The Consequentialist Foundations of Traditional Yoruba Ethics: an Exposition

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Abstract

Several treatises have been written on the foundations of African moral systems. A significant number of them favours the claim that these systems are founded on religion, with the latter providing a justification for the former. Others have taken a contrary position, denying the supposed necessary causal connection between religion and African moral systems. This paper neither seeks to support nor rebut any of the foundations proposed, but rather to argue for the thesis that from whichever perspective it is viewed - religious, humanistic or rationalist - the Yoruba moral system has strictly consequentialist foundations, and is hence subsumable under the general consequentialist ethical programme. However, the paper notes that Yoruba consequentialism diverges significantly from its western counterpart on the claim that "the end justifies the means"; for whereas this is true of western consequentialism, according to Yoruba consequentialism no evil, however well-intended, can bring about a good end. The Yoruba oral tradition, and particularly the Yoruba language as currently spoken and written among the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, supplies tools of analysis, while ethical consequentialism provides the theoretical framework.

Key Words

Consequentialism, Foundations, Yoruba, Traditional Ethics

Glossary

A se gbe kan kosi; a se pamo lowa – Human actions are never with impunity, even though they may be hidden.

Bi a ba se rere fun eniyan kukuru, o le je eniyan giga ni yio san pada - The good done to a short person may be repaid by a tall person.

Ehin/Igbehin - The end or the ultimate end of an individual.

Ehinju/Igbehinloju - Personal name meaning "the end is absolute".

Ehinlanwo - Personal name meaning "we are focused on the ultimate end".

Eni ti o gbin ebu ika, ori omo re ni yio hu le - He/she who sows the seed of wickedness, it is on his/her children's head that it will grow.

Esan - Cosmic justice, something akin to *Karma* in Hinduism.

Ifa - A medium of divination among the Yoruba.

Ika a to on'ika; rere a ba eni rere - Wickedness will follow the wicked; goodness will follow the (morally) good.

Ise l'oogun ise - Hard work is the antidote for poverty.

Iwa - Personal character.

Iwa buburu/buruku/iwa ibaje - bad/negative character.

Iwa l'esin - Character is religion.

Iwa l'ewa - Character is beauty.

Iwa l'oro - Character is wealth.

Iwa ni bani de saree, owo/ola ko je nkan fun ni - Character is what follows one to the grave (as the route to the after-life); money/wealth is of no help to one.

Iwa rere - Good character.

Odu ika-wori - A verse in *Ifa* literary corpus.

Odu Irosun-Obara - A verse in *Ifa* literary corpus.

Odu Ogbeate - A verse in *Ifa* literary corpus.

Orisa bi o gbe mi, fi mi sile bi o se ba mi - If the deity will not profit me in any way, let him/her not let go of me worse than he met me.

Orun apaadi - Equivalent of the Christian "hell".

Orun rere - Equivalent of the Christian "heaven".

Rere ati ika, ikan ko ni gbe - Good and bad, none shall be lost.

Rere l'ope, ika ko sunwon - only (moral) goodness pays, wickedness is not pleasant.

Bi omode ba dupe ore ano, a gba mii - If a child shows gratitude for the favour received yesterday, he/she shall surely receive another.

Introduction

The search for a theoretical foundation of African moral systems forms one of the earliest attempts at establishing a philosophy that is authentically African, both in perspective and content. It forms one of the basic kernels of discourse in the African philosophical evolution set in motion in the writings of such African scholars as J.S. Mbiti (1969), Akin Makinde (1988) and Kwasi Wiredu (1981). The controversy among these scholars arose from the declaration of Mbiti (1969) that Africans exist in a religious universe. Makinde (1988) takes this to mean that a system of morality based on African cultural beliefs must have a religious foundation. Among other supporters of this claim are Awolalu and Dopamu (1979).

However, this position has been rejected by African scholars such as Wiredu (1980, 1981), Omoregbe (1989) and Oluwole (1984-1985).

The present paper is not intended to contribute to the controversy mentioned above: it is neither a defence nor a rebuttal of any of the proposed foundations of African moral systems. Instead, it argues that from whatever perspective it is viewed - religious (Mbiti 1969), humanistic (Wiredu 1981) or rational (Oluwole 1984-1985) - traditional Yoruba morality has a teleological foundation, that is, it focuses on the end-product of actions/inactions of moral agents. As such, it is subsumable under the general consequentialist ethical programme. However, the paper notes that Yoruba consequentialism diverges significantly from its western counterpart on the claim that "the end justifies the means"; for whereas this is true of western consequentialism, according to Yoruba consequentialism no evil, however well-intended, can bring about a good end.

In view of the foregoing observations, the paper seeks to achieve three principal objectives. *First*, it seeks to identify the essential characteristics of Western teleological ethical theory. *Second*, it reviews some of the literature on Yoruba ethics, with a view to arriving at a classification of the Yoruba moral system by paying special attention to the debate on the religiosity or otherwise of African moral systems. *Third*, in the light of the foregoing review, it seeks to illustrate how the Yoruba moral system can be subsumed under the general consequentialist conceptual scheme. The Yoruba oral tradition, and particularly the Yoruba language as presently spoken and written among the Yoruba of south-west Nigeria, supplies the tools of analysis, while ethical consequentialism provides the theoretical framework.

An Outline of Consequentialist Ethics

As Shaw (2007, 5) notes, "philosophers use the term 'consequentialism' to identify a general way of thinking about right and wrong and thereby provide a convenient label for a whole family of theories or possible theories in normative ethics." Consequentialism is an academic conglomerate of ethical theories bound by a common claim that the effect of actions is all there is to the determination of right and wrong conduct. Also called teleologism (from the Greek word *telos* meaning "end"), consequentialism refers to those moral theories that hold that the outcome of a particular action forms the basis of any valid moral judgement about it. Thus on a consequentialist account, a morally right action is one which produces desirable results. In other words, consequentialism embodies the practice of considering the end-product of actions to determine the moral worth of the said actions. According to Shaw

(2007, 5), "when consequentialists affirm that the results or consequences of an action determine whether it is right or wrong, they have in mind, more specifically, the value of those results." Hence desirability and undesirability, being values of the results of actions, are the determinants of rightness or wrongness of actions. Thus what distinguishes consequentialist from non-consequentialist ethical theories is the insistence that when it comes to rightness or wrongness, nothing matters but the results of our actions (Shaw 2007, 5).

Since we are not here concerned with assessing the adequacy or otherwise of consequentialism, it is sufficient to note, from the foregoing account, that consequentialism presupposes the belief that all morally relevant actions have antecedent reasons why they are carried out. This reason or set of reasons is viewed in terms of what to expect should the action be executed. No actions, capable of being praised or blamed from a moral point of view, come forth arbitrarily. Moral actions are conscious actions, and as such, are value-laden. Among other things, this implies an ultimate reduction of all moral statements to some sort of conditionals exemplifiable in a schema such as X does Y because Z, where X is a moral agent, Y is the action performed, and Z the anticipated consequence of Y. The claim central to the consequentialist mode of thinking is that the moral permissibility of Y is conditional upon its tendency to produce Z, where Z is a sufficient quantum of an outcome which has positive value, irrespective of X's means of achieving this outcome. This is what is meant when consequentialism is laconically described as the principle of "the end justifies the means" (Oke and Esikot 1999, 95).

Consequentialists are not in agreement concerning the nature of the outcomes that morally praiseworthy actions ought to produce. Egoism, one of the earliest variants of consequentialism, construes the end to which all morally right actions ought to aim in terms of self-interest. Whether in its psychological form (the view that all individuals *are* selfish in everything that they do) or in its ethical form (the normative view that regardless of how people do in fact behave, they have no obligation to do anything except what is in their own interest) (Rachels 1971), egoism extols the *self* above others. Hence, in the egoist ethical programme, what is right is that which promotes, gratifies or enhances self-interest, whether or not it has a negative effect on others. The converse of egoism is altruism, the claim that the consequence of morally right actions ought to be the interest of others. There is no consensus among philosophers as to which of the two theories better appeals to us from a moral point of view as sentient beings.

Utilitarianism is another ethical theory that pegs rightness or wrongness of actions on their consequences. In fact, Dreier (2007, p.xi) thinks it is fair to say that the concept of consequentialism is an abstraction from utilitarianism. While egoism restricts the consequences of actions to only the self, utilitarianism extends them beyond self to other people, albeit not to all people but rather to the majority of people. Mill (1979, 7), one of the co-founders of utilitarianism, defines the ethical theory as that which "holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." Often referred to as the greatest happiness principle, utilitarianism holds that actions are right if they produce the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people in the society (Iluyomade 2004, 76). By "happiness", Mill (1979, 7) means "pleasure and the absence of pain", whereas "unhappiness" means "pain and privation of pleasure". This has led scholars to the classification of Mill's theory as "hedonistic utilitarianism". It is informative to note that the two variants of utilitarianism, namely, act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism, have both been criticised for neglecting the happiness of the minority (Shaw 2007, 11).

Other consequentialist theories abound, including hedonism, eudemonism, and contractarianism (Iluyomade 2004, 76). As evident in the foregoing discussion, a common theme running through these theories is the emphasis on the *effects* of actions, which determine the difference between right and wrong actions. This theme, it should be emphasised, differentiates consequentialist ethics from its deontological counterpart. In sharp contrast to consequentialism, deontological ethics holds that at least some acts are morally obligatory regardless of their consequences for human welfare (Encyclopædia Britannica 2010). The determination of the better out of these two ethical theories is beyond the scope of this paper, which sets out to demonstrate that the traditional Yoruba ethical system is subsumable under consequentialist ethics. Before this, however, we review some literature on the foundations of traditional African moral systems of which traditional Yoruba ethics is an instance.

Foundations of Traditional African Moral Systems

Perhaps the first attempt at a comprehensive account of the foundations of African moral systems is that in Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969). Mbiti makes an interesting observation about the nature of African moral systems, namely, that they are irredeemably religious in approach. The summary of his findings is as follows:

According to African peoples, man lives in a religious universe, so that natural phenomena and objects are intimately associated with God. They not only originate from Him, but also bear witness to Him. Man's understanding of God is strongly coloured by the universe of which man is himself 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 to African society (Mbiti 1969; quoted in Makinde 1988, 2).

Makinde (1988) infers certain consequences as inevitable from Mbiti's hypothesis:

First, we can derive from it the view that religion plays a great role in the lives of the peoples. Perhaps a more general deduction from this is that since, according to Mbiti, the Africans live in a religious universe, then, all their activities must be influenced by one kind of religion or the other. From this, it can be more specifically stated that an African system of morality, based on African cultural beliefs, must have a religious foundation. This claim is perfectly consistent with the idea of an African religious universe (Makinde 1988, 2).

Makinde seems to be more sympathetic to Mbiti's thesis about the religious foundations of African culture than to its rival view; for Makinde never rigidly opposes the possibility of God being theoretically paradigmatic of moral ideals. As he notes, "in so far as reason can neither prove that God exists or not, it cannot be an offence against reason to postulate that God, as a perfect, benevolent and the highest good, exists and then trace the origin of our morality to His will and ideal of moral perfection ... afterall (*sic*), there is nothing objectionable in an obedience to the Biblical injunction 'love thy neighbour as thyself'" (Makinde 1988, 8). Consequently, it is reasonable to infer from the foregoing that Makinde is, in fact, in support of the religious foundations of African moral systems.

The noted difficulty in reference to Makinde's attitude above does not arise with regard to some other African scholars. To give some examples, Idowu (1962), Busia (1954), and Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) have all expressed their acceptance of the view that African moral systems have a religious bases. Idowu (1962, 146), writing about the Yoruba people of Nigeria, regards morality as *certainly* the fruit of religion. Similarly, Awolalu and Dopamu (1979, 212) write to the effect that morality is not merely a human invention, but an offspring of religion. The import of these scholars' argument is that in Africa, religion and morality, like Siamese twins, are inextricable, with the former providing a basis and justification for the latter. In the opinion of Bewaji (2006, 397), the attitude displayed by the foregoing scholars is attributable to the academic influence of their foreign mentors such as G.E. Parrinder, R.S. Rattray, and A.B. Ellis on their understanding of the African morality.

Taken at face value, nothing seems to be inherently wrong with religion being a basis for morality, if by this relationship derogation is not intended. Religion and morality are not mutually exclusive: religion, especially in Africa, helps to encourage individuals to make correct moral choices as a way of courting friendly relationships with Deity and other spiritual beings. Thus, in Africa, religion is important, not as the foundation of morals, but as an instrument for ensuring the welfare of the individual and that of the society (Bewaji 2006, 397). To say that African moral systems are pathologically religious is to miss this point. Wiredu espouses the independence of morality and religion in traditional African ethics in the following words:

> What is morally good is what befits a human being: it is what is decent for a man - what brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy, to man and his community. And what is morally bad is what brings misery, misfortune, and disgrace. Of course, immoral conduct is held to be hateful to God, the Supreme Being, and even to the lesser gods. But the thought is not that something is good because God approves of it, but rather that God approves of it because it is good in the first place - a distinction which, as Socrates noted in the context of a different culture, does not come easily to every pious mind (Wiredu 1980, 6).

What Wiredu articulates above has been dubbed the humanistic foundation of African moral systems. Nevertheless, if this is what is meant by morality in the African context, it is not to be divorced from religion. After all, no living religion ever denies cherished notions such as human dignity and the obligation to promote the welfare of fellow humans. However, this is not the point which those scholars who consider religion to be the foundation of traditional African moral systems are making. What they mean is that morality is subservient to religion - something akin to the former being a slave of the latter.

Nevertheless, the antagonists of the religious foundations of traditional African moral systems have not completely relegated to the back burner the role of religion in morality. In their view, religion may play some sort of role, but definitely not a pivotal one. For instance, Gbadegesin (1991, 82) maintains that Africans (particularly Yoruba) "are very pragmatic in their approach to morality, and although religion may serve them as a motivating force, it is not the ultimate appeal in moral matters." Similarly, Oluwole (1984-1985) asserts: "for the Yoruba, the gods are agents of moral sanction rather than authorities whose moral prescriptions man must obey." The implication of this is that, in Africa, moral codes of conduct are not the inventions of the gods, but since the gods are interested in human affairs,

they help supervise man's compliance with these codes and appropriately punish deviance from them. Bewaji summarises the anti-religious thesis as follows:

> The injunctions of morality, insofar as they are related to religion in the African environment, will be found to be motivated by humanistic considerations. Thus, the invocation of the Supreme Being, the divinities, the ancestors, and other forces in moral matters is mainly intended to lend legitimacy, through an already available reinforcement mechanism, to what is often taken for granted as morally obligatory in humanistic sense. Being morally upright is not a matter of pleasing the supernatural forces as it is of promoting human welfare (Bewaji 2006, 398-399).

Scholars are often oblivious to the fact that by and large, the differences in opinion regarding the foundations of traditional African moral systems are explicable in terms of the diversity of cultural milieus in a geographical entity called Africa. More often than not, they talk about Africa without paying attention to the cultural diversity among African societies, however minute it might be, that exists side by side with their obvious commonality. Consequently, it is arguably more expedient for scholars to beam their searchlight on a specific moral system as practised by a particular African ethnic group. This will afford African scholars and their counterparts elsewhere interested in studying African morality a clearer theoretical vision of the nuances that pervade moral systems as observed from one African society to another. In tandem with this approach, we attempt, in what follows, an illustration of the consequentialist foundations of the traditional Yoruba moral system. The Yoruba ethic is chosen not only because the researcher is himself a Yoruba, but also because it is the system with which he is most familiar.

The Traditional Yoruba Moral System as an Instance of Consequentialist Ethics

In an important sense, the central issue in all ethical theories is an attempt to answer the question, "Why be moral?" (Oke 1988; Omoregbe 1989; Oyeshile 2002). This question points to a concern found in the vast majority of cultures in the world, so that an exception seems to be unthinkable. According to Oke (1988, 80), the question, "Why be moral?" entails two distinct questions. On the one hand is the question, "What are the purposes - social and individual - which morality is intended to serve?" (Oke 1988, 80). This is a question on how the institution of morality came about in human society. Oke (1988, 80) poses the question in another form: "What are the causes - social, political, psychological, philosophical, religious, etc., in general, the circumstances of human life - which gave rise to the institution and

theories of morality?" The second sense of the question is when it is asked as a self-directed inquiry: "Why should I be moral?" In this form, the question becomes a demand for the ultimate justification for the persuasion to act morally (Oke 1988, 80). In other words, it is the quest for the foundation of morality - the fundamental reason behind the general desirability to act in accordance with a stipulated set of moral principles.

The present section is an attempt to provide a rational answer to the second question, and to do this within the context of the Yoruba traditional moral system. The aim of this section, therefore, is to argue that the traditional Yoruba answer to the question, "Why should I be moral?" is rooted in the consideration of the *effect* of human actions and inactions as the standard of moral rightness or wrongness. Put differently, the section argues for a consequentialist basis for the necessity of morality in the traditional Yoruba ethical system.

Yoruba morality is, perhaps, one of the most well-studied in Africa. A consensus seems to have been arrived at among scholars about the notion of *iwa* (character) being the most important moral concept among the Yoruba language speakers (Idowu 1962; Abiodun 1983; Oke 1988; Oyeshile 2002; Ogundeji 2010). Beside ethics, *iwa* also takes a critical position in Yoruba hermeneutics, aesthetics, theology and ontology. "Sayings such as *iwa l'ewa* (character is beauty); *iwa l'esin* (character determines how religious one is); and *iwa l'oro* (character is wealth) testify loudly to this" (Ogundeji 2010). What is left undone, however, is the utilisation of this concept as a paradigm for assessing the ethical system of the Yoruba: this is what we attempt to do in this section.

Within the Yoruba moral context, there are two types of *iwa* (character): *iwa rere* (good/positive character) and *iwa buburu/iwa buruku/iwa ibaje* (bad/negative character). Sometimes, however, *iwa* is used to mean good character. Hence, the Yoruba will say *iwa l'ewa omo eniyan* ("a person's real beauty consists in his/her character"). This implies that a person with good character, however ugly he/she may be, is morally beautiful, while his/her counterpart with bad character, although he/she may be physically attractive, is thought of as morally repulsive. The Yoruba, in this case, will say of the former person that he/she has *iwa* (character) whereas the latter does not.

Now, the question is, what is the nature of *iwa* that makes the Yoruba hold it in such high esteem in their ethical programme? This question is seldom asked, let alone answered, by scholars, who often appear satisfied by the mere etymological derivation of the term and its diverse interpretations among the Yoruba linguistic community. According to Oke (1988,

96), *iwa* is "rated above all other valuable things, such that a person who has all the other valuable things and opportunities of life but lacks good character or moral *beingness*, which is the essence of proper human existence, will sooner than later forfeit all his material possessions which would not let him be moral." Oyeshile (2002, 93-94) cites a myth as contained in *Ifa* literary corpus on how *Orunmila*,[1] when seeking success, was advised to marry *iwa*, and how the marriage yielded lofty successes. The implication of this, in the words of Ogundeji (2010), is that "it is through the critical lens of *iwa* that genuine success in life, including the after-life, is determined; hence, it is said that *iwa nii bani de saree; owo/ola ko je nnkan funni* – character is what follows one to the grave (as the route to the after-life); money/wealth is of no help to one (i.e. in the matter of the journey to the after-life)."

It is worth noting that the concept of the hereafter, and its division into heaven and hell, was not foreign to the Yoruba mind prior to the arrival of the missionaries. There is evidence that the concepts of *Orun Rere* (Good Heaven or simply "Heaven") and *Orun Apaadi* (Heaven of Potsherds) had been in use before the first European stepped into Africa, so that it is misleading to suggest that the Yoruba concept of the after-life is due to the influence of Islam and Christianity (Dopamu and Alana 2004, 170). In the opinion of Dopamu and Alana (2004, 170), the general lack of clarity as to the location of the duo notwithstanding, "there are sufficient hints to believe that the good go to the Good Heaven of the ancestors, divinities, and God while the wicked go to the Heaven of Potsherds."

The foregoing reflections seem to suggest that *iwa*, as the highest moral virtue in the Yoruba value system, is never courted for its own sake, but rather for its pragmatic purposes. These pragmatic ends can be thought of in terms of both material and non-material benefits accruing to the moral agent himself/herself and to others who fall under the direct or indirect influence of his/her action. Hence Oyeshile writes:

> We can say that people obey moral laws to enjoy the benefits of morality on the one hand and to avoid sanctions that accompany the violation of such

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[1] Orunmila is a mythical personality believed by the Yoruba to possess a perfect measure of wisdom. He is reputed to be the founder of the *Ifa* divination, which is a major medium through which the Yoruba find out about what they need to know. A detailed work on *Ifa* can be found in Wande Abimbola's *An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1977). Other works by the same author include *Ifa Divination Poetry* (New York: NOK Publishers, 1977), and *Sixteen Great Poems* (Niamey, UNESCO, 1975).

moral rules, on the other hand. In talking about benefits, the individual tries to be prudent in his actions. He also takes actions on an expeditious basis depending on the situation he finds himself in. What all this points to is that human well-being in the form of individual interest and societal interest, constitutes the main rationale for being moral (Oyeshile 2002, 95).

It is intuitively warranted to conclude, contrary to some scholars' opinion, that a morally upright lifestyle is never sought for its own sake. This conclusion looks similar to the Biblical declaration: "I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain'" (Isaiah 45: 19b). The person who pursues moral ideals does so for his/her own self-interest. This point has been aptly argued by Oke (1988, 79), who concludes that "self-interest, when properly understood, is the only ultimately rational basis for persuading anyone to be morally committed in any context." The Yoruba, like Socrates, believe that it is ignorance that makes people act contrary to moral injunctions, for were they adequately informed about the consequences of their actions/inactions, the urge to act wrongly would have been reduced to its barest minimum. Makinde (1988, 13-14) vividly captures this in his analysis of *Odu Ika-Wori*[2], where he contends that "an evil done to others is an evil done to oneself." Evidence for this can be found in several traditional Yoruba sayings.

In seeking to properly understand the place of *iwa* in the Yoruba moral universe, it is instructive to consider the role of *esan* (roughly rendered "cosmic justice"). Interpreting *esan* as vengeance/retribution may not fully capture its conceptual intricacies; for whereas the latter connotes punishment inflicted in return for a wrong, the former embodies both punishment and reward, depending on one's character. *Esan* is that which a moral agent receives as a consequence of his/her moral deeds. This may be pleasant or otherwise, depending on the agent's character. The Yoruba accept that whatever a man sows, that he shall reap. According to them, *rere ati ika, ikan ko ni gbe* ("good and bad, none shall be lost"). Good begets good; evil begets evil. To obviate negative consequences accrued to evil deeds, the Yoruba are emphatic on *always* doing good. Thus they say, *rere lo pe; ika ko sunwon* ("moral goodness pays; wickedness is unpleasant"). Another way of stating this is to say that the moral commitment to doing good gets its rational impetus from the benefits it offers as necessary consequences.

An important feature of *esan* (roughly rendered "cosmic justice") is its inescapable character. This is a natural fruit of the belief that *esan* should be left to Olodumare, an impartial judge,

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[2] *Odu Ika-Wori* is a verse in Abimbola's *Ifa literary corpus* (1977).

who not only sees all, but also knows all: "The Yoruba are very conscious of divine judgement, hence, they keep the ethical norms of the society so that they may not be found wanting" (Dopamu and Alana 2004, 158). Consequently, the possibility of doing evil with impunity is eradicated within the Yoruba ethical framework. To the Yoruba, secrecy does not confer immunity on evil deeds, hence they will say *a se gbe kan ko si, a se pamo lowa* ("human actions never enjoy moral impunity, even though they may be hidden.") Similarly, the Yoruba believe that the good done to others has a way of returning to the doer or his/her family. It is not the case, however, that the motivation comes primarily from what Oke (1988, 90) refers to as "canal interests of here and now", but for long-term profitable consequences that transcend earthly existence and the acting agent.

One may infer from the preceding paragraph that the Yoruba moral outlook does not consist in the gratification of the agent's immediate interests. Nevertheless, by no means should this be interpreted as an outlook with no end in view at all; for while they frown on doing good for its immediate benefits, the Yoruba acknowledge the divine guarantee that the good done to others is never lost. They hold that in most cases, it is the agent's close social circle, especially his/her children, who get the deserved proverbial "another" for one good turn earlier done, not necessarily by the recipients of the good, but through other channels set in motion by providence. Evidence of this can be found in the Yoruba saying that *bi a ba se rere fun eniyan kukuru, o le je eniyan giga lo maa san pada* ("the good done to a short person may be repaid by a tall person"). On the other hand, the evil done to others will also be appropriately paid back in due time: "This is why the Yoruba say: *Eni ti o gbin ebu ika, ori omo re ni yoo hu le* ('He/she who sows the seed of wickedness, it is on his/her children's head that it will grow')" (Dopamu and Alana 2004, 163).

On a general note, the nature of *esan* is adequately captured in the Yoruba proverb that *ika a to onika; rere a b'eni rere* ("wickedness will follow the wicked while goodness will follow the good"). This belief in reciprocity pervades the Yoruba sense of urgency for morally upright living.

On the basis of the foregoing reflections, the description of the Yoruba moral system as an expression of the Golden Rule appears justified. Indeed, there seems to be a convergence of opinion among several commentators on the Yoruba moral system being sufficiently founded on the Golden Rule (Makinde 1988; Oluwole 1984-1985; Omoregbe 1989). The opening line

of *Odu Irosun-Obara*[3] admonishes that "if we practise the principle 'share with me that I may share with you', the world would be an orderly place" (Karenga 1999, 127). This gives insight into what the Yoruba version of the Golden Rule looks like: it is guided by a sense of fair play. It is characterised by "giving, but only to those from whom we receive in equal measure. Receiving, but from only those to whom we give in reciprocal measure" (Armah 1979; quoted in Oladipo 2006, 141).

Now, this give-and-take relationship does not terminate at an individual-to-individual level. On the contrary, it spans the entire spectrum of social relational possibilities such as from an individual to the community, from the individual to the whole humanity, even extending to the dead members of the society. One may thus categorise the purpose of the Yoruba moral system as the realisation of three fundamental ends, namely, (a) good personality/name; (b) well-ordered relationships with others; and (c) security of a place among the ancestors at the exit from the (physical) world. One should add that these three are not mutually exclusive, for one readily leads to another in that order. At each of these levels, the chief expected consequence is the interest of the moral agent: good name for social prosperity, well-ordered society for the enjoyment of the prosperity, and admission into the clique of ancestors to ensure the agent's relevance in the affairs of society after death. However, the origin of the desire in the individual to achieve these ends remains intellectually cloudy.

Finally, it is imperative to differentiate Yoruba ethical consequentialism from its Western counterpart. Yoruba consequentialist thought is not motivated by "the end justifies the means", an essential element in the Western variant of moral consequentialism, which has, to date, remained a liability rather than an asset. It is important to note that unlike the Western variant of consequentialism in which "the end justifies the means", the Yoruba do not differentiate between the "means" and the "end", especially when these two categories are taken to be causally related. In the Yoruba belief-system, the means is the end in process, so that when the means is wrong, the end cannot be right. A justification for this can be found in *Odu Ogbeate*:[4]

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[3] *Odu Obara-Irosun* is a verse in Abimbola's *Ifa literary corpus* (1977).

[4] *Odu Ogbeate* is a verse in Abimbola's *Ifa literary corpus* (1977).

Bi iwaju ika ba dara,

Ehin ika ko nii sunwon.

A kii fi ika di eru ko gun gege. ...

Esan ni ti Olodumare.

Oba yio san fun onikaluku

Gege bi ise won.

["Even if the beginning of wrong doing is pleasant,

The end of wickedness cannot be good.

We cannot use evil to secure good and expect them to be anchored firmly ....

Retribution belongs to Olodumare.

The king of the world will reward everyone,

Precisely according to the work of their hands"] (Karenga 1999, 183-184).

The passage above suggests that the means-end dichotomy in Western ethical consequentialism does not hold in the Yoruba consequentialist thinking. This implies that the Yoruba variant of consequentialism is immune to any attack emanating from the possibility of using a wrong means to achieve a good end. This fact helps to illustrate that the Yoruba version of ethical consequentialism is a better alternative to the western variety. Classical Western consequentialist doctrine has been accused of having a tendency to use fellow human beings as means to achieving an end, instead of treating them as ends in themselves: "The principle of [Western] consequentialism has been used repeatedly to do evil and to justify evil" (Oke and Esikot 1999, 95). It has provided justification for certain unethical practices such as slavery, colonialism and capitalism, with all their evil ramifications. Colonialism, for instance, has been justified as a "civilizing mission", despite the fact that it curtails the recipients' God-given liberty!

In sum, the Yoruba moral outlook is an "end-centric" system. This means that the Yoruba consider the outcome of their actions before embarking on them. The Yoruba word for end is *ehin* or *igbehin*. When it is used metaphorically, *ehin*/*igbehin* means the ultimate end of an individual. The Yoruba consider the end of a thing to be more important than its beginning. Personal names such as Ehinju or Igbehinloju (the end is absolute) and Ehinlanwo (We are focused on the end) bear witness to the importance of consequences of actions among the Yoruba: "Within indigenous Yoruba belief-system, one does good so as to have a good end,

based on the firm belief that neither good nor bad conduct shall perish or be forgotten ... hence, if one considers his end, he will see that he ought to be moral" (Oke 1988, 97).

Conclusion

At this juncture, it is apposite to restate that there is no other rational justification for moral persuasion among the Yoruba except that inspired by self-interest. There seems to be no exception to this rule. For example, Idowu's "main components of good character" (Idowu 1962) which include, but are not limited to, chastity in women, hospitality, unselfishness, generosity, truth-telling, protection of women, respect for others especially elders, as well as the avoidance of stealing, covenant-breaking and hypocrisy, etc. are all highly esteemed among the Yoruba for their favourable consequences. Others such as family unity, fair play, respect for the rights of others, industry, cooperation and mutual helpfulness, obedience, and gratitude (Dopamu and Alana 2004, 166-168) are equally extolled for having practical utility.

Consider gratitude, for instance. In Yoruba society, gratitude is held in high esteem because it opens doors for further favours: "Appreciation of favour received encourages the benefactor to do more in the future" (Dopamu and Alana 2004, 168). It is said, *ti omode ba dupe ore ano, a gba mii* ("if a child shows gratitude for the favour received yesterday, he/she shall surely receive another"). Gratitude, therefore, is a morally imitable character, not because of its inherent moral worth, but because of its benefits to those who practise it. So also is the moral virtue of industry, which is extolled for its role in saving the individual from the embarrassment of poverty. As Paul the apostle rightly puts it, "if any would not work, neither should he eat" (2Thesalonians 3: 10b), the Yoruba abhor idleness because of its attendant plummeting of the indulgent individuals into a state of lack. Hence hard work is considered to be the antidote to poverty: *ise l'oogun ise* ("hard work is the antidote for poverty").

In view of our thesis that the traditional Yoruba moral system is a variety of the consequentialist ethical programme, it is possible to conclude that such a scheme does not have a fixed system of valuation based on which actions are to be adjudged either right or wrong. This, though it may be correct in Western consequentialist thought, is not the case with the Yoruba. The Yoruba's approval or condemnation of an action is based on a keen observation of its constant conjunction with beneficial or harmful consequences, which entails the difference between right and wrong actions. Hence whereas they agree with Kant that some actions are irredeemably wrong, the Yoruba refuse to follow him to the conclusion that their wrongness emanates chiefly from their non-conformity to the categorical

imperative, but rather from their historical attachment to human miseries. In this regard, Balogun and Layi have written:

> ... when the Yoruba say, *Ohun ti ko dara ko dara* ("what is not good is not good"), they seem to agree with Kant that certain actions are to be avoided for their inherent wrongness. This does not make the Yoruba ethical system sufficiently Kantian in flavour. On the contrary, that which is not morally worthy of being done is to be eschewed for its harmful consequence on the acting agent and other people around him/her. This explains why, *Odu Eji Ogbe, Ifa* (a verse in Ifa literary corpus) advises: *K'a wo waju ojo lo titi; k'a tun bo wa r'ehin oran wo, nitori ati sun ara eni ni* ["Let us give continuous attention to the future; let us give deep consideration to the consequences of things, and this is because of our eventual passing") (Balogun and Layi 2013, 33).

The point of the extract above is that among the Yoruba, the classification of actions as either morally right or wrong is largely influenced by considerations of their consequences. If the consequence of an action is good, the action is considered to be morally acceptable; if otherwise, it is regarded as morally undesirable. The consequentialist outlook of Yoruba religion is embodied in the saying that *Orisa bi o gbe mi, fi mi sile bi o se bami* ("if the deity will not profit me in any way, let him/her not let go of me worse than he/she met me"). A similar consequentialist orientation is true of the Yoruba moral outlook. If the Yoruba raise *iwa* (character) to the level of religion as manifested in the saying that *iwa l'esin* ("character is religion"), it is reasonable to infer that any *iwa* (character), like any *orisa* (god) must promote the welfare of the person who defers to it. After all, is it morally plausible to continue doing that which constantly brings to one negative results?

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