony within which the author is rooted as a native.

Among the fundamental ideas that are common among the Shona and most African communities is the notion of the ontological relationship and significance of existence as *being* as such within the cosmic world of other *beings* that are in turn morally related. Hence, *being* or existence in general and morality are closely intertwined among not only Shona communities but most African societies. The attempt however to adopt ‘strategic particularism’ on Shona ontology and their environmental ethics is deliberate since Africa is not metaphysically unanimous such that it seems risky to adopt a [universal] African metaphysics.¹⁸⁰

The argument developed here is that the adoption and appreciation of Shona metaphysics, as part of a broad African metaphysics, could be the basis for a sound environmental moral philosophy. I attempt to show how a plausible environmental ethics could be derived from Shona ontology. It is established that despite the attempted relegation of metaphysics to the realm of

¹⁸⁰ L.J Teffo and A.P.J Roux, *Metaphysical Thinking in Africa*, in P.H. Coetzse and A.P.J Roux (Eds.) *The African Philosophy Reader* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press of South Africa, 2002), p. 163.

nonsensical discourse by philosophers of a positivist orientation like Hume, Wittgenstein and Ayer, among others, metaphysics, particularly Shona metaphysics, could be taken as central towards defining and shaping their moral and environmental worldview.

Some of the questions that are crucial and to be critically examined in this work are: Where does the idea of the *good* come from among the Shona people of Zimbabwe? Can the Shona understanding of the person (*being*) inform Shona morality? And if it does, can such an ontology be an attractive basis for Shona environmental ethics?

First, the traditional Western philosophical fallacy that rationality is the supreme source of morality is critically revisited and analysed as a dogma that continues to distort the scope of not only Shona and African moral thought at large, but moral philosophy in general. I espouse the position that the dominant Western thinking that reason is the only gateway to universal moral truths is not only fallacious, but that it propagates a moral thinking that is exclusive in so far as it relegates the place of the metaphysical constitution of the individual person and his/her environment at large. Here, the Western metaphysical concept of being is critically juxtaposed with the Shona concept of being. In this regard, I critically expose how *being* in the Shona world-view could be closely related to morality, as opposed to the Western atomic notion of *being*. At the same time, I propose the ways in which, for example, the wisdom in taboos, tradition and the revelation from supernatural insights could be taken as alternative sources of knowledge and environmental thinking among the Shona and other African communities.

Second, the chapter critically considers Shona ontology or metaphysics in general. In this regard, the words ‘ontology’ and ‘metaphysics’ will be used interchangeably to denote what Viriri and Mungwini describe as “a science that seeks ultimate understanding of reality; that is,

existence and being. . .[involving] a synthesis of all experiences in order to achieve a coherent whole, which gives a complete picture of reality.”¹⁸¹ Thus, I will use the words ‘ontology’ and ‘metaphysics’ to denote existence, being or essence beyond the physical phenomenon in general, but most especially related to the individual person or being.

Overall, the chapter imports Shona metaphysics to moral thinking as an example of how African communities could reasonably understand and articulate environmental ethical thinking from their notion of existence in general.

HUMAN REASON AND MORALITY: RETHINKING THE TRADITIONAL DOGMA

A dominant feature of Western philosophical thinking has been the emphasis on the importance of human reason as informed by the classical Socratic-Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophies, philosophical realism and the Cartesian philosophical traditions. These central philosophical traditions characterising and heavily influencing contemporary philosophical thinking are based on the basic Western traditional assumption that human reason alone is the fundamental source of our knowledge about the world. While admitting reason as one of the gateways to human knowledge and the truth about the universe, to sustain the argument that human reason should inform humanity on all fundamental moral issues is very problematic. Hence, in this regard, I use the term *dogma* precisely to critically expose the extent to which contemporary moral questions are informed and shaped by the truism that morality is a product of human reason. I consider this to be simply an inherited myth from Western philosophical

¹⁸¹ Advise Viriri and Pascah Mungwini, *Down But Not Out: Critical Insights in Traditional Shona Metaphysics*. Journal of Pan African studies, 2009: 180.

tradition which is incapable of explaining the Shona and the African environmental ethical discourse.

In essence, within a Shona cosmic worldview, knowledge about how human beings ought to live and treat each other, as well as relating well with nature is metaphysically embedded in their conception of what it means to *be* or to exist as communities. As complement to reason for example, among the Shona and most African communities, various insights, which are part of their metaphysics constitute sources of Shona and most of sub-Saharan environmental epistemology and axiology. So, how to make sound moral judgements depends on the ontological conception of *being* among member of many African communities.

At variance with what obtains in most other non-European intellectual tradition, Western philosophical perspectives have been heavily influenced by the dogma that our fundamental moral values come solely from our reasoned belief systems on pertinent moral questions. Such a thinking is not only dismissed as a myth that continues to distort current moral thinking, but that it is also purely subjective to the human individual and therefore, propagates an individualistic and atomic conception of human existence that is somewhat alien to and incompatible with most African moral traditions. Such thinking has continued to distort human perceptions on most fundamental philosophical questions and their answers.

As Teffo and Roux see it, “rationality has been seen as a universal inherent ability of humankind to determine *the* truth. . . . Rationality, therefore, is seen as the only avenue toward reliable knowledge, and also as being certain of success in yielding correct, final answers if its methods are promptly followed.”¹⁸² In environmental ethical discussions, this kind of thinking is

¹⁸² L.J Teffo and A.P.J Roux, *Metaphysical Thinking in Africa*, 162.

problematic, particularly because most of the African communities, like the Shona, are suspicious of individual human reason as one of the factors championing individualism, egoism and the promotion of an atomic and subjective morality. Hence there is a likely danger of prompting a somewhat anthropocentric thinking which is based on a conceptual division between humankind and nature,¹⁸³ a thinking that is alien to the Shona tradition and that of most sub-Saharan communitarian societies, contrary to a reading of Bujo's contention that African ethics is primarily anthropocentric.¹⁸⁴ Rather, the anthropocentric view of environmental ethics which prioritises the interests of humanity on the basis of the capacity of rational deliberation is the one that I suspect to be Western in both origin and approach.

Reason has traditionally been perceived as primarily defining *being* or existence from a Western philosophical persuasion, where *being* or existence, from the Cartesian understanding, is obtained from the notion that *I think, therefore I am*. From this Western Cartesian dogmatic perception of existence, *being* is defined by reference to some rational thought. It has thus become the cardinal expression towards asserting one's ontological status. At the same time, following this thinking, the ability to make moral judgement is heavily influenced by the ability of rational deliberation. Such a moral theory is highly problematic as it is based not on human existence or being with others, but on how the human person perceives certain things within a given context and time, from his/her atomic existence as informed by his/her rational capacity to

¹⁸³ F. Mathews, Deep ecology, in D. Jamieson (Ed.) *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), p. 225

¹⁸⁴ Bénédet Bujo, Is There a Specific African Ethic? Towards a Discussion with Western Thought, in Munyaradzi F. Murove (Ed.) *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2009), p. 113.

think. Even the famous empiricist dictum by Berkeley that *esse est percipi* merely serves to substantiate the Western philosophical dogma that *being* is defined by one's realisation of the ability to think and perceive things. The understanding of *being* that is espoused by Cartesian rationalism and Western philosophy in general becomes not only atomic in so far as it prioritises the existence of the atomic human person, but it propagates a notion of being that is far removed from one's socio-centric circumstances, like the one that is inherent in Shona metaphysics and among African societies where existence is communally cherished and not a desirable quality for the individual alone, like what is purported to be the case with human reason.

Although subscribing to the notion that reason is important towards deducing some idea of the moral *good*, I consider the thinking that, within the Shona moral cosmogony, mere reliance on reason as a source of knowledge on fundamental moral questions is not enough. Rather, besides the validity of Teffo and Roux's claim that truth is a social construction¹⁸⁵, there is more to the idea of one's existence that can be learnt within the Shona moral cosmogony and African communities at large. *Being* among the Shona is closely related to morality in so far as it has certain moral obligations closely knit to it. Hence *kuva munhu* (being in general) has moral overtones to the extent of not only depicting existence in the Cartesian sense, but it goes beyond to denote the varying degrees of moral relationship with other beings (*vanhu*) and non-human beings as well, that is struck by merely existing in the Shona worldview.

SHONA MORAL THOUGHT: A COMPLEMENT TO REASON.

¹⁸⁵ L.J Teffo and A.P.J Roux, *Metaphysical Thinking in Africa*, 163.

In this section, I advance what I regard as alternative and complementary sources of moral guidance to reason that can be discerned among Shona and other African societies. Here, I advance the view that taboos, tradition and supernaturalism, as part of Shona ontology, go a long way towards instilling the moral and environmental thinking of the Shona in the moral beliefs of members of the community.

Although most traditional Shona and African values may have significantly undergone transformation, there are certain value-systems rooted in African ontology that continue to reasonably inform a sound environmental thinking. Taboo wisdom is one aspect that forms part of the Shona ontology of *being* and how it could possibly contribute to environmental well-being. In terms of moral guidance on fundamental environmental ethics, the Shona and many African societies value the wisdom enshrined in certain avoidance rules or taboos in general.

Shona people could still reasonably rely on and use taboo wisdom as crucial in enforcing desirable human behaviour. For example, among the Shona, the idea that one must not violate certain societal taboos (known in Shona as *Zviera*), like eating one's totem animal, holds and could be plausibly taken as contributing towards nature's preservation. Taboos represent both an epistemic category and a moral tool at the same time. These are avoidance rules that are aimed at positively instilling knowledge of the Shona value systems, but mainly, they are based on threats for either some sickness, bad omen, or death in the case of some violation or some skepticism towards the uptake and acceptance of knowledge, beliefs and values that are associated with taboos. Of course some of the threats that are inherent in, and associated with, such taboos may not hold, but this is not a diminishing factor with regard to how members of society guide their behaviour and existence.

However, taboos remain an important epistemic and moral tool of the Shona. According to Tarira

the Shona people often use *zviera* (taboos) as one of the ways of teaching young members of their society. The Shona had, and still have unique ways of transmitting social values which are crucial to the development of their society. Thus, taboos qualify to be one of the major sources of Shona people's source of indigenous knowledge about how humanity ought to relate well with the natural environment. In essence, taboos, among other practices, encourage conformity [to societal expectations on correct human behaviour in the environment]."¹⁸⁶

Taboo wisdom has been one aspect of traditional knowledge among Shona that continue to shape various aspects of Shona ideas of values including environmental philosophy. The knowledge and wisdom of taboos as part of the Shona traditional knowledge and at the same time part and parcel of Shona ontology continues to contribute to the good of humanity and the environment at large.

Metaphysically, the knowledge of environmental well-being of the Shona and most of sub-Saharan communities seem to be embedded in the wisdom inherent in taboos. Considering the various dimensions of environmental concern that certain taboos seem to safeguard, it seems apparent that taboos are an important aspect of Shona metaphysics that are etiologically oriented. From an axiological perspective, the well-being of the environment seems to be taken into account by the various areas of environmental concern that are considered by the beliefs in the knowledge of, for example, totemism, taboos protecting water sources, endangered species, forests and those protecting the future generations. Overall, without being anthropocentric about some of these taboos, it is logical to conclude that the ontological import of various taboos to environmental ethics seems evident.

¹⁸⁶ Levison Tatira, *The Role of Zviera in Socialism* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publishers, 2000), p. 146.

As opposed to the Western philosophical perspectives that commonly regard traditional knowledge as archaic and no longer relevant to contemporary challenges, within an African philosophical context particularly the Shona worldview, traditional knowledge is regarded as synonymous with wisdom. Wisdom in this regard is more qualitative than just knowledge. There is more to wisdom than just knowledge within the Shona world-view, such that wisdom is highly valued as opposed to mere knowledge. Among the Shona, having wisdom entail the ability to possess knowledge and being able to manipulate knowledge for the practical bearing on humanity.

Traditional knowledge, as part of many African communities about wisdom is central among the Shona's epistemic and moral worldview. Knowledge that is passed from generation to generation, by way of tradition and word of mouth through, for example, proverbs should not be questioned as it goes a long way towards educating generations and generations. Hence an Ibo African proverb that: *what an old man sees sitting down, a young man cannot see standing up.*¹⁸⁷ The moral story behind the proverb is simply to inculcate a sense of respect for traditional wisdom and not to take it for granted. As opposed to moral subjectivism that is inherent in the thinking that knowledge comes from one's individual reason, morality among most African communities is something that is picked spontaneously from one's society, community or ethnic set-up. It is such that one's ethno-cultural circumstances shape one's moral worldview. Advocating for ethno-philosophy as a valuable source of fundamental values of the African

¹⁸⁷ I.A. Menkiti, Person and Community in African Traditional Thought, in R. Wright (Ed), *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), p. 173.

epistemic tradition, Henry Odera Oruka notes that the community as opposed to individuality is brought forth as the essential attribute of African philosophy.¹⁸⁸

Among the Shona, and of course most African communities, knowledge that is passed from one generation to the other generation is very valuable as compared to knowledge that emanates from within the individual alone, which may not have faced the test of time and the accretion of witnesses from other members for validation. For Oruka,

among the various African peoples one is likely to find rigorous indigenous thinkers. These are men and women (sages) who have not had the benefit of modern education. But they are none the less critical independent thinkers who guide their thought and judgements by the power of reason and inborn insight . . .¹⁸⁹

The kind of moral knowledge that these sages transmit to the young ones is thus wisdom, as it is more qualitative than the common knowledge that everyone possesses.

RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AMONG THE SHONA

Although they are heavily contested among people in many communities, insights into supernatural issues should be regarded as yet another major source of the African value system.

Closely related with the notion of supernaturalism is the belief in causality. Causality, is a metaphysical phenomenon for explanation of events in all societies. Sogolo notes that

one of the puzzles yet unresolved by scholars seeking to understand traditional African belief-systems is how, in the explanation of observable events, disembodied or non-extended entities (spirits, witches, ghosts, etc. existing beyond the confines of space) can possibly be invoked as causes."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ H. O. Oruka, Four Trends in African Philosophy, in P.H. Coetzse and A.P.J Roux (Eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press of South Africa, 2002), p. 120.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ G. Sogolo, *The Concept of Cause in African Thought* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press of Southern Africa, 2002), p. 192.

Normally, questions that come to the fore in the light of this fundamental aspect of Shona metaphysics are: what is being? Is there life after the death of the present ontologically constituted being? What (if in any way there is such a relationship) is the nature of the relationship subsisting between the living being/s and the dead? Is there a link between the living being/s, the dead and the environment both present and future? How best can environmental problems such as air and water pollution, soil erosion, droughts, extinction of rare species, global warming and heat waves, among a host of other environmental problems be understood and solved from an African perspective? These questions are approached mainly from the context of the problem of causality, which is central among the Shona and most African communities.

While causality is at the core of Shona ontology, it is not quite clear how it could help towards shaping Shona environmental ethics, but the Shona think that causality and environmental ethics are closely related. According to this notion, from a Shona ontological perspective, it is believed that everything that happens has a cause, including *being* itself, which is thought to exist for a certain cause and purpose. According to Teffo and Roux

African metaphysics [Shona metaphysics included] is organised around a number of principles and laws which control so called vital forces. There is a principle concerning the interaction of forces, that is, between God and humankind, between different people, between humankind and material things. These forces are hierarchically placed, they form a 'chain of beings.' In this hierarchy God, the creator and source of all vital forces, is at the apex. Then follow the ancestors, then humankind, and then the lower forces, animals, plants and matter.¹⁹¹

Shona ontology respects a hierarchical order of existence among human persons and their cosmic world. In this respect, Shona ontology is organised in such a way that there is some kind of interaction from the level of the supreme *Being* that morally cascades to the human beings,

¹⁹¹ L.J Teffo and A.P.J Roux, *Metaphysical Thinking in Africa*, 164.

animals, plants and other parts of the physical and non-physical environment. The Shona moral cosmos thus, starts from the metaphysical existence of the supreme *Being* (Mwari) the Shona God, the dead who are in the form of ancestors, the living human beings as well as nature in general, both physical and non-physical. Thus, an action produced by the human person that negatively impacts on nature, is not only judged in terms of how it negatively affect the immediate physical nature alone, but that it is morally judged in terms of how it goes towards provoking the non-physical beings, such as ancestors and the Shona God.

Murove notes that *unhu* or *being* or *ubuntu* among the Shona is realised through *ukama* (relatedness) such that *ukama* (relatedness) provides the ethical anchorage for human social, spiritual and ecological togetherness.¹⁹² In this regard, I forward the argument that *ukama* (relatedness) also exists between and among the individual human beings from the level of the family, village, and the society at large through communitarian relations, up to the level of the ancestors, God and the environment at large. This is perhaps the reason why when the Shona and most sub-Saharan African communities are faced with environmental challenges in the form of droughts, they know that they are themselves to blame hence, they appeal to the metaphysical beings beyond themselves, like ancestors in order to mend their moral relationship.

The 'chain of *being*' that characterises Shona ontology is such that the supreme *Being* or *Mwari* (the Shona name for God), who is at the apex of other *beings*, is the supreme regulator of moral action amongst a community of other beings. Hence, *being* at the level of the human person is closely related to and is regulated by the supreme *Being* both metaphysically and

¹⁹² Munyaradzi F. Murove, *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu Natal press, 2009), p. 317.

morally. Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, *being* or existence has certain moral obligations attached to it such that the Shona person is incomplete morally without recognising his/her moral linkage with other beings that morally form a 'chain' up to the supreme *Being* (Mwari). Thus, in recognition of this moral chain, an individual, while pursuing that which promotes his good or well-being also must take into account the good or well-being of the other *beings*, which includes the environment.

While looking at the African worldview in general, Chivaura notes that "the African worldview states that although the ancestors are dead, they remain human and continue to exist among human beings and take part in human affairs and influence human destiny."¹⁹³ The same can be said about how Shona ancestors go toward shaping the well-being of the environment. The Shona, and many other Africans, believe in the death of the individual person and the immortality of the soul. As Viriri and Mungwini see it,

spiritual beings are very much counted among the living as important participants in shaping everything that may happen and by their very nature they now occupy a better position in determining events and influencing them, as they are no longer subject to the limitations of space and time.¹⁹⁴

Hence, for them, metaphysical causality is at the core of the Shona being and his environmental well-being.

Because of the belief in the existence of the spiritual world and the immortality of the soul, as well as the notion of causality, Shona communities and other African societies at large,

¹⁹³ Vimbai G. Chivaura, *Hunhu/Ubuntu: A Sustainable Approach to Endogenous Development, Bio-cultural Diversity and Protection of the Environment in Africa*. 234.

¹⁹⁴ Advise Viriri and Pascah Mungwini, *Down But Not Out: Critical Insights in Traditional Shona Metaphysics*. 181.

give ontological priority to the spiritual world of the dead, the ancestors, the living society of other human beings, and the surrounding environment, rather than the individual alone. In other words, in order of importance, the spiritual world of the departed, the environment and society comes before the atomic individual. This is supported by the African understanding of the individual as explained by Mbiti when he says that “whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: *I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.*”¹⁹⁵ Of note here is the dependence of one’s status ‘as a person’ on ‘one’s relations with others’, which include the whole [community], of animate and non-animate reality that encompass the environment as well.

Although Kaphagawani would like to suggest that Mbiti is propagating a socio-centric view of personhood or being¹⁹⁶, for Mbiti, “this is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man [as well as his environmental well-being.]”¹⁹⁷ Environmental well-being, or the *good* of the environment is the *end* or *telos* of human action among the Shona and most African societies. Hence in Mbiti’s axiom that “I am because [we] are...,” the [we] denotes a symbiotic and mutual relationship between the individual and some other forces that include the spiritual world.

The foregoing is the basis of our submission that Mbiti seems to imply by his use of [we] to refer to not only the other individual members of the community, but also to include the dead,

¹⁹⁵ John S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. New York: Double Day, 1969: 106.

¹⁹⁶ Didier N Kaphagawani, “African Conceptions of a Person: A Critical Survey.” Kwasi Wiredu (ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006 337.

¹⁹⁷ John S Mbiti, *Ibid.*

as well as nature in general, in the realm of morality, because we share the environment in our interconnectedness as implied by our metaphysical existence. Bujo thus observes that, “the African is convinced that all things in the cosmos are interconnected. All natural forces depend on each other, so that human beings can live in harmony only *in* and *with* the whole of nature.”¹⁹⁸ Thus, in advocating for a communitarian basis of African environmental philosophy we are suggesting that the correct moral relationship must be struck between the living, the dead as well as the environment. Although not assessing the extent to which the communitarian system extends towards cementing the moral relationship between the individual, society, the spiritual world and the natural environment, Chivaura acknowledges that,

... the environment as the abode of the ancestors is sacred in African worldview and the destruction of nature is forbidden in Declarations of Ma’at and *hunhu/ubuntu*. If the environment is destroyed, the ecosystem will be disturbed. . . . The ancestors and the cosmic forces will desert the land and go to other areas where they can find abode and carry on with their respective functions there.¹⁹⁹

This understanding of society emanates from the African communitarian view of the human person where an individual person’s action can only be understood in the context of relational factors emanating from his community and the environment. Although scholarship on African communitarian philosophy may seem to be having some Tempelsian representaiton,²⁰⁰ it is now closely discussed by Mbiti, Gyekye, Wiredu, Ramose and Menkiti, among others. For these and other thinkers, in traditional Zimbabwean and African societies at large, the individual person’s ontological status could only be understood by reference to the community as well as

¹⁹⁸ Bénézet Bujo, *The Ethical dimensions of Community*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1998: 22-3.

¹⁹⁹ Vimbai G. Chivaura, *Hunhu/Ubuntu: A Sustainable Approach to Endogenous Development, Bio-cultural Diversity and Protection of the Environment in Africa*. 234.

²⁰⁰ Didier N Kaphagawani, *African Conceptions of a Person: A Critical Survey*. 2006 337.

the environment. As Ramose sees it, “neither the individual nor the community can define and pursue their respective purposes without recognizing their mutual foundedness and their complementarity.”²⁰¹

Viewed this way, the promotion of individual liberties that is fostered by the notion of liberalism in Western philosophical thinking may not be necessary for the African since it prompts anthropocentric thinking. While Tangwa, Mbiti, Bujo and Chivaura seem to at least substantiate the existence of an indigenous African environmental ethics, there is need to go further and critically explore how that environmental consciousness could be realised from the ontological understanding of the individual as I attempt in the following section.

BEING *QUA* BEING AND SHONA ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING

In this section, I use the phrase *environmental well-being* to mean the good of the environment or nature at large. Shona metaphysics, which involves the way in which the Shona people perceive, understand and make meaning from the way they perceive themselves as Shona beings existing in communities with other human beings and non-human beings around them, including the whole of the environment, will be assessed in terms of its environmental orientation. Shona understanding of *being qua being* should be understood in terms of how it is transcendental, purposive, teleological and interrelated with nature in general. I will move on to critically discuss how such metaphysical notions have environmental underpinnings.

As opposed to the Cartesian prioritisation of individual existence, the Shona and most African communities appreciate the philosophy of communitarian existence. Menkiti argues that “the African view of man denies that persons can be defined by focussing on this or that physical

²⁰¹ Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*. 1999: 154.

or psychological characteristic of the lone individual. Rather man is defined by reference to the environing community.”²⁰² Juxtaposing the Cartesian understanding of the individual with the African view, in the context of how human beings exist with the environment as their surrounding, gives the impression that the former is limited to the epistemic individuation and categorisation of the individual person, while the latter has an axiological import closely knit into it, in addition to its epistemic classification of the individual person.

Based on the foregoing, it is clear that the reflective Shona understanding of *being* has to be holistically considered. If Shona reflective moral and environmental world-view is to be understood, there is a serious need to appreciate what Shona metaphysics is all about. Shona metaphysics is part of African metaphysics, for which Teffo and Roux see the essence as “the search for meaning and ultimate reality in the complex relationship between the human person and his/her total environment.”²⁰³ Viewed this way, what emerges from the reflective Shona conception of *being* becomes crucial because, it is helpful towards a critical assessment of how the Shona conceive what lies beyond the physical human being and how best it could go towards contributing to their environmental welfare.

The idea of *being* or existence as enunciated by reflective members of Shona society is premised on the thinking that morality could be possibly and most reasonably best understood if *being* or existence is not separated from the nexus of reality. Otherwise without acceptance and recognition of the inclusive orientation of existence, the nature of the relationship subsisting

²⁰² Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, *Person and Community in African Traditional Thought*. New York: university Press of America, 1984: 171.

²⁰³ L.J Teffo and A.P.J Roux, *Metaphysical Thinking in Africa*, 165.

between the individual person and his relationship with other human and non-human beings would seem difficult to comprehend. Such a relationship can best be understood if and only if the analysis of such a relationship starts from a consideration of the significance of the individual person and his interconnectedness with other beings beyond his/her immediate cosmos.

It is therefore easy to understand that for the reflective among the Shona people, being (*kuva munhu*) is and cannot be realised without first realising *others* or the community of *others*, who in essence could encompass the environment at large among other living and non-living *beings*, whose moral prioritisation comes in varying degrees that are also in accordance with Aristotle's recognition of nature as a hierarchy, where for him, ". . . after the birth of animals, plants exist for their sake, and that the other animals exist for the sake of man. . . ." ²⁰⁴ This explains why, for example, even though it is an anthropocentric view of nature, in as much as all animate and sentient beings have inherent value in them, the life and intrinsic value of an insect cannot be equated to that of an elephant – not because one is bigger than the other, but because of the intrinsic position each occupies in nature. So, in this regard, respect for others has to do with acceptance and realisation of these varying degrees of existence or *being*, such that, for example, using the environment to further one's ends becomes justifiable on the basis of these varying degrees of ontological-moral priority, which recognizes the value of everything in nature in themselves as co-functionaries in the promotion of harmony and well-being of everything that exist. Thus, existence is a matter of mutual recognition and acceptance of co-existence between

²⁰⁴ Aristotle, "Politica (Politics)." In R. Mckeon (ed.) *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. New York: The Modern Library, 2001: 1137.

the individual person with, and among other human persons and the environment at large, encompassing the animate and non-animate reality.

Thus, reflective Shona individuals embrace an understanding of *being* as having an teleological orientation towards the environment as well. That is, existence is not meaningless, but that existence also has relatively non-anthropocentric aims and obligations towards nature closely knit into it. A human being (*munhu*) among the Shona is essentially understood as a complete person, both epistemologically and morally. For this reason, it is supposed that human being denote existence, a personhood, but it does not end there. This is why *unhu* among the Shona is part of being morally upright, to the extent of acknowledging the surrounding community of other human beings, non-human animals and nature as well defending the importance of their varying degrees of existence and moral prioritisation.

Hence, a complete and good human being is one whose existence is defined by the way he/she morally relates with other human and non-human beings such as animals, and the environment in its entirety. The same relates to what generally weaves through in Aristotelian ethics where, “his metaphysics and his philosophy of nature is a teleological theory concerned in relating concepts like nature, function, and purpose to the notion of the good life.”²⁰⁵ Even Shona metaphysics becomes compatible with Aristotelian ethics in this regard, where for Aristotle, every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ D. J. O’Connor, *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*. New York: The Free Press. !964: 57.

²⁰⁶ Aristotle, “Ethica Nicomachea (Nicomachian Ethics).” In R. Mckeon (ed.) *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. New York: The Modern Library, 2001: 935.

Teffo and Roux note that existence is driven by aims such that there are no blind happenings but only planned action.²⁰⁷

The notion of existence in this regard has to be understood in terms of its ontological, epistemological and moral import among the Shona. An individual within the Shona moral cosmogony does not exist only or just for himself, such that *unhu* is not judged on the basis of the extent to which one promotes one's own selfish and anthropocentric ends. Rather *unhu* denotes a complete and morally upright individual, whose existence is tailored towards promoting the well-being and welfare of not only oneself, but that of other human beings and non-human beings, who are part of the environment upon which humanity depends for survival, a factor that Western societies are just beginning to appreciate as a consequence of the many natural disasters which nature is visiting on these societies in contemporary times. This is the reason why the individual, among the Shona and most African communities, is morally judged even on the basis of how one relates and treats, for example, one's tamed animals and pets or the seams of his/her gaments.

Although focussing on African philosophy in general, as informed by *ubuntu/unhu*, Ramose gives an succinct exposition of how the sub-Saharan African *being*, particularly the Bantu speaking people, have the ontological, axiological and epistemological dimensions attached to their philosophy in general. For Ramose, "*Ubuntu . . . is the wellspring flowing with African ontology and epistemology.*"²⁰⁸ Thus construed, *being* among the Bantu speaking, of which the Shona are a part, becomes intrinsically attached to the whole of nature or the

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 161.

²⁰⁸ Mogobe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*. Harare: Mond Books, 1999: 49.

environment in general, in accordance with its respective degrees of their epistemic and axiological significance.²⁰⁹

Shona ontology of *being*, in this regard, is holistic in so far as it encompasses the whole of nature, such that environmental well-being among the Shona is inseparably anchored upon *ubuntu/unhu*. For the Shona, *unhu* has an ecospheric dimension, such that it becomes what Ramose calls “the source and manifestation of the intrinsic order of the universe, . . . [hence] the principle of wholeness applies also to the relationship between human beings and physical or objective nature. To care for one another, therefore implies caring for physical nature as well.”²¹⁰ Thus, among the Shona, environmentally damaging actions, like polluting the physical environment and water sources, are not only unfriendly to the environment, but they are regarded as incompatible *unhu*, which denotes a thoroughgoing moral consciousness among human persons.

Ingrained in the reflections of Shona people has been a pragmatic metaphysics or ontology of the being or person in general. In other words, their understanding, explanations and acceptance of existence as significant is premised on praxis, in so far as the individual relates with other beings and the environment in general. Looking at African communities in general, Viriri and Mungwini note that they “have a pragmatic metaphysics, meaning that, if an idea, an

²⁰⁹ J. A. I. Bewaji, “If my people must go, they will have to find their way by themselves – Critical comments on Wim Van Binsbergen’s *Ubuntu and the Globalisation of Southern African Thought and Society*” in *South African Journal of Philosophy*. Volume 22, No 4, 2004: 378-287 and “Beyond ethnophilosophical myopia – Critical comments on Mogobe B. Ramose’s *African Philosophy Through Ubuntu*” in *South African Journal of Philosophy*. Volume 22, No 4, 2004: 388-401.

²¹⁰ Mogobe B. Ramose, “Ecology Through Ubuntu.” Munyaradzi F. Murove (ed.) *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*. Pietermaritzburg; University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2009: 308.

explanation, a belief, works, it is accepted even though it may not fulfill certain criteria of defining objective reality such as empirical validation.”²¹¹

CONCLUSION

While the general tendency in contemporary philosophical thinking is to treat metaphysics and moral philosophy as if they are totally distinct, separate and not complementary to each other, in this chapter we have attempted to critically re-think the ethical import of African metaphysical thinking as it relates to environmental ethical discussions. Here, one appreciates the way in which the understanding of the individual could go towards an appreciation of the world around. It has been established that, unlike Western traditional ethics that is mainly informed and shaped by the philosophical thinking that reason is at the core of morality, understanding the ontology of *being* among the Shona is somehow succinct in instilling environmental ethics among the Shona, and amongmost African communities. This is evident in the knowledge about African axiology that is inherent in taboo wisdom, traditional knowledge and the insights from the supernatural world among others. It is also the hope of the author that, besides the legitimizing of a African ontology-based environmental ethics as a viable perspective on ecosophy, this chapter has added to the growing body of scholarly engagement of environmental ethics found in the engaging attempts by Murove, Behrens, Bujo, Metz, Ramose and Tangwa among others, who are very critical of various attempts to downplay the relevance of African ethics where environmental philosophy and practice are considered in the global academy. In that spirit, this chapter dispels the ignorant view which sees ethics solely through

²¹¹ Advise Viriri and Pascah Mungwini, *Down But Not Out: Critical Insights in Traditional Shona Metaphysics*. 2009: 180.

the lens of the Western philosophical ethical tradition, and asks that the global tapestry of ethical reflection, especially regarding our common environment can only be enriched and be better informed, when diverse traditions of peoples in various parts of the world are brought to the global table of human sustainable development.

A REINTERPRETATION OF GENDER POWER PLAY IN THE METAPHYSICS OF ADULTERY AND MORAL EXCLUSIONISM OF MARRIED MALES IN AN AFRICAN CULTURE

Isaac E. UKPOKOLO

INTRODUCTION

In its standard sense, adultery is defined as the act of sexual intercourse between a married person (male or female) and someone other than the spouse. Other cognate terms associated with the phenomenon of adultery include ‘bigamy’, ‘cheating-on’, and ‘philandery’. In this understanding, the fact of adultery, the act of it, and the culpability thereof, apply to a male and a female committed to each other in a relationship of marriage. In most cultures and societies, the very act of adultery is regarded as an abomination, a taboo, an injustice, and an immorality. Therefore, cultural or customary and societal prohibitions against the act are found to constitute part of the marriage code of virtually every society. Indeed, adultery is of as common knowledge, discussion and attention as marriage itself. And, perhaps, for purpose of emphasis, to the extent that the fact of adultery applies to males and females (couples) committed in spousal relationships in the institution of marriage, to that extent either of the couple is adjudged culpable in any event of adultery. However, in some cultures we find some representation or view concerning adultery that seems to fly against the face of this general conclusion. The present discussion identifies indigenous Esan culture²¹² as one such example

²¹² The word ‘Esan’ is used here in three senses. First, it refers to a geographical location in Southern Nigeria; second, it is used to refer to a people occupying this location and their culture; and third, it is used to refer to a language spoken by the people of Esan. For the people of Esan have a common language, custom and tradition [Cf. M. O. Omo-Ojugo, *Esan Language Endangered? Implications for the Teaching and Learning of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria. Inaugural Lecture Series* (Ekpoma-Nigeria: Ambrose Alli University Publishing House, 2006), p.4.] Esan (now popularly referred to as Ishan) is located in the tropical zone of the northern part of the Nigerian forest region [A. I. Okoduwa, *A Geography of Esan*. In A. I. Okoduwa (Ed.), *Studies in Esan History and Culture* (Benin City: Omo-

where married males are, essentially speaking, excluded from the culpability of adultery, particularly when it is between a married male and an unmarried female. The discussion explores this peculiar cultural phenomenon with a view to:

- i. Locating and bringing to the fore the perceived interface between metaphysics and morality with regards to adultery in indigenous Esan culture, and
- ii. Presenting a re-interpretation of the gender power play in the people's conception of adultery and the exclusion of married males from severe punishment.

The methodology employed includes the philosophical techniques of clarification of concepts, argumentations and inferences drawn from existing literature. All these, the author, being a member of Esan society and product (at least partly) of its culture, combines with observation to arrive at stated conclusions.

THE IDEA OF ADULTERY

Uwesan Publishing Ltd, 1997), p. 1] or about 100 kilometers northeast of Benin City, Edo state in Southern Nigeria, between two larger and better known Nigerian peoples, the Benin Edo (or Binis) to the west and the Igbos to the east [F. I. Omorodion, *The Socio-Cultural Context of Health Behaviour among Esan Communities, Edo State, Nigeria. Health Tradition Review* 3-2 (1993): 125]. It occupies a landmass of about 1, 162 square miles [C. O. Aluede, *Gender Roles in Traditional Musical Practices: A Survey of the Esan in Edo State, Nigeria. Studies in Tribes and Tribals* 3-1 (2005): 58] or 2, 988 square kilometers. The Esan people are about half a million in number; the Nigerian 1999 population census estimates them to be about 372, 122. Esan land consists of about thirty-five communities namely Each of these communities is under the rule of a king called the *Enijie* or *Onojie*.

The Esans originated from the Binis (now popularly called Benin). Recorded history shows that the Esans migrated from Bini during the reign of Oba Ewuare in the fifteenth century at about 1460 [A. I. Okoduwa, *Tenacity of Gerontocracy in Nigeria: An Example of the Esan People in Edo State. Studies in Tribes and Tribals* 4-1 (2006): 47]. What was responsible for this migration? According to C. G. Okojie [C. G. Okojie, *Ishan Native Laws and Customs* (Lagos-Nigeria: John Okwessa Publishers, 1960), p. 32], Oba Ewuare lost his two sons on the same day in a mysterious incident and enacted some harsh laws including forbidding the citizens from cooking, washing or having sexual intercourse for three years. It was the resentment of people against the new life-style in Benin that made people to migrate into the forest. Hence the word "Esan" is an abbreviation of a Benin phrase "*Esan-fua*" meaning "They have jumped away or fled."

Etymologically, the term adultery derives from a combination of two words: ‘ad’ (which means ‘towards’) and ‘alter’ (which means ‘other’). From its semantic history, the notion of adultery is variously considered and defined among cultures, religions, and legal systems, but the idea is largely similar in Judaism, Hinduism and Islam²¹³; referring rather exclusively to the act of sexual intercourse between a married woman and a man other than her spouse.

In Judaism, the total fidelity demanded of the woman is taken to symbolize what God expects of his people, making unfaithfulness to God’s covenant with them a spiritual adultery.²¹⁴ However, although adultery in Judaism is forbidden, the law’s definition of it is restricted. It is the act by which the possession of a woman by her husband is violated. The woman is regarded as the man’s chattel, rather than as a person, with whom he forms but one in the fidelity of a mutual love. This degradation of the woman is of course, connected with the practice of polygamy.²¹⁵

In Christian ethics, adultery refers to marital infidelity. When two partners, of which at least one is married to another partner, have sexual relations – even transient ones – they commit adultery.²¹⁶ Within the understanding of Christian morality therefore, adultery is an injustice. Whoever commits adultery fails in a fundamental commitment. Such a one does

²¹³ Cf. Encyclopedia Britannica, ‘Adultery’ Source: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/6618/adultery> (Last Modified February 09, 2009). Retrieved 22nd December, 2012

²¹⁴ Cf. Xavier Leon-Dufour (ed.), Dictionary of Biblical Theology (London: Burn & Oates, 2004), p.9

²¹⁵ Xavier Leon-Dufour (ed.), Dictionary of Biblical Theology, p.3

²¹⁶ Cf. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Art. 5, No. 2380 (Ibadan: Paulines Publications,1994), p.549

grave injury to the sign of the covenant, which the marriage bond is, and transgresses the rights of the other spouse and undermines the institution of marriage by breaking the contract on which it is based. Such a person compromises the good of human generation and the welfare of children who need their parents' stable union.²¹⁷

Closely related to the foregoing is the fidelity of conjugal love. Fidelity expresses constancy in keeping one's given word. By its very nature, conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of the spouses. This flows from the gift of themselves which they make to each other.²¹⁸ To be sure, love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an arrangement "until further notice". The intimate union of marriage, as a mutual giving of two persons, and the good of the children demand total fidelity from the spouses and require an unbreakable union between them.²¹⁹

As mentioned earlier, the idea, definition and consequences of adultery are largely similar in Judaism, Hinduism and Islam. In these cultural or religious contexts, adultery refers rather exclusively to that act of sexual intercourse between a married woman and a man other than her husband. For instance, the code of Hamurabi prescribed a penalty of death by drowning for adultery.

In ancient Jewish culture, the punishment for adultery was stoning to death, while in ancient Greece as well as ancient Roman law, a culpable female spouse was killed. Among the indigenous Esan people of Southern Nigeria, cases of adultery receive very serious attention,

²¹⁷ Cf. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, Art. 5, No. 2381, p.549

²¹⁸ Cf. The Catechism of the Catholic Church Art. 7, No. 1646, p.403

²¹⁹ The Catechism of the Catholic Church Art, p.403

particularly when it is between a married woman and a man other than her husband. The dynamics of the people's view concerning the act of adultery is to be examined next.

THE CONCEPTION OF ADULTERY IN INDIGENOUS ESAN CULTURE

In indigenous Esan culture, the word 'adultery' is translated as oghele, while the act of adultery is referred to as 'igboghele'. In its, perhaps most straight forward or common understanding and usage, the idea of Oghele invokes or generates in the mind of the hearer the thought of sexual intercourse between a married woman and a man who is not her husband. I said straight forward or common usage, because this is the immediate or readily stimulated impression – that of a married woman involved in illicit sexual relations. This, of course, does not rule men out of court in terms of culpability with regards to adultery; just that it is not usually at the forefront of impressions when a case of adultery is mentioned.

If a case of sexual relation is established involving an unmarried man and a married woman, both are culpable and penalized. In the same vein, if it is proved that there was a case of sexual intercourse between a married man and a married woman who is not his wife, both are culpable and punished. Part of the concern of this discussion is that in all these, the woman is more severely punished while the man's penalty is insignificant.

There is, of course, no case to answer by the man if it is an act of sexual relations between a married man and an unmarried woman. This moral exclusionism of married males from culpability in adultery is the central focus of this essay. Before attempting an examination of this moral exclusionism of married males from the culpability issue in adultery, I would want to say a few things concerning the indicators of the very act of adultery among indigenous Esan people.

Among indigenous Esan people, the virtue of chastity is regarded very highly, and occupies a very central place in the peoples ethical and metaphysical systems. It is in the light of this that oghele or adultery is treated as forbidden, a taboo and an abomination. And, as in Christian ethics, where adultery is extended from the act of sexual intercourse to include any ‘desire’ of it (in thought), so also among indigenous Esan people, adultery extends from the very act of sexual intercourse to include any unwholesome or indecent touch or body contacts, overtures and gestures, language and other forms of expressions. All these are taboos, attracting and receiving equal condemnation and consequences as adultery.

For instance, it is unacceptable for a married woman to be held by or touched at the waist region by any other man other than the husband. By extension, acts such as direct hugging and embracing are not common between married women and other men other than their husbands or very close relatives. Furthermore, a man who is not the husband could not cross or walk over a woman in lying position or her legs stretched out. Furthermore, as words are considered ‘performative’, active and alive, the indigenous Esan people believe that verbal expressions must be guided and guarded, particularly when they had to do with the sexuality and privacy of a married woman. All these have equal ethical and metaphysical status as the act of adultery or ‘oghele’. Thus, in the event of any such occurrence, the married woman is expected to protest and report same to the public space through her husband. If there is a failure to do so on her part, she would be found to be morally wanting and she may be guilty of having transgressed some metaphysically projected notion of being.

OGHELE IN THE MORAL AND METAPHYSICAL SYSTEMS OF INDIGENOUS ESAN PEOPLE

Among the indigenous Esan people the act of adultery is not just frowned at but completely resented and absolutely condemned, particularly when it has to do with a married woman. The fact of its being an injustice to the husband and compromising the good of the children constitute a major moral or ethical problematic. It is characterized by falsehood and cheating which are immoral dispositions. Any individual found to have such character is regarded as lacking in integrity; the person is corrupted by the immorality and has brought grave metaphysical injury on himself and his community. This is where the connection between the metaphysical and the ethical becomes clear. There is a disconnect between the person's moral state and ontological state of being of the person as well as the collective sanctity of the existence of members of society at large.

In what is perhaps best considered as the conception of reality in indigenous Esan thought system, there exists a duality of realms – material and immaterial, separable but not always separated. This duality constitutes a whole, a unity or a one. Beings existing in these realms of the material and the immaterial are animated , or vitalized by an ontological principle of 'forces' called 'ahun' or 'orion' or 'etin'. All these translate as 'energy', 'strength', or 'power'. The source or origin of this ontological principle is 'Osenobuluwa', the Supreme Being. The nature of the said principle of reality is that it is in every living being, including the human person and spirits. And importantly, the dead (ancestors) possess this category of 'force'. The communities are not left out in possessing these spiritual categories of forces.

What all these point to is that there is a network of relationship between these beings through their spiritual categories of forces. This network of forces is sustained in a harmony – a harmony constituting a whole reality or ontology. Very importantly, the spiritual categories of forces operate in a matrix of interactions between whatever are real, are good, are true, are

truthful, are just, are pure, are whole or integral, are noble and honest; in sum, an interaction between life and virtue. And so all actions of men and women, kings and subjects, slaves and freeborn, goods and divinities, ancestors and departed ones are carried out in the animation and vitality of the forces. But perhaps most important to the moral wellbeing of members of society, communities and reality is the fact that the actions embarked upon by members of society are guided, guarded and above all, have their harmony adjudged in the light of life and virtue mentioned earlier.

Any act, therefore, performed or executed emits or generates and releases a quantum of forces or energy. If such acts emit vice-carrying energy, such as adultery, it destabilizes the order of reality by altering the state of equilibrium of the network of interactions among the forces. The result is a metaphysical disharmony with ripples in the material life of the culprit and community. So, a woman who commits adultery first, violates a moral code; second, breaks the bond of integration of the self by corruption; third, breaks the order of reality of forces; fourth, offends the husband, and fifth, alters the order of inheritance. In addition, among the Esan people, it is believed that adultery sometimes results in the death of the children when the harmony of forces is altered.

In the light of the foregoing, it is clear that the social, material and metaphysical outcome of the immoral act of adultery would need to be resolved and harmony and order restored. Among the indigenous Esan people, this takes a number of steps of rituals, sacrifices and sanctions. These include the sacrifice of goats and fowls (number varies), payment of monetary fines, and suspension from the service of the husband for a given period, as public display of information in her presence. Once these are done, the offence is made open, she

repents, pays or atones for the injury done to the community spirit, and she is restored back to harmony with reality.

REINTERPRETING THE GENDER POWER-PLAY IN ADULTERY

The traditional reaction to the exclusion of married males from culpability in the event of adultery is one of a declaration of oppression of the woman, segregation against her, and selective justice in favour of the male. And so, in gender discourse one is likely to find protests against injustice and unfair regards when it comes to the question of how to reasonably and objectively deal with the definition and consequences of adultery in various culture contexts.

In order to provide a more balanced understanding and interpretation of the moral appreciation and enforcement of prohibitions of adultery among the Esan people of Nigeria we would not among others the following issues:

- a) Among the indigenous Esan people of Africa the institution of marriage is regarded very highly;
- b) Females are usually prepared for marriage encounter from every home; they undergo formation in chastity, purity, and integrity;
- c) Part of the virtue expected of every Esan woman is faithfulness, meekness, docility, obedience, affection, care and so on;
- d) At the beginning of any marriage, the young lady is admonished not to consider returning back to the parent's home as an option. So, she is meant to sustain the marriage, and
- e) To that extent, the young woman is formed in fidelity before marriage.

One of the reasons why the married woman must remain faithful is, as stated earlier, because it is one way of enhancing harmony of forces of reality and order. Any act of adultery alters this order and leads to many and profound metaphysical and material consequences, including the death of children and/or husband. The question then is why should a married man be free to engage in sexual intercourse with an unmarried woman? One readily available reason is that this is supported by the practice of polygamy.

At a different level, one intuitive explanation that is to be considered here is the need for the reinterpretation of the traditional power-play between the genders in Esan society. Here, it is argued that the reality is that women are supreme to men in determining generational establishments or inheritance. When a woman commits adultery, there is the tendency to adulterate the off-springs (children) of the marriage between her and her innocent husband. Also, the innocent husband is expected to support and provide for another man's child(ren).

Perhaps, most importantly, once the off-springs of the innocent man are adulterated by the wife's adultery, the inheritance of the product of the illicit sexual intercourse is altered. This could only happen if the women commit adultery and not when the man does. The woman is, therefore, seen here as having a higher position in the space of gender power-play. She should therefore be protected, her products preserved pure, her position made sacrosanct and her life sustained in purity; for with her lies the cradle of kings and princes. And so, the indigenous Esan culture would go to the length of state protection to help the woman to preserve what the Esan culture considers as what she cherished most – preserving the family tree from adulteration and impurity which adultery brings upon her family.

CONCLUSION

The discourse so far shows that the justification of norms of action in African cultures is primarily hinged on the sustenance of social order in the society. If an adulterous act can distort or alter the harmony and unity enjoyed by a kin in particular, and the society in general, then it ought to be avoided by all means. And since the African (Esan) woman occupies a crucial place in preventing adulteration and impurity in a family lineage and in the entire community, tough measures are taken to deter her from engaging in such an act. Thus, the issue that arises from adultery among the Esan people is not primarily an issue of gender bias but one that seeks to understand the basis of justification of the punitive measures against adultery.

BEYOND CULPABILITY: APPROACHING MALE IMPOTENCY THROUGH LEGITIMATED ADULTERY IN ESAN METAPHYSICS

Justina O. EHIAKHAMEN

INTRODUCTION

Adultery or extra-marital sex is a human act generally adjudged immoral by human society. In fact, the concept ‘adultery’ is conceptually connected with the concept ‘immorality’ and to characterise a behaviour as adulterous is already to characterise it as immoral.²²⁰ The impermissibility of adultery is variously justified and legitimated and such legitimations are usually engrossed in heated and protracted debates. I do not here intend to engage consciously in this debate neither do I claim to hold the needed size and type of fire extinguisher to quench the heat in the debate. My intentions here are more streamlined to an African perspective on adultery and the implication it could have vis-a-vis the limit it could set for the global discourse on adultery.

Among the Esan people of Southern Nigeria, adultery is presented as immoral on social and ontological grounds. It is an act seriously frowned upon by the Esan community of beings – visible and invisible. This paper however brings to the fore the limit to such frowning by identifying a particular situation among the Esans that grants ontological legitimacy to adulterous behaviour defined as *extra-marital sex*: the rite of *Isukhuré*. My intention is to show that ontological commitments are essential in adjudging an action as right or wrong. An action is

²²⁰ Richard Wasserstrom, Is Adultery Immoral? In Richard A. Wasserstrom (Ed.) *Today's Moral Problems*, 3rd Ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1985)

permissible insofar as it is legitimated by a community of beings and impermissible if it is not. To this extent, the link between ontology and ethics is intrinsic rather than crucial.

ADULTERY IN ESAN CULTURE

In order to understand the way and manner adultery is viewed and treated among the Esan people, I must first, as a matter of elucidatory necessity, pay close but apt attention to two issues: (i) ascertaining the Esan conception of reality; and (ii) establishing the resulting conception of what is deemed good to the Esan. These elucidations are necessary if we must appreciate the moral culpability of adultery among the Esan people.

The Esan view of what is ultimately real or, what it means for anything to be, is in many respects similar to what has been theorised about many African cultures. To be real for an Esan is to be fused to, or entangled within, a community of forces, active or passive. Tempels was far from being wrong after all when he theorised about five decades ago in *Bantu Philosophy* about the notion of vital force as Bantu (African) ultimate reality.²²¹ *Etin* or *ahu* which literally translate as ‘energy’ or ‘vital force’ is the primary principle that a being, in fact, any being needed to partake of to exist in the Esan world of beings.

What is striking about the Esan metaphysics of presence is that it, in some interesting manner, finds a way of enveloping all sorts of beings into its fold. Humans, lower animals, invisible but experienced forces, trees, stones water bodies and so on are all part of the Esan world of being because they in some form or the other emit or absorb energy or force. Thus, although certain entities are passive rather than lively – e.g., stones natural minerals, lakes, etc –, they are still real existents because when acted upon by active forces such as humans, they emit

²²¹ Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959)

their force. For instance, *oriwo* (bitter leaf) is a plant that is naturally inactive until it is acted upon. When someone plucks it and extracts the juice from it, the force is emitted and it is used as a drug or for preparing the hygienic bitter leaf soup. Thus in whatever realm of existence a being is found in Esan – visible or invisible – what remains common to all being is that they possess force in one form or another.

This key substance of reality also accounts for causal relations among entities. When two or more entities interact, their forces intermingle and produce new hybrids in forms of objects and events. Thus, explaining the occurrence of illness, joy, pain, death, and other such events involves identifying the interacting forces and what was produce thereof.²²²

Among the Esan, the *etin* possessed by entities vary from being to being. In fact, it is on the basis of the degree of *etin* possessed by beings that determines the level of existence a being belongs within the Esan community. It forms the basis for the hierarchy of beings such that entities with higher forces occupy the top of the lather while lower forces are at the bottom with the Supreme Being, *Osenobulua* (the builder and sustainer of the universe) is at the apex. It therefore logically follows that the playing field for interaction among beings will be distorted and unfair, a playing field that encourages the survival of the fittest unless there are some strategic tools and checks and balances to ensure a level playing field, sense of solidarity, and protect the order in the community of beings.

There is a resultant conception of the good from the interaction among being: actions and interactions that promote sense of solidarity and sustains the peaceful coexistence among beings are deemed proper and good while anything otherwise is frowned at and discouraged. Hence,

²²² Cf. Christopher E. Ukhun, *Metaphysocal Authoritarianism and the Moral Agent in Esan Traditional Thought. Uma: Journal of Philosophy and Religious Studies* 1.1: 145-46.

moral culpability or the deserving of blame by an individual within an Esan community is communally determined to the extent that the action deserving blame has distorted the community order and harmony. In the words of Harry Sawyren, wrongdoing in an African tradition,

...is seen within the context of community life (as opposed to individualism) in which the clan relationship embracing the living, the dead and the unborn is essentially a covenant relationship. Any breach which punctures this communal relationship amounts to sin, whatever words may be applied to it. (So) the corporate solidarity of the family, the clan and the tribe becomes a fundamental factor of life ... This solidarity is indispensable for the maintenance of ethical conduct and a common standard of behaviour...²²³

This is why the admission of wrongdoing by an individual or group of people, follows several interlinked steps between the wrongdoer and the community. It entails much more than personal, interior feelings of guilt. Such personal feelings constitute only an initial step in a wrongdoer's possible acceptance and confession of guilt. But the most decisive element in the recognition and acceptance of moral culpability involves the community.²²⁴

Adultery by a woman is a serious wrongdoing among the Esan people that falls within the rubric of taboo morality, a prohibited act that evokes communal sanction when committed.

Among the Esans, adultery is known as 'Ughelemin' or 'Ugboghele'.²²⁵ *Ugboghele* is committed in the following instances:

- i. When a man (married or unmarried) attempts to seduce, or actually has sexual intercourse with the wife of another man of the same kin (*Egbe*);
- ii. When a woman have extra-marital affair of any kind, that is, with another man, married or unmarried, from anywhere other than her husband.²²⁶

²²³ Harry Sawyren, quoted by Kasomo Daniel, *An Investigation of Sin and Evil in African Cosmology. International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 1-8 (2009): 147-148

²²⁴ Kasomo Daniel, *An Investigation of Sin and Evil*, p. 150

²²⁵ C. G. Okojie, *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People* (Benin City: Ilupeju Press Ltd., 1994), p. 95.

²²⁶ Cf. *Ibid*, pp. 95-96

However, a man who keeps concubines or has extra-marital affairs with unmarried or betrothed ladies is not morally culpable of adultery as such is excluded from the Esan conception of adultery. Thus, in Esan, a woman must display complete sexual fidelity to her husband but the same is not expected of the man. In a case where the woman is not sexually faithful to the husband, she is said to commit adultery, one she must be punished for. Familusi expresses the same sentiments among the Yoruba when he says,

On extra-marital sexual affairs, the woman is duty bound to be faithful to her husband while the rule is loose regarding the man. In fact, women are expected to be calm when their husbands have been found to have been involved in extra-marital sexual affairs.²²⁷

Thus, the moral culpability of adultery is obviously felt more by the female folks than the males as the males are given liberty to engage in extramarital sex if they wish to so long as they do not cross some lines. If a woman is caught in the act of adultery or there are clear and sufficient evidence to show that she was involved in an adulterous act, the punishments are severe. This is because she is seen as contaminating the community, particularly the husband's kin, with an impure union with another man, one that can distort the balance of order in the community if measures of purification are not taken. C. G. Okojie aptly describes the punishment an adulterous woman must undergo among the Esans:

In the punishment for adultery, the woman suffered the greatest physical atonement, crowned with subjection to a public ridicule and indignity as a deterrent to other in the village... she was shaved..., stripped of all her clothes and the terrible and the terrible stinging nettle leaves were rapped round her waist and body; a heavy load... require[ing] the two hands to balance on the head was put on her and, with her hands already employed for this purpose, she could not scratch her intensely itchy body. She was asked to sing and with this, she was danced round the village... mocked and flogged and when her

²²⁷ O. O. Familusi, African Culture and the Status of Women: The Yoruba Example. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5-1 (2012): 304.

tormentors were at last tired, she was returned to her husband's house, a disgrace to herself and her husband.²²⁸

However, the man with whom an Esan woman commits adultery receives a much milder punishment. He is only made to provide the sacrificial goat that is used to appease the ancestors in order to purify the land of their wrong doing. The goat is sacrificed at the ancestral shrine of the offended husband's kin, and the kin blesses the man with whom the woman committed the adultery with *U-Don-Lobho* which means 'You have done bad, but we are praying our ancestors that this will not end with loss of libido. You will always be a man'²²⁹

Many will consider this a mere pat on the back of the offending male and, obviously, gender is implicated in the way the male and female are treated when both are guilty of the same crime. One wonders if there are any justificatory grounds for the difference in punishment of males and females who commit adultery. Isaac E. Ukpokolo, an Esan indigene, has examined this issue at some length in very useful ways,²³⁰ implying that there may be circumstances that grants legitimacy to a woman to involve herself in extra-marital affairs, without suffering any dire consequences, which we examine more in the following section.

CHILD BEARING AND THE PROBLEM OF MALE IMPOTENCY IN ESAN TRADITION

Child bearing is one of the most essential elements in an African family life. Being married in many Africa communities in general and among Esan people in particular is essentially for the purpose of raising a family or, in other words, having children. There is a

²²⁸ C. G. Okojie, *Esan Native Laws and Customs*, p. 96.

²²⁹ *Ibid*

²³⁰ See Isaac E. Ukpokolo's contribution to this volume

common saying in Esan culture that ‘one is a *man* because he has children’, and ‘one is a *woman* because she is able to bear children’; meaning that true manhood or womanhood can only be confirmed by the reality of reproductive success. The esteemed position given to child bearing in majority of considerations relating to traditional African family life explains the reason why not being able to bear children after marriage leads to a strong social stigma. A barren woman or an impotent man cannot have any peace of mind within an African (Esan) culture, not with all the complains from family members, side talks from neighbours, insinuations from friends, open and public embarrassments in meeting places and social gatherings, and all suchlike derisive attitudes he/she has to endure from members of society.

So, when a woman is barren or a man is impotent, he/she does not simply fold his/her hands without doing anything. Rather, within most indigenous African cultures, persistent efforts are made to resolve the situation; in many instances, these efforts can take various forms, ranging from clearly physiological assistance to spiritual intercessions by those versed in such matters such as native doctors, witch doctors, and revivalists in Pentecostal churches.

Infertility, understood as the inability for a couple to conceive,²³¹ is therefore an issue taken very seriously even by the Esan. But, based largely on weak scientific understanding of reproductive health, it is common in many African and non-African traditions, to see infertility as a female problem. Esan women carry more of the burden of infertility as they appear to receive more of the blame for a couple’s childlessness.²³² Nevertheless, Esan men do receive

²³¹ Marcia C. Inhorn, Middle Eastern Masculinities in the Age of New Reproductive Technologies: Male Infertility and Stigma in Egypt and Lebanon. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 18-2 (2004): 162

²³² Cf. S. J. Dyer et. al., You are a man because you have Children: Experiences Reproductive Health Knowledge and Treatment-Seeking Behaviour among Men Suffering from Couple Infertility in South Africa. *Human Reproduction* 19-4 (2004): 867.

blame as well for the childlessness of a couple in some few instances, particularly when it has been proven beyond doubt that the woman and her lineage have no history of barrenness or infertility. And, for this reason in this section I consider male impotency or infertility, as it forms the needed fulcrum for understanding the legitimization of adultery among the Esan people.

When it becomes obvious that an Esan man is impotent, the first line of action is to attempt explaining and locating its cause. Once this is done, efforts are then made to remedy the predicament. Within the framework of Esan traditional thought, causal explanation of events consists of natural and supernatural considerations. In the first instance, the Esan seeks to find natural causes for an event, causes that are readily available to one's senses or that are scientific in nature. However, in the event that such situations do not admit of natural considerations, explanations are sought from the supernatural realm of existence, consisting for example of such beings as ancestors and divinities. The same applies to the search for solutions to existential problems encountered which include but surely not limited to untimely death, ailments, poor farming harvest, and infertility.

Thus, when an Esan is faced with the serious problem of male impotency, bearing in mind the importance of child bearing, himself and his kin make conscious efforts to bring the situation under control. First, they seek for natural explanation and solution by patronising indigenous (as well as modern) health care services. When such efforts fail, then supernatural forces are consulted via the necessary channels such as the chief priests available at the various ancestral shrines and the witch doctors. After both natural and supernatural considerations are made and it is proven beyond reasonable doubts that (i) the man has no known organic defects to result in impotence, and (ii) he has not acted in ways that would arouse the wrath of supernatural forces to cause him impotency, it becomes obvious that since the man's impotence is inborn and

has not been caused by natural or supernatural causes, neither can it be resolved by the same means. It becomes clear that the man in question cannot father a child. Nonetheless, the man is aware of the stigma that comes without having children and also of the fact that his lineage may be cut short without offspring, particularly male offspring, to carry on his name. But what alternative measure can he take to have children, knowing that he cannot impregnate his wife (or wives). This leads us to the rites of *Isukhuré*.

ISUKHURÉ: THE ONTOLOGY OF LEGITIMATE ADULTERY IN ESAN CULTURE²³³

Isukhuré consists of the act of, and the rites performed in granting permission or consent to a married woman allowing her to engage in extra-marital activities, which would otherwise, without such consent be considered adulterous and abominable in the sight of men and the divinities. Such consent is granted only if it has been proven beyond reasonable doubt that her husband cannot, or is no longer able to function sexually.

Before elaborating on *Isukhuré*, some preliminary clarifications are necessary. This revolves round the questions: Is a woman compelled to remain with the man even when the he cannot function sexually? When is divorce allowed?

In Esan tradition, if a woman, after being given out in marriage, finds out that the husband is impotent or cannot function sexually, she has seven days after the marriage to lay her complain and ask for divorce, which will be granted on the ground that her husband is impotent

²³³ Bulk of the information on *Isukhuré* contained in this section were gathered primarily from interviews with Esan elders in the various regions of Esan land. Those interviewed are: Mr Paul Edebhagba (86 years), Mr. John Omoike Akhogba (81 years), Mrs. Egbibhalu Omodion (78 years), Mr. Jeremiah Okoh (77 years), Mr. Odianoson Elenbuade (74 years), and Mr. Johnson Aikohi (69 years). The author's ability to adequately interpret the pieces of information gathered draws from the fact that she is an Esan indigene who has had firsthand experience of *Isukhuré*. The information contained here are therefore factual and accurate

and she was ignorant of this fact. However, the woman has the liberty of deciding to remain in the marital bond and explore other means of resolving the problem amongst which is *Isukhuré*. However, there could be instances where the man was sexually active for years after marriage but, for one reason or the other, become inactive. In such cases, the woman has the option of *Isukhuré*, which, of course, is not compulsory. Thus, summarily put, *Isukhuré* is practicable only when it is clear that a man is sexually inactive to satisfy the wife's sexual needs or lacks the ability to impregnate her.

The rites of *Isukhuré* vary slightly among the various communities in Esan land. Among communities in Esan West, Esan Central and Esan North, when a man is sufficiently convinced that he is unable to function sexually, in spite of various efforts to remedy the condition, he, in the quest to retain his wife and raise children, opts for *Isukhuré*. This would involve the following processes. First, he informs the eldest man in his immediate family about his impotency or sexual dysfunction. The eldest man in turn inquires from the wife her disposition and readiness to accept the option of *Isukhuré*. Her favourable disposition to the option of *Isukhuré* necessitates the performance of the rites.

The rites among these regions of Esan communities require the attention and presence of the eldest man in each family across the man's kin (*egbele*). It is the assemblage of these men that grants the consent or permission to the woman to engage in extra-marital affairs with any man other than those in her husband's kin. This assemblage of elders is also entrusted with the duty of committing their approval to the knowledge of the ancestors and divinities in order to avert any possible punishment on the woman by such supernatural forces. In achieving this, a goat provided by the husband is slaughtered and the blood is sacrificed at the ancestral *Ukhure*, the staff of authority possessed by the eldest male in every Esan family and representing the link

between the physically living and their ancestors. The flesh of the goat is then used to prepare soup, along with pounded yam. This is eaten by the assemblage of elders and prayers are then offered for the release of the woman from the chains of fidelity and the ancestral punishment on adulterous women.

However, among some communities in Esan East and Esan South, although the rites generally follow the same processes, there exist some slight differences. For example, it is the responsibility of the woman to approach the eldest man in the husband's immediate family to lay her complains concerning the man's sexual dysfunction. Again, it is the responsibility of the woman to provide the materials needed for the sacrifice to be performed. In the case of Esan East and Esan South, the woman is obligated to provide only a few seeds of Kola nuts and, sometimes, a bottle of hot drink in addition. The reason why it is the obligation of the woman to provide the items is because it is believed among these communities that it is the woman who benefits more from the freedom she gains through the rites of *Isukhuré* than the man, since the reasons for *Isukhuré* is not only restricted to child bearing but also include the desire of the woman to satisfy her sexual needs which the husband is no longer able to fulfil.

In all, *Isukhuré* liberates the affected woman from the punishment for adultery by the different spheres of the Esan community: the community of the physically living no longer subject such a woman to any humiliating punishment for committing adultery and the community of the ancestors no longer afflicts her for having extra-marital affairs. Simply put, *Isukhuré*, for some specific reasons, legitimates and justifies as moral and right what would have been considered immoral and wrong. This however has implications for the discourse on the legitimation of moral norms in African traditions.

THE IMPLICATION OF ISUKHURE FOR AFRICAN META-ETHICS

The debate in African meta-ethical discourse has often revolved around what forms the foundation of moral norms in African thought systems or, in other words, what is the basis of legitimizing moral norms in African traditions. Generally speaking, there are two major viewpoints that have been at loggerheads: humanism and supernaturalism.²³⁴ In the camp of the former viewpoint, we find scholars such as Kwame Gyekye and Kwasi Wiredu. According to this view, morality in Africa traditions is not hinged on the authority of deities such as the ancestors; rather moral norms are simply necessitated to promote community well being. So, African ethics can be described, in this view, as a social humanist ethics. In the camp of the later, we find scholars such as John Mbiti and Benezet Bujo. According to this view, although moral norms in African thought are geared toward community wellbeing, the deity should be maintained as authority behind moral imperative notwithstanding the emphasis on the community.²³⁵

However, the discussions above on adultery and *Isukhure* give strong credence to the humanist position. If men can come together to give consent to a woman to engage in the highly condemnable extra-marital affairs and liberate her from the punishment incurred by an adulterous woman, then, it follows that the justification and legitimation of moral norms in African traditions falls on the community of selves. As Nel puts it,

The fact is that morality in African thought does not necessarily involve a justification with reference to a deity. This is not to say that African cosmology is unaware of a creator deity. This deity is, however, not perceived as the custodian or guardian of the moral code. The sanction of the moral code relates to the intrinsic orientation towards the well-being of the community and its

²³⁴ See Motsamai Moloeffe's contribution to this volume.

²³⁵ See P. J. Nel, Morality and Religion in African Thought. *Acta Theologica* 2 (2008): 33-46.

members. Through tradition, practice, custom, and memory, the community has arrived at these moral codes. The moral code is value-embedded.²³⁶

Notwithstanding the laudability of the humanist position, it in some way trivializes the role supernatural forces play in African ethics. From our discourse in the previous sections, it becomes obvious that in African traditions, although supernatural forces may not directly play a role in the justification of norms, they are quickly enlisted in enforcing moral codes needed to sustain harmony in the entire community of beings such that they are believed to reward acts that promote communal harmony and punish those that cause disintegration. As Elechi Amadi succinctly puts it, “in ethics, man proposes, god enforces.”²³⁷ It therefore implies that in the legitimating of norms in African thought, the community of beings – including the physically living and the living dead – work together for the betterment of the entire society. To this end, the physically living have the room to revise and create new moral codes to meet up with the demands of society whenever the need arises and with proper rites and rituals, they can get the backing of the deities.

CONCLUSION

Thus far, this chapter has identified and examined a rather peculiar situation in Esan moral thought which grants legitimacy to a woman to be involved in extramarital affairs and protects her from any dire consequences that an adulterous woman lacking such legitimacy and authority would have faced. An important point to be drawn from the above examination of *Isukhuré* is that moral norms in Esan (African) thought are dynamic and subject to revision rather than static and unalterable as it is often assumed. This is because the invention and

²³⁶ Ibid, p.44.

²³⁷ Elechi Amadi, *Ethics in Nigerian Culture*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982, p. 6.

legitimation of such norms do not necessarily rest solely on the shoulders of supernatural forces like the ancestors and divinities. In fact, what becomes obvious from our analysis so far is that the community of the physically living invent and modify norms to the extent that they meet up with the demand for human welfare and the improvement of life's condition. However, the will and powers of supernatural forces are then enlisted in ensuring compliance by individuals within the community of selves, a much needed compliance for the sake of social order and harmony. Thus, the human being has always been and remains the centre of the universe; he creates, invents, modifies, deconstructs and destroys values and beliefs. Bearing this in mind, the load falls on our shoulder in the justification of the norms we uphold. If humans cannot redeem, validate and justify the norms they live by, then, they rest on shaky foundations.

FINDING COMMON GROUNDS FOR A DIALOGUE BETWEEN AFRICAN AND CHINESE ETHICS

Jim I. UNAH

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I attempt to identify some common grounds between African and Chinese ethics. My intention is to show that although African and Chinese cultures have essentially different origins and histories, they share some common basis on which a dialogue, rather than a comparative analysis, can ensue between their conceptions of the good. Daniel A. Bell and Thaddeus Metz have attempted a similar task in a recent paper “Confucianism and Ubuntu” where they focus on three precepts shared by both Confucianism and the African ethic of Ubuntu – the central value of community, the desirability of ethical partiality and the idea that we tend to become morally better as we grow old.²³⁸ In addition to these, I go further to show that the Afro-Sino moral outlook share common ontological notions that serves as a basis for a humanistic, socially oriented welfarist ethic. They both lay emphasis on the inteconnectedness of things, the need to sustain the equilibrium and mutual interdependence among the forces of nature. And, as I intend to show, such a notion of being underscores the primacy given to a socially-motivated, praxis-driven morality that promotes human welfare. For these reasons, we can easily detect, in both moral outlooks, a reverence for social bonding, mutual interdependence, mutual success and resentment for individualistic tendencies and selfishness. This common feature within both cultures can further furnish a ground for a dialogue between them that can produce a more robust moral outlook.

²³⁸ See D. A. Bell and T. Metz, Confucianism and Ubuntu: Reflections on a Dialogue between Chinese and African Traditions, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38 (2011): 78-95.

THE PURPOSE OF ETHICS

In clarifying the ultimate purpose or essence of ethics, we should first of all take a quick glance at how it has been characterized or the meaning assigned to it by professional philosophers, since it is a core discipline of Philosophy. Ethics is simply described as moral philosophy. It is that branch of philosophy concerned with articulating, proposing, clarifying and prescribing concepts and standards of human conduct. Ethics is the professional philosophical study of morality; for morality can indeed be studied in a non philosophical manner.

Thus, when morality is studied philosophically, it becomes ethics. But ethics, like philosophy, has many subdivisions. When it prescribes the standards to which human actions should conform or rather when it proposes the yardsticks with which to evaluate the rightness or wrongness of human behavior; what is right to do and what is wrong to do, and the consequences of our actions as a people, it becomes prescriptive in character and normative ethics would emerge. Normative ethics may stipulate the right conduct to adopt at all times or as circumstances dictate; and may catalogue a hybrid criteria such as utility and the joy of the quantity of persons concerned, self interest, social custom, the decree of God, right reason, *et cetera* as standards for measuring the rightness or wrongness of human actions.

But when the concern is about the ultimate source of moral authority, the meaning of the sentences of a moralizer – whether or not they are objective or whether indeed they are expressions of private personal preferences; then moral philosophy becomes classified as meta-ethics. And then we have applied and professional ethics which investigate specific controversial issues of moral nature such as abortion; euthanasia; same sex interaction and marriages; the production of consumable but obviously harmful articles; capital punishment and environmental

pollution and degradation; and the code of conduct in specific departments of human activities such as education, medicine, law, architecture and business concerns, respectively.²³⁹

Ethics is a human science. But it is not just about deducing abstract moral principles in a philosophical manner. It is about the task of decision for a living person confronted with situations and challenges. Thus, the ultimate purpose or essence of ethics is to guide human beings in their daily interaction with their fellowmen in a social environment; which is full of complications, contradictions and challenges.

Construed in this fashion and in this context, ethics means the moral thinking which guides human actions, interactions and in relationships, to result in a cohesive social bonding and a well rounded life moderated by reason. Ethics is ultimately about moderated and guided human actions. It is about voluntary decisions, choices and actions that we take and how these make or mar our interaction with other people. Consequently, it is important for our own sake and the sake of future people that these decisions, choices and actions be well informed and guided by ideals and values that have weathered the test, the vagaries, the changing fortunes, of time. Now what are these Afro-Sino moral ideals and values and in what sense are they in dialogue?

AFRICAN MORAL SYSTEM

Reflections on ethical matters in many African societies have generally placed some emphasis on the theory of forces in their hierarchical order of placement, in their interdependence and their interfusion with one another. What affects one life force affects the other(s). Ethnographical surveys also confirm that this theory of interdependence and

²³⁹ See Jim I. Unah, Emotivism: A Critical Account of Ayer's and Stevenson's Views on Ethical Philosophy, *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, 10.1& 2 (1990).

interpenetration of forces in their ontological hierarchy is the basis of social action in all African communities.²⁴⁰ Amongst the Bantu, for instance, human actions are judged to be good or bad, right or wrong depending on whether or not the acts promote or diminish vital force or life force. As with the Bantu, a lucid expression of African ethics is articulated in Yoruba World View.

Oluwole explains that Yoruba ethics, a variant of African ethics, is founded on the golden rule and the principle of utility. In other words, the moral standard for the Yoruba is the principle which states that one should always act towards others the way he would want others to act towards him. Invariably, with the golden rule principle, the individual makes himself the standard of morality.²⁴¹ This rule is a summon of and a command to the individual to do well always and avoid evil and injury to others. It is a categorical imperative, Kantian style, for the individual to abhor evil, abhor corruption and adopt modest and honest living.

The point of interest here is that the essence of Yoruba ethics is goodness of character which consists in doing good to others, in having others in mind and in showing consideration for our fellowmen. It is a general belief in the Yoruba society that respect is equivalent to good behaviour, and vice versa. This brings us to the ethical concepts of *Iwa* (Character) and *Omoluabi* (Good Character). The Yoruba holds in high esteem *Iwa rere* (Good Character) as the source of beingness. This is affirmed to by Bolaji Idowu²⁴² citing a verse from *Ifa* corpus thus: Character is all that is, character is all that is requisite, there is no destiny to be called unhappy in

²⁴⁰ See J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heinmann Educational Books Ltd, 1967; J. Jahn, *Muntu: The New African Culture*, Dusseldorf, Germany, 1961; P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959.

²⁴¹ See Sophia Oluwole, *Witchcraft, Reincarnation and the God-head: Issues in African Philosophy* (Lagos: Excel, 1992),

²⁴² See E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religions: A Definition* (London: SMC Press Ltd, 1993).

the city of Ife, character is all that is requisite. Imperatively, this common saying by the Yoruba complements the ethical position thus: character is the King of Solicitude. *Iwa* (Character) in this context could be associated with personality building and could also be influenced by other concepts such as destiny and conscience. A man of good character and good conscience is the one who is able to contribute positively to societal growth and ensues harmonious living, who ensures not only his own happiness but the happiness of the society as a whole. Correspondingly, in Igbo ethical thinking, the Ofor title holder (*Onye jide Ofor*) is a man of moral high ground, a man of clean hands, a man of justice, a man of fair play, one who dispenses equity. *Ijide Ofor* signifies a custodian of justice, the symbol of upright living. Such a person radiates his moral character on the whole community.²⁴³

Also in Ika moral thinking, a corrupt or immoral action upsets the equilibrium of forces in their ontological hierarchy and generates tension in the community. When there is an infringement of a taboo, the perpetrator is not the only one to suffer. Everybody is affected. So everybody suffers; , hence the Ika saying that even when a finger brings oil, it soils the others. Immoral and criminal acts weaken the vital force and the spiritual potency of the clan. That is why the way people conduct themselves is the concern of everyone. Evil deeds not only impact negatively on the doer and his victim, such deeds put the entire community at risk. What one does with his life is not just about his life alone; it is about interacting, intermingling and interpenetrating vital forces. It is because of this that elders and heads of families in a typical Ika community take steps to interfere with the activities of the individual. If such interference does not happen, if the excesses of the individual are not checked, the existential harmony of the group would be severely threatened. The moral exemplar, the man of moral high ground in Ika

²⁴³ E. A. Ruch, and K. C. Anyanwu, *African Philosophy: An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Contemporary Africa*, Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1981, pp.139-144

ethics is called *Onye obi ocha*, literally, “a person of white mind”, and one with purity of soul. His conduct, comportment and general carriage overflow the community and equilibrate vital forces. One man’s conduct, therefore, if he is an ethical all rounder, can illuminate and vitalize the entire community. Ika ethics emphasizes the quality and character of the human person. This has a potential for increasing the happiness and wellbeing of the community. It is at this point that African ethics becomes utilitarian in character.²⁴⁴

The gist of utilitarian ethics, even as it is presented in Western Philosophy, is that emphasis is put on the effect which the action will produce. Thus, when presented in utilitarian terms, African ethics entails the proposition that “if an action produces excess of beneficial effects over harmful ones then it is right otherwise it is not”. The official doctrine of utilitarianism as articulated by Jeremy Bentham is to the effect that an action is right if it promotes the greatest happiness of the largest number. In a similar vein, African ethics accepts the maxim of the greatest happiness of the people or the sustenance of joy, peace and equilibrium in the entire community as the foundation of morality. This is so, because the ontological basis of African communal system is anchored on the thesis that the wellbeing of men and their happiness must be the standard for evaluating human conduct.²⁴⁵

CHINESE MORAL SYSTEM

In Chinese Philosophy, as exemplified by Confucianism, ethical ideals are tailored to suit the demands of practical daily existence. This means that, as with African ethics, Chinese ethics is praxis-driven. That is why Confucianism is characterized as the ethics of virtuous living. Now,

²⁴⁴ Jim I. Unah, Ika Philosophy: What is it? 6th *Ikanma Annual Lecture* August 20,2005.

²⁴⁵ J. I. Omoregbe, *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*, Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd, 1993, pp.135-141

the praxis driven ethics or the ethics of virtuous living comes from the works, life and teachings of Kung Fu Zu (Confucius), a Chinese sage who lived between 551 and 479 B.C., in the state of Lu in the Southeastern part of present day Shantung Province of Eastern China. Growing up was difficult for Confucius because of unstable and changing family fortunes and circumstances but eventually he settled down in adult life as a teacher of great renown. From the life and times of Confucius, the rise of Philosophic schools in China was interconnected with the practice of private teaching. Records show that Confucius was the first in Chinese scholarship to teach a large crowd of students in a private capacity. However, there were teachers before him such as the older and influential Lao Tzu who was said to have authored the *Tao Te Ching*, from which Taoism, as a philosophical school and doctrine, developed and spread like bush fire in ancient China.²⁴⁶

It is recorded that there was disagreement between Lao Tzu and Confucius regarding the nature and characteristics of the Tao. And from this, two rival schools of Taoism emerged in ancient China. Fortunately, a rich, profound and interesting philosophic climate developed from this rivalry. While there is a common ground between the rivals that the Tao is the informing and organizing principle of nature, they disagreed about the characteristics of the Tao²⁴⁷

While Lao Tzu maintained that the Tao is indescribable and unnamable or rather that the Tao represents the course of nature as the speaking of the speechless and the comprehension of the incomprehensible, Kung Fu Zu averred that The Dao (Tao) is both nameable and describable.

²⁴⁶ L. Tzu, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking: A Translation of Tao Te Chang*, Trans by Chang Chung Yuan (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975)

²⁴⁷ For details of this and what follows see C. Chung-yuan, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking: A Translation of the Tao Te Ching*, New York: Harper and Row, 1975; and F. Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, Derk Bodde (ed.), New York: The Free Press, 1948.

The eternal Tao cannot be spoken, says Lao Tzu, because it is indescribable, and unfathomable. For Kung Fu Zu, although the Tao is an abstract universal which permeates all things and flows in every direction, it (the Tao) is equally multiple and refers to the principles which govern each separate class of things in the universe. This is to say that while for Lao Tzu, the Tao is a unitary phenomenon, for Confucius there is a multiplicity of the Tao. On this view, every class of things has its own Tao which is separate from those individual things. For example, the principle which governs all things solid is the Tao of solid things and is distinguishable from the solidity of individual things. Thus, the Tao of Confucian philosophy shares a resemblance with the universal of Western philosophy, which is a general term for things that share certain basic characteristics. This is important because, whether that of Lao Tzu or that of Kung Fu Zu, the theory of Tao is the basis of Chinese ethics. But while Lao Tzu's ethics is reclusive, Confucian ethics is more directly socially oriented and socially friendly. As presented in Literature and for our purpose,²⁴⁸ Lao Tzu's system of philosophy inclusive of ethics is called Taoism while that of Kung Fu Zu is called Confucianism. But since Confucianism is steeped in Taoist thinking, it is also called Taoism. So there is non-Confucian as well as Confucian Taoism.

Now, the ethical concern of non-Confucian Taoism is the preservation of life and the avoidance of injury. For this brand of Taoism what makes the right conduct possible is the achievement of "personal purity" which in turn results in sageship and longevity. The ultimate purpose of personal purity is for the preservation, sustainability and the enjoyment of life. The individual should at all times strive to be pure by valuing and preserving what is important in life. Earthly possessions and social acquirements count for nothing to the non Confucian Taoists. Injury to the self comes from attachments to worldly things, involvement with earthly

²⁴⁸ See F. Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: The Free Press, 1948).

possessions and treasures. What it is morally sound to treasure is human life, the life of the individual, because once you lose it, you can never get it back.²⁴⁹

Society is both a corrupting and brutalizing influence on the individual and social relations encumbrances on the way of the individual to the destination of personal purity and therefore a huge network of deceits, mistrusts, distractions and betrayals. Society is like a tumor or an ulcer. Nobody can cure it. No value orientation can change the world or heal it of its moral wounds. No matter the quantity of brilliant accountants and auditors that society can train and showcase, frauds and crimes of financial sorts would not abate. On the contrary, the greater and more competent the number of accountants, auditors and financial experts we can boast of, the more embarrassing and scandalous the volume of financial crimes that are perpetrated, even on a daily basis..²⁵⁰

Thus, striving to save the world or re-order society is a futile endeavour. Such efforts lead to frustration, hypertension and untimely death. In the circumstances, the best strategy to adopt, for the non Confucian Taoists, is to abandon society and retire to the mountains and forests where nobody would impose a prior constraint on one's human essence. Outside society, a person would be free like the birds, with no imposition of any kind to give him stress and high blood pressure. Then he would be wise and live up to a ripe old age. From here, the Taoists espouse a philosophy of uselessness. And it goes like this: if you want to live long and become a sage, you should value self and despise things. To value self and despise things means to abandon society and retire to the mountains and forests where there are no disturbances, where

²⁴⁹ L. Tzu, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking*

²⁵⁰ Jim I. Unah, *Metaphysics in Ancient Chinese Philosophy*, Jim I. Unah (Ed.), in *Metaphysics, Phenomenology and African Philosophy* (Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1996), pp. 155-180.

you would flow with nature. Well, it would appear that one would be useless to society if he does so. The Taoist says that such uselessness is valuable for the preservation of life and avoidance of injury. In other words, uselessness or being useless is the authentic clue to longevity. The best way to enjoy oneself, the best way to be happy and the best way to preserve one's life and live long is to be useless. To reinforce this point of view, we are reminded by the Taoist that the valuable and useful trees in the forest do not last long, but the useless ones grow big and huge and tower above every other tree in the forest and last very long. Now, the story is told of a sacred Oak tree which is reported to have confided in someone in a dream thus:

For a long time I have been learning to be useless. There were several occasions on which I was nearly destroyed, but now I have succeeded in being useless, which is of the greatest use to me. If I were useful, could I have become so great?²⁵¹

The gist of all of this is that self is the only thing ultimately worth valuing and preserving. If one should lose this self, he/she can never get it back. Obviously, this is the Chinese version of ethical egoism which states that actions are good, morally right, if they conduce to the wellbeing of the doer, and that the individual should perform only those acts which are incremental to the wellbeing of the self. On this view, selflessness would be an ethical aberration since it may cause you injury and reduce your life span.

Unfortunately, it does not appear that the proposal of a hermit-like existence in the mountains and forests would result in sound ethical living, in which one would totally avoid injury to the self and achieve longevity. In those days, people were killed in the mountain forests by wild animals, scorpions and reptiles. People were killed by floods, avoidable pestilences and sundry other inclemency of the wild and untamed nature. Thus, ethical egoism of the sort

²⁵¹ L. Tzu, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking*

prescribed by non-Confucian Taoism would be perilous and self destruct to the individual. However, it is important to note here that this egoistic view represents the early or boyhood phase of Taoism, and one version of Taoism for that matter. This is to say that the early or boyhood ethical view of Taoism is corrected in the middle and more cerebral manhood stages of Taoist morality.²⁵²

In the middle or second phase of Taoism, for instance, conscious and concerted efforts were made to discover and comprehend the laws or principles underlying the motion or changes of things in the universe. It was noted that things were always in a state of constant motion, constant alteration, but that the laws governing motion must be unalterable and stable. If this is the case then if one understands the laws governing the universe one would be able to guide one's actions according to them and so, one would be able to turn everything to one's advantage. Again, there is no absolute guarantee that comprehending the laws of the universe in the manner suggested by the cannons of Taoism would give man complete advantage over the evils and travails of the world.

In the life-world, there are always emergences and contingencies which vitiate every attempt to gain advantage over the evils of the world. This is because being sober, being careful and being circumspect is not a proof and assurance that one could not suffer injury. Man's life, whether he agrees or not is full of irredeemable losses. All this is possible because we are human. On this point Lao Tzu raises a poser, "The reason that I have great disaster is because I have a body. If there were no body, what disaster could there be" .²⁵³ The point is that we are human beings who exist in flesh and blood

²⁵² A. Watts, *The TAO of Philosophy: The Edited Transcripts* (USA: Charles E. Tuttle Company Inc., 1995)

²⁵³ F. *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, p.64.

In the more mature and manhood stage of Taoism, there is the realization that neither escape from society to the mountains and forests nor the mastery of the laws governing the universe could bring about the overcoming of man's moral predicaments and inadequacies. For advanced Taoism, the ultimate solution to the problem of moral turpitude is the equalization of life with death and the identity of the self with others. To fully overcome the evils of the world, the escape one needs is not from the world to the mountains and forests or in attaining a state of uselessness or purposelessness, but in the abolition of the self or in the fusing of the one into the many. In this state of affairs, man is nature and nature is man. What is, is what ought to be. In this, there is the reversal of self-love of early Taoism to selflessness, from ethical egoism to altruism.²⁵⁴

We now return to the Confucian brand of Taoism. In this, there are three essential teachings. First, that the moral exemplar, the philosopher, is not one who contrives fixed doctrines, who imposes ideas and values or who originates something new. The moral exemplar is a transmitter and interpreter of cultural values and heritage. This paints the picture of the modern day philosopher, in the Husserllian fashion, as a passive spectator or observer of cultural practices and traditions, a point of view hotly contested by post Husserllian existentialists. For the existentialist, man is neither a passive observer of moral norms and ideals nor an uncommitted and disinterested transmitter of ethical ideals, but an active participant in the social milieu that he transmits to posterity.²⁵⁵

The second principal teaching of Kung Fu Zu (Confucius) is that society needs constant re-ordering and renewal through the science of the rectification of names. This doctrine or

²⁵⁴ Ibid

²⁵⁵ J. I. Unah (ed.), *Metaphysics in Chinese Philosophy Metaphysics, Phenomenology and African Philosophy*, Ibadan: Hope Publications 1996, p.184

science means that people should be made, in their conduct, to behave according to the implication attached to their names. The right principle of governance, on Confucius' view, is for a ruler to be a ruler in words and in deed, not to be a stooge, a surrogate, or a tyrant and not even to be a boss because a boss is a product of a system of mistrust. A ruler should be one who flows with the citizenry as a guide and not a tyrant. In the same way, a minister should be a minister in words and in deed. The point made by Confucius is that every name in social relationship contains certain implications which constitute the essence of that class of things to which the name applies. A ruler should, ideally, be one who rules, which means that he should conform to "the way of the ruler" without which he will cease to be a ruler. On this view, there is or there ought to be a correspondence between a name and what it stands for. Every name in social relationship implies certain duties and responsibilities. If everyone lives according to his name in social relationship, duties and obligations would be performed as categorical imperatives. This is how to re-order and put society in a sound footing.²⁵⁶

The third teaching which is profoundly ethical is anchored on the concept of human "heartedness", "kind heartedness" and "righteousness". Here, righteousness is a categorical imperative, which means that there is an oughtness implied in our situation. Everyone in social relationship has certain duties which he ought to perform, certain things which he ought to do and which have to be done for their own sake. If a man's action is motivated by something else other than the moral oughtness or obligation then he does not act out of righteousness, but he acts out of the profit motive. This is the most fundamental form of corruption and immorality. You act, not because of the gain or profit in view. You act because it is morally obligatory to do so. Thus, to act for nothing, not for reward is the authentic clue to righteousness in Confucianism.

²⁵⁶ See F. Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*

For Confucius, those who act out of *Li* act out of the profit motive. This is not good enough. It is unrighteous to do so. But those who act out of *Yi*, act out of righteousness. For Confucius, the essence of all of these, the essence of moral obligations is human heartedness which means loving others. The man who loves others is one who is able to perform his duties in the society. A ruler acts as ruler in words and in deed because he loves his country men; a father acts the way a father should because he loves his children, and conversely, children act the way they should because they love their father. From this morality of human heartedness, Confucius developed a concept of the man of *Jen*, a man of moral high ground, a man of all round virtue, an ethical all-rounder, who actually does his duties in society. In expressing the principles which govern the man of *Jen*, Confucius proposed two forms of moral exhortation, that is, the principles of *Chung* and *Shu*, more or less two sides of a moral coin. The principle of *Chung* is a positive moral exhortation which says “do to others what you wish yourself,” whereas *Shu* expresses a negative moral exhortation which states that one should not do to others what he would not wish himself.

In this form of ethics, that is, in the practice of *Jen*, the moral actor or agent applies the principle of

the measuring square”, which entails using the self as a standard of morality. It further states, “do not use what you do not like in men of high positions in dealing with men of low rank. Do not use what you hate in men of low birth in relating to men of high rank, do not use what you could never tolerate about your predecessors to await or ambush your successors and vice versa. Do not use what you do not like on the left to affect the right and vice versa. Serve your ruler as you would require your subordinate to serve you. Serve your elder brother as you would require your younger brother to serve you. Set the example in behaving to your friend as you would require them to behave to you.”²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ Ibid

These moral precepts are taken from the *Doctrine of the mean* and the emphasis is that, the moral agent should use himself, his likes and dislikes, as a standard of morality, as the guide of his social conduct.

The next emphasis in Confucian moral philosophy is on knowing *Ming*. This aspect of Confucian ethics is intended to assist the individual to achieve mental health and tranquility of the soul. According to Confucius whether our principles in this world succeeds or not depends entirely on knowing *Ming*. To be happy one needs to know *Ming*. Success or failure does not depend on doing but on *Ming*. One may die of frustration and disappointment if one does not know *Ming*. Knowing *Ming* entails doing ones duties, performing ones obligations, without bothering about the result of one's action. Once we have performed our duties, once we have done what is morally obligatory for us to do, it is inconsequential whether we succeed or fail. A concern about non-moral considerations incidental to our actions ruins the oughtness demanded of our situation. So you act for the sake of acting, you act for nothing and not for results. Thus, righteousness comes from the idea or notion of "doing for nothing". Now, in doing for nothing, the Confucian makes the point that you cannot just fold your arms in the face of insurmountable difficulties. Confucian ethics contends that in spite of the frustrating consequences incidental to acting, it is disingenuous and escapist to just sit down and do nothing as the pure Taoist would prefer. That one does not succeed in getting his principle to work in trying to reform the society, in trying to re-direct human conduct, does not entail that we should sit down and do nothing. If one knows *Ming* he will not bother about the success or failure of his act. For it is as if man proposes *Ming* disposes.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Jim I. Unah, *Metaphysics in Ancient Chinese Philosophy*

But then, what is *Ming*? For Confucius, *Ming* means fate or destiny or the total existent conditions and forces of the universe. For our principles to prevail in this world, for the material success of our endeavour, we need the co-operation of these conditions and forces. But such a co-operation is entirely beyond our control. It is foolish, therefore, for us to worry about what is beyond our control. If we know *Ming*, we would carry out whatever we intend to carry out regardless of whether or not we succeed. This is what Confucius means by knowing *Ming*. According to him only a superior man can know *Ming*. Thus, to know *Ming* means to accept the inevitability of the world as it exists, and so disregard one's external success or failure. Once we know *Ming* we would be active participants in the drama of social existence and would care less about the consequences of what is morally obligatory for us to do. Consequently, happiness and sound moral living is a function of knowing *Ming*.²⁵⁹

AFRO-SINO ETHICS IN DIALOGUE

It is at this juncture that we return to the concept or idea of dialogue. In what sense is there a dialogue between African and Chinese ethics? Why is it not a comparative discourse? The answer to this is simple. In a comparative discourse you are concerned with what existed or transpired between two currents or thoughts. You are concerned about similarities and differences. That is not my interest in this essay. In the matter concerning Afro -Sino moral outlook, we are not just concerned about what existed, in what areas they looked alike and in what areas they are different. We are concerned about cultural interfusion, a continuum in which ancient wisdom is invited to vitalize the present and the future. It is interplay of past, present and

²⁵⁹ J. I. Omoregbe, *A Philosophical Look at Religion* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1993)

future in which the future is in the past and the past is in the future, of our present engagements. Thus, the sense of dialogue in this discourse is not one between interlocutors in which one talks and the other replies. The notion of dialogue here is in terms of a common ground between two cultures that existed separately in the past but are now in contact to discover that a common affinity binds them together in some fundamental respects.

We take a quick look at two moral outlooks that are connected now and which are thrust together into the future and what to make of this understanding:

1. In African presentation of ethics, the purpose of morality is the consideration of human welfare, the general good and social bonding of society. In Chinese philosophy the purpose of ethics is for personal purity, kind heartedness, righteousness and social bonding.
2. In African ethics emphasis is on moral values and the preservation of life, mutual interdependence, reciprocal solidarity, mutual happiness and mutual conviviality. In Chinese ethics emphasis is on human heartedness, kind heartedness, empathy, mutual welfare and mutual success.
3. African ethics is anchored on communal patriotism, that is, the sharing of happiness and sorrows, burden and benefit together. What affects one affects the others. Correspondingly, in Chinese ethics patriotism is demonstrated through the man of *Jen*, that is, one with a high ethical virtue, who in helping himself helps others.
4. In African ethics, the ideal man as depicted in Yoruba concept of Omoluabi is contemporaneous with the sage in Chinese moral philosophy. A sage here is the custodian of the cultural heritage of his society as shown by Confucius.

5. Selflessness in African ethics is the antidote for the problem of corruption. In Chinese ethics, selflessness manifests in the ethical dictum of “do for nothing”. One should see the performance of his duty not from the point of profit but as an obligation.
6. In African ethics the re-ordering of society is achieved through the strict adherence to the hierarchy of forces and man’s placement in the ontological order of beings. In Chinese ethics, the re-ordering of society is achieved by the Confucian doctrine of the rectification of names, that is, man should live up to his name in social relationship.
7. In African ethics, the Golden Rule is the standard of morality and it means that one should act towards others the way he would wish others to act towards him. In Chinese ethics, the Golden Rule is expressed in the Doctrine of the Mean, the principle of Chung and Shu, which states that, one should do to others what he would wish himself, and conversely, that man should not wish others what he would not wish himself.
8. In African ethics, the utilitarian principle accepts the happiness of the largest population as the foundation of morality. In Chinese ethics, the utilitarian principle manifests as the perspective that the wellbeing and happiness of men is the basis for sound ethical living.
9. Most importantly, the concept of Tao in Chinese thought plays similar roles as the notion of vital force in African thought which consist in enhancing moral values that enforce social bonding. The recognition in both framework of thought of an interconnected universe of forces plays an important role in the development of the ethics of social bonding

There are several other areas of common concourse not highlighted here. No one can exhaust everything, nor should anyone claim to know everything. Suffice it to state that this is an ongoing conversation between two cultures that appear to have an understanding arising from a

common moral outlook. None of the two cultures appears to want to conquer anyone. Each of the cultures simply wants to be allowed a space in the world to exist freely as human beings.

CONCLUSION

Both the African and Chinese ethics parade sound ethical principles and great moral exemplars and cherish the wisdom of the ancients. None of these moral outlooks presents notorious historical figures as their ethical flag bearers. This is to say that all human cultures treasure men and women of high moral standards. The problem now, from the conduct of people in cultures where these high moral ideals originated, is that the most rigorous morality appears to be accepted by everyone when there is no question of putting it into practice. In other words, the conducts of many people from African and Chinese descent and even beyond, are not particularly ethically impressive. It raises the question whether such ethics truly works. If they do not work, why do people treasure and preserve them? If they do work, why do we have so many cases of corruption, immorality and misconduct in societies where these ethical theories were spurn? Or could it just be that they do work but that man is morally too weak to abide by them? Are they afflicted by the ethical disease of *akrasia*?²⁶⁰ These questions are pertinent because of the following experience with which we are all familiar.

Modern day United States of America, for instance, is reputed to be efficient and successful in every sphere, especially in the realm of strict regulation and control. Yet, we can recall vividly the huge fraud perpetrated by Enron and the recent mind blowing financial crime committed by Madoff. All this happened in a society peopled by wiz kid Harvard-trained and

²⁶⁰ S. O. Tamuno and I. E. Nelson, Social Ethics and Nation-Building, *SOPHIA: An African Journal of Philosophy*, 8.2 (2005): 93-97.

Goldman Saachs-mentored financial experts, accountants and auditors. Correspondingly, with the famous Coopers and Lybrand, two notable accounting associations (ICAN&ANAN) and several high brow accounting and auditing firms in Nigeria, the society is daily constipated by the Halliburton scam, the Bunmi Oni – Cardbury financial fraud, the Tafa Balogun saga, and a host of others too numerous to mention.

As if to add insult to injury, Chinese manufacturers and merchants, in collaboration with Nigerian profiteers, have inundated every market with sub-standard and fake products, such as GT Radial Tyres, that are life threatening. This is not good enough, coming from peoples who lay claim to rich cultural heritage of high ethical values and ideals.²⁶¹

There is therefore a need for genuine cultural renewal and ethical reorientation, to make people practice what they preach and live by the ideals which they purport to hold dear. For after

²⁶¹ See Jim I. Unah, "Ontologico-Epistemological Background to Authentic African Socio-Economic and Political Institutions" in *Journal of Oriental and African Studies*. 9 (1997/98): 134-147

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all said and done, the ethics of character and integrity, of mutual interdependence, of reciprocal solidarity, of mutual conviviality, of civilized progress and mutual success, which African and Chinese people proclaim would be a ludicrous sham if the ensuing conversation, the ethical dialogue, leaves the poorer partner poorer and the richer partner richer.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON GYEKYE'S HUMANISM: DEFENDING SUPERNATURALISM

Motsamai MOLEFE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter critically scrutinizes Kwame Gyekye's argument for trivializing or undermining a supernaturalist meta-ethics, in African traditions, in favor of a naturalist view that espouses a humanistic ethic, which places emphasis on welfare as the chief good. My aim is to reject Gyekye's view chiefly for two reasons. Firstly, Gyekye's view departs from a holistic thought that generally characterizes African traditions. Secondly, his view is grounded on flawed premises that essentialize a revealed religion within a framework of the divine command theory, as is common in Western ethics. I then proceed to defend a more viable alternative premise on which morality in African tradition can be grounded: the life force theory

The chapter will therefore proceed in the following fashion. The first section will frame the debate in African meta-ethical thinking, with the view of providing an answer to the question: which of the two competing meta-ethical views in African traditions is more attractive, humanism or supernaturalism? The second section will present Gyekye's argument for rejecting the supernaturalist view, in African ethics. The third section will evaluate and reject Gyekye's argument against supernaturalism. I will argue that his view is bolstered by flawed premises and, as such, as it stands, it is indefensible. The final section will provide reasons why the notion of life-force may ground a plausible alternative to the humanism advocated by Gyekye. However, this paper only offers a *prima facie* case for taking the life-force thesis seriously; and, thus, serves only as a precursor to a fully-blown account of why this account is more justified.

Gyekye, in a paper titled “African Ethics”²⁶² explains, generally, the nature of ethics in African traditions. Gyekye discusses *inter alia* several important issues related to African ethics, such as, the meaning of the terms "moral" and "ethics", the notion of moral personhood, the importance of character, and the idea of universal brotherhood of humanity. What is relevant in Gyekye’s paper for this present essay is his discussion of the two competing meta-ethical views in African traditions – humanism and supernaturalism. Humanism is the view that explains moral value entirely in terms of “human interests or welfare independently of any religious considerations”²⁶³ Supernaturalism, on the other hand, is a view that “bases ... morality on some supernatural source”²⁶⁴. In other words, a supernaturalist view makes God or some spiritual consideration a foundation for morality. For example, the divine command theory would make God’s command a standard of right or wrong.

FRAMING THE META-ETHICAL DEBATE

Gyekye’s discussion of African ethics is elegant and appreciable for many reasons, except that his discussion of the debate between humanism and supernaturalism strikes me as less philosophical (or so I read him); and, instead more historical or anthropological. His argument hinges on anthropological facts, such as the utilitarian approach that the Akan people have towards god/s. He also appeals to socio-historical fact about a lack of revealed religion in Africa when compared to Christianity and Islam. From these considerations, Gyekye argues for a secular view and rejects supernaturalism. My interest however, is in a normative project, one

²⁶² K. Gyekye, African Ethics. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.) (2010). Available at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/african-ethics> (Accessed 20 June 2012).

²⁶³ K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.5.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*

which aims to systematically articulate a philosophically attractive view in an African context; a view that will be grounded primarily on rational considerations, and one which flow from axiological principles that have an African pedigree.

Thus, the question that will frame the discussion that follows is: what might an attractive African moral philosophy look like? Note, my question is largely not concerned with what Africans actually believe or their history, but my focus is developing an attractive normative package relative to our question, that will fit within dominant African conceptions of morality.

GYEKYE'S ARGUMENT AGAINST SUPERNATURALISM

I suggest that we read Gyekye as arguing that in the African tradition, ethics is best interpreted as secular and morality a function of securing human welfare. He styles his secular approach to ethics as 'humanism'. He defines humanism within this ethical ambit as concerned with the "master value" of human welfare²⁶⁵. In other words, in this moral scheme, all that promotes human interests, goals and welfare counts as good and the opposite as evil. Also, taking humanism seriously implies a rejection of supernaturalism as Gyekye does. So, for Gyekye, the idea that morality depends on, or is founded on, religion is unsustainable, philosophically speaking, in the African context. Gyekye's argument for rejecting a supernaturalist ethic is as follows:

The claim, made by many scholars that African morality is founded on, or derives from, religion cannot, in my opinion, be upheld, if by morality we are referring to social principles and norms that guide the conduct of people in a society. One reason is that, unlike Islam or Christianity, the traditional, that is, indigenous,

²⁶⁵ K. Gyekye, *Beyond Cultures: Perceiving a Common Humanity: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies*, 3. Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy (2004), p. 41.

African religion is not a revealed religion whereby divine truth is revealed to a single individual who becomes the founder²⁶⁶

And he continues by saying,

In a revealed religion, what is revealed is generally elaborate and can be conceived to include moral principles and ideals as part of the will of God thus revealed. A morality that is founded on religion is thus a necessary concomitant of a revealed religion. Since the indigenous African religion is not a revealed religion, there is no way by which the people would have access to the will of God that contains elaborate moral principles upon which a coherent moral system can be erected. In the context of a non-revealed religion, then, to make divine or supernatural commands the source of moral values and principles would be conceptually impossible.²⁶⁷

Analyzing these quotations, the following points may be observed from Gyekye's argument. Gyekye's view is that a supernaturalist ethic finds a best model in the Christian or Islam religion, since these are revealed religions. Thus, if African ethics is to be supernaturalistic, it must have a revealed religion. Revealed religion, in Gyekye's view, is a necessary 'property' of a supernaturalist ethic, since it answers the challenge of accessing moral instructions or truths.

By revealed religion Gyekye has in mind a religion that has prophets who receive the will of God and this may include written materials of such prophets (as we find, for example, in the Bible and Koran). Or, put simply, Gyekye has in mind an institutional religion. African religion, at least according to Gyekye, lacks a revealed foundation and by implication offers no answer to the challenge of accessing the will of God on moral truths. It follows thus that if African religions are not revealed, then it fails to give access to moral truths or the will of God; and, therefore, morality in Africa cannot be founded on, or dependent on, religious claims. It implies

²⁶⁶K. Gyekye, *African Ethics*

²⁶⁷*Ibid*

therefore that the idea of ‘revealed religion’ plays a critical role in Gyekye’s sustenance of his rejection of supernaturalism.

We can thus represent Gyekye’s argument:

Premise 1: If African ethics were founded on religious claims then it would (need to) have a revealed foundation.

Premise 2: African religion is not a revealed religion.

Conclusion: Therefore, African ethics cannot be founded on religious claims.

EVALUATION AND REJECTION OF GYEKYE’S ARGUMENT

If I can successfully show that revealed religion is not essential for a supernaturalist ethic, in African traditions, I would have undermined Gyekye’s view. Further, if I can show that revealed religion need not be imagined within the framework of the divine command theory within the African tradition, then I would have completely undermined Gyekye’s rejection of supernaturalism, in African traditions. I think both these tasks can be done.

I find Gyekye’s rejection of supernaturalism to be predicated on flawed premises, as such, I repudiate his view. I reject the first premise on the basis that at least, in African ethics, one can imagine morality, as it is usually done, outside of the framework of revealed religion such as those found in Christianity or Islam. Revealed religion, although construed as a ‘necessary concomitant’ of a supernaturalist ethic, as argued by Gyekye, can be watered-down to merely refer to one of the ways of understanding religious ethics – admitting this is not tantamount to implying plausibility of this view, it’s merely a recognition of a fact/s.

I am thus arguing that in African traditions there are other ways of conceptualizing morality other than the divine command theory. The essence of this moral theory (divine

command theory) is that “‘moral right’ is a matter of being commanded by God and ‘morally wrong’ is a matter of being forbidden by God”.²⁶⁸ Rightness and wrongness, in this view, are a function of merely what God pronounces as His will. Beyond this view, I argue that in African traditions the notion of life force provides a departure from the divine command framework. In this view, morality does not require divine commands; instead, morality is grounded on a divine attribute of life force, which is an attribute of God. This moral value grounds life as a basic moral fact and value.

The notion of vital force or life force (I use these phrases interchangeably) is both a metaphysical and a moral concept. As a metaphysical concept, it describes how African societies and intellectuals understand the stuff that fundamentally characterizes the world. Placide Tempels, a famous missionary philosopher, elucidating this notion states:

Bantu (people) speak, act, live as if, for them, being were forces. Force is not for them an adventitious, accidental reality. Force is even more than a necessary attribute of beings: force is the nature of beings, force is being, being is force".²⁶⁹

Bikopo, et al, also observes that in this metaphysical framework

all beings are endowed with varying levels of energy. The highest levels characterize the Supreme Being (God) ... the muntu (person, intelligent being), participates in God's force, and so do the non-human animals but to a lesser degree.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ J. Rachels. & S. Rachels. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2010), p.50.

²⁶⁹ P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*. Translated by Dr. A. Rubbens (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959), p.54.

²⁷⁰ B. Bikopo & L. P. Bogaert Reflections on Euthanasia: Western and African Ntomba Perspectives on the Death of a Chief. *Developing World Bioethics* 10 (2009): 42 - 48.

Vital force is thus an invisible or spiritual energy of life that is possessed by both animate and inanimate things, albeit to varying degrees.²⁷¹

This notion of vital force also has moral overtones. The moral nature of vital force is premised on the idea that what is of basic moral value is life and the goal of morality is the promotion of life. The promotion of life in this thinking implicates increasing as opposed to the diminishing of one's vital force – the more vital force one possesses the better. "The supreme value that expresses the integrity of our whole being is life, strength and force, to live strongly".²⁷² Tempels notes, for example, concerning the Bantu that

their purpose is to acquire life, strength or vital force ... Each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation ... Supreme happiness, the only kind of blessing, is, to the Bantu, to possess the greatest vital force."²⁷³

Bujo, a Congolese African philosopher, argues similarly that, "... for Africans, it is crucial to share with one's neighbour. Whoever does not share withholds the life force from another."²⁷⁴ If these observations are construed in the light of African communitarian thinking, it follows that, ethics is about increasing the community's vital force. The idea that emerges (from the above) is that the more vital force one possesses the better the world. It is not within the scope of this

²⁷¹ I. Menkiti, On the Normative Conception of Personhood. In K. Wiredu (ed.) *Companion to African Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 328 - 329.

²⁷² B. Bikopo & L. P. Bogaert Reflections on Euthanasia, p. 43.

²⁷³ P. Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, pp.30-32

²⁷⁴ B. Bujo, Springboards for Modern African Constitutions and Development in Africa Cultural Traditions. In F. Murove (ed) *African Ethics: an Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*(Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2009), p. 345.

project to determine, whose, ethically speaking, vital force to increase, that of the agent or that of (moral) patient and whom to sacrifice in contexts of trade-offs, where one has to pick.

This idea of vital force grounds an interesting way to account for the value attached to the notion of community or harmony by many African people and intellectuals. The best way to value, protect and preserve life is by promoting interdependence or harmony. Godfrey Onah argues for this view when he states that

to protect and nurture their lives, all human beings are inserted within a human community ... the promotion of life is therefore the determinant principle of African traditional morality and this promotion is guaranteed only in the community. Living harmoniously within a community is therefore a moral obligation ordained by God for the promotion of life."²⁷⁵

In this thinking, the community is a structure created to facilitate the most fundamental of human needs, life. Onah, like most African thinkers, underscores the critical role of the community in the moral life but construes the role of the community to be contributory or instrumental. In other words, the community is good insofar as it enhances harmony and interdependence which are good for life. The foundational good is life and the community is there only as a structure that enhances life. The value of harmony is only insofar as it is a divine arrangement for ensuring that life is valued.

What follows from above is: if we treat others badly, we diminish their vital force and our own. If my observations about vital force and the idea of community are correct, it follows that we can make sense of a supernaturalist ethic in the sub-Saharan tradition without relying on revealed religion, contrary to Gyekye's submission.

²⁷⁵ G. Onah, *The Meaning of Peace in African Traditional Religion and Culture*. Available from <http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/goddionah.htm>, (n. d.). Accessed 12 April 2012.

The concepts of life force and of community, as construed here, provide an interesting way for rethinking the dependence of morality on religion outside of the divine command framework. This religious ethic, which is based on the notion of life force, emerging from the African soil gives a good reason for rejecting Gyekye's claim that morality in the African context cannot be religious since it would require institutional religion or a prophet to reveal the will of God. In this thinking, mere possession of vital force grounds a relationship of dependency between religion and morality. Thus, in African thinking, we have an ontology that is geared towards the promotion of spiritual life through the instrumentality of a human community.

Above, I have showed how the first premise is flawed if we take seriously the notion of life force, as some African scholars and peoples do. Now, I turn to the second premise. The second premise claims that African religion cannot and is not a 'revealed religion'. Interestingly, many African scholars differ with Gyekye's observation as they describe African religions, generally, as implicating some kind of 'revelation'. In fact, the revelation at play in the African thinking is much more immediate and implicates the whole community, not just an individual. For example, Steve Biko, a South African political martyr and a practitioner of African cultural beliefs observes,

We thanked God through our ancestors before we drank beer, married, worked ... Neither did we see it logical to have a particular building in which all worship would be conducted. We believed that *God was always in communication with us* and therefore merited attention everywhere and anywhere."²⁷⁶

If we take seriously this assertion by Biko it has interesting implications for a moral theory; it implies a kind of ethical situationalism, wherein God would, through a variety of

²⁷⁶ S. Biko, Some African Cultural Concepts. In P. Coetzee & A. Roux (eds) *The African Philosophy Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p.29.

natural instruments and moral agents, communicate moral duties. Instead, of a religion and an ethical framework that offers absolute moral rules as one finds in institutionalized religions, as like those appealed to by Gyekye, in this thinking one finds a situationally sensitive and responsive kind of revelation of a God who is more immediate and involved in the moral drama and dilemmas of life.

Another interesting way of thinking about revelation in this tradition is clearly highlighted by Mogobe Ramose, an esteemed South African philosopher of Ubuntu:

The living-dead play a vital role in the life of the living as they are deemed to have special powers the living do not have. Because of this belief, it is crucial to be attentive to their ‘whisper’ and carry out the wishes or instructions received. The carrying out of the instructions is understood to be obligatory on the premise that the living-dead are the protectors of the life of the living and as such wish them only the good.²⁷⁷

Ramose, here, suggests that God reveals Himself via the agency of the living-dead, usually also referred to as, ancestors. Ramose’s view is undergirded by what may be termed a spiritual community, which he describes as the “onto-triadic being”; this community comprises of God, ancestors (living-dead) and human beings.²⁷⁸ In this line of thought, the living-dead, those who reached the highest form of moral perfection, serve as guides and God’s voice to guide those on this earth on the moral journey to perfection.

It is controversial, practically speaking, how this revelation actually happens but not worse than other accounts with such metaphysical appeals. The point, however, is to argue that, it is wrong of Gyekye to *unqualifiedly* argue that the African religion is not revealed. It is also

²⁷⁷ M. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999), p.300.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, pp.67-68.

unfair to construe revealed religion only in the light of Western religions or ethics, worse so, if one is analysing African traditions.

In the foregoing, I have attempted to show that Gyekye's arguments fail to undermine a religious ethic in the African traditions. As my argument stands, it is only sufficient to upset Gyekye's argument and view, but far from claiming plausibility for itself. It thus becomes urgent that we reflect on this critical question: can a *prima facie* case be made that may postulate the plausibility of the notion of vital force in the African tradition? I think the (metaphysical) holism that characterizes African thinking gives the first cue that may render the notion of vital force more attractive than Gyekye's humanistic view.

The notion of vital-force may be controversial but the ontological structure that grounds this notion itself is not controversial, at least, in the African tradition. African traditions, metaphysically and (even) morally can best be described as holistic. I want to appeal to this notion of holism to make two distinct arguments. Firstly, I appeal to this notion to further upset Gyekye's rejection of supernaturalism. Secondly, I use this notion to build a *prima facie* case for the plausibility of the life force view.

Gyekye, in the midst of rejecting supernaturalism as a plausible view in the African tradition, articulates a *surprising* metaphysical claim. He observes that, "The African metaphysic, to be sure, is a theistic one, and yet it does not nurture theistic or supernatural ethic".²⁷⁹ This observation strikes me as very odd in the light of the tendency of how African traditional thought generally flows. There is no dispute that African thinking is holistic. Holism,

²⁷⁹ K. Gyekye, African Ethics.

metaphysically and morally speaking, respectively refers to the view that reality is interrelated and interdependent and that these relations in some way are of basic moral value. Both the metaphysical and moral holism, as typical in this tradition, would resist Gyekye's strict dichotomy between a metaphysics that is religious and an ethic that is humanistic. In the African thinking, it is *strange* (note, not contradictory) for one to separate the moral and religious in way that Gyekye does. In what follows, I will give a rough sense of the metaphysical holism that characterizes the African tradition.

African metaphysical systems generally construe reality as an interconnected web of life. Reality itself is defined in terms of relationships, all-inclusive relationships. For example, Bujo argues that, "Africans do not think in 'either/or', but rather in 'both/and' categories."²⁸⁰ Elsewhere, Bujo also notes: "Africans are traditionally characterised by a holistic type of thinking and feeling. For them, there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular; they regard themselves in close relationship with the entire cosmos."²⁸¹ In the same light Felix Murove, an African philosopher from Zimbabwe, who studies the notions of *Ukama* and *Ubuntu*, argues that,

African ethics arises from an understanding of the world as an interconnected whole whereby what it means to be ethical is inseparable from all spheres of existence ... This relatedness blurs the distinction between humanity and nature, the living and the dead, the divine and the human.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ B. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*. Translated by Brian McNeil (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), p.4

²⁸¹ B. Bujo, Ecology And Ethical Responsibility from an African Perspective. In F. Murove (ed) *African Ethics: an Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2009), p.281.

²⁸² F. Murove, Beyond the Savage Evidence Ethic: A Vindication of African Ethics. In F. Murove (ed) *African Ethics: an Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2009), p.28

What emerges from these views is not only interconnectedness but also an interesting conception of reality. Verhoef observes, “Everything – God, ancestors, humans, animals, plants and inanimate objects – is connected, interdependent and interrelated”. She adds that “From the African world view, what is not connected, what is not related within the web of the universe does not exist ...”²⁸³ Bujo adds a very interesting facet to this view on the African web of interrelations and interdependence when he observes that “the consequence of this affirmation is that the community based on this kind of thinking is not only three dimensional but four dimensional as well, since it includes God as the ultimate foundation.”²⁸⁴ Shutte also observes that God, in the African thinking, is not outside this earth but is at its centre.²⁸⁵ He also observes that,

Life force is thus the fundamental reality in the universe. So the universe can be seen as a graded system of life force, emanating from the source of all force, God ... One can visualise this world view as a spherical universe of life force. At the centre of the sphere, is God, continual source of all force.²⁸⁶

If we take holism as presented here seriously, holding a view similar to that of Gyekye that an African metaphysics is religious and yet denying the foundational status of religion strikes me to be characteristically ‘un-African’. The fact that all being and reality is interrelated in the African traditions is not merely a descriptive fact but also one which entails a normative load. The normative package flowing from this view of reality is that, the interrelatedness of

²⁸³ H. Verhoef & C. Michel, Studying Morality within the African Context: A Model of Moral Analysis and Construction. *Journal of Moral Education* 26 (1997): 395 - 396.

²⁸⁴ B. Bujo, Differentiations in African Ethics. In W. Schweiker (ed) *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p.424.

²⁸⁵ A. Shutte, Ubuntu as an African Ethical Vision. In F. Murove (ed) *African Ethics: an Anthology of comparative and Applied Ethics* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2009), p.96.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 90.

being is a state of being we ought to strive to maintain. Thus, we began to have a sense of a metaphysic that entails a moral view, which teaches that moral sphere cannot and is not to be separated from metaphysical. For example, Nel argues that,

the most common feature of this cosmology is the integration of three distinguishable aspects, namely environment, society, and the spiritual. All activities are informed by this holistic understanding ... An act is never separated from its environmental, societal and spiritual impact.²⁸⁷

In other words, moral acts are caught up in these three spheres of reality: the natural, the social and spiritual. And, the spiritual or God is the foundation of all reality. Thus, the African cosmology entails a picture that shows interrelations between beings, but also a normative paradigm that teaches that morality functions to maintain this interrelation or harmony of all beings, from God to the inanimate object. Thus, we can observe that (moral) holism, as construed here, undermines Gyekye's attempts to create a dichotomy between a spiritual metaphysic and morality in African traditions. We, thus realize that the goal of ethics is to function within a context in which the moral and the spiritual are essentially inseparable. It must also be observed that in the African thinking the is-ought gap does not hold water.

The is/ought gap is the view that moral duty cannot be derived from statements of facts about the world.²⁸⁸ Generally, in the traditional thinking, moral truths are derivable from factual statements. It will be interesting to justify this philosophical tendency as found in the African tradition, but it does not fall within the scope of this work to explain and defend this tendency.

ADVOCATING A VITALIST PRINCIPLE (REJECTION OF HUMANISM)

²⁸⁷ P. Nel, *Morality and Religion in African Thought. ActaTheologica 2* (2009): 37-38.

²⁸⁸ E. Sober, *Core Questions in Philosophy: A text with readings* (Englewoods Cliff: Prentice Hall, 2005), p.168

Moreover, the notion of vital force is at home within the holism that characterizes the African traditional thinking. The ethic following from this notion of life force is, at face value, more attractive than the humanistic ethic following from Gyekye's naturalism. Humanism is loaded with the negative elements entailed by its anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is the view that construes moral goodness relative to human interests or instrumentality.²⁸⁹ If value is measured only in terms of utility or human welfare, then this view will not find the act of torturing animals for fun immoral, or if it does, it will not offer a plausible rationale that speaks to the welfare of the victimized animals but will centre its concern on the damage that will be caused in a person's character - not the (animal) victim in question. As a result, this view also fails to engender a robust environmental ethics, unlike the notion of vital force, which posits that all of nature possess vital force and, as such, is worthy of some moral regard. Humanism limits moral value to human interests and welfare and thus departs from the entire web of life that African holism commits us to.²⁹⁰ Insofar as the life force view is consistent with the holistic tendency of African thought and also provides a broader moral purview than does humanism; it seems the life force view can be postulated to be more attractive.

However, the vitalist principle may be accused of encouraging multi-killings since those who commit these acts do them to increase their vital force by taking that of another. Another concern raised may be that of animal slaughtering in African tradition to promote the vital force of the community. Kevin Behrens²⁹¹ provides a good philosophical basis to respond to these philosophical and practical moral challenges. He clearly argues for a non-anthropocentric view

²⁸⁹ K. Behrens, Exploring African Holism with Respect to the Environment. *Environmental Values* 19 (2010): 468.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, pp.474-475

²⁹¹ *Ibid*, pp.468-484

of ethics that extends ethical relations to embrace the entire cosmos. His view shows that African thought, correctly construed, shows the inconsistency of multi-killings and promotes treatment of nature with dignity. I think that if we understand the notion of vital force in the light of promoting life within the instrumentality of the community (society, environment and spiritual), this may begin to redress some of these practical moral challenges.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued that Gyekye's rejection of supernaturalism is unsustainable and have also rejected his humanistic ethic as unattractive when compared to a vitalist principle. I have argued that the idea of life force undermines Gyekye's efforts of rejecting a supernaturalist ethic in African ethics. I pointed out how the notion of life force, at face value, is at home in African holism and is also flexible to account for why we must care for nature in a way that, it seems, the "welfarist" position advanced by Gyekye is not. For future research, it seems one may need to systematically develop this idea of life force and its nuances and also evaluate its plausibility fully within the African tradition. Also, it seems urgent that African scholars justify why they do not take the is/ought gap seriously in moral philosophy. But, for now, the above is enough to upset Gyekye's defence of naturalism and to point out an interesting way for advocating a supernaturalist account, which has an African pedigree.

LIFE'S ORIGIN IN BIOETHICS: IMPLICATIONS OF THREE ONTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES: JUDEO-CHRISTIANITY, WESTERN SECULARISM AND THE AFRICAN WORLDVIEW

Elvis IMAFIDON

INTRODUCTION

The question of the origin of human life is an essential question in bioethics that is highly contested. My intention in this chapter is to show that the different perspectives upheld by different parties to the issue tend to be fundamentally an outcome of the different notions of being upheld by the said parties. I pay attention to three of such parties in this perennial debate on the issue of the origin of human life: The Judeo-Christian perspective, the (Western) Secular/Humanist viewpoint, and the African perspective. In carefully scrutinizing these perspectives, I intend not only to show that the moral issue of the origin of human life in bioethics is implied in ontological viewpoints embraced by the different societies and cultures, but also I go on to assert that any serious attempt to resolve this perennial issue in bioethics must furnish an acceptable grounding notion of being on which its position can be founded.

ORIGIN OF HUMAN LIFE

In the last five decades or so, bioethics has become a very notable area in applied ethics, dealing generally with moral issues resulting from a sense of moral obligation to living things with some particular interest in the practice of medicine.²⁹² Engelhardt Jr. explains that the emergence of bioethics was primarily tied to the moral issues that characterized mid-20th-

²⁹²See R. L. Walker, Bioethics, in Donald M. Borchert (Eds.) *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2nd Ed., Vol. 1 (Detroit: Thomas Gale, 2006), p. 598.

century American society. Bioethics emerged in the early 1970s as an attempt to provide secular moral guidance for health care and the biomedical sciences, in a newly normatively secular society undergoing rapid change, while at the time the society lacked authoritative secular moral guides.²⁹³

The story of the emergence of bioethics in the mid-twentieth century can be summarily stated thus: Medicine and the biomedical sciences had become a dramatically effective and influential scientific, academic, and industrial complexes, raising questions about how health care costs should legitimately be contained and resources allocated, about how one should understand the moral propriety of traditionally morally problematic medical interventions, which had become significantly safer (e.g., abortion), about how to determine the definition of death and proper character of end-of-life decision-making, about how to determine when life begins and what gives life its worth, and about how to determine the moral propriety of new biotechnological interventions (e.g., cloning and human genetic engineering), among others.

As these questions were pressed upon society, there was a vacuum of moral guidance, particularly due to the marginalization of traditional sources of moral direction. The established moral governance of the medical profession had been brought into question, traditional societal norms were under assault, the authority of individuals gained salience over that of medical professionals, and society's religious-theological framework were privatized and marginalized, thus challenging the moral authority of physicians, priests, ministers, and rabbis; with the result that government bodies, hospitals, health care professionals, patients, and their families called for moral guidance as to how properly to engage the promises of medicine and the biomedical

²⁹³ H. T. Engelhardt Jr. , *Global Bioethics: Taking Moral Differences Seriously* *Centro Universitário São Camilo*, 3-1 (2009): 30

sciences. There was a call for a moral vision that could direct, as well as provide concrete guidance. Bioethics emerged to fill the cultural and moral vacuum engendered by the marginalization of traditional moralities.²⁹⁴

But what issues should preoccupy bioethical discourses? The issues dealt with by bioethics are not exactly fixed or clear-cut. Schuklenk and Kerin are of the view that

Bioethics, both as an academic discipline and as a professional activity... is a multidisciplinary field that extends far beyond the spheres of healthcare and medical ethics. It encompasses a wide range of ethical problems in the life sciences. These include issues related to genetics, theories of human development, behavioral psychology, and resource allocation in healthcare management. Bioethical expertise is sought by courts, parliaments, research ethics committees, and is used in clinical consultations to guide the behavior of medical professionals. Despite its practical appeal, however, disagreement exists about the nature and scope of bioethics as a professional/theoretical discipline. Bioethicists come from a diverse range of professional backgrounds, including healthcare professions, philosophy, jurisprudence, sociology, and theology.²⁹⁵

Rebecca L. Walker identifies three competing viewpoints on the scope of bioethics. On the first view, which is the most restricted view, bioethics simply reduces to biomedical ethics, which encompasses ethical issues relating to the practice of medicine broadly understood and the pursuit of medical research. Even on this restricted view of bioethics, the scope extends, for example, to the ethics of our use of nonhuman animals in biomedical research. On the second understanding, bioethics encompasses, in addition to biomedical ethics, ethical issues related to the life sciences and technologies. On this understanding, considerations of environmental issues are also included. According to the third view which happens to be the widest view, bioethics includes the biological aspects of environmental ethics, issues related to nonhuman-animal use,

²⁹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 30-31

²⁹⁵ U. Schuklenk & J. Kerin, Bioethics: Philosophical Aspects, in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences* (Elsevier Science Ltd, 2001), p.1195

and biomedical ethics. On this understanding, the ethical dimensions of vegetarianism and how global warming affects biotic communities are also bioethical issues. She adds that this widest understanding of the term is closest to the meaning given by biochemist Van Rensselaer Potter, who originally coined the term. However, it also offers the least common understanding of the term within the discipline.²⁹⁶

These viewpoints on the scope of bioethics are surely interwoven and interlocked in a way that a thorough going bioethical discourse would encompass moral issues concerning the biosphere, that is, planet earth and its life, be it human or nonhuman. However, the focus of the present chapter is streamlined to an aspect of bioethical discourse, the beginning (and perhaps end) of *human* life. The issue of when does human life begin takes a central and a crucial place in bioethics for two main reasons: (i) the person occupies a central place in the scheme of things and fits rightly to what Martin Heidegger calls *Dasein*, one who occupies a here,²⁹⁷ and (ii), answers given to the question of the beginning of human life have direct moral implications on how the human being is treated particularly in the sphere of medicine with reference, for instance, to abortion, new reproductive technologies and euthanasia. Often debates on the beginning of human life are heated on whether the embryo or fetus can be said to be genuinely a living human being. As Schuklenk and Kerin says,

The moral status of embryos, fetuses, and infants continues to dominate beginning of life debates. Some ethicists suggest that fetuses deserve moral standing and consideration by virtue of their belonging to the human species. Others reject this proposal as speciesist, arguing that the mere fact of being human does not give fetuses special status. Rather, their moral standing ought to depend on their dispositional capacities. The debates about the moral status of

²⁹⁶ R. L. Walker, *Bioethics*, pp.598-599.

²⁹⁷ Gregory Freid, Richard Polt, (trans.), Introduction to Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (New York: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. xi-xii.

embryos and fetuses primarily affect issues surrounding new reproductive technologies and abortion.²⁹⁸

However, the question of the beginning of human life implies a much more primordial-ontological question, when did life of any form first begin? How did life originate? What is the basis of life of any form? The answers proffered to these primordial questions, be it an evolutionist or creationist viewpoint and its many variants, determine the stand taken in any bioethical debate on the beginning of human life and how life should be treated. The present paper thus intend to show that the different answers proffered to the primordial question on the origin of (human) life stands under as *substantia* and remain present in the different perspectives on when human life begins and what actions are permissible or impermissible in the treatment of human life. Particular attention is paid to Christian, Secular and African bioethics.

THE ONTOLOGICAL BASIS OF THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The most appropriate and reliable source of the Judeo-Christian thought system in general, and her notion of being in particular, is the Hebrew-Greek scriptures, the Bible. The need to clearly identify this primary source becomes imperative once we realize that within Christendom, there are many differing fragments upholding varying canon doctrines and laws. The open and readily available reason for such differing doctrines found in the various divisions of the Christian faith is thought to be the hermeneutical challenge in reading the scriptures. However a closer examination and careful scrutiny of these views of the scriptures reveals that the differences often ensue from some bias and selfish tendencies within the various denominations to justify certain central practices within their belief system that may not immediately follow from the scriptures. For example, the ordination of a Pope or the rigorous

²⁹⁸ U. Schuklenk & J. Kerin, *Bioethics*, pp. 1198 – 1199.

stages of the making of a saint in the Catholic faith may not necessarily follow from the Bible, but the Catholic canons have a way of justifying them scripturally. Therefore, the best approach in understanding aspects of the Judeo-Christian religion, such as its ontological, epistemic and ethical worldviews is directly through an examination of what is contained in the scriptures and not through any interpretation as provided by the numerous divisions within the Christian faith. For the Bible, for a Christian, contains the inspired word of God; that is, the Christian God's view concerning what is, what can be known and what is moral.²⁹⁹

Besides being a religious book that talks about the nature of humankind's relationship with a Supreme Being, the Bible, among other things, contains the very ontological foundations of the Judeo-Christian religion. We can deduce from the scriptures that reality is God-given. What is real is what is created by God, the material evidence of which is contained in the Genesis account of creation. The being of things is therefore an outcome of God's creativity and is also dependent on him for their sustenance and survival. In the creation account, human life takes a central and very significant place for three reasons: (1) the bearer of human life was the only material being made in the image of the creator;³⁰⁰ (2) human life did not come about by mere utterance as did other created things but rather through a direct breath of God into the bearer, which makes it to be a spark of the creator;³⁰¹ and (3) all other created things in the Genesis account were made for the bearer of human life except, of course, the tree of life and of the knowledge of good and evil.³⁰²

²⁹⁹ See, for example, 2 Timothy 3: 16. All scripture quoted in this essay are gotten from the *New International Version* of the Bible.

³⁰⁰ Genesis 1: 26

³⁰¹ Genesis 2: 7

³⁰² Genesis 2: 9, 16-17

In Christian ontology, therefore, the first human life came into being through God's breath and thereafter, this God-given life entered other persons from the first man through a God-created and ordained means of life-passage: procreation. Thus, the life possessed by humans is a divine spark of God that animates and makes lively the material human being, just as it did to the image of man that God made from dust.

However, the question of when human life actually begins is not yet clearly answered. What the foregoing ontological account of the coming-to-be of human life grants us is an account of the coming-to-be of the first, primordial life and the subsequent pattern of distribution through procreation. It remains silent on when life actually comes into being in every procreated human. Only further excavations of the scriptures can provide us with such answers, if any are to be found.

Although there are no direct expressions or answers in the Bible to the question of when life begins in every procreated human, there are, to be sure, clear indications in the scriptures on what the Christian God would proffer as an answer to the said question. For example, we find a clue to God's answer to the question in Exodus when it says that:

If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows... but if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot...³⁰³

The above command given to the Israelites by God reveals God's value for an unborn child. He demands retribution for any severe, life threatening or deforming injury caused to an unborn child as a result of some carelessness on the part of any person: life for life, eye for eye...

However, this only reveals that God cherishes an unborn child as having life since life can be

³⁰³ Exodus 21: 22-24

taken on its behalf if necessitated; it still does not indicate clearly the exact moment when life begins. Nonetheless, a more in-depth excavation of the scriptures does this.

In the Psalms, King David says aptly, “My frame was not hidden from you when i was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”³⁰⁴ There are clear indications in these lines that David held that the Christian God was fully aware of his existence as soon as he was conceived, “... you saw my unformed body...” David also says in the Psalms that “surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”³⁰⁵ Arnold E. Lemke explains that the Hebrew word here for conception, "*yachem*" is perhaps worthy of note due to certain questions that have been raised in the past. *Yachem* literally translates as “heat of sexual passion.” Simply put, the question often raised is: does the Hebrew understanding of this term clearly extend to the very earliest life stage of initial fertilization and quick cell division, or might it actually exclude those initial seven days or so of human existence, prior to implantation as an embryo? Lemke is of the view that it appears to go beyond both and points to the earliest stage possible due to the term used (conceive or “the heat of sexual passion”).³⁰⁶

In fact, Isaiah sums up this view when he says, “This is what the Lord says – your Redeemer who formed you in the womb: I am the Lord who has made all things, who alone

³⁰⁴ Psalms 139: 15-16

³⁰⁵ Psalms 51: 5

³⁰⁶ Arnold E. Lemke, A Christian View on Bioethics (and the Public Sphere). A Paper presented at Winter Pastoral Conference, on February 1, 2005, Minnesota. Retrieved on March 20, 2012 from: www.christianliferesources.com/pdf

stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself.”³⁰⁷ This is once again buttressed when God tells Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart...”³⁰⁸ These show in clear terms that procreated human life begins at the very least at conception and that God is the maker and source of life. Thus, what becomes obvious from the scriptures is that the Christian God is the originator and source of life; he created the first human life and thereafter originated a process of procreation by which life is formed at conception, life that is cherished by him.

A clear understanding of these facts about the being of human life within the Christian worldview would inevitably have implications for a Christian view of bioethics concerning such issues as abortion, cloning, and stem-cell research. According to David M. Smolin, “... a Christian bioethics is awash in norms and principles, which can legitimately be derived from the structure or teaching of the Christian religion... Christian teachings regarding the nature of God, human nature, nature, truth, and good and evil, make it logical that ethical norms would be a part of the faith.”³⁰⁹ Engelhardt Jr. Adds that,

Religious viewpoints tend to bring together a fabric of moral commitments that are global in enlisting the full commitment of those who credit their claims. They tend to offer a point of final orientation in terms of which all else is understood. Their explanatory scope is global, in that they tend to give a final account of the ultimate meaning of all things. They tend to be totalizing in requiring all elements of each person’s life to be lived with reference to this final point of orientation. Their obliging force is all-encompassing in its scope.³¹⁰

³⁰⁷ Isaiah 44: 24

³⁰⁸ Jeremiah 1: 5

³⁰⁹ David M. Smolin, Does Bioethics Provide Answers: Secular and Religious Bioethics and our Procreative Future. *Cumberland Law Review*, 35-3 (2005): 493

³¹⁰ H. T. Engelhardt Jr. ,Christian Bioethics in a Post-Christian Age. *O Mundo Da Saude*, 30-3 (2006): 494.

Religious viewpoints thus provide its adherent with moral precepts that are in consonance with its view of reality on issues such as abortion, cloning, euthanasia, stem-cell research, artificial insemination, test tube baby and many other bioethical issues. If life for the Christian is directly formed by God during conception, then the foetus at its earliest stage is created by God, which makes him the rightful owner. If it is naturally wrong for a person to destroy or decide the faith of another's property, then, it implies that no one has the right to destroy the life that God has created. For this reason traditional Christian bioethics regard abortion as the equivalent of murder, and physician-assisted euthanasia as physician-assisted self-murder or suicide. Human embryonic stem cell research, human reproductive cloning, and other medical practices having direct or indirect import on question of the origin, meaning and ultimate end of human life becomes perennially debated and disputed issues in Christian bioethics.³¹¹

Even medical practitioners are affected by their religious perspectives when handling issues of life. A Jehovah's Witness, who is a physician might, find it very difficult to recommend or administer the transfusion of blood to a patient in need of it. He/she may try alternative measures that will not involve such transfusion in order to adhere strictly to a principle found in the bible book, Acts of the Apostles.³¹² Again since Christians generally acknowledge the transcendent goals of humanity, some physicians may find themselves committed to aiding patients to repent and to confess their sins and see it as integral to giving care particularly in Christian hospitals and health care facilities (e.g., Christian hospices and long-term-care facilities). Within such care facilities, physicians who ask their patients to repent before they die would not be regarded as acting unprofessionally, but rather as acting in conformity with the

³¹¹Ibid, p.495

³¹² See Acts 15: 28-29. Cf. Leviticus 17: 13-14 and Genesis 9: 3-4

appropriate norms of medical professionalism exemplified in the medical practice of the Holy Unmercenary Physicians such as Saints Cosmas and Damian, who sought to cure their patients through converting them.

But often in sharp contrast with Christian bioethics is secular bioethics. The section that follows examines the basis for such a difference.

THE ONTOLOGICAL BASIS OF THE SECULARIST PERSPECTIVE

In the words of Engelhardt Jr.,

Christian bioethics conflicts with secular morality and its bioethics. From artificial insemination from donors, stem cell research, and abortion to passive euthanasia, the commitments of traditional Christian bioethics collide with those of the dominant secular Western culture. For example, where secular morality cum bioethics regards prenatal diagnosis and selective abortion as integral to responsible parenting, traditional bioethics regards such as a form murder. The differences are not defined simply in terms of particular prohibitions, but more significantly in terms of the metaphysical force and totalizing moral character of Christian claims.³¹³

What metaphysical force forms the basis of the secular age that makes its bioethics in sharp contrast with that of Judeo-Christianity? Western secularism, a non-religious, liberal attitude towards life, can rightly be referred to as the first born of the age of Enlightenment, of modernity. In traditional, pre-Enlightenment Western societies, Judeo-Christianity had a strong hold on individuals within the society. It provided the moral code, and punitive measures for correcting offenders. But the Enlightenment age experience a reversal of values and authority whereby authority and values were transferred from the Church to the individual. There was thus a collapse of religious foundation at the dawn of Enlightenment and an enthronement of individual autonomy.

³¹³ H. T. Engelhardt Jr. ,Christian Bioethics in a Post-Christian Age, p.491.

Perhaps, Immanuel Kant laid the theoretical foundation for the nature of the project of Enlightenment. In his essay “An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?””, Kant says succinctly that,

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] “Have courage to use your own understanding!” — that is the motto of enlightenment.³¹⁴

He adds that,

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why so great a proportion of men, long after nature has released them from alien guidance (*natura-liter maiorennnes*), nonetheless gladly remain in lifelong immaturity, and why it is so easy for others to establish themselves as their guardians. It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I need not exert myself at all. I need not think, if only I can pay: others will readily undertake the irksome work for me.³¹⁵

Enlightenment has thus been the quest for emancipation and liberation of humankind from the authoritarian, rigid, fixed and static social, economic and religious structures through the rational critique of power. It seeks the individual’s freedom from rationally indefensible ideologies and mythologies. Its legacy has been the “notion of critical reason”³¹⁶ and it is intrinsically intertwined with the “critique of foundationalism”³¹⁷ with the aim of producing a normative though fallibilistic perspective of reality.

³¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (Konigsberg, Prussia, 1784) Retrieved February 11, 2011 from <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/kant.html>. 1.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

³¹⁶ S. W. Nichol森, Enlightenment on Enlightenment: Review of Richard Wolin’s *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992). *New German Critique* 63 (1994): 155

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The promise and goal of enlightenment is the elevation of “reason as the medium of truth and freedom”,³¹⁸ “reason, not prescription; persuasion, not threat.”³¹⁹ Or, as John Milton says, “willingness and reason, not force.”³²⁰ Horkheimer and Adorno therefore says aptly that,

Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters...

Enlightenment’s program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.”³²¹

The age of Enlightenment is expected to reduce the docility in humans. For the pre-Enlightenment age is heavily characterized by docility and authoritarianism. As Kant says, “The guardians who have so benevolently taken over the supervision of men have carefully seen to it that the far greatest part of them ... regard taking the step to maturity as very dangerous, not to mention difficult.”³²²

Religion remains the effective tool that the few privileged ones employ in making the many timid. For the proclivity to submission lead many to blindly follow strong religious leaders.³²³ Many good and evil deeds have been done in the name of God and since authoritarianism involves a strong value for social conformity,³²⁴ the docile followers often do not see any reason to question the divine will as expressed by their leaders, even when such actions clearly presents anti-social behaviour. But it is exactly such authoritarian attitude that Enlightenment seeks to nullify. In Kant’s words,

³¹⁸ D. L. Guss, Enlightenment as Process: Milton and Habermas. *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 106.5 (1991): 1156.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.1157.

³²⁰ J. Milton, 1953-1980. *Complete Prose Works*. Wolfe, D. M. et. al. Eds. 8 Vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953/1980), p.746 (Vol.1), p.359 (Vol. 7).

³²¹ M. Horkheimer & T. W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p.1

³²² Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* pp.1-2.

³²³ See T. W. Adorno, et. al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1950)

³²⁴ D. Canetti-Nisim, The Effect of Religiosity on Enforcement of Democratic Values: The Mediating Influence of Authoritarianism. *Political Behaviour* 26.4 (2004): 379.

... would a society of pastors, perhaps a church assembly or venerable presbytery..., not be justified in binding itself by oath to a certain unalterable symbol in order to secure a constant guardianship over each of its members and through them over the people, and this for all time: I say that this is wholly impossible. Such a contract, whose intention is to preclude forever all further enlightenment of the human race, is absolutely null and void, even if it should be ratified by the supreme power, by parliaments, and by the most solemn peace treaties. One age cannot bind itself, and thus conspire, to place a succeeding one in a condition whereby it would be impossible for the later age to expand its knowledge..., to rid itself of errors, and generally to increase its enlightenment. That would be a crime against human nature, whose essential destiny lies precisely in such progress; subsequent generations are thus completely justified in dismissing such agreements as unauthorized and criminal.³²⁵

The Enlightenment project thus has distaste for dogmatism and supernaturalism and gives an esteemed position to reason and its liberating power. This is because reason is believed to penetrate bias, dogma, and prejudice and show us the truth, i.e., enlightens us. The pursuit of truth, the fact of the matter, has been the project of Western rationalism since Kant's essay, and this pursuit has framed what we can today call the "project of Enlightenment." This project is maintained through the continuing belief that through the use of reason to better represent the world as it really is, our beliefs, cultures, social institutions, and lives will become enlightened/.

The immediate consequence of the enlightenment project is secularism. The secular age that we find ourselves in is one that favours the Protagorean dictum: "man is the measure of all things". If secularism, as a stance to be taken about religion,³²⁶ is the complete neutrality of government and all public services and institutions from matters relating to religion for the reason that religion should have no hold on public decisions as it did in the past, then, its views of human life and bioethical issues will invariably depart from religious viewpoints. Since the idea of individual freedom and autonomy stands under secularism, there are bound to be a

³²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* pp.3-4.

³²⁶ Akeel Bilgrami, *Secularism: Its Content and Context. SSRC Working Papers* (Brooklyn, NY: Social Science Research Council, 2011), p.2

number of non-religious/secular views on the nature of human life. These views can generally be said to be anthropological or scientific rather than religious.

There are three main views evolving from secularism on the nature of the human being. The first is the materialistic view commonly referred to as mechanistic materialism, a recurrent viewpoint in metaphysics and the philosophy of mind. According to this view, the human being is nothing but a machine whose engine house is the brain and its processes. It denies that human beings have a spiritual principle of animation or a rational soul. It opines that the human being is essentially reducible to his or her brain and central nervous system, insofar as it is only by reason of his or her highly developed nervous system and brain that the human animal is able to think and communicate to a degree superior to other animals.³²⁷ Thus, according to this view, the brain with its processes (the central nervous system) is essential in determining the personhood of a human being. A foetus, an infant and the insane may therefore not easily pass as a person in this view.

A second view, which is quite intertwined with the first, is radical dualism. This view separates bodily life from personal life. Those who hold this view are fond of making a distinction between being *human* and being a *person*, or between *biological life* and *personal life*. In this understanding, a “person” is one who is self-aware, able to communicate, feel pleasure and pain, act autonomously, and has a sense of self and of one’s continued existence over time. If a member of the human family lacks these characteristics, we could call this individual “human,” according to this way of thinking, but we could not call him or her a “person.” As one prominent proponent of this view has written (the British bioethicist John Harris), a “person is a unified complex being, but that complexity is part of what it is to possess

³²⁷ See, for example, John Pollock, My Brother, The Machine. *Nous* 22 (1988): 173-211.

the radical capacities of intelligence and autonomy – in short, the capacity to value existence. *When these are lacking the person has ceased to exist (or has not yet come into being)* ³²⁸

Moreover, this dualistic view (as well as the other secular anthropologies) involves a denigration of the body as an *intrinsic*, rather than just merely instrumental, good. That is, it justifies choices to treat the body as if it were a sub-personal object separate from the person as an acting subject, something that one has or uses like a tool in the service of one’s conscious purposes. Hence, sterilization, to take but one example, can be justified according to this view as the sacrificing of a “lesser,” mere “biological” good (i.e. one’s fertility and bodily integrity) in order to realize a “greater good” – one of a so-called higher and “personal” nature, say, the good of saving one’s marriage which one sees as threatened by additional children. There are also some notions of personhood, especially common in modern philosophy and law that would in fact equate animal life with human life. This *equal species* anthropology maintains that it is wrong, even a form of racism, to treat human life as more valuable than nonhuman animal life, simply because it is *human* life alleged uniquely capable of rational thought.³²⁹

A third view question the very concept of “human nature”. According to this view, there is no such thing as a stable and common human nature that one must respect and act according to as normative. Rather, the proponents of this view, often called *trans-humanism*, seek to use modern biotechnology to create what is often termed a “post-human” future where children and adults are genetically engineered according to some model of “perfection.”³³⁰

³²⁸ Mark S. Latkovic, *Bioethics and Priests: A handbook of Moral Principles and Pastoral Practice for the New Evangelization*. Retrieved on June 02, 2012 from www.shms.edu/aodonline-sqlimages/

³²⁹ *Ibid*

³³⁰ *Ibid*

What is common to all these views is that they are devoid of religious sentiments and are products of the individual's exercise of his intellect and autonomy rather than divinely informed. Again, these views give primacy to the material composite of human beings maintaining that the intellect is merely an epiphenomenal of the biological constituents, particularly the brain processes of the human being. Bioethical issues concerning human life are therefore treated in line with such convictions in the secular age. In line with the above views, abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, genetic engineering and the like would not result in any serious moral disputes for two main reasons: the actor who, for instance, performs an abortion or voluntarily accepts euthanasia has the right to his or her own body and can decide what happens to it without the fear of the need to explain his or her action to a superior being in the hereafter; the foetus in, for example, an abortion or a genetic research cannot be said to be a fully developed cerebral human being which implies that its use in a research or evacuation from a woman's womb need not cause unnecessary moral tension and disputes.

The above once again shows that disparities in bioethical decision making are strongly underpinned by varying orientation toward being. A careful look at yet another orientation toward being, the African viewpoint, further reiterates this point.

THE ONTOLOGICAL BASIS OF THE AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Since Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*, the force thesis has continued to gain ground in scholarly efforts to postulate a grand metaphysical theory of the African worldview. Concisely said, what this theory entails is a metaphysics of presence or substance ontology, which states that what remains present in all things or entities, the fundamental stuff, the primary principle or

substratum of all that is, is force. The force ensues from the being who creates all things, the Supreme Being, and animates all things, making some lively and active (e.g. the ancestors, the human being and divinities) and others passive, only emitting their force when they are acted upon (e.g. stones minerals, plants, etc.). The immediate implication of the theory of force as an African metaphysical theory is the notion of the interconnectedness of all things based on a common essence such that beings within an African reality are ontologically bonded and form a web of interacting relationship.³³¹

Maintaining the equilibrium and harmony within the interlocked web of relationship among entities is seen by the African as the utmost good or, as Desmond Tutu puts it, “the *summum bonum*.”³³² Polycarp Ikuenobe says therefore that “reality always seeks to maintain an equilibrium among the network of elements and life forces.”³³³ It therefore follows that the moral principle that will be operational in African traditions will be communitarianism or a social ethic, and it is generally agreed that African cultures operate a communitarian form of morality even though identifying the exact form has led to a protracted debate between moderate communitarianism and radical communitarianism. However, communitarianism generally means that only actions that promote communal harmony or equilibrium within the structure of being are permissible while those that do not are impermissible. As Thaddeus Metz puts it,

...an action is right just insofar as it is a way of living harmoniously or prizing communal relationships, ones in which people identify with each other and exhibit solidarity with one another; otherwise, an action is wrong. Permissible actions are all and only those that esteem harmony and impermissible ones are

³³¹ For more details on an African concept of being based on the theory of force, see Elvis Imafidon, *On the Ontological Foundation of a Social Ethics in African Traditions*, in this volume.

³³² Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 35.

³³³ Polycarp Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspectives on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions* (London: Lexington Books, 2006), p.63.

those that fail to do so. Harmony in this context is a relationship constituted by the combination of two logically distinct forms of interaction, identity and solidarity.³³⁴

He adds that

To identify with each other is largely for people to think of themselves as members of the same group, that is, to conceive of themselves as a 'we', as well as for them to engage in joint projects, coordinating their behavior to realise shared ends. For people to fail to identify with each other could involve outright division between them, that is, people thinking of themselves as an 'I' in opposition to a 'you' or a 'they' and purposefully undermining one another's ends. To exhibit solidarity with one another is for people to engage in mutual aid, to act for the sake of one another (ideally, repeatedly over time). Solidarity is also a matter of people's attitudes such as affections and emotions being invested in others...³³⁵

Thus, the main thrust of African normative ethics is the duty to enhance social bonding and communal harmony through attitudes of solidarity. The application of such a communitarian-based normative moral principle to the field of bioethics is at once obvious in such bioethical issues as the exact duty of a medical practitioner or health-care agent, what free and informed consent entails. What should constitute health care services, patient-doctor confidentiality, etc. An indigenous African perspective on these issues will be garnished with emphasis on the community preservation rather than individual preferences.³³⁶ For example, in the case of patient-doctor confidentiality in traditional African bioethics, the traditional health care agent places emphasis on the need for the patient to confess and open up to family members and, in some instances, the entire community before commencing treatment as this is seen as a very vital step towards recovery. To be sure, this contrasts with Western bioethical viewpoint on

³³⁴ Thaddeus Metz, African and Western Moral Theories in a Bioethical Context. *Developing World Bioethics* 10-1 (2010): 51

³³⁵ *Ibid*

³³⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 52-58

patient-doctor confidentiality which places emphasis on the right of the patient to privacy of information such that a doctor who reveals a patient's information to anyone without his/her consent is said to violate the rights of the patient.

However, African normative ethics does not readily reveal the African perspective on when human life begins. Nonetheless, that every entity or being in an African reality is animated or infused by force immediately reveals two things about human life: first, that human life is made possible by the presence of an active force and, second, that the giver of this active human force is the Supreme Being. Human life is therefore sacred, because it shares of the divine essence. The sacredness of human life makes any act that threatens its preservation, such as suicide, voluntary euthanasia and abortion abominable acts in African cultures. For example, the corpse of a man who took his own life is dumped at the evil forest. The point is to show that his action is detestable and negates the sacredness of human life which necessitates that the community of living and living dead rejects his corpse.

Although it still remains unclear when exactly a human being becomes animated with force (at conception or at any other particular stage of the development of a human being), one can infer from the fact that life is given by the Supreme Being that life starts at the earliest stage of conception. The ability of a woman to conceive a child is seen by Africans as essentially a gift from the Supreme Being. When a woman conceives and become pregnant, the entire family and kin have received divine blessings. This is often revealed in the names Africans bear in the different African tribes and communities, which depict the fact that children are gifts from the Supreme. A pregnant woman is seen as carrying sacred life needing protection. This is why indigenous African communities are saturated with rites and rituals meant to protect the unborn child from the machinations of evil forces that may want to harm the unborn child or destroy the

destiny that he/she is carrying. Oracles and medicine men are consulted and their views are sought on the destiny of the unborn child, his/her personality and measures needed to be taken to preserve the child in the mother womb and during delivery. What these signify is that the life of an unborn child is sacred and deserves protection. Any act done purposely to harm such a life is deemed abominable. This is further buttressed by the fact that bareness or childlessness is mostly seen as caused by evil forces and African cultures are permeated with rights and rituals to avert such.

The implication of the foregoing for the issue of life's origin in bioethics is that any bioethical research or practices that involve a conscious and deliberate attempt to cause harm to a foetus or an unborn child will be, in the African viewpoint, tantamount to deliberate murder. Human life, in any form, is, in the African perspective, a sacred life force deserving protection and preservation.

One major challenge to the African view of human life is the charge of the practice of stigmatization labelled against traditional African communities.³³⁷ According to this charge, Africans do not consider as worthy and sacred the life of the terminally ill. These ones are often ostracized, abandoned and separated from the entire community. Two reasons have however been given for this: first, the terminally ill that has been ostracized from the community is thought to be suffering some form of paranormal recompense for some wrong deed that can only be cured if the patient confesses such wrong deed and follow strictly the community's guidelines to purification and healing; second, and as justified by modern day medical quarantining systems, since community is worth preserving, it is safer to ostracize the terminally ill to avoid

³³⁷ See J. A. Aigbodioh, Stigmatization in African Communalistic Societies and Habermas' Theory of Rationality. *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* 8-1 (2011): 27-48.

extinction of the community through the spread of the disease.³³⁸ It is not within my scope of analysis to scrutinize these reasons per se as to their sufficiency in countering the alleged charge of stigmatization and justifying ostracizing practices within African cultures. However, it is important to recognize this charge as a fundamental challenge to the nature of human life in African tradition.

CONCLUSION

The immediate inference from the foregoing is that it is difficult and quite unrealistic to ignore ontological commitments in bioethical discourses. This is because the ontological commitments of those involved in the discussion of perennial issues in bioethics directly or indirectly influence their viewpoints on what is permissible or impermissible in bioethics. In the above sections, we have focussed primarily on a fundamental issue in bioethics: the origin/beginning of human life. What is clear, for instance, is that the viewpoints held by adherents of Judeo-Christianity, Secularism and African thought on bioethical issues that have direct implication for our definition and treatment of human life and life generally, are essentially informed by their respective notions of being in general and the human being in particular. Since it is obvious that ontological viewpoints have direct implications for bioethical viewpoints, it is essential that a genuine bioethical system clearly identify and defend its ontological commitments.

In an age like ours that is fast becoming a global village and that is saturated with secularist, cultural and religious perspectives, there is need to develop a comprehensive metaphysico-bioethical system that does not only recognize moral differences and take them seriously, but goes beyond them to identify common grounds and general structures common to

³³⁸ See J. A. Aigbodioh, *Stigmatization in African Communalistic Societies*

the different perspectives on being, on human life. To be sure, this is an ontological task that will result in a more robust bioethics that will gain a wider acceptance than what is presently obtainable in the different perspectives.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ELDERSHIP BASED ETHICS IN AFRICAN (YORUBA) THOUGHT

Oluwafunmilayo Elizabeth KEHINDE

INTRODUCTION

The African world view is predominated with the interconnected network of life forces as the constituents of African reality; the hierarchical structure of African societies places elders in a prominent place among the living and have pivotal role in maintaining the status quo of the cultural heritage, societal norms, political and economic stability of these societies. The Yoruba world view holds the position of elders sacrosanct and their role in steering society in the right course, hence the adage “where there is an elder, the young cannot go astray”, *agba ki wa loja ki ori omo tuntun wo*. But the contemporary reality in African societies negates this, as it manifests the implicit anachronism of the concept of elders and their role in contemporary African societies.

While scholars like Leopord Senghor, Julius Nyerere, Campell Shittu Momoh, Neil McGlasham, Igor Kopytoff established the concept of eldership in African traditional societies and their relevance to the stability and progress of those societies, scholars like Kwasi Wiredu and Jim Unah have contended that such views and related concepts have, due to reasons of obsolescence, refused to sign a pact with reality in our postmodern era.³³⁹

This chapter attempts, through a comparative analysis of the concept of eldership in the traditional African society and the contemporary socio-political milieu, to determine the

³³⁹ The works of these authors are cited and discussed in more details in what follows.

sociological reality that aided its success in the past and assess its ethical relevance in contemporary times.

According to Leopold Senghor,

the family is the microcosm, the first cell. All the concentric circles which form the different levels of society...village, tribe, kingdom, empire...reproduce in extended forms from the family.... The African is thus held in a tight network of vertical and horizontal communities, which bind and support him... the family in Africa is the clan...the sum of all persons, living and dead, who acknowledge a common ancestor...”³⁴⁰

This African conception of family, informed by the interconnected, interwoven, intermingling and hierarchical structure of life forces in African society was the basis of eldership, its role and relevance in promoting stability in the economic and socio-political structure of African societies in the past. The reality today is that in the contemporary African socio-political structure, the concept of eldership seems obsolete, as the people society deem fit to be elders are bereft of eldership qualities and the young have long forgotten the art and act of deference.

It further argues that the concept of eldership in its role and relevance to the family stead is still very relevant, and can be revived and made relevant in contemporary socio-political structures. That is, there is a lacuna between the concept of elders and their roles in past African societies and the contemporary society especially in the area of governance. This paper posits that contemporary realities, sociological transformation, global environmental factors have adversely affected this concept, but that because of its timeless values, it can be revived and rendered contemporarily relevant.

³⁴⁰ L. Senghor *Poetry and Prose*, selected and trans by Reed and C. Wake. London: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 43.

CONCEPT OF ELDERSHIP IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

The concept of eldership is fundamentally age-based; it describes someone who is advanced in age compared to some others who are younger. Oyeronke Oyewumi renders eldership as seniority and she explains that “seniority is the primary social categorization that is immediately apparent in Yoruba language. It is the ranking of persons based on their chronological ages. The prevalence of age categorization in Yoruba language is the first indication that age relativity is the pivotal principle of social organization”.³⁴¹ Igor Kopytoff describes the eldership concept of the Suku people thus: “lineage authority and the representation of the lineage to the outside world are organized on continuum of age, that is, of relative eldership... Thus inequality of power and authority is most pronounced between generations...”³⁴² In traditional Yoruba society, “the hierarchy within the lineage was structured on the concept of seniority. In this context, seniority is best understood as an organization operating on a first-come-first-served basis. A priority of claim was established for each newcomer, she or he entered the lineage through birth or through marriage”.³⁴³

C.S. Momoh expounds on the concept of eldership as follows:

in traditional Africa, respect, honour and superiority is based on age... The way African traditional thought had structured things in society was such that old age came first ... On this basis, authority, discipline and respect was to flow... Traditional Africa accords a prominent place to eldership because it is thought to symbolize wisdom and knowledge... eldership is leadership, it is authority...³⁴⁴

³⁴¹ O. Oyewumi, *The Invention Of Women: Making An African Sense Of Western Gender Discourses*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p.40.

³⁴² Igor Kopytoff, “Suku Epistemology and the Ancestors”, *African Studies* (1978): 131

³⁴³ O. Oyewumi, *The Invention Of Women*, p.45

³⁴⁴ C. S. Momoh, “The function of Eldership in African Marital Relations”. In C. S. Momoh (Ed.), *The Substance of African Philosophy 2nd edition*, Lagos: First Academic Publishers, 1989, pp. 283-284.

Nyerere, in describing the concept of elder in Tanganyika, asserts that “The respect paid to the elder by the young was his because he was older than they and had served his community longer.”³⁴⁵

In traditional Yoruba society there is belief in the importance and necessity of elders in a family as well as in the society. This proverb highlights the necessity of elders for the stability of the society and it goes thus: *agba ko si ilu baje, baale ku ile d’ahooro*; meaning literally: due to the absence of elders in the society, things have fallen apart, no elder in the home, the home is deserted. The hermeneutic interpretation of this proverb goes thus: there are usually elders in every traditional society who regularly deliberate on matters that concern the welfare and stability of their community, and ensure that peace, social harmony and progress reigns. As time goes on, the young ones, due to lack of experience, impatience and youthful exuberance, may embark on a course of action that the elders, due to their wisdom and experience, may perceive that the outcome of such actions or ventures may be unfavourable or even endanger them. These elders usually counsel the young ones, dissuading them from such actions, even when they are not related by blood or some other kind of filial connections. But where there are no elders around to warn the young ones, they would, by relying on their own wisdom, endanger themselves. And by virtue of the interconnected and intermingling web of the community, the community will be endangered too. The same applies to the family unit too.³⁴⁶

Other proverbs with similar meaning are as follows:

1. *Agba kii wa loja ki ori omo tuntun wo*: meaning, where there is an elder, the young cannot go astray”

³⁴⁵ J. K. Nyerere, “Ujamaa–The Basis of African Socialism”. In G. W. Mutiso & S. W. Rohio (Eds.) *Readings in African Political Thought*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Nigeria Plc, p. 513.

³⁴⁶ K. Akinlade, *Owe Pelu Itumo (A – GB)*, Lagos: Longman Nigeria Ltd, 1987, p.57.

2. *Ti omode ba n ge'gi l'oko, awon agba lo mo ibi ti o ma wo si:* meaning, when the young ones embark on a course of action, the elders already know the consequence of such action or endeavour.
3. *Nkan ti oju agba ri ti o fi n pon, ti omode ba ri, oju re a fo:* meaning, the experience the elders passed through with a slight scar, if a young one experiences it, it may cause serious and permanent damage
4. *Oro agba ti ko ba se l'owuro, a se l'ojo ale:* meaning, the counsel or warnings of the elders surely are true predictions.

Implicit in the concept of elders is the concept of authority. The authority of the elders belongs to them legitimately primarily because of their age, the whole society accepts this as necessary condition for reverence, obedience and deference. With this authority comes power and this lays the legitimate foundation for inequality of authority and power in the society; in fact, this is the situation in any relationship involving elders and the young ones in the society. According to Kopytoff "...inequality of power and authority is most pronounced between generations; it is presumptuous for the junior generation to question the decision of the senior generation".³⁴⁷ And according to C.S. Momoh, all anthropologists agree on the fact that one invariant item of training in the upbringing of any African is the inculcation of respect for and deference towards elders... children are taught to respect their elders and honour them. For instance, the Yoruba saying that asserts that the young shows respect to elders when "the young gives their seats to elders when there is scarcity of seats especially in a gathering" *bi agbalagba ko ba ri ibi jokoo, gbediigbedii agbe omode*. The custom of respect inculcated in the young is the "gbediigbedii" that will compel the young to abdicate his or her seat for the elder. With this respect comes obedience and with the elders' authority comes the right to discipline the young ones.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁷ Igor Kopytoff, "Suku Epistemology and the Ancestors", p. 131.

³⁴⁸ C. S. Momoh, "The function of Eldership in African Marital Relations", p.283.

The Yoruba language and custom even support this respect and deference to elders, for instance, in greeting an elder the young female kneels while the male prostrates. In giving something to the elder, they both do it kneeling or bowing using their right hands. In the Yoruba language structure, second-person and third-person pronouns distinguish between elders and the young ones, such as *e* used in place of *o*, *won* instead of *o* in social interactions. Elders are not called by their names by the younger ones; they usually affix a prefix such as *egbon*, *baba*, *iya*, and in post colonial influenced renditions of sister, brother as in “sister Bola”, “brother Bade”, uncle, auntie. There is a Yoruba proverb that explains this deference to elders as “becoming an elder implies exercising authority, superiority, discipline and power over the young ones”; *agba dida, omode ni a fi n reje*.

This concept of elder does not end with a range of privileges for the elder; it connotes responsibility on their part. In children socialization, the eldest is expected to maintain law and order, restrain the young ones from contravening any rules. He or she is held responsible for any misbehavior. Elders must be seen living responsibly and not violating the societal expectations of their age.

It is important to know that the concept of eldership being fundamentally age-based transcends familial relationships. It includes anyone advanced in age in the community, anyone who occupies the position earmarked for elders, such as the monarch and even children who by the virtue of being born within a specific time frame of the death of their grandparents and are named as either “Yetunde” or “Iyabo” (meaning mother is back) or “Babatunde” or “Babajide” (meaning father is back). For, according to C. S. Momoh, African traditional societies’ social custom, sanction that respect and deference be paid even to a child when it is thought the child is a dead parent reincarnated as it is believed that the parent (or the child’s grandparent) whom the

child is named after, has actually come back to the world with his age and wisdom intact only in the guise of a child.³⁴⁹The Yoruba worldview though identifies age as symbolizing wisdom and knowledge; and being careful to annotate nuances they did not lump all those who were advanced in age together as elders, but were able to differentiate between elders (*agba or agbalagba*) and old people (*arugbo*).

In Yoruba culture, the value systems did not naively hold that everyone advanced in age is wise; in fact, to them advancement in age is not necessarily synonymous with wisdom as implied by these proverbs: “*inu ni agba wa*”: meaning, maturity is not only by advancement in age but through the acquisition of wisdom enhancing experiences of life. “*O ri agba, o ni ki o ko e l’ogbon, o ko mo boya were ni o se d’agba*. This means that a young person who appeals to an elderly person for wisdom should first find out whether or not that elder spent his or her entire life (youthful days) in buffoonery.³⁵⁰ Hence, they acknowledge the possibility of having some elders who were foolish, probably because they misspent their youth, they did not pay attention to the learning opportunities and training that ought to have inculcated knowledge and wisdom in them and they did not garner the necessary insight from the experiences that was supposed to equip them with first-hand knowledge of things and events. Hence the proverbs that goes thus, *agba to r’eru to fa opa l’owo, o ti fi aaro re sere ni*; which translates thus “because of respect for elders when they carry any load either on their heads or in their hands, the young ones collect such from them, helping to carry it; but when this does not happen, it probably is because such

³⁴⁹ Ibid

³⁵⁰ S. B. Oluwole, “African Philosophy On The Threshold Of Modernization”, Valedictory Lecture, February 15th 2007, Lagos: First Academic Publishers, 2007, p. 6.

an elder has not been helpful of those older than him and is therefore reaping the fruits of his bad youthful life”.

Also elders that have been diligent in their youth retire at old age and are thereafter supported by their young ones. But when an elder with walking stick in one hand, carries his or her load, and there are no young ones to assist him or her (even when the young ones pass by without paying attention to his plight), it is a pointer that that elder had a misspent youth. That is, at the time he ought to be retired, resting and depending on the young ones for assistance, he is still working, because he failed to utilize his/her youth to diligently secure his/her old age.

Furthermore, in Yorubas culture, the intellectual leaders did not hold that wisdom is static but as the correct application of knowledge, they assert that it is continually evolving and cannot be hoarded or kept intact. This is alluded to in this proverb thus: *ogbon odun yi, were eemi*, which literarily means “Wisdom of this year is folly of tomorrow”.

Finally, the concept of elder is in two phases, that is, it operates on two levels. The first phase is the family phase and the second is the clan or community phase. The family phase of eldership is absolutely and fundamentally age-related, ordered hierarchically on seniority basis. The clan and communal phase is not absolutely age or seniority related. There is in the Yoruba belief that in communal relations and matters, there are other factors beside age that qualifies one for eldership. These are maturity, character, virtuous living and pedigree and so on. This is corroborated by the following Yoruba proverbs and sayings:

Proverb: *ti omode ba mo owo 'we, a ba agba jeun*: meaning, when a child comports himself properly in the society, he will be called upon to sit and commune with the elders.

Proverb: *agba merin ni o n se ilu: agba okunrin, agba obirin, agba omode, agba alejo*. This means, four experienced groups of people manage the affairs of a clan or

community: matured men, matured women, matured youths and matured foreigners.

A bye product of the two operational phases or levels of eldership is referred to as *ijoko agba*, meaning elder's council. At the family level, they are usually referred to as *agba to je ise'bi*; meaning: the family elders comprising of direct lineage relations. In Yoruba land, as in most African societies, marriage is not simply between the couple, it is a marriage of two or more families. During marriage ceremony, these people's consent is shown by the kola nut shared between all of them, which is referred to as the act of *ise'bi*; that is, kola nut sharing. And so, when the marriage runs into troubled waters, and the squabbles reaches its peak, these elders (*agba ti o je ise'bi*) are called upon to give the crisis a definite resolution. And their word is law.

At the clan or communal level, they are simply referred to as *ijoko agba*; that is, elders' council. Members of this council, like the family level one, are called upon when there is a grave crisis, and their word too is law. This makes them seem cult-like.

ONTOLOGICAL BASIS OF ELDERSHIP IN AFRICAN SOCIETY

The ontological foundation of the concept of elder in African societies is the theory of life force propounded by Placid Tempels in his Bantu philosophy. According to him, force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force; in the universe of forces, there is a hierarchy that starts from God and descends through the ancestors, living human beings, animals, plants and down to the least forceful inorganic world. This interdependent, intermingling hierarchy of forces is based on age.³⁵¹ This ranking by age informed the structure of the traditional system that institutes the concept of elders. The bye-product of this hierarchy of life or vital forces is the family unit and its extended form - the clan, the village, the community, the kingdom etc. The

³⁵¹ Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, Paris: Presence Africaine, 1969, pp. 19-23.

Yoruba world view also holds that their cosmology has both existential and functional hierarchy which is interdependent and complementary.³⁵²

ATTRIBUTES OF ELDERS Elders in traditional African societies as earlier stated were qualified by their advancement in age; and the concept of elder has the implicit in it the concept of authority over the young ones and the control of the young. The attributes of elders are further explored below.

Elders are the repositories of experience, knowledge and wisdom; as explicated in these Yoruba proverbs: *bi omode ba ni aso bi agba, ko le ni akisa bi agba*. Literal meaning: if a child's wardrobe is like that of the elder, his rags cannot be as much as the elder's. That is, a child may seem as wise as an elder but the elder who has lived longer has more experience than the child. *Amoran mo owe ni i la'ja*; meaning: elders as judges must be knowledgeable and proficient in proverbs and wise sayings, as this is the vehicle of word used to exhort, convict and acquit.

Elders are honorable people who are to comport themselves with dignity, for, *agba to se bi ise wo'lu, igbakigba ni won fi n bu omi fun won mu*, and, *agba aja ki i ba awo je* both mean that elders must comport themselves with dignity, self respect, self confidence and piety due their respected position; because, if they do not, then the respect will be withheld and their positions of dignity will be compromised. This also means that they would cease to be good role models to the young and would not be fit to sit in the council of elders on important occasions when they are required to lead the family, community or society.

³⁵² C. Okoro, "The Notion of Integrative Metaphysics And Its Relevance To Contemporary World Order", *Integrative Humanism Journal*, 1-2 (2011): 18-19.

Elders must be just and impartial as judges; *agbejo enikan dajo, agba osika ni*; meaning, elders adjudicate in conflict situation, they are expected to consider both sides of the issues before passing judgment or else the elder will be labeled wicked and unjust.

Agba ti ko binu ni omo re n po si, meaning, elders are forbearing and not having rash personalities, they are patient with both bad and well behaved people, they are meek and so overlook trifle offences, they temper justice with mercy and meekness. *Agbalagba ki mu owo rehin lo pa emurin*; meaning, there are certain issues that elders are required to overlook instead of probing into them and consequently fighting over them.

Elders must use their power, position and authority reasonably and in moderation; since they have not attained the position of elders to oppress and exploit the young and others in the community. According to Nyerere, the elders hold all that community bestows on them in trust for the use of all in the community; “the wealth he appears to possess was not his personally; it was only ‘his’ as the elder of the group which had produced it. He was its guardian. The wealth itself gave him neither power nor prestige”.³⁵³ Hence, the Yoruba proverb *agba to wewu aseju, ete ni yo fi bo o*; meaning, an elder that wears the robe of tyranny, disgrace will disrobe him or her. Moderation is essential in the relationship between elders and the young in the community because abuse of power, position and authority births disgrace and ignominy.

They are competent and diligent people especially in their career and service to the community. This is explicated in the following Yoruba proverbs thus: (a) *a ki i fi eniyan j’oye awodi, k’o ma le gbe adie*; meaning, competence and diligence are essential in successfully completing a given task especially in leadership position. (b) *agbalagba ki i ti aaro ho idi ko ma*

³⁵³ J. K. Nyerere, “Ujamaa–The Basis of African Socialism”, p. 513.

funfun; meaning, any endeavour or task an elder embarks upon early in the morning, by evening time there should be commensurate proof, evidence or fruit of such labour, elders have a track record of having been hardworking and diligent in their youth, they have pedigree, for “even the elder who appeared to be enjoying himself without doing any work and for whom everybody else appeared to be working, had, in fact, worked hard all his younger days”³⁵⁴. (c) *a ki i pe ni ni ak’eran (ako eran) ki a se ori boro*; meaning, when an animal is identified as a male deer, it must have horns and not plain and smooth head. That is, any elder occupying a position or given a task must have the prerequisite attributes, skills or knowledge befitting the position or essential to the successful completion of the given task.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE YOUTH

The elders in African societies have symbiotic relationship with the young ones in the society. The following Yoruba proverbs lend credence to this: (a) *omode gbon, agba gbon ni a fi da ile Ife*; meaning, the wisdom of both the elders and the youth are essential in establishing and sustaining any society. (b) *owo omode ko to pepe, ti agbalagba ko wo akeregbe*; meaning, the hand of the child cannot reach the ceiling, the hands of the elder cannot enter the mouth of the gourd. That is, both elders and the youth need one another for survival. There is a symbiotic interdependence between the youth and elders in the society.

RELEVANCE AND THE ROLE OF THE ELDER IN THE SOCIETY

The role and relevance of elders in African societies cannot be overestimated; they maintain stability in the society, protect the cultural heritage and “represent the lineage to the

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

outside world”.³⁵⁵ The following Yoruba proverbs corroborate this fact, thus: *a i fagba fun enikan ni ko je ki aye ko gun*; Meaning, elders are leaders in the community, whenever the young ones deliberate, the elders sanction it or propose a better counsel or course of action which all will abide by. But where there are no elders, there are no leaders; there is usually chaos, unrest and instability; that is the essence of leaders in communities. Hence, failure to install a leader births anarchy, chaos and instability.³⁵⁶

From the aforementioned concepts of *ijoko agba* that is elder’s council; their relevance in the society has been established.

ASSESSMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF ELDER IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

Parker and Kalumba,³⁵⁷ in their assessment of Mbiti’s work, highlighted the criteria any ideal concept must satisfy and in this paper we pass the concept of elders through these purifying and certifying furnaces.

1. Is it progressive?
2. Is it concrete?
3. Does it have historical roots?
4. Does it have clear and practical goals?
5. Can the African individual (present generation) find in it sense of direction worthy of personal identification and dedication?

³⁵⁵ Igor Kopytoff, “Suku Epistemology and the Ancestors”, p. 131.

³⁵⁶ K. Akinlade, *Owe Pelu Itumo*, p. 41.

³⁵⁷ See P. English & K. M. Kalumba, *African Philosophy: A Classical Approach*, New Jersey: Prentice –Hall Inc., 1996.

To all of these, we answer yes! If yes, then what is the source of its anachronism? Why is there dearth of elders at the helms of affairs in African countries in the area of governance? According to Unah, “a viable theory of social and political action is often vindicated by practice”.³⁵⁸ Why does the once cherished virtue of deference to and respect of elders seem obsolete?

There is therefore need to analyze the factors in the African communities then and compare them with the present.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ELDERSHIP IN THE PAST AND IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

PAST	PRESENT
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The theory of life force and extended Family system was the ontological basis of the African traditional society. 2. The socio-cultural environmental setting was clannish, with interconnected and interrelated people. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The theory of life force is obsolete; multiculturalism is the theory of this age. 2. The socio-cultural environmental setting is atomistic, semi or fully urbanized, and industrialized; with people who are mostly not related, a cosmopolitan setting of different tribes.

³⁵⁸ J. I. Unah, *African Philosophy: Trends and Projections in Six Essays*, Lagos: Foresight Press, 2002, p. 89.

<p>3. The principles, customs and sanctions evolved from the theory of life forces cum extended family system were relevant and effective in maintaining the status quo.</p> <p>4. Since man is the product of his environment and by implication his society, this society produced interconnected men, who are bound by the web of society</p>	<p>3. The communal sanctions have been replaced by law and constitutions that are foreign to the traditional African people but effective in keeping law and order. It disposed off the customs and sanctions of the people but replaced it with customary courts whose creation was not customary and which had nothing much to do with the customs of the people (Oyewumi O. 1997:147)</p> <p>4. The product of this semi urbanized, industrialized and post-colonialism as well as globalism and globalization are disjointed, confused people, who are both interconnected and atomistic, who are burdened with the task of choosing which part of their make-up manifests at any point in time or in the face of certain challenges. People plagued with moral and socio- psychological schizophrenia.</p>
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IMPLICATION OF THE RESULT OF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Due to the factors that were prevalent in traditional Africa, that is, the social harmony enhanced by the theory of interconnected and intermingling life forces; extended family relation and the hierarchical structure of the community; the concept of elder, its moral role and relevance in the society was pivotal to the stability and progress of the community.

But in the contemporary socio-political structure of African societies, which is characterized and invaded by urbanization, modernization, industrialization, globalism and globalization and apparent multiculturalism, the concept of eldership seem irrelevant and is viewed and treated with contempt. This seeming obsolescence has not completely permeated the family units, it is only apparent in the societal relations. This is because the modern African is suffering from a socio-psychological schizophrenia; hence he is torn between his past custom along with its tenets and sanctions and his present along with its tendencies of atomistic liberalism. This has no traditional root, binding and constraining web of interdependence and interconnectedness.

THE WAY FORWARD

Unah argues that the present age is the age of intersubjectivity and multiculturalism.³⁵⁹ Sophie Oluwole charges that research into indigenous African knowledge systems and philosophy is not an end in itself, but a means to develop new ideas and initiatives. That self knowledge promotes self confidence which is needed in reaching for the best.³⁶⁰

We propose that in the consensus point of multiculturalism, every African society that ever had and cherished the concept of eldership should identify themselves with it, rededicate

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ S. B. Oluwole, *African Philosophy On The Threshold Of Modernization*, p. 35.

themselves to it and use it as the guiding compass in the wilderness of ideas, ideology, innovations, customs and technological advancement.

African societies by identifying themselves with it must reappraise themselves and put right everything that went wrong, so that they can present it as theirs to the world. The system of governance in contemporary socio-political structure in Africa is not based on the eldership concept. This should be corrected. Anyone who aspires to leadership must have pedigree, must have exhibited the stated attributes of elders, and must have shown competence in his or her career and shown to be united to the people, bound by the web of social interconnectedness and interdependence. Leadership positions must be local, there should be decentralization of power and true federalism to ensure that those in positions of authority are people close to the people and are aware of, affected by their plight, joy and excitements. That is, they are not insulated from or cocooned from the realities of life of the people.

CONCLUSION

If decisive actions are taken by Africans to heal themselves of their moral and socio-psychological schizophrenia, the concept of eldership will not become obsolete in the contemporary socio-political milieu. Rather it will be relevant both within families and the society at large. Africans should identify with this concept as one whose values distinguished the African society. Africans should abandon everything antithetical to the development and entrenchment of this concept in the society and even showcase it on the global plane. Africans should use the concept like a compass, to find their way and teach the young generation to do the same. Also the defaulting elders should conscientiously retrace their steps, and live up to

expectation. Africans should adopt it as a concept that has timeless values and so make it have contemporary relevance.

MORAL VALUES IN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

Chris Tasié OSEGENWUNE

INTRODUCTION

Moral values constitute veritable tools for the growth and development of institutions and society. More fundamental is the need to continually engage these values for effective mobilization and development in various departments of African societies. To this end, this chapter focuses on the following questions: What is the nature moral values in African societies? And, what role can moral values play in the attainment of developmental goals of African societies? For a proper articulation and understanding of these issues in this chapter,, it is important to examine two crucial concepts here; moral values and African Philosophy.

The concept of value presents some difficulties in terms of usage and meaning. Unah describes values as pursuits or engagements that are perceived by persons or groups to be worthwhile. The perception of what is worthwhile according to him may be right or wrong, positive or negative. The wrong or negative perception of what is worthwhile would result in a wrong value system. Unah sees values as components of development, because they are structurally connected with behavior. The connection of values with behavior makes it imperative not only to influence, and direct human actions, but also guide our conduct generally. To this end a wrong value system will result in a wrong pattern of conduct. The adoption of a wrong pattern of conduct by persons or groups especially those looked upon as role models would definitely affect their followers which may have a negative impact on society.³⁶¹

³⁶¹ Jim, I. Unah, Values and Development. In Olusegun Oladipo and Adebola Ekanola (Eds.) *The Development Philosophy of Emmanuel Onyechere Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe*. Volume 1 *Personal Values, Personal Awareness and Self-Mastery*, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2009, p.52.

Examining values from a personal perspective, Agbakoba maintains that personal values are related to democratic ethics and can be viewed as individual ethics.³⁶² Making reference to Thiroux, he maintains that this aspect of ethics is connected to individuals in relation to themselves and to an individual code of morality which may or may not be sanctioned by any society or religion.³⁶³ Agbakoba, insists that personal values stems to a large extent, from individual conscience and includes the obligation individuals have to themselves, (to promote their own well-being, to develop their talents, to be true to what they believe, and so on). The individual conscience which forms the bedrock of personal values is formed to a great extent by customs, religion, family and society. This in Agbakoba's view, constitute the basis of the codes or standards of conduct in a family and the ethics that a society and a state teaches formally and informally through its institutions. Generally, values refer to the worth placed on a thing or idea by a person, group of persons or society at large. In placing values on a thing by man or society it is expected that a scale be placed in other of priority. In this connection, some values reign supreme than others.³⁶⁴

The second crucial concept in this discourse is the question of African Philosophy. African Philosophy still creates a sense of loss to some scholars. The question often raised is what makes philosophy African? Mbiti defines African Philosophy as the understanding, attitude of mind, logic, perception behind the manner in which African people think, act or speak in

³⁶² J. C. A. Agbakoba, Personal Values and Democratic Ethics. In Olusegun Oladipo and Adebola Ekanola (Eds.) *The Development Philosophy of Emmanuel Onyechere Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe*. Volume 1 *Personal Values, Personal Awareness and Self-Mastery*, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2009, pp.102-103.

³⁶³ J. P. Thiroux, *Ethics*: 3rd edition, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988, as cited by J. C. A. Agbakoba, Personal Values and Democratic Ethics, p.102.

³⁶⁴ J. C. A. Agbakoba, Personal Values and Democratic Ethics, pp.102-103

different situations of life.³⁶⁵ Even though this definition is accused of being too general it seems to capture the way philosophy is conceived generally. Philosophy does not seem to have a general definition. One cannot but agree with the notion that a good conception of philosophy is one that takes into account the socio-cultural milieu in which an individual is philosophizing.

Russell makes this point clearer in these words:

To understand an age or a nation we must understand its philosophy, and to understand its philosophy we must ourselves be in some degree philosophers. There is here a reciprocal causation: the circumstances of men's lives do much to determine their philosophy, but conversely, their philosophy does much to determine their circumstance.³⁶⁶

Russell's position shows to a large extent that philosophy has a cultural affinity hence we talk of German, British, American or Indian philosophy. As long as a people can reflect on the problems that they are confronted with in their immediate environment that in itself is their philosophy. It is in this regard that Wiredu pointed out that:

A typically philosophical inquiry must be critical, but even more importantly, it must be conceptual and, above all, it must focus on the most fundamental concepts or clusters of human thought, those concepts, that is, which are presupposed in the very possibility of a word-view-- concepts like object, quality, cause, mind, spirit, person, truth goodness, destiny, world, and so on.³⁶⁷

The point being made by Wiredu is that a philosophy deserving of its onions should be critical, reconstructive with clarification of concepts as its watch word. For him these are the features of contemporary African philosophy. Bearing these elucidations in mind, let us now attempt to

³⁶⁵ See J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1969.

³⁶⁶ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1962, pp.13-14.

³⁶⁷ Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophical Research and Teaching in Africa: Some suggestions, Teaching and Research in Philosophy: African Studies on Teaching and Research in Philosophy throughout the World*. Vol.1 Paris, UNESCO, 1984, p.33.

articulate the foundation of African moral values as such is essential in locating its importance in African development.

FOUNDATION OF MORAL VALUES IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Every society has a source of her moral values no matter the level of development. Africa is not an exception. What makes African situation critical to the rest of the world is the criticism on religion as the source of her moral values. As Makumba explains, it is important for any society that wants to proceed meaningfully in politics to first of all take stock of its own identity by discovering its values. These values, according to him, are normally expressed in a people's beliefs, and thinking about the human person, community, authority, the world and God. It is only when these values are identified that supplementary (foreign) values can be incorporated in the creation of a solid political structure.³⁶⁸ Makumba maintains that in most African communities, there is belief in hierarchy of forces in the universe, which are constantly interacting between them. In this network of interactions, there falls the important rapport between the individual and the other. This order can be another human individual, the community, this world or the other-world (ancestors and God). The individual is never defined as some isolated monads, for he is in constant relations with other individuals in the community and with the community at large. He is "the light of the whole and that meaning, significance and the value depend on the art of integration."³⁶⁹

³⁶⁸ See M. M. Makumba, *Introduction to African Philosophy Past and Present*. Nairobi, Paulines Publication Africa.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 29.

In African Philosophical thought, cooperation and understanding underscore the basis of unity and solidarity. This is because the life of the individual is the concern of the community. Emphasis is on collectivity rather than individualism. This is what Anyanwu was saying when he posited that there is no doubt that even in African societies conflict arise between the individual and the whole.³⁷⁰ But normally, this problem is sorted out by responding to the basic dictum that, the life of the individual is the life of the whole society because what each life-force does affects the whole web of social, moral and ontological lives. This reminds the individual even in his personal aspirations, to sustain an inner equilibrium and support the well-being of society. Anyanwu extended the theory of forces in meta-epistemological abstractions of ancient African view of the world. According to him, the African who wants to have knowledge of reality intuitively, reasons, feels, imagines all at the same time.³⁷¹ In trying to have knowledge of the world he maintains, the African not only perceives the object of his interest but also imagines a life force interacting with another life force. Anyanwu insists that the African “sees the colour of the object--- feels its beauty, imagines the life force in it, intuitively grasps the interrelationship between the hierarchy of forces.”³⁷² There is no individuality, he continues, no object-subject dichotomy in an African world of magical fusion, and great synthesis for a thing is known and understood only in terms of the totality of its relations with other things.

Unah (1997-1998:134, 2002:267), giving credence to the theory of forces in African Philosophy and its attendant consequences stressed the view that Africa metaphysical system

³⁷⁰ K. C. Anyanwu, African Political Doctrine. In E.A. Ruch and K.C. Anyanwu (Eds), *African Philosophy: An Introduction to the Main Philosophical Trends in Contemporary Africa*, Rome, Catholic Book Agency, 1981, p. 371.

³⁷¹ Ibid., p. 84.

³⁷² Ibid.

operates on the basic assumption that there is mutual compatibility among all things; that the universe is a hierarchy of forces interacting and interpenetrating one another in a continuum, and that contradictions are synthesized artistically, aesthetically and magically. It is on this metaphysical assumption,³⁷³ Unah maintains, that reality is a compounded admixture of contradictions conceived as interacting, intermingling and interpenetrating vital forces that underpins the extended family system which in turn reflects on social, economic and political practices in virtually all African societies. Throwing more light on how the vital forces grounded the extended family system, Unah maintains that the family comprising parents and children is the fundament of society. All vital social institutions and practices hinge on the family. Unah made a distinction between the family in Western society and Africa. In modern European version, the nuclear family comprises one man, one woman with or without a limited number of children. The family in the African context is a network of blood relationship and kinship ties extending beyond man, wife or wives, and children to the clan and the entire community.³⁷⁴ This scenario is so because since the human community is regarded as an aggregate of interacting and interpenetrating life-forces, what affects the individual or his immediate family affects the existential harmony of the whole group. The bond made possible by the life-force laid the foundation for the economic, political and social order known as African Communalism. What is African Communalism? What are its postulates? These questions will take us to another aspect of the discourse.

³⁷³ See J. I. Unah, Bantu Ontology and its Implications for African Socio-Economic and Political Institutions, *Journal of Oriental and African Studies*, 9 (1997-1998): 134; and J. I. Unah, African theory of Forces and the Extended Family Relations: A Deconstruction, *Analecta Husserliana* LXXIV (2002): 267.

³⁷⁴ J. I. Unah, African theory of Forces and the Extended Family Relations, p. 268.

AFRICAN COMMUNALISM

The ontological nature of African Communalism is embedded in the “Black Ethos” or “Ego” that is, the essence of the black man. The ego of the black man is that thing that distinguishes him from any other person or any other race. In other words, the Ego is one’s self- concept or identity. This self-concept or identity is a composite of thoughts and feelings which constitute a person’s awareness of his individual existence; his conception of who and what he is. This identity formation is a lifelong development largely unconscious to the individual and to his society. This identity development and maintenance occupies each human life as long as that life lasts. The self in identity is heavily affected by the reflected appraisals of the society in which one lives. If this reflected appraisal of the self is mainly derogatory, then the affected person’s attitude towards himself will be derogatory. If the self is looked down by other people or other groups or races, this further and massively conditions interpersonal relations and self-perception of the individual.³⁷⁵ I have taken pains to examine the African identity because of the situation we find ourselves today. Our educational institutions seem to have failed us as they are busy adopting foreign curricula that are alien to our cultural environment. How now do we correct this failure fostered by our educational institutions?

The solution, I think, lies in recognizing our identity. The first is to know who we are. Then we ask; who are we? We are Africans with a communal social system and an inbuilt self-discipline. A communal social system is one that presupposes that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all. In traditional African society, people respected age. No young man was known to disobey his elder. No elder was known to deceive the young. Furthermore, family

³⁷⁵ See C. T. Osegenwune, *An Ontological Basis for Plato’s Theory of Justice as a Foundation for Socio-Political Stability*, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Lagos, Nigeria: University of Lagos, 2008.

name was maintained as it was a sacred object. Family discipline was the weapon with which this name was maintained. There was peace and stability in our family life and system. Our communal system was the only one where there was no police man, because it was self-protecting. There was no scrambling for wealth or property, because everyone was his brother's keeper. Nobody was hungry because food was communally owned and shared. There were no land disputes because the land belonged to the family, community or clan. You farm a portion allocated to you and after harvest, the land reverts back to the clan, the family or the community (Ibid). Today the situation in Africa is gloomy as terrorism, armed-robbery, kidnapping, corruption and wars dominate our national lives.

There is a high incidence of poverty, suffering, greed, primitive accumulation and underdevelopment. You can see from here that property and police are signs therefore not of civilization as we are misled to believe but of corruption and inordinate ambition. Lamenting on the moral crises in Africa, Nwala observed that the Nigerian society and Africa at large have been undergoing serious crisis ranging from social justice, moral values, social control and discipline. The society has been beset by enormous social problems such as corruption, nepotism, inordinate and unprincipled lust for wealth, indiscipline, exploitation of the working population by the few rich ones, widening gap between the rich and poor, lack of adequate democratic and legal protection for the poor, inflation, unemployment, crime and other social maladies. Nwala further observes and outlines the following moral principles as the ingredients of African communalism. They are respect for the authority and pre-eminence of the community, respect for the elderly, unity and solidarity of the people of the community, justice, peace, order and harmony, truth, innocence, honesty, transparency, co-operation, being one's brother's keeper

and hospitality. These moral values so cherished are almost going extinct. This is a negation of African communalism and by extension peace and development that are needed badly.³⁷⁶

African communalism derived from the extended family system was given credence as a paradigm for development by Julius Nyerere and Leopold Senghor with the title of African Socialism. It is indispensable for the building of a true African egalitarian society. For Nyerere, “Ujamaa” which means “familyhood” is given prominence in this way:

The foundation and the objective of African socialism is the extended family. The true African socialist does not look on one class of men as his brethren and another as his natural enemies... he rather regards all men as his brethren--- as members of his ever extending family. Ujamaa or “familyhood” describes our socialism. It is opposed to capitalism which seeks to build a happy society on the basis of exploitation... is opposed to doctrinaire socialism which seeks to build its happy society on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man.³⁷⁷

Familyhood for Nyerere therefore, gives rationality to African socialism as the foundation for social communion. We commune with one another, and insist on this because we belong to one human family. African philosophy which is the foundation of African civilization drives government, economy and labor. For Senghor;

The family in Africa is the clan and not in as in Europe “mum, dad and the baby’. It is not the household but the sum of all persons, living and dead, who acknowledge a common ancestor. As we know, the ancestral lineage continues back to God (Senghor).³⁷⁸

Senghor is of the view that the family is not limited to space and time. The basis of the family bond becomes a supra-physical reality. All that acknowledge a common ancestry belong to a

³⁷⁶ See T. U. Nwala, *Igbo Philosophy: The Philosophy of the Igbo- Speaking Peoples of Nigeria*, Second edition, New York, Triatlantic Books Ltd, 2010.

³⁷⁷ J. K. Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism*, Dares Salaam, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 11-12.

³⁷⁸ L. S. Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, selected and translated by J. Reed and C. Wake, London, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 43.

family. Religion has brought men to acknowledge a common origin in God and humanity through the family. To this end, one can conceive the family as a spiritual reality that transcends physical limitations. Nwoko notes that Senghor's definition of the family above, identifies what a complete and true society means for the African. It also radiates clearly the light that distinguishes African socialism from European or Soviet socialism, that is, the issue of religion. According to Nwoko, a true African socialism cannot afford to diminish religion--- the communion with the supernatural. For religion is at the base of its definition of society--- the extended family, the extended brotherhood, which extends to the ancestors and culminates in God.³⁷⁹

The view that religion plays a role in stabilizing moral standards in African social and political order was supported by Mbiti when he maintains that man lives in a religious universe, so that natural phenomena and objects are intimately associated with God.³⁸⁰ They not only originate from him, but also bear witness to him. Man's understanding of God is strongly colored by the universe of which man himself is a part. Man sees in the universe not only the imprint but the reflection of God, and whether that image is marred or clearly focused and defined, it is nevertheless an image of God, the only image known in traditional African societies. Many African philosophers attest to this viewpoint because African societies are composed of multi religious societies. Since the Africans live in a religious universe, then all their activities must be influenced by one kind of religion or the other. From here it can be specifically stated that an

³⁷⁹ I. M. Nwoko, *The Rationality of African Socialism*, Roma, Oasis Publishers, 1985.

³⁸⁰ See J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*,

African system of morality which African communalism represents must have a religious foundation.³⁸¹

The religion we are referring to in this essay is African traditional religion which is indigenous. It is a religion which fosters effective communication between the practitioners and the supernatural. It is a religion built on the communal social system with spirit-de-corps among members. It is a religion that perpetuates communion with our ancestral spirits through our “Africanness” and discipline. Throwing more light on justice which is one of the strongest tools in African communalism, Ekei, maintains that justice in its distinctive features from Western expressions of justice, justice in communalism is not determined, just in one level of relationship as “giving to everyone what is his due.”³⁸² It does not focus exclusively in relating to man and man, but also with man and the entire realities. It involves a whole pattern of relationship with all that is, including man and man, man and nature (the cosmos) as well as man and God. Justice as outlined in above relation, seems basically elementary and dynamic, according man the status of being: “a person”, “a human being” and “responsible.” In African communal system justice is first of all given to the individual, the clan or community. Emphasis is on collectivity rather than individuality. In the dispensation of rights which justice demands, the relationship between the community and the ancestors is sacred. This also applies to the customs and traditions of the community. From this communal relationship, moral justice rests on co-existence, acceptance, care and concern. What happens to one happens to other depicting unity in strength. This has been the secret of co-operation, integration, discipline and solidarity. Unfortunately, these noble

³⁸¹ M. A. Mankinde, *African Philosophy: The Demise of a Controversy*, Ile-Ife, Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 2007, p. 291.

³⁸² See J. C. Ekei, *Justice in Communalism: A foundation of Ethics in African Philosophy*. Lagos, Realm Communications Ltd, 2001.

ideals are fast disappearing from African greatest enemy “cultural imports” that are incompatible with our economic, political and social environment. Corruption has become a national ethic in Africa destroying our core and cherished values. It seems to be a pride to embezzle public funds, acquire wealth, capital flight, misappropriation and bribery. African countries are at the cross road today because of moral bankruptcy in all departments of our lives and needs urgent moral regeneration and re-orientation through a radical African Philosophy.

RE-INVENTING AFRICAN CORE VALUES FOR DEVELOPMENT

The crises of leadership, economic underdevelopment, political and spiritual problems have compounded the African situation. The greatest problem at the moment is corruption and its consequences perpetuated by African leaders. Scholars of African extraction have been offering solutions to redeem the situation in African societies. One factor keeps on resurfacing as fundamental to the revivalism needed to set African countries on the path of development. This factor is a re-orientation on our core moral values. Schweitzer observed categorically that the disastrous feature of our global civilization is that it is far more developed materially than spiritually. This development according to him is disturbing. Through the discoveries which now place the forces of nature at our disposal in such an unprecedented way, the relations to each other of individuals, of social groups, and of states have undergone a revolutionary change. Our acquisition of knowledge and power as if they are all there is has made our civilization defective. We value highly its material achievements rather than the spiritual. The danger in this development, Schweitzer observes, is that a civilization which develops only on its material side, and not in corresponding measure in the sphere of the spirit, is like a ship with defective steering gear which gets out of control at a constantly accelerating pace, and thereby heads for

catastrophe. He insists that the essential nature of civilization does not lie in its material achievements, but in the fact that individuals keep in mind the ideals of the perfecting of man, and the improvement of the social and political condition of peoples, and of mankind as a whole, and that their habit of thought is determined in living and constant fashion of such ideals. Only when individuals work in this way, as spiritual forces brought to bear on themselves and on society is the possibility given on solving the problems which has been produced by the facts of life, and of attaining to a general progress which is valuable in every respect.³⁸³

The spiritual dimension mentioned by Schweitzer for a dynamic civilization is fundamental to African philosophy. The spiritual dimension provides the linkage for the interaction, interpenetration and intermingling of forces in African metaphysical system. When put in perspective, there is a synthesis in the core branches of philosophy that is, metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. In the pursuance of re-inventing African core values, education becomes crucial in this task. But what kind of education are we talking about? A spiritual education which stresses the collectivity through our “Africanness” is necessary. We must as a matter of fact accept it, retain it, defend and secure it. If entrenched it follows that there will be no communication gap between students and teachers including parents. Our educational system will promote all that is ennobling and creative in African psyche. Then too, the African education will affirm the promise of the African life, creating the African environment at home, at school and at work. Youths are said to be the leaders of tomorrow. This proposition will be attained when we lay a strong foundation for the emergence of leaders grounded in the African spirit. In this connection the leadership we are talking about will be superior to the present crop

³⁸³ See `A. Schweitzer, *The Philosophy of Civilization*, translated by C.T. Campion, New York, The Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960.

of leaders. This is because there is the knowledge of the self; grounded by the theory of forces. With this knowledge from African education we will perpetuate communion with our ancestral spirits through our “Africanness” in the firm belief that the dead, the living and the unborn will unite to rebuild the destroyed shrines of Africa.³⁸⁴

Within this belief system, we hold a position and conviction that great and lasting revolutions and the resulting social edifices that may be constructed are the creative works of honest principles and those who believe in them. Such principles acting through cognition are achieved through the transformation of the mental and spiritual personality of the individual and the collective. Such mental and spiritual transformation anchored on firm principles, honesty, moral values and dedication to service becomes the moving force for revolutionary change and the creation of a new social order that replaces the old.³⁸⁵

The question now is; what is African personality? As the concept implies, African personality is the commitment to the creation of a greater Africa with honesty, modesty, full devotion to the service of Africa, rejection of vanity, abhorrence of greed, and the embrace of humility as a source of our people’s strength and integrity. These factors mentioned above will form the catalyst for African greatness. The development of the new African personality is made complete by an uncompromising detachment from the cognitive legacy of colonial, neocolonial, slavish and imperialist intellectual order.³⁸⁶ These characteristics mentioned constitute the cluster of the basic principles of humanism that was practiced and is still being practiced in traditional

³⁸⁴ See C. T. Osegenwune, *An Ontological Basis for Plato’s Theory of Justice*.

³⁸⁵ K. K. Dompere, *Polyrhythmicity: Foundations of African Philosophy*, London, Adonis and Abbey Publishers Ltd, 2006, p. 109.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 112.

African societies. These principles are grounded in strong moral and spiritual foundations to which some of the world's best civilizations are indebted. These personality characteristics identified in African philosophy must be the basis for reforming the low moral standards in African societies for effective development. Wiredu recommended humanism as a tool for moral reformism. Humanism is a point of view according to which morality is founded exclusively on considerations of human well-being. When rules, policies and actions are based on people's appreciation of the conditions of human well-being there is, indeed, no absolute guarantee that consequences will always actually be in accord with humane ideals, human understanding being limited.³⁸⁷ For Wiredu, anyone who reflects on our traditional ways of speaking about morality is bound to be struck by the preoccupation with human welfare: what is morally good is what befits a human being; it is what is decent for man—what brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy, to man and community. And what is morally bad is what brings misery, misfortune, and disgrace.³⁸⁸ Most philosophical systems are also founded on humanism but the humanism of African philosophy is one that is grounded on spiritualism. Emphasis is placed on respect for elders, interaction of the dead and the living through the hierarchy of forces for sustained communion and co-operation.

The re-invention of African core values is a task that must be vigorously pursued in order to put African societies on the path of development. Unah suggested that as we move into the new millennium with most of black Africa and indeed, Nigeria still embroiled in moral, economic and political quagmire, philosophizing in the continent should go beyond the analysis of myths, proverbs and wise sayings and the justification of witchcrafts and reincarnation to the

³⁸⁷ See K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

³⁸⁸ K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, p. 6.

confrontation and actualization of our historical possibilities. Researchers in African philosophy should now move into the social, economic, and political arenas of contemporary Africa to chart the course of social emancipation and upliftment of black Africa by intellectually wresting it from the clutches of the enemy within who lord it over us by impoverishing us. For Unah, therefore, the current task of African philosophy is to cultivate inter-subjective consensus with a view to evolving stable governments in the continent and hopefully pave the way for economic prosperity and buoyancy of the average person. A vitally relevant issue that should also engage the attention of philosophy in the present age, in Unah's view is to re-order the extended family relations which have prevented black Africa from ascending the pedestal of global humanism and true egalitarianism.³⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

This work started by looking at how the core moral values which African philosophy has been propagating has diminished over the years. It also considered what African philosophy means and how it can contribute to the revival of moral degeneration. The paper identifies communalism as the basis of the moral order advocated to redeem Africa from the brink of moral collapse. African Communalism is one constructed on the theory of life forces in African society. A life of "live and let live" is very much emphasized stressing the need for co-operation, understanding and solidarity. African communalism was equated to African socialism by such philosophers as Julius Nyerere as "Ujamaa" or "familyhood", and Leopold Senghor as "Negritude". These philosophers presented African socialism as a philosophy of liberation and decolonization that will be achieved through a radical reconstruction of educational curricula to

³⁸⁹ See J. I. Unah, *Lectures on Philosophy and Logic*, Lagos, Fadec Publishers, 2001.

attain African personality. If this personality is achieved and sustained, it would have made an inroad to African greatness.

The work also stressed the need for spiritual education in African philosophical system as a necessary condition for development. The emphasis on material values has become an agenda for underdevelopment. It is expected that the crusade on moral reformism in African philosophy will retrieve the core values we have lost; which we are indirectly paying for in our quest to achieve a peaceful, prosperous and decent society.

NEO-ONTOLOGICAL CHALLENGE TO NEGATIVE ATHEISM: FEUERBACH'S GOD OF SECULARISM

Jim I. UNAH

INTRODUCTION

The various arguments for the existence of God have provoked anti-theistic tendencies, culminating in various forms of atheism. Atheism, as we find, for example, in the atheism of Nietzsche and Sartre, denies the existence of God in whatever form it is conceived, as every conception of God is often fraught with theoretical difficulties. My aim in this chapter, in congruence with the proposal of post-modern ontological science, is to emphasize the point that in whatever form God is presented, it could be comfortably argued that such a being exists on both ontological and intentionality grounds.

Ontology is the study of being, the study of that which is; it is about 'isness', about the indisputable fact that something is. Whatever is thought of or conceived as an idea in whatever form already is. This is how ontology – theory of being - is connected to the doctrine of intentionality of consciousness. Intentionality is the phenomenological concept that whatever is thought of by the human mind, in whatever form, already exists. Consequently, even if we were to reject all existing conceptions of God on account of the theoretical difficulties they pose, it would still be difficult to wish away the concept of God, because it has not only become entrenched in our thought processes, habits and linguistic conventions but also exerts a great influence on people's conducts and actions.

To elaborate, theological thought from the time of Saint Anselm of Canterbury has incurred the censure of cerebral, non-theistic, humanity by insisting that God's existence must be in the objective sense.³⁹⁰ Arguments are either premised *a priori* and concluded *a posteriori*; or presented to transit from a possibly necessary being to a necessary (N) being, resulting in logical quandaries. In

³⁹⁰ L. Berkhof. *Systematic Theology*. Reprinted, USA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958.pp.26-27.

some cases, purported arguments for the proof of God's existence are mere parodies resulting in crypto-linguistic utterances;³⁹¹ and the transgression of the internal boundaries of factual discourse³⁹².

Immanuel Kant was severely critical of the theological strategy of connecting the idea of a Necessary Being with the notion of existence. In his view, it is wrong to assume that existence is a predicate or property which must be added to the concept of God to make it real.³⁹³ Similarly, Mulla Sandra seems to reject the idea of "existence as a predicate" when he asserts that we first confront things that exist and affect us in a variety of ways before forming ideas of them and their essences afterwards; hence, the famous dictum: "existence precedes essence"³⁹⁴.

This state of affairs compelled some theologians to concede that the proofs for God's existence that they offered merely demonstrate that issues of faith and belief are not altogether outside the domain of rational discourse. Subsequent proofs for God's existence, such as those of Blaise Pascal (i.e. the Wager), John Hick (the Eschatological Verification) and Kierkegaard's earlier attack on Christendom, have served to confirm that faith and conviction are the only necessary bulwarks of the religious life.³⁹⁵ Unfortunately, this latter concession has not helped to ease the fundamental headache of theology that God's existence must be in the objective sense. This insistence of theology reached its peak in the theodicy of Hegel, which presented the Absolute Idea as a mediating force

³⁹¹ J. Tucker. "Clashes between Paradigms for Logic" in *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 1, No 2. 1981.

³⁹² L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D.F Pears and B.F. McGuinness Introduction by Bertrand Russell F.R.S., London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922, pp. 71-72.

³⁹³ I. Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn, London: Everyman's Library, 1934, p.350.

³⁹⁴ www.answers.com, 2010.

³⁹⁵ J. Cargile, Paschal's Wager, *Philosophy*, 41.157 (1966); J. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd Edition, London: Macmillan, 1988: 177-178; J. Hick, *Philosophy or Religion*, 4th Edition, London: Prentice Hall, 1990: 82-89; 135-136. S. Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon 'Christendom' 1854-1855*, translated by Walter Lowrie, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1946.

through the human agency in world affairs; that is, the God idea is the exhibition of reason's working in the sphere of history³⁹⁶.

Kant's position in this matter is that we cannot understand the things of God the way we understand the things of the world. The things of God are transcendental in nature, while the things of the world are empirical. The human mind is incapable of attaining a clear and articulate knowledge of God, because the latter is locked up in Noumenon, accessible only by inferences and conjectures.³⁹⁷

Unfortunately, for conventional theology there is need for God to be both 'transcendent' (loftier than mankind) and 'immanent' (resident with man). This God, even while in Heaven, finds it necessary to maintain residency simultaneously on earth, to respond to the needs of man in times of utter helplessness and hopelessness, in abundance and want, and in misery and joy, because he is an all-powerful, all-seeing and all-kind being, though it is a world structurally permeated with evil

This theory that an all-powerful, all-seeing and perfectly good God is resident (immanent) in a world full of evil (social and natural) provoked the atheism of the likes of Nietzsche and Sartre, which resulted in the disorientation and disillusionment of modern man.³⁹⁸ What theologians, especially absolutists and dogmatists who promote intolerance and negative theism, seem to overlook is the fact that the concept of God does not need to have existence added to it in order to make it real (in a non-empirical sense) and beneficent to mankind. This is the point also missed by atheists who often think that the concept of God ought to satisfy the conditions of theology (i.e. that of immanence or objective existence) for it to be real, meaningful and useful.

Fortunately, a critical dimension of ontology and intentionality can be adapted to illuminate the view that the concept of God does not need to satisfy the criteria of theology or that of negative atheism for it to be. It already is. I will sketch, in what follows, the ontological and intentionality

³⁹⁶ G.W.F. Hegel. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy Vol.1*. Trans. E.S. Holdane. New York: The Humanities Press Inc. 1953.pp.12-22.

³⁹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by F. Max Muller, New York: Anchor Books, 1966: 393-413

³⁹⁸ B. E. Nwigwe, Martin Heidegger's Philosophical Anthropology in Jim Unah (ed) *Philosophy, Society and Anthropology*, Lagos: Fadec Publishers, 2002: 247-248.

grounds for canvassing the inevitability of the idea of God in human undertakings, while proposing to atheists that what is required in the arena of the discourse on God is multi-form of representation of the reality of this all-encompassing concept. The meaningfulness of this all-encompassing concept is implicated in how it affects and influences moral values in different ages as the concept evolves. I pay attention to Feuerbach's conception of secularism and how it forms the basis for secular morality. What becomes obvious is that as the ontological conception of God changes, moral values would change as well.

THE ONTOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

Theological thoughts about the concept of God are domiciled in ontology, which deals with that which exists or what is. Now, what exists or what is can be immanent or transcendent. There are concepts that describe entities in the realm of immanence. These concepts are called empirical concepts. The second category of concepts are designed by the mind to articulate order, connectedness, homogeneity, unity, diversity, causality, freedom, justice, meaning, God, etc. These are called non-empirical, *a priori*, transcendental concepts³⁹⁹.

Transcendental exercises in ontology demonstrate that concepts are capsules of ideas created imaginatively by the mind to articulate and organize experience. What exists in whatever form as an idea in the human mind, whether they are about abstract entities or related to as a concrete material object is in the realm of ontology, and exist in either of these two forms. What we are is being. Whatever we think about is being, regardless of whether or not it has factual, concrete, objective reality. In other words, what exists and what is may be factual or abstract. An idea does not have to correspond with facts for it to be real, meaningful and useful.

Pragmatists even contend that an idea is real, meaningful and useful if it can be applied to resolve a problem in human experience. What is crucial here is not whether an idea or a concept has

³⁹⁹ Jim I. Unah. *On Being: Discourse on the Ontology of Man*, Lagos: Fadec Publishers. 2002a.pp.83-109.

objective reality, but whether we can apply the idea or concept; that is, for instance, put the concept of God to work to solve human problems, not minding if we are theists or atheists?⁴⁰⁰

Further, on the ontological conditions which challenge negative atheism, I should, perhaps, take recourse to the “ontological characterization of the fundamental nature of reality” by the Greek Parmenides, who asserted quite categorically that “Being is; non-being is not”.⁴⁰¹ What is is, what is not is not. Existence is perpetual. Nothing comes into existence and nothing goes out of existence. So, for Parmenides, everything exists. That being the case, there is no vacuum, no void, and no nothingness in terms of absolute non-being-ness. On this view, Reality is a Unity. Everything is One. To take plurality seriously is an error. The variety of opinions on any issue such as the question of God’s nature is superficial and temporary. Everything resolves itself into the One, making change, plurality, or becoming an illusion of the senses. Consequently, Vacuum is something. Void is something. Nothing is something⁴⁰².

Thus, there may be no God in the objective, anthropomorphic sense; but God is still something. Atheists (negative atheists), therefore, have no business denying the existence of God in absolute terms. This is not to say that atheists have no right to reject anthropomorphic theism if they are so disposed. The point here is that the very contemplation and mention of the word ‘God’ confers existence; it confers being-ness on it. This orientation that everything (including the God idea) exists is what I call Neo-Ontologism.

⁴⁰⁰ This proposal is to mitigate the pernicious consequences of negative theism and atheism, for both tendencies have been known to promote evil in society. But while misguided theistic tendencies have resulted in the dehumanization of man by man, such as the Inquisitions, the Jihads and now fundamentalist insurgence, anti-theistic tendencies that culminated in negative atheism, such as the Holocaust, is considered here to have unleashed a humongous collateral damage on mankind. Perhaps, at this juncture, a little more flesh should be added to the skeletal concept of negative atheism. Negative atheism is the tendency to suppose that since God cannot be located in space and time or presented in incontrovertible conceptual terms, He, in fact, does not exist. It is the view that wherever the argument is directed and in whatever form it is presented, the claim that God exists does not make sense. It is the denial of God’s existence in absolute terms. Frederick Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre are examples of negative atheists, as their works contain evidences of negative atheism (this is further elaborated in the section subtitled “negative atheism”).

⁴⁰¹ Parmenides, *Fragments of Parmenides*, St. Louis: E. P. Gray, 1869: 4-5

⁴⁰² R. Podolny R. *Something Called Nothing: Physical Vacuum; what is it?* Trans. from Russian by Nicholas Weinstein. Moscow: Mir Publishers, 1986, pp.112-116.

The Neo-Ontological perspective is not exclusive only to the thesis of Parmenides; it is implied in the thinking of the early Greeks, the scholastics and even the modern philosophers and scientists. For instance, the doctrine of atom, motion, the law of the indestructibility of matter, and the ultimate grand unification theory are claimed to be direct accretions of the thesis of Parmenides. In the tradition of Western thought, both being and becoming (i.e. non-being) are inseparable⁴⁰³. What is, and what is not are somehow structurally interconnected. That is why we contend that everything exists.

At a particular period in the history of thought, metaphysical monism predominated. In another period the doctrine of flux and pluralism gained acceptance. As Parmenides' thesis of the immutability of reality characterized the ontological nature of being, so too did Heraclitus' river of eternal flux, endless motion and perpetual change, periscope the features of reality. At other times, there was a confluence or convergence of the doctrines of permanence and impermanence in human thought; and both found a synthesis.

In explaining the nature of what exists, Plato, following the Parmenidean example, produced a metaphysical dualism, where he distinguished true reality from its surrogate, and consigned the latter to the realm of imperfection and illusion. Only the ideas or forms of things truly exist. Their physical or sensible versions are surrogates, which are real only in so far as they partake of their originals – the invisible ideas or forms. All that there is, are in two categories namely, ideas or forms and imperfect photocopies. All names refer to real entities as they partake of the forms. This being so, Plato reasons that ideas exist both for being and non-being. On this ground, it is evident that ideas of abstract and tangible entities do exist.⁴⁰⁴ Consequently, God would exist whether as an abstract concept or as a being with objective reality.

Similarly, but in a somewhat different key, Aristotle, the master of Ontology, articulated the common denominator of all that exists and classified the different senses in which entities can be said

⁴⁰³ M. Heidegger. *Existence and Being*. Trans. R.F.C. Hull and Alan Crick. Chicago: Henry Roguery Company. 1968.pp.337-339.

⁴⁰⁴ See Plato, *Sophist*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2006.

to exist. First, the entities that could be said to exist are many and are independent of each other. These independently existing substances inform the existence of other things; things like qualities or relations, so that existences become invariably a combination of matter and their forms implying that class names are dependent on the particular entities that they domicile.⁴⁰⁵

The import of this Aristotelian view of what exists is that, “a being becomes manifest in regard to its being in many different ways”⁴⁰⁶. My take on this is that what exists has many ways of exhibiting itself; and if this assumption is correct, the idea of God would have many ways in which it could be conceived; even within theistic and non-theistic domains. Thus, on Aristotle’s ontological characterization of what there is, the idea of God is real whether it is conceived in immanent or transcendent sense, or in any other sense for that matter.

What we have done so far with Neo-Ontologism is to demonstrate the impossibility of closing shop on the question concerning the reality of God. For if we state that ‘God is not’, which more or less corresponds to the assertion that ‘God does not exist’, we cannot without sounding absurd, imply that there is no such thing as God; but would merely be reacting to a prevailing idea of God, which we consider inadequate. I have argued elsewhere that inadequacies in the conception of God need not broaden the escape route to atheism.⁴⁰⁷ A discussion of the intentionality challenge should throw more light on the issue of the inevitability of the idea of God.

THE INTENTIONALITY CHALLENGE

The doctrine of intentionality of consciousness, as espoused by Husserl, is the version I wish to explore to further challenge negative atheism, as it deals with the nature of mental acts. All mental acts, according to this version, are intentional in character, expressing what the acts are about or what the acts are directed to. Intentionality defines the ‘directedness’ or ‘aboutness’ of mental states. Every mental state is directed at something: that which the state or act is about, regardless of

⁴⁰⁵ Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, translated by Joe Sachs, New Mexico: Green Lion Press, 1999.

⁴⁰⁶ Cf. F. Brentano F. *On the Manifold Sense of Being in Aristotle* (1862). Trans. By R. George. London: University of California Press. 1975.

⁴⁰⁷ J. I. Unah, J. I. “Atheism: Grounds, Charges and Refutations.” *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*. A Publication of the Department of Philosophy, University of Lagos. 1988. pp.69-75.

whether or not the thing which the thinking is about is sensible or insensible, concrete or abstract, immanent or transcendent, empirical or supra-empirical.

Intentionality teaches that mental states are conscious states, and that consciousness is like a stream that flows between subject and object. Consciousness is about objects because it relates itself to objects: it is always directed at objects, or at something. Consciousness is never about what does not exist because it is incapable of apprehending what does not exist. Husserl says that such is the nature of consciousness, that “True being..., whether real or ideal, has significance only as a particular correlate of my own intentionality”⁴⁰⁸

Expressing a similar point of view about intentionality, David Carr quotes Brentano:

Every psychic phenomenon is characterized by... the intentional (or perhaps mental) inexistence of an object, and what we...call the relation to a content, the direction towards an object... or immanent objectivity. Each contains something as an object within itself... In representation, something is represented; in judgement something is acknowledged or rejected; in love, something is loved... This intentional inexistence is characteristic exclusively of psychic phenomena...⁴⁰⁹

Expressions like “intentional inexistence”, “relation to a content”, or “direction towards an object” demonstrate that thinking is necessarily thinking about something. Chisholm makes a similar point that a statement is intentional if it uses a name or a description in such a manner that neither the sentence nor its contrary implies either that there is, or that there is not anything to which the name or description truly applies⁴¹⁰

The point of interest in this somewhat elaborate forage into the literature of ontology and intentionality is that in doubting, something is doubted; in unbelief, something is disbelieved. Something always is; something always remains an issue, our dispositions notwithstanding. God exists whether or not we have adequate and rational grounds for our belief or unbelief and regardless of whether or not we conceptualize it in the theistic or non-theistic sense. Thus, the proposition ‘God

⁴⁰⁸ E. Husserl. *The Paris Lectures*. Trans. by Peter Koestenbaum. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. 1970.p.8.

⁴⁰⁹ Cf. D. Carr. “Intentionality.” *Phenomenology and Philosophical Understanding*. Ed. Edo Pivavic, Bristol: Cambridge UP. 1975. pp.19-20.

⁴¹⁰ R. M. Chisholm. *Intentionality, Mind and Language*. Ed. A Marras. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 1972. p.32.

is not' severely undercuts itself and prepares the ground for me to deliver a solid punch on negative atheism.

NEGATIVE ATHEISM

From the foregoing, the challenges of ontology and intentionality combine to fire purposeful or constructive atheism, which fundamentally differs from negative atheism. I find instances of negative atheism in the declarations of Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. Nietzsche declared the death of God and celebrated his obituary on the ground that he looked around, searched everywhere and could not find God. He reasoned that it is quite possible, from what had been said by his predecessors, that God once existed. But if somebody went around searching for God everywhere, as he (Nietzsche) did, and could not find him anywhere, it was safe to conclude that he (God) is dead. Now if God is dead, it is proper to celebrate his obituary. Such celebration would involve transvaluating the values traditionally attributed to the transcendent God of rational Christianity. The introduction of reason and arguments into religious matters, which are indeed matters of sentiments, feelings, emotions etc, has made Christianity a counterfeit. All the virtues and values of honesty, humility, kindness, meekness etc extolled by Christianity are slave morality.⁴¹¹

The conclusion of the celebration of God's obituary, for Nietzsche, calls for a replacement for God. Nietzsche finds the replacement for the dead Christian God in an artist tyrant, the Superman, whose destiny is to set aside the slave morality of Christendom and introduce the master morality that pulsates and makes the world bubble; a morality that epitomizes the true vitality and enthusiasm of living; that is, values that express the spirit of man. Such a Superman would awaken in men the spirit of spontaneous conduct, competition, fitness of character, conquest, domination, will to power and even bravado; for, as he says, the best way to live is to live dangerously. Nietzsche consequently calls his ideal man Zarathustra. But who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra, and how has the occidental man fared with the emergence of Zarathustra? Without going into the sordid details of his life, Adolf Hitler of Germany has been identified as the alter ego of Nietzsche's Zarathustra. With Hitler, Europe bubbled, pulsated and burst into flames towards the middle of the 20th century. The replacement of the "dead"

⁴¹¹ F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Germany: Ernst Schmeitzner, 1883-1885

Christian God with Zarathustra formed a new basis for a new kind of morality (Superman morality) which spelt doom for the European man. In demonstrating that the Christian God, born in Israel, is dead and buried under the ruins of the Roman cathedrals, and that the Christian morality is a slave morality; Hitler roasted well over six million Jews in Auschwitz in what is described in the annals of history as 'the Holocaust'. The devastation of Europe was unparalleled. It took the whole world, through the Allied Forces, to subdue Nietzsche's Zarathustra, and return the world, once again, to the path of peace. Hitlerism therefore is the institution of terrorism; the product of negative atheism and with him the modern man had never been more disenchanting, disillusioned and disoriented.⁴¹²

As if to exacerbate the Nietzschean strain in the literature of terrorism and violence, and complicate human utter helplessness and hopelessness in the face of the exhibition of raw power by Zarathustra, Jean-Paul Sartre, a radical and influential French thinker, extolled negative atheism in a form of discourse that suggests that God himself (the anthropomorphic Deity) sent him a letter to confirm His non-existence. In drawing out what he calls the full consequences of a coherent atheistic position, Sartre claims that he knows that God does not exist. He portrays man as an orphan cast into a vast universe without a heaven of values to guide him; and because man knows that he cannot make excuses for himself, he is forlorn and despondent.

Sartre finds it incontrovertible and distressing that God does not exist. He makes these claims and declarations even in a world where an overwhelming majority of humankind look up to a transcendent being for visa to immigrate to a utopian space of perpetual bliss. Such a rugged negative atheism promises no redemption and therefore no salvation for distressed humanity. Such atheism, it has been charged, results in forlornness, despair and an attitude of desperate quietism as it paints a gloomy picture of a loveless universe.⁴¹³

Needless to say, Sartre and Nietzsche, men of profound insight and sharp intellectual carpentry, prodigies and prolific writers, strategists of textual power, superb analysts of human nature,

⁴¹² S. E. Aschheim, Nietzsche, Anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust in Jacob Golomb (ed.), New York: Routledge, 1977.

⁴¹³ J. P. Sartre. *Essays in Existentialism*. Seacacus, New Jersey: Citadel Press. 1977.

startled and rattled the world with their unequivocal condemnation of a universal moral order (exemplified in traditional ontology and Christian Morality), and totally denied God's existence. But if God does not exist in any sense, how is it that atheists, like Nietzsche and Sartre, are able to talk about and enter into rational agreement or disagreement about its nature? Need we resort to intellectual terrorism and despair to profess unbelief in the transcendent Deity of the world's aggressive religions?

The point here is that while individuals may maintain an attitude of unbelief if they are so disposed, it is socially and politically very dangerous for anyone to elevate atheism to the status of necessary truth, especially in view of its devastating consequences for mankind. The thrust of this essay is that atheistic or secular view of God, if presented with a positive social purpose could form the basis for a morality that adds greater value to humanity than an outright attempt to universalize either atheism or anthropomorphic theism. That one is allowed to keep a poison in his closet does not grant him the freedom to administer it to people indiscriminately in the name of hospitality. There is no way he would escape the charge of genocide if he does so. Atheists, and theists alike, should therefore think responsibly since what they say in the public domain could have severe moral consequences for mankind.

Indeed, proponents of universal atheism should take a cue from Feuerbach and redefine the concept of God in ways that are agreeable to their disposition and yet socially responsible. Could God not be conceived, for instance, in secular terms as independence of action; a sufficiency of means; a competency; a perpetual striving after perfection; the seeking spirit which discloses the true state of reality? Could God not be conceived as the outward visible manifestation of the human capacity to surpass natural limitations in pursuit of authenticity? A constant elaboration of the concept of God along this axis could provide guidance to a large army of *Homo sapiens* who are uncomfortable with the limitations of anthropomorphic theism, and the basis for developing a robust secular notion of the good, a humanist morality that is humane in nature.

THE LESSON FROM FEUERBACH

There is indeed a non-theistic idea of God that has been used to transform the world and human societies. Consider, for example, the conception of God by Ludwig Feuerbach as man's

“idealized essence”.⁴¹⁴ The idealisation of man’s essence is self-alienation as it involves a projection of human attributes into a transcendent sphere. Thus, God is perceived as man’s self-consciousness and self-knowledge of himself. In Feuerbach’s analysis are two aspects and perspectives with a common ground in anthropomorphic theism. These are Christianity as a monotheistic religion and polytheism as nature religion.

In his discourse on the monotheistic Christian religion, Feuerbach made the point that whenever we contemplate God’s fine attributes of power, seeing-ness, kindness and love, we are contemplating man’s attributes in the superlative form; and that, whenever we seem to understand the meaning of God’s fine attributes, we actually strive to understand man and his potentialities.

Similarly, in his analysis of the polytheistic nature religions, Feuerbach tells us that man’s fears and foibles lead him to venerate the forces of nature represented by mountains, rivers, massive trees etc., all symbolic of different deities to grant him strength and succour to fill the aching void of life.⁴¹⁵

Feuerbach contends that in its concept of God, anthropomorphic theism alienates man from his true attributes. In the monotheistic religion of Christianity, man projects his attributes into a utopian space and deifies them. But in the polytheistic religions, man turns the forces of nature into a multiplicity of gods which he then venerates and worships. Hence, the transition from polytheism to monotheism symbolizes the movement from reliance on “physical nature” to reliance on “idealized nature”⁴¹⁶.

Feuerbach rejects this idea of God and replaces it with a secular view which holds that all the superlative attributes of God are human deposits in a transcendent realm which he must withdraw to

⁴¹⁴ L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, translated by Marian Evans, London: John Chapman, 1854: 12-13

⁴¹⁵ L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Religion: God the Image of Man, Man’s Dependence on Nature, the Last and only Source of Religion*, translated by Alexander Loos, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2006.

⁴¹⁶ Cf. F. Copleston. *A History of Philosophy: Volume VII: Modern Philosophy: From the Post-Kantian Idealists to Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche*. London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1963. pp.62-64.

invest in his possibilities.⁴¹⁷ Surely, this is a non-theistic idea of God. But the point is this: after Feuerbach, how has the occidental man fared with this non-theistic conception of God?

The occidental man saw with Feuerbach that “God was born when the child’s father died”⁴¹⁸; and that to reclaim love which had been siphoned away to God, man needed to retrieve himself from the self-alienation of religion.⁴¹⁹ The Western man of the modern period, the enlightenment era, agreed with Feuerbach that the task of philosophical anthropology is to institute secularism and disentangle man from the clutches of anthropomorphic theism. The feat of disentanglement is achieved when man fearlessly wins back his love, dignity and ego and reclaims those fine attributes he has invested in a transcendent Being and reinvests them upon himself. Thus, with Feuerbach and his European contemporaries, philosophical anthropology which they variously called atheism or secularism was to inculcate the spirit of self-realization, self-dependence, self-actualization and self-emancipation to drive the locomotives of self development; an aggregate of which could be used to power national patriotism and collective achievements

Feuerbach’s atheism is a challenge to humanity to reclaim its investment in a supernatural Deity to prosecute its own grand designs of transforming the world into a paradise. The Europeans and the Asians have eventually, accepted the challenge.

The Western European world which first accepted this challenge has successfully elevated itself to the pedestal of a visible God on earth. With the invention of the atomic bomb, the Western European community retrieved omnipotence from God. Likewise, with the invention and launching of satellites into space coupled with high auto-tech information devices planted all over the world, the Western European world repossessed the capacity for omniscience and omnipresence from the God of religion. Perhaps, more significantly, the practice of genuine democracy in the civilized world

⁴¹⁷ L. Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*. New York: Prometheus Books. 1989. pp.12-13.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid. p.5.

⁴¹⁹ Cf. V. N. Kuznestov. *Engels’ Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. 1987.

resulting in human empowerment, provision of life-enhancing amenities and social welfare schemes for both citizens and non-citizens alike relocates the attributes of all-kindness and love to humanity. As we speak today, by adopting purposeful atheism or secularism in managing their state affairs and rapidly developing their environment, the Asians are in hot pursuit of the Western Europeans for world domination and supremacy in turning the earth into a realm of envy and nostalgia for departing ancestors. From this angle, therefore, it seems that purposeful atheism or secularism has achieved more in dramatically transforming the world and human societies than anthropomorphic theism. All this is possible because Feuerbach dared to tell the world that God is man; or rather, that man is God. God exists in human form. Man is God and God is man.

CONCLUSION

The inadequacies of the conception of God by anthropomorphic theology do not necessarily require that anyone who is not so disposed must take to a brand of atheism that is destructive. In other words, these inadequacies do not necessarily warrant a destructive, or what I have labelled as ‘universal atheism’ or “negative atheism”, because such inadequacies cannot justify the assertion that God does not exist in any sense.

From ontology and intentionality disclosures, whatever enters one’s mind at all is an object of thought. How one describes that object is a different matter and a secondary activity. The primary activity is that something occurred in one’s mind. So, once the idea of God is conceived in someone’s mind, the person may evaluate it and reject it; however, that rejection still does not abolish the concept of God.

Difficulties engendered by a person’s conception of God should not prompt those who reject it to turn to negative atheism and its devastating consequences, especially considering Nietzsche’s views which produced Hitler and Sartre’s which created disenchantment, forlornness and despair in the world. Feuerbach’s example is quite instructive in the direction it gives to man. This direction is that, if a particular notion of God is rejected, one should present an alternative that is more in tandem with reality than one that would engender massive destruction. Also, thinking must be done responsibly;

because when a thinker's negative thoughts get to the public domain, it could have severe consequences. Where one considers a particular conception of God inadequate, such person should have the presence of mind and social consideration to avoid disseminating views or doctrines that could lead to a relentless catastrophe.⁴²⁰

⁴²⁰ From the foregoing it would seem clear why in African philosophies of religion there are no elaborate treatises pontificating about the existence of the Supreme Being. It would seem clear that African religions already start from the linguistic perspective which has been elaborated in this chapter, and which make obsolete the anthropomorphic and anthropocentric conceptions of theistic traditions, transcending these to the position where no need arises to provide a proof for the existence of the Supreme Being. Even more significant is the form and tenor of values which would derive from this tradition of recognition of Deity; neither supernaturalist simpliciter, nor vacuously humanistic, but one holistically derived for the edification of all beings and life.

QUESTIONING AFRICAN ATTEMPTS TO GROUND ETHICS ON METAPHYSICS

Thaddeus METZ

INTRODUCTION

In the literature on African moral philosophy, it is common to find normative conclusions about the way we ought to act directly drawn from purported metaphysical facts about the nature of ourselves and the world. For example, in the famous Menkiti-Gyekye debate on personhood, Gyekye attempts to defend moderate communitarianism, roughly the view that agents have strong duties to support others in ways that do not violate human rights, by contending that it follows from the dual nature of the self as both social and individual. It thus, denies that the community has complete ontological priority over the individual. In my contribution, I critically analyze this, and contend that it is unsound. I conclude that it cannot bridge the ‘is/ought gap’, and that similar arguments found in the field of African philosophy, such as the frequent claim that we must treat nature with respect, since everything in the universe is interdependent, also fail to do so.

FROM ONTOLOGY TO AXIOLOGY IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Probably the default view among African philosophers is not merely that ontology must be done before axiology, but also, more strongly, that justified claims about the latter follow immediately from those about the former. That is, it is common for African thinkers to maintain that a given conception of the nature of the self or the world directly supports claims

about how one ought to treat oneself, others or the environment. As Kwame Gyekye, probably the most famous proponent of such an argumentative strategy, has said, “Moral questions may, in some sense, be said to be linked to, or engendered by, metaphysical conceptions of the person.”⁴²¹

In this chapter, I argue that such an argument is fallacious. I maintain that nothing moral, just or otherwise prescriptive straightforwardly follows from any ‘purely’ metaphysical view, by which I mean one that is about the nature of reality and is free of evaluative and normative elements. There is a gulf between ontological claims about what is or exists, on the one hand, and ethical claims about what is good or how agents ought to act, on the other, in the sense that nothing about the latter is justified merely on the basis of the former. Furthermore, I argue against attempts to bridge the is/ought gap with premises that explicitly ground ethical claims on metaphysical ones. Although the positing of such premises can resolve the problem of invalid inference, the premises themselves are implausible.

I begin by laying out the most familiar and influential attempt in African philosophy to ground the moral on the metaphysical, namely, Gyekye’s argument for moderate communitarianism. Then, in what follows section, I object to Gyekye’s rationale and critically examine three ways to reconstruct it, contending that none of them provides an attractive way to ground a moral-political theory on metaphysical claims about the nature of the self. I then generalize my objection to other, similar kinds of arguments in the field of African philosophy, including the common suggestion that respect for nature follows from the purported fact that everything in the universe is inter-related. Note that my aim is to reject neither Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism nor the idea that we have duties to natural objects; instead, my goal is to cast serious doubt on attempts to defend these conclusions by

⁴²¹ K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 36

appeal to purely ontological premises.

FROM A METAPHYSICS OF THE SELF TO A MORAL-POLITICAL THEORY

The most influential African political philosophy of the past 25 years has been the moderate communitarianism of Kwame Gyekye.⁴²² Even where critics have found it wanting, it has stimulated the most debate and is the most well-known African political theory of how the state ought to function. In this section, I spell out the essentials of Gyekye's normative politics, demonstrate how he tries to ground them on a descriptive conception of the self, and provide new objections to his attempt to do so. I reiterate that my criticisms are not meant to cast doubt on moderate communitarianism itself in favour of, say, a more radical form of it, as many African scholars have sought to argue. In fact, I favour Gyekye's conclusions, but find his central, metaphysical argument for them unsound.⁴²³

Moderate Communitarianism:

What makes a normative theory rightly called 'communitarian', as formulated by Gyekye, is principally that it requires both participation in a shared way of life and substantial action for the sake of a common good.⁴²⁴ The common good is a kind of interest that is both universal and basic among human beings. It is basic in that it is a matter of meeting urgent needs, providing items essential for any human being to function, such as food, water, healthcare, clothing and so on.⁴²⁵ The common good is also universal in that actions that promote it are those that at the very least make no one worse off, and, in the typical case,

⁴²² See Ibid

⁴²³ For a different, fundamentally moral defence of many of Gyekye's conclusions about political choice, see T. Metz, *Developing African Political Philosophy: Moral-Theoretic Strategies*, *Philosophia Africana* 14 (2012): 61-83.

⁴²⁴ See K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, pp.42-46, 66-67, 70, 142

⁴²⁵ Ibid, p. 45

make everyone better off.⁴²⁶ Communitarianism contrasts with what Gyekye calls ‘individualism’, the view that a moral agent in such as a state by and large need neither support society’s norms nor do much to help its members.⁴²⁷

Communitarianism and individualism admit of degrees, and Gyekye of course defends a moderate form of communitarianism. Gyekye famously argues that moral agents have a duty to promote the common good as much as possible,⁴²⁸ and so what makes his view moderate is not that its burdens are light. Instead, the moderation is a function of two other facets of Gyekye’s view. First, although an agent must do all he can to improve others’ well-being, he may not do so in ways that violate individual rights. Gyekye believes that there are human rights to life and to civil liberties regarding free expression of opinion,⁴²⁹ bodily integrity⁴³⁰ and even lifestyles that the majority might frown upon.⁴³¹ A radical or extreme form of communitarianism would permit agents to perform whichever actions would most promote the common good, which, as is well known from contemporary discussion of utilitarianism, could involve treating an individual merely as a means to the end of social well-being.

The second facet that makes Gyekye’s communitarianism moderate rather than extreme is that, although individuals are required to do all they can to improve others’

⁴²⁶ Ibid, p. 46; K. Gyekye, *Beyond Cultures; Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, III* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2004), p. 117.

⁴²⁷ See K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, p.45.

⁴²⁸ See Ibid, pp. 70-75; K. Gyekye, *Beyond Cultures*, pp. 105-111.

⁴²⁹ K. Gyekye, Traditional Political Ideas: Their Relevance to Development in Contemporary Africa. In: K. Wiredu and K. Gyekye (Eds.) *Person and Community; Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, I*. (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992) p. 251.

⁴³⁰ K. Gyekye, *Beyond Cultures*, p. 36

⁴³¹ K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, p. 65

welfare, they need not utterly conform to the ways of life that are dominant in their society. When criticizing extreme forms of communitarianism, Gyekye rejects the idea of a ‘cramped or shackled self, responding robotically to the ways and demands of the communal structure’⁴³². Instead, he appreciates the ‘viable and telling pursuits of individuals who can appropriately be described as idealists, visionaries, or revolutionaries’.⁴³³

What these two elements have in common is the idea that ‘moderate communitarianism acknowledges the intrinsic worth of the individual and the moral (natural) rights of the individual that the acknowledgment can be said to entail’.⁴³⁴ Unlike the extreme form, moderate communitarianism accepts that individuals have the rights not to be used as a mere means to the promotion of the common good, on the one hand, and the rights to choose idiosyncratic ways of life for themselves, on the other. Gyekye’s view remains fundamentally communitarian, and not individualist, insofar as agents must do everything in their power to promote the common good (without degrading individuals) and they have some (defeasible) obligation not to upset a community’s culture.

It is fairly clear what Gyekye’s moderate communitarianism entails for state protection of civil liberties. Although the state should support social cohesion in broad terms, as well as prod people to maximize the common good without violating rights,⁴³⁵ the state must also leave plenty of room for individuals to choose their own ways of life. What does Gyekye’s philosophy of maximizing the common good, subject to respect for individual dignity entail for additional public-institutional matters?

With regard to political power, Gyekye was one of the first professional philosophers

⁴³² Ibid, pp.55-56

⁴³³ Ibid, p.57

⁴³⁴ Ibid, p. 69

⁴³⁵ Ibid, pp. 46-47

to advocate a consensus-oriented form of representative democracy for a modern, industrial society.⁴³⁶ He maintains that elected legislators ought not to base law and policy on what a majority of them favour, but rather should seek unanimous agreement among themselves. Such a view appears to follow straightaway from a political theory requiring agents to maximize the common good. If legislators are obligated to do all they can to promote the well-being of everyone in society, and not merely of a constituency, then decisions that have been the product of consensus are most likely to fit the bill.⁴³⁷

As for economic distribution, Gyekye believes that moderate communitarianism prescribes not a socialist economy, but rather a form of redistributive capitalism, since the latter has done the best job of any known economic system of improving people's quality of life,⁴³⁸ and, one might add, without violating people's individual rights to choose their own ways of life. A capitalist system legally allows individuals to own natural resources, large firms and social infrastructure, which they deploy to make profit for themselves by buying people's time, effort and skills on a labour market and then selling their services or goods on a consumer market. A redistributive form of capitalism is one in which, roughly, the state taxes those who have been successful in these markets and directs the proceeds to those who have not. Although those on the left often criticize this economic system, the worst off living under it have historically tended to be much better off than the worst off in socialist economies, and people generally have had more control over which kinds of lives to lead

So far, I have laid out Gyekye's moderate communitarian ethical principle and indicated what he thinks it entails for some key issues in political theory. In sum, agents are morally obligated to maximize the common good in ways that respect individuals' dignity and

⁴³⁶ See K. Gyekye, *Traditional Political Ideas*

⁴³⁷ K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, pp.130-131, 142

⁴³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 159; K. Gyekye, *Beyond Cultures*, pp. 128, 129, 133

rights, which Gyekye believes entails that the state must protect substantial civil liberties, adopt a consensus-oriented form of democracy and enforce a redistributive capitalist economy. Now the question arises as to why Gyekye believes in moderate communitarianism.

Grounding Moderate Communitarianism on Our Dual Nature

It is useful to distinguish between two basic elements of Gyekye's moderate communitarianism. On the one hand, individuals have the obligations to lend some support to their society's culture and to do all they can to promote the common good. On the other hand, individuals are entitled to choose their own lifestyles and not to be treated as mere means to the end of improving others' lives. Why does Gyekye favour this combination of duties and rights?

His central argument in favour of this moderate communitarianism is an ontological one. Basically, the two elements of his principle are supposed to follow from the fact that there are two metaphysical aspects to ourselves, an individual nature and a social one. Our duties are a product of our nature as communal beings, whereas our rights follow from our nature as beings who are not utterly determined by the community. Gyekye says,

(M)oderate communitarianism offers a more appropriate and adequate account of the self and its relation to the community than the unrestricted or extreme or radical account, in that the former sees the self both as a communal being *and* as an autonomous, self-assertive being with a capacity for evaluation and choice, while the latter sees the activity of what I have referred to as the 'mental feature' of the person as *wholly* contingent upon, and determined by, the communal structure itself.⁴³⁹

Against a radical communitarian ethic, Gyekye makes these purely descriptive claims: 'The individual is by nature a social (communal) being, yes; but she is, also by nature, *other* things as well',⁴⁴⁰ and 'The powers of inventiveness, imagination, and so on are not entirely a

⁴³⁹ K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, p.59; see also pp. 41, 53.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 47

function of the communal culture; they are instead a function of natural talents or endowments, even though they can only be nurtured and exercised in a cultural community'.⁴⁴¹ Since part of us is determined by our inner biology and part of us is determined by our external community, Gyekye maintains that the correct ethic is one that requires us to do a lot for society, albeit in ways that do not degrade individuals' mental features, which include criticism, creativity and the like.

More specifically, Gyekye maintains that the self is an *equal* product of nature and nurture, the inner and the outer, the individual and the social, which, in turn, requires giving *equal* weight to rights and duties. An individualist morality, which lays great emphasis on individual rights and rejects the idea of weighty duties to help others, would purportedly follow from a metaphysical view of the self as atomistic and self-sufficient, where a community is nothing but the product of individual choices.⁴⁴² And a radical communitarian normative theory, one that recognizes no individual rights, would be suitable for a self that were completely determined by society, a view that is ascribed to Ifeanyi Menkiti by Gyekye.⁴⁴³ In contrast, according to Gyekye,

(I)n view of the fact that neither can the individual develop outside the framework of the community nor can the welfare of the community as a whole dispense with the talent and initiative of its individual members, I think that the most satisfactory way to recognize the claims of both communality and individuality is to ascribe to them the status of an equal moral standing.⁴⁴⁴

The attempt to ground ethics in metaphysics is clear in Gyekye's key argument for moderate communitarianism. I now maintain that this argument is a *non sequitur*; nothing

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, p. 59

⁴⁴² Ibid, pp. 38-39, 45

⁴⁴³ Ibid, pp. 47-48; 52-59

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, p.41; see also p. 67

moral can follow from anything merely metaphysical.

CRITICALLY EVALUATING GYEKYE'S ARGUMENT

One readily sees that Gyekye's reasoning, as expressed in the quotations above, is not merely invalid, but also weak, upon presenting it in standard form:

P1: The human self is equally the product of the nature (biology) and the society (culture).

C: Therefore, the correct ethic for human selves is one that ascribes equal weight to individual rights and communal duties (viz., duties to participate in society and to promote the common good, subject to individuals having rights to do so in ways that are a product of their mental features).

The view of this writer is that the conclusion, C does not follow necessarily or even probabilistically from P1. The conclusion is not logically implied by the premise, which it would have to be in order to follow without another, intermediate premise. In the absence of a bridge premise mediating P1, which is solely about the source of the self, and C, which is instead about the content of our rights and duties, the latter gains *no* epistemic support from the former.

A First Reconstruction

To be fair to Gyekye, let us consider what a bridge premise might look like, and see whether it is attractive. The intermediary would have to speak of both the sources of the self and the content of morality, and I can think of three ways it might be expressed in a *prima facie* reasonable way. Here is one:

P1: The human self is equally the product of the nature (biology) and the society (culture).

P2: The correct ethic for human selves is one that reflects the source of the human self.

- P3: The ethic for human selves that reflects the source of the human self, *qua* equal product of the nature (biology) and the society (culture) is one that ascribes equal weight to individual rights and communal duties (viz., duties to participate in society and to promote the common good, subject to individuals having rights to do so in ways that are a product of their mental features).
- C: Therefore, the correct ethic for human selves is one that ascribes equal weight to individual rights and communal duties (viz., duties to participate in society and to promote the common good, subject to individuals having rights to do so in ways that are a product of their mental features).

I have not found an explicit statement of P2 in Gyekye's most sustained defense of moderate communitarianism as contained in *Tradition and Modernity*, but it has some intuitive pull, and it turns out to be similar to the kind of argument that another major political philosopher, John Rawls, has used to support his theory of justice that includes substantial individual rights.⁴⁴⁵ With the insertion of P2 along with P3 the argument is now valid; one cannot logically reject the moderate communitarian conclusion while accepting the premises.

The question now is whether the premises are plausible, with P2 being of particular concern. Before evaluating it, I pause to clarify it. What is it for an ethic to 'reflect' certain facts about human beings? I presume that for a principle to reflect (or mirror) an object is for the principle to be contoured to it or to replicate it. To reflect something is to match or duplicate features of the thing. I find it difficult to explicate this concept in any further general terms, but Robert Nozick has provided some examples that might be useful to the reader:

⁴⁴⁵ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), S 5, 6, 30. For the only critical discussion of Rawls' under-explored argument of which I am aware, see T. Metz, *The Foundations of Social Contract Theory*. PhD Dissertation, Cornell University, 1997, PP.23-45 (from which the next few paragraphs borrow).

First, consider workmanship, wherein the artisan adapts his action to the variational details of his particular materials. Second, consider the way intimate sexual behavior is contoured to the partner's general desires, passing pleasures, passions, and emotions as these are expressed also in subtly nuanced physical position and configurations, pressure, sound, and rhythm, as well as to the reciprocal contouring of one's partner to oneself. Third, consider how a voice is contoured to the thought it expresses; consider the different modulations and nuances, tempos, hesitations, emphases, and changes of inflection whereby a voice shows intelligence.⁴⁴⁶

Gyekye's specification of moderate communitarianism might be viewed as contoured to the sources of our selves: our individual rights replicate our natural origins as biological beings with mental features, and our duties toward others fit our social origins as beings brought up in a culture, or so P3 should be understood to say. One might question whether moderate communitarianism indeed 'reflects' the factors that determine who we are, i.e., whether P3 is true, but I set that issue aside in favour of casting doubt on P2. It is far from clear that the correct ethic for us, or more generally, the correct norm for an object, is necessarily one that mimics it in some way. Instead, sound norms are naturally understood to be those that direct or constrain their objects in accordance with good reasons.

Consider, for example, norms of prudence. When it comes to self-interested behaviour, people often tend to act on strong desires against their better judgment, and they also tend not to give enough weight to their long-term interests, focusing too heavily on the short-term. It would be odd to think that norms governing how one *ought* to act with regard to one's own good should *reflect* these wayward dispositions of human nature.

Of course, norms that are meant to regulate people's decisions ought to *take account of* human nature—they cannot be overly idealistic or utopian, for example, or else the dictum of 'ought implies can' will tell against them; we can have no reason to do what we simply cannot do. However, that point differs from the idea that norms ought to *reflect* human nature, which

⁴⁴⁶ R. Nozick, *Philosophical Explorations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p.464.

is the idea of P2.

A Second Reconstruction

Let me try a second way to reconstruct on Gyekye's behalf the inference from the metaphysical claim about the nature of the self to a moral conclusion of moderate communitarianism. In the book Gyekye published, just prior to the major defense of moderate communitarianism, he remarks, 'If sociality is in fact fundamental to human nature, then the type of social order that ought to exist is that which would conduce to the full realization of that nature'.⁴⁴⁷ Instead of moral rules mirroring what humans are like, perhaps they ought to serve the function of helping us to become what we are. This sort of idea is expressed in the following argument:

- P1: The human self is equally the product of the nature (biology) and the society (culture).
- P2*: The correct ethic for human selves is one that, when followed, would realize the human self.
- P3*: The ethic for human selves that, when followed, would realize the human self, *qua* equal product of the nature (biology) and the society (culture) is one that ascribes equal weight to individual rights and communal duties (*viz.*, duties to participate in society and to promote the common good, subject to individuals having rights to do so in ways that are a product of their mental features).
- C: Therefore, the correct ethic for human selves is one that ascribes equal weight to individual rights and communal duties (*viz.*, duties to participate in society and to promote the common good, subject to individuals having rights to do so in ways that are a product of their mental features).

⁴⁴⁷ K. Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), pp. 156-157; see also pp. 161-162

Once again, the argument is now valid, requiring us to consider whether the premises are true. It is worth questioning P3*, the claim that Gyekye's combination of rights and duties would, if followed, do the best job (or even an adequate job) of realizing human nature. However, I elect to focus on P2*.

P2* might appear attractive in light of some familiar Aristotelian ideas about ethics. It is not uncommon for ethicists to hold perfectionism, which is broadly the idea that our aim as moral agents should be to develop human nature, either one's own, as per Aristotle's *eudaimonist* or self-realization ethic, or everyone's nature generally, a view that Thomas Hurka⁴⁴⁸ has advocated with great sophistication.

Now, perfectionism admits of two distinct varieties, one of which is much more plausible than the other. Perfectionism₁ is the view that a moral agent ought to develop human nature, whatever it metaphysically is as distinct from what, e.g., animals are, whereas perfectionism₂ is the view that a moral agent ought to develop the *valuable aspects* of human nature, features of us that are good for their own sake and that animals characteristically lack.

The difference between the two varieties is revealed upon consideration of features of human nature that are not good, viz., that are either downright bad, on the one hand, or neutral, on the other. For an instance of the latter, it appears to be a part of human nature *simpliciter* to have a belly button and to have been born from a woman impregnated by a man, which would not be true of a 'test-tube baby'. Perfectionism₁ would entail that there is some moral reason not to have such a test-tube baby because it would not be a characteristic human being, whereas perfectionism₂ would not entail that.

I realize that there are those who might bite the bullet and deem a test-tube baby to be wrong to create, and this they would maintain precisely because it would be 'unnatural'.

⁴⁴⁸ See T. Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Others might suggest that although we are often born from two parents, we are not *essentially* born in that way, where it is only a human being's essential features that are morally relevant.

Therefore, consider another, more telling example, of our deep disposition to divide human beings along racial, ethnic and related characteristics, to be paranoid of those we deem 'other', and to work to 'cleanse' ourselves of them.⁴⁴⁹ On the face of it, perfectionism₁ would prescribe rearing human beings who exhibit that divisive tendency, since it is part of human nature *simpliciter*, and probably essentially so in light of our evolutionary history, whereas any plausible version of perfectionism₂ would rule that out.

I presume the reader shares my judgment in finding the implications of perfectionism₂ to be more attractive than those of perfectionism₁. However, P2* is expressive of the latter, and not the former. P2* says that the function of morality ought to be to realize human selves, where, in order to do epistemic work in conjunction with P1, the notion of human self at play is free of any evaluative or prescriptive elements and is instead purely descriptive. Insofar as P2* expresses perfectionism₁ and we find that conception of ethics unattractive, we must reject P2*.

A Third Reconstruction

Here is a third, and final, idea I have about how to help Gyekye by shoring up his inference from a metaphysical judgment about the self to a moderate communitarian conclusion about morality and politics. Although I will argue that it, too, is unsuccessful, it should be revealing to address it.

P1: The human self is equally the product of the nature (biology) and the society (culture).

⁴⁴⁹ For two philosophically informed discussions of this tendency, see Koestler (1967) and M. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 27-46.

- P2†: The correct ethic for human selves is one that has us pay back those responsible for the course of our lives in proportion to their contribution.
- P3†: The ethic for human selves that has us proportionately pay back those responsible for the course of our lives, where we are equally the product of the nature (biology) and the society (culture), is one that ascribes equal weight to individual rights and communal duties (viz., duties to participate in society and to promote the common good, subject to individuals having rights to do so in ways that are a product of their mental features).
- C: Therefore, the correct ethic for human selves is one that ascribes equal weight to individual rights and communal duties (viz., duties to participate in society and to promote the common good, subject to individuals having rights to do so in ways that are a product of their mental features).

The idea behind P2† will perhaps be attractive to those familiar with an influential version of the Divine Command Theory. According to this view, our most basic obligation is to pay back God as our creator, which entails that we have moral reason to do whatever He commands us to do.⁴⁵⁰ P2† is similar, indicating that we owe a debt of gratitude, or otherwise a debt of repayment, to whomever is responsible for our existence and our lives insofar as they have done well.

P1 proposes that, with respect to a given individual, both she and her community are comparably responsible for the course of her life. And the rest of the argument expresses the idea that the way to pay back the individual and her community is to ascribe her both rights and duties of the sort Gyekye does. She owes it to herself to take advantage of rights to exercise her mental features of criticism, imagination and the like, and she owes it to others in

⁴⁵⁰ For critical discussion of some of these lines of argument, see J. Lombardi, Filial Gratitude and God's Right to Command, *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 19 (1991): 93-118.

her society to promote their culture and common good.

Note that this interpretation of Gyekye's rationale, while far removed from Gyekye's own comments, also does a nice job of making sense of the partiality that is perhaps inherent to African ethical perspective. It is characteristic of sub-Saharan morality to maintain that one owes the most to kin or otherwise to those related to oneself (e.g., Appiah⁴⁵¹), which would naturally follow from the claim that morality is about giving back in proportion to what others have given you. P2† gives 'Family first' and 'Charity begins at home' a principled foundation.

Again, the third reconstruction is a valid defense of moderate communitarianism, but the question is whether P2† is true or not. One immediate problem with it is that it cannot plausibly serve as a complete ground for morality. Intuitively, I have some obligation to help distant foreigners and even animals in distress, when I can do so at little cost to myself, but distant foreigners and animals are in no respect responsible for the course of my life. Or, at the very least, I would owe them a duty of beneficence *even if* they were not at all responsible for that. So, whatever duties I have to aid compatriots, those who have benefited me, must be tempered against the duties I have to aid those who have not, potentially blocking the inference to acting in a moderately communitarian way toward compatriots.

Another problem with the argument concerns P3†, which, upon reflection, appears unsupported by the logic of the argument. While the rationale appears able to make sense of why *one ought to take advantage* of a right, it does not, upon reflection, make sense of why *another ought to accord* one a right.

Note, first, that P2† and P1 entail that, since I am partly responsible for my existence and the path my life has taken, I owe it to myself (or, strictly speaking, to the inner part of

⁴⁵¹ A. Appiah, Ethical Systems, African. In: Craig, Edward (Ed.) *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

myself) to guide my life in part on the basis of my mental features. P2† and P1, secondly, entail that, since others are partly responsible for my existence and the path my life has taken, I owe something to them. But what?

Setting my parents or legal guardians aside, it appears that I primarily owe other members of society something related to the culture they have maintained and imparted to me. It might also be that, insofar as others have supported an economic system enabling me to meet my needs, I owe members of my society behaviour that would help them meet their needs. So, if the logic of the current argument is sound, Gyekye can fairly derive the conclusion that I owe others in my society support for their culture and promotion of the common good. However, it is unclear how he can derive the idea that I owe others respect for their individual rights to live as they see fit, for *it is not in virtue of those rights that others have benefited me*.

Again, others have helped me in terms of conferring meanings, values and more generally a way of life on me that grounds my sense of self, and by supporting an economy that meets my needs, and so I should return the favour with regard to fostering a society's culture and the general welfare. However, others have not helped me (or, at the very least, not very much) insofar as they have taken advantage of rights to live idiosyncratic lifestyles. It therefore appears, from the logic of the present argument, that I do not generally owe it to them not to violate individual rights of theirs.⁴⁵²

⁴⁵² Notice that this criticism of the reconstructed argument for Gyekye does not turn on the more frequent ideas that in order for one who benefits another to be owed repayment by the beneficiary, the former must intend to benefit the latter, or the latter must request it from the former. I suspect it is possible to owe debts of gratitude and related obligations to those who have benefited one, even though they did not intend it and one did not seek it out. For example, one can owe a debt of gratitude toward war veterans, even if they were conscripted and did not seek to benefit the society they were forced to defend, and even if one mistakenly did not think they should fight. In any event, in this essay I grant Gyekye the idea that we can owe others who have unintentionally benefited us and even if we did not seek help from them. What I question is the notion that what we owe them is treatment in accordance with the kinds of rights Gyekye favours

Reasons to Doubt Any Sound Reconstruction is Forthcoming

In this section, I point out that Gyekye's defence of moderate communitarianism by appeal to purported metaphysical facts about our-selves is, as it stands, a *non sequitur*. From purely ontological claims about what is, one cannot derive any epistemic support for a moral conclusion about what ought to be. I have considered three ways that one might add premises to Gyekye's basic rationale, ones that would make it valid and would include claims that *prima facie* merit exploration. However, I have argued that none of these reconstructions is plausible, in the final analysis. Before concluding, I now present two reasons for doubting that any attractive reconstruction is available, i.e., for thinking that it is fruitless to try to ground a moral-political theory on claims about the nature of the self in the way Gyekye attempts.

First off, consider that debate among scientists still rages about the extent to which nature and nurture are respectively responsible for who we are and what we do. It is not so clear that nature and nurture are equal sources of our selves, or even that they are comparable. Appealing to shaky descriptive claims about our human nature is, for the foreseeable future, out of place as a defense of the firmly held claim that one should accord an 'equal moral standing'⁴⁵³ to the claims of individuality and communality.

But suppose that, once the dust settled, it turned out that nature and nurture were in fact comparable determinants of us. Even so, I maintain, the point would be irrelevant to establishing the plausibility of moderate communitarianism relative to its individualist and radical communitarian competitors. To see why, consider that one could continue ably to defend moderate communitarianism, or at least certain forms of it, in the face of a different metaphysics.

First, imagine that individuals were self-sufficient and did not need each other.

⁴⁵³ K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, p.

Imagine, as Gyekye remarks of the underpinnings of individualism, that the individual person were ‘prior to the community and equipped with conceptions of the good perhaps totally different from the purposes of the community, individual conceptions of the good *wholly* and *always* arrived at independently of the system of values available in a community’.⁴⁵⁴

My claim is: nothing yet follows with respect to the way we ought to treat people. In particular, one need not hold the individualist view that there are no duties to assist others. It could still be, for instance, that atomistic individuals would have a dignity that warrants respectful treatment from a given agent, one form of which would be helping them to achieve whatever ends they have set for themselves. Consider how plausible such a view is in light of the way many of us think of God. If God exists, it is extremely unlikely that he is dependent on us—His conception of the good, for instance, is surely independent of our perspectives. If any person is self-sufficient, it is God. And yet most believers in God maintain that it is possible to have duties with respect to Him, and, specifically, duties to obey God’s commands or to help God realize His plan for the universe.

Second, now imagine the opposite. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the way Gyekye reads Menkiti were true, i.e., that little, if anything, about us were the result of our natural endowment, and nearly everything about us were instead a product of socialization and other external influences. My claim is: nothing yet follows with respect to the way we ought to treat people. In particular, one need not hold the radical communitarian view that there are no individual rights and that one is obligated to conform blindly to the community’s extant norms, whatever they happen to be. It could still be, for instance, that, although everything about us is a product of society, what society has produced in us are beings with a dignity that warrants respectful treatment from a given agent, one form of which would be to

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 45

avoid using coercion or deception to force us to adopt a given way of life.

What these thought experiments demonstrate is that settling questions about how to treat one another cannot be done immediately on the basis of metaphysical descriptions of human nature. Instead, one invariably has to take up irreducibly evaluative or normative considerations, some of which are whether we have a dignity and what is involved in treating it with respect. It is sometimes said that the way to transcend a debate between two positions is to reject a premise that both of them share. Both the radical communitarian Menkiti and the moderate communitarian Gyekye appear to assume that the way to treat others is a function of the extent to which the community is ontologically prior to the individual. I have argued that this common assumption is false, clearing the way for a new, resolutely value-theoretic approach to moral-political disputes in African philosophy.

FROM A METAPHYSICS OF NATURE TO AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC?: GENERALIZING THE CRITICISM

I conclude this chapter by pointing out another kind of argument in the literature similar in form to Gyekye's and by suggesting that the criticism I have made of his applies with equal force to it. Salient is the rationale for ascribing a moral status to nature as a whole, or to many non-human beings in it, on the basis of the purported metaphysical fact that everything in the world is interrelated, indeed, interdependent. Often the suggestion is that, according to a Western ontology, human beings are separate from nature, which allegedly entails the view that it is permissible to dominate it, whereas, according to an African metaphysics, human beings are dependent on or otherwise tied to nature, from which it is said to follow that they must treat it or large parts of it with respect of some kind. For just two examples of such a rationale from African theorists, consider:

The Judaeo-Christian ethic has placed humans apart from nature, a fact that has contributed to global environmental degradation. There is a need for a shift towards a new epistemological outlook in which humankind is

viewed as part of a complex and systematic totality of nature...an ecophilosophical approach which recognizes the totality of (spatial, temporal and other) interlinkages in nature.⁴⁵⁵

Cosmic unity means that everything is perpetually in motion, influencing and being influenced by something else. From this perspective has evolved the view that knowing is a relational act. One does not know by standing and observing at a distance, unaffected. Knowing involves participation in the dynamic process, which involves interaction between parts and the whole. From this belief emerges an ethic that prioritises social obligations to others, to one's community and to the cosmos in general.⁴⁵⁶

Similar claims abound.⁴⁵⁷

The problem with these rationales should be clear: from the bare fact that everything in the natural world is interrelated nothing immediately follows about how to respond to nature. It could be that, although human beings are dependent on nature, nature should be exploited, as much as is consistent with a long-term anthropocentric interest in promoting human lives and well-being. Conversely, it could be that, even if human beings were not dependent on nature or on certain natural objects, the latter have a moral status and should be taken into consideration for their own sake, say, because they are capable of feeling pain.

Perhaps there is a way to fill in the inference from a metaphysics of nature to an environmental ethic, or to fill in the inference from a metaphysics of the self to a moral-political theory. However, I have given the latter project my best shot in this chapter, and from my failure to find a plausible way to bridge the is/ought gap, I conclude that African philosophers ought to drop attempts to ground axiology on ontology in the ways I have

⁴⁵⁵ H. O. Oruka and C. Juma, *Ecophilosophy and Parental Earth Ethics*. In: H. O. Oruka, (Ed.) *Philosophy, Humanity and Ecology*. (Nairobi: ACTS Press, 1994), p. 115.

⁴⁵⁶ N. Mkhize, *Ubuntu and Harmony: An African Approach to Morality and Ethics*. In Ronald Nicolson (Ed) *Persons in Community: African Ethics in a Global Culture* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), p.38.

⁴⁵⁷ For additional references, as well as a reasonable attempt to reconstruct something attractive out of such a perspective, see Kevin Behrens, *An African Relational Environmentalism and Moral Considerability*. *Environmental Ethics* (forthcoming)

discussed.

This conclusion does not imply that metaphysical claims are always utterly irrelevant to drawing a moral conclusion. For example, one might plausibly do so from an Aristotelian perspective according to which a thing's nature is constituted at least in part by its purpose.⁴⁵⁸ While I am not inclined to believe this sort of teleological perspective, insofar as it conceives of the 'is' *in terms of* 'ought', it does not try to *derive* the latter from the former, which is what I have argued cannot coherently be done. Here is another example of a metaphysical consideration that can be reasonably appealed to in support of a moral conclusion: one might maintain that a certain property such as life-force is intrinsically good, and then draw the conclusion that we ought to treat beings with life-force, of which there are many, with respect.⁴⁵⁹

Such a rationale is also not vulnerable to the criticism I have made here, as the moral judgment about how to treat others is based not solely on a metaphysical claim about what is, but also on an evaluative claim about what is good. Perhaps Gyekye and others whose views I have criticized in this chapter have meant to be providing one of these kinds of arguments, but I submit that a plain reading of the quotations I have provided suggests otherwise. The strategy of grounding ethics on metaphysics must be executed in some other way.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁸ On which see Munamoto Chemburu's contribution to this volume

⁴⁵⁹ On which see Motsamai Molefe's essay in this volume

⁴⁶⁰ For comments on an earlier draft of this paper, I thank Kevin Behrens and Pascah Mungwini.

CONCLUSION

Anthologies, in any of the humanities disciplines, have a dual advantage. In the first instance, there is the benefit of numerous perspectives from different scholars illuminating issues in perceptive ways. But more significantly is the diversity of ideas which are brought to bear on issues, which, in the end, enlarge the scope of discussion as well as enrich the area of interest. *Ontologized Ethics – New Essays in African Meta-Ethics* is a collection of essays which has not only benefited from both positives, but the freshness of the issues raised and the insights arising from careful attention to the issues by different scholars have conduced even more significantly to the evident fact that ethics and meta-ethics is as much in flux as is philosophy itself.

The essays in this volume have been cognizant of the fact that the appellation “African”, in African meta-ethics, is as tenuous as “European” in European philosophy. But this has not become such an encumbrance that debilitates discourse on intellectual cultural heritage of peoples of geo-political and geo-ethnic locations in the world. While being mindful of this, the different scholars whose essays form part of the collection here presented made no pretense to claiming to be writing for a homogenous African cultural intellectual community. It is for this reason that even when the discussion propagates an African perspective, the specific context and locus of discussion is made clear.

The template formulated by the early essays by Gbadegesin, McCalla and Imafidon provide fertile ground for the development of the view that any discussion of ethics without paying attention to the phenomenology of being of the group will be saddled with insurmountable problems. The usual tendency in Anglo-American analytic tradition of abstracting philosophy from the lived experiences of human thinkers is a colossal failure, which in hindsight is often blamed on logical positivism, but which is more appropriately a function of what Lewis R. Gordon has ably diagnosed as *Disciplinary Decadence*, a process

where scholarship retreats into introversive tendencies in the face of “the decaying tendencies in recent attitudes toward the study of human beings.”⁴⁶¹ While in the current quagmire of presenting a uniform agenda for human relations and existence science is deployed and technology invoked, it is often forgotten that even cloned human beings would still have diversities of perspectives and experiencing loci, and giving the perspectives and loci which when blended with ecological, social, cultural and other factors, must breed differences in preferences. The same cannot but be true of humans spread all over the face of the globe, and the traditions which have formed the underpinnings of meaning and being, constituting markers of interactions. That there can be no one true ethical outlook for all of humanity given these ways of being must necessarily show us that there is need for modesty in the impositional pontifications we are disposed to enforce as *the* true, right, correct, proper mode of being.

The body of essays in the middle part of this book clearly brings this paradox out; they hark to the cultural, intellectual, epistemic and axiological values of members of the societies discussed, in order to bring out the ontological factors which underwrite the ethics discussed. What may seem far-fetched on the face of it, or even strange, when located within the context of the traditions that gave them birth, become bastions of intellectual subtlety. As Baier⁴⁶² and Nielson⁴⁶³ have ably shown, there certainly is enough room for disagreement about ethical values. The questions about what moral principles or theories ground the beliefs of groups and behaviours of members of specific societies can vary widely, and the sources of the standards to use to measure the validity of the theories cannot be but mixed, as to do justice to the beliefs and values of societies different from our own we must assume the point of view of the other, whose values and beliefs we wish to understand.

⁴⁶¹ L. R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 1996, p.1

⁴⁶² K. Baier, *The Moral Point of View*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1958

⁴⁶³ K. Nielsen, *Why Be Moral*. New York: Prometheus, 1989.

Even more significant in the overall goal of the efforts brought together in this volume is the critical manner in which the authors in the later set of essays take the pains to remind us that ontology, indeed, metaphysics, is critical to any value system that a society embraces. Consider the fact that in some societies artistic objects are to be displayed and eye-feasted, while in other societies such objects are only to be brought out for specific occasions and ceremonials, but even then they are only to be seen by very select few. The same goes for ethical values, as evolves from existence of humans, they cannot but vary in the manners in which they apply to different peoples from different climes. It is our hope, as the editors of this volume, that we have not only enriched our common humanity with the perspectives provided in the essays presented here, but that we have equally facilitated the further process of understanding across cultural boundaries, values which make life meaningful for peoples in different societies.

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