

A Discourse on the Humanistic and Ontological Foundations of African Morality

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Abstract

The morality of human action has come under serious assessment from scholars far and wide. There is not a doubt that the morality of human action is a very serious issue and has generated different positions. The central task of this paper is to address the origin, nature and foundation of morality of human action from the African perspective. It is argued here that humanism is actually the springboard of the morality of human actions as opposed to other areas of research that believes that it is religion. This does not rule out the fact that ontology also plays a very crucial role in the assessment of human actions. This paper submits that both ontology and humanism serve as the foundations for assessing the morality of human actions from the African perspective, and peculiar to them is “communal consequentialism,” which considers the collective consequences of actions irrespective of the initiator of the actions, for there exist a causal relation built on a communitarian existence, connecting all lives in the universe. In approaching the set goal, critical exposition and analysis would be employed as our methodology.

Keywords: African, morality, humanism, ontology, religion

Introduction

Ethics is one of the indispensable branches of philosophy that is as old as man. It is the branch of philosophy saddled with the ‘morality of human action’ (Omogbe, 1993; 23). In his 1979 book, Samuel Enoch Stumpf highlights what makes a case to be pregnant with moral realities. According to him, facing alternatives, deliberations, making choices, being responsible for the choice made, concern of the choice made on self, and concern on the choice made for others are the many factors that affect moral actions and judgments (Stumpf, 1979; 14). These, among other factors are the common denominators that inform a particular moral outlook. However, it is necessary to make a distinction between ethics and morality. This, shall be the next task of this essay.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines both Ethics and Morality in different ways. Accordingly, the term ‘ethics’ is a philosophical concept and at the same time a branch of philosophy which deals with morally good and bad, and morally right and wrong actions. As argued, “its subject consists of the fundamental issues of practical decision making and its major concerns include the nature of ultimate value and the standards by which human actions can be judged right or wrong”

(Singer, 2021; 4). However, morality on the other hand, restricts its usage to systems such as that of Immanuel Kant based on duty, obligation and the principles (Blackburn 2008: 240). In other words, Ethics is more like a cover housing morality, which signifies to be a standard, while morality on the other hand represents a code of conduct. Hence, the justification of human behavior is what ethics try to portray. The British philosopher, Thomas Hobbes defines ethics or moral philosophy “as science of virtue and vice” (Omogbe, 2004; 11). It is out of the study of Ethics that other areas of morality infer how to deal with people. For instance, if ethics is put side by side with law, they seem to deal with the same issue which is looking into the norms of human behaviour. They have the similarity of being descriptive and prescriptive and espousing human freedom. However, ethics is wider than law when it is being studied because law still finds a place for itself within the confines of Ethics. In order for any law to be authentic and to be obeyed, it must conform to morality and never contradict it (Omogbe, 2004; 43), because as exposed by the contractarians, morality is the core foundations of every society, and going against this would negate the foundation of the society. In this case, morality is an intrinsic attribute of every respective society. When compared with religion, the difference is that Ethics is concerned with morality as its main purpose but the main purpose of religion is the worship of a supreme being, but it does not dispute its active embodiment of morality. The case herein is that ethics publicises its dealings with morality, but religion utilizes fear of the supreme being to tame the people into being a moral being. By implication, without the people being moral, the religious leaders would not be able to lure the people into submitting to a supreme being. Hence, being moral is almost inseparable from religion, but they are distinct, and this is observable with the Africans, as their religion and morality are intertwined and inseparable. However, there are cases where some individuals take being moral as their preferred religion. But irrespective, religion has a lot to do with morality, but different from it. From the description, it is pertinent to explore the moral praxis of the African. This is necessary to expose some levels of familiarity with the ways an African person portrays a moral action as either worthy of praise or blame.

African Moral Worldview: An Overview

African ethics gives checks and balances to actions that are authentically African. In this section, we shall concern ourselves with some native African societies in order to extrapolate the moral contents in their world-views. For instance, the Yoruba speaking people of Nigeria condemns individuals with *iwa buruku* (bad behaviour) and praise those with *iwa dada* (good behaviour). That is, their sense of recognising what qualifies as good and bad exposes their moral cognition and its implementation. However, concerning moral awareness on the African soil, it is important we

take into cognisance that it (Its contents) differs from a set a people to another set of people because they are faced with different realities. Thus; by African ethics we mean a limited ethical philosophy which only takes into consideration the diverse ways African cultures see what good and evil means from the moral dimension. Culturally and collectively, even amidst the diversity in their moral awareness, the Africans are communalistic in the exercise of morality. For them (the Africans), what affects an individual affects the whole society, since everything in the traditional African society is communally enjoyed and answered to, conjoined. Reiterating this togetherness in existence, Mbiti (1993:181) avers the maxim that “I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am”. This maxim shows the collective humanistic consideration celebrated in Africa.

Furthering the above, it is no news that contemporary African thinkers like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere and Leopold Senghor, maintain that the traditional African society’s life is based on *communalism*. Communalism is the background to the traditional African’s concern about the well-being of his neighbour which is also at the heart of African traditional ethics (Omogbe, 2004:141).

In the African society things are seen to happen not without a cause and the communal system makes it imperative for them to view any problem as that which affects all and it is in this that an African man, more than anything, is his brother’s keeper. He knows that while protecting his brother he is as well protecting himself. What happens to one, happens to all and this makes morality a unanimous affair. Sanctions are provided to deter and to nip in the bud any disposition that is likely to spell doom to the whole community or to a member of the community because a harm caused to one is a harm done to all. Hence the sayings that ‘if one finger touches oil it quickly spills over to the others’ is apt in describing this communal engagement. This saying completely epitomizes the African belief which informs its morality (Uduigwomen, 2002:56).

In the African setting, goodness amounts to those acts, attitudes and behaviours which are congenial to the attachment of peaceful communal coexistence. An act is regarded as good if it does not jeopardize the spirit of oneness, solidarity and single purpose that guide the social existence of people in the society. Good acts then will include those acts that have been approved by the oracles, those laid down by the law makers of the community (which comprise mostly of elderly people). It is the accepted belief among the Africans that wisdom goes with age because the longer one lives the more s/he experiences things. Hence the Igbo adage which says that the woman *who starts cooking first had more cooking utensils*. This means: The Individual who begins a venture first has more experience than the new comer. This however does not rule out the room for the young and prodigious who proves his mettle early, he is co-opted into the law-making machinery; hence the saying that *bi omode ba mo owo we, o ma ba agba jeun*, which translates to be if a

child washes his hands well he could dine with the elders and means that if a child washes of his/her bad behaviour or character and is of good moral dispositions, would be opportuned to be recognised by the elderly ones and hereby recruited to benefit from their privileges. What is moral therefore, becomes all the acts which will bring joy to the community: the strict adherence to the customs and traditions of the people (Uduigwomen, 2002:57). The belief is that peaceful co-existence of good acts leads to the development and progress of African communities. While on the other hand any acts of evil leads to the decadence of the African community. So in a nutshell the Africans condemn anything that would hinder the peaceful coexistence of things and people in the community.

However, there are three foundational theories that are in line with African Ethics, and these are: the ontological, religious and communal foundation. The communal foundation has already been explained above. The religious foundation is more concerned with the recourse to the gods, ancestors and deities who are custodians of justice. In fact, African ethical system has been said to be based on religion (Azenabor, 2007; 35). Both Bolaji Idowu and John Mbiti hold these views strongly in their respective works. The ontological foundation of African ethics has to do with the basic assumptions of African metaphysics and African morality as a derivative of African ontology. Accordingly, a wrong moral action is one, which offsets and diminishes the set-up and man's life force (Ibid; 33). Since the focus of this paper is to explain in details the ontological foundation of African ethics we shall first and foremost define African metaphysics which of course accommodates the Ontological make up of African ethical system. After which the ontological foundation of African ethics would be stressed out (Nwala's position on Igbo Ontology and Placid Tempels' Bantu Ontology would serve as a major reference point).

Igbo Ontology

The African thought system clearly justifies and rationalizes the way and manner Africans relate to their world, their environment and their peculiar nature. It is a body of ideas and principles that are exclusively African, which reflects the traditional African belief system, African custom and culture, ceremonies and festivals. In the African thought system, holism is the gatekeeper that qualifies and governs the universe of forces such that reality, knowledge, consciousness, word, truth, thought, language, meaning and understanding are all imaginatively and symbolically modeled and deposited in complete and comprehensive unity. On this basis K. C. Anyanwu stated that:

The African Universe cannot condone regimentation, because there is a continuous interplay, intermingling and interdependence between spirit (forces) and the material world (Unah, 2004:14).

The African universe is a balanced one, because of the interfusion of forces so much so that they do not contemplate disunity, dissociation or division, but association, co-existence and co-operation. Africans do not speak of isolated situations, but of symbioses. There is no fragmentation, no compartmentalization and certainly no departmentalization in the African holistic universe. For example, Okoro exposed that

In (Igbo) cosmology, nothing is absolute. Everything, everybody, however apparently independent, depends upon something else. Interdependence exhibited now as duality or reciprocity, now as ambivalence or complementaries, has always been the fundamental principle of the (Igbo) philosophy of life (Okoro, 2011; 4).

Due to this fact Anyanwu draws the following conclusions:

1. Since there are no isolated life forces in the Universe, there can be no isolated individual.
2. Society is the manifestation of the order of the universe.
3. All relationships between all the forces ought to be strengthened and not weakened.
4. There is no dissociation of sensibility from rationality in the African culture. The duality of experience should not be discussed as if it were separated from religion, or religion as if it were separated from all practical activities.

Now to the African, because of his communalistic nature, the family bond in Africa is never broken, whether in death or alive. Man is seen as a tripartite being within the African context, comprising of body, soul and spirit. Upon death, the body goes back to mother earth where it came from, the soul returns back to its maker and the spirit may return to the world through the process of reincarnation. The African, therefore, reaches out to those dead members of the family or community through the process of pouring libation, incantation or other forms of sacrifices and rituals. The African belief in reincarnation is informed by some strange occurrences that manifests in the family especially after the death of a family member.

For example, after the death of a family member, somebody within the community may receive a message via dream, trance or any other medium, where that dead member of a family will announce his or her desire to come back to life (reincarnate), a child may be born with physical marks or character traits of a recently departed relation. Sometimes, these wounds or scars could be so glaring and on the same spot where it was on the body of the dead relation, that one cannot help but logically infer that the dead member of that particular family is back to life.

For the Igbo Speaking people of Eastern Nigeria (in Africa), ontology emphasizes their belief in the spiritual nature of things, and in cosmic harmony in which

man and his actions are central, with supernatural powers and forces superintending (Nwala, 2010: 13). This view of the Igbo is also analogous to Placide Temples thesis on Bantu ontology. For the Igbo, the cosmos is conceived in terms of unity and interaction of all beings. Basically, Igbo traditional ontological order falls into three broad categories with sub-categories as stated below:

1. *Nmuo*: This ontological order includes *Ogwu*. Spirits and Forces. These are invisible beings.
2. *Madu*: Human beings. Including the living, the dead and those yet to be born.
3. *Ihe*: Things (animals, plants and all natural and social phenomena) (Nwala, 2010: 51).

Of the three enlisted above, *madu* (humans) relevant to this work, since it deals with the ontological interpretation of man. *Madu* refers to both the living and those about to be born. Human beings and other created things are of the visible realm of nature - the universe (*uwa*). Human beings are at the center as well as being the main actors on the stage of existence and life. Their actions evoke reactions from the gods and equally have deep implications for the lower beings and forces that may be manipulated to satisfy the need of the human beings. On the stage of life, human beings are the actors while the pure spirits are the moderators and lower forces and beings are the agents (and victims as well). Viewed from another angle, if life's drama is a game of chess, man is the chess player, the disembodied spirits of the rank of deities and ancestors are the referees while the animals, birds and other animate and inanimate beings (in fact, including the abstract forces) are the pawns. Man's desires constitute the Kings, queens, knights and bishops (Nwala, 2010:57). Man in an African sense is seen as the center of the universe who is also the main actors in the drama of existence and life. This can be likened to the philosophy of existentialism. Although existentialism promotes extreme individualism which is not so with the African, because things are conceived communally. Also in Igbo thought, man is conceived as both spirit and non-spirit. Man possesses two main parts - *nmuo* (spirit) and *ahu* (body).

Bantu Ontology

Bantu Ontology is a particular perspective on the nature of being, peculiar to a set of people located in sub-saharan Africa. Accordingly, 'Bantu ontology' as exposed in the work of Tempels, encompasses the total reality of a particular African people. It is a philosophy peculiar to a clan in South Africa. The term 'Bantu' "(as it was used by colonists) is the Zulu word for people. It is the plural of the word <umuntu>, meaning <person>, ...this original meaning changed through the history of South Africa" (South African history online). This philosophy is grounded

in expressing African metaphysics by shedding light on the very essence and existence of man. This philosophy expresses a causal relation of reality and a communitarian existence of all things in the universe. Bantu conception of reality revolves around the notion of Vital-force. This according to Bantu philosophy is behind every existence and is inseparable with the notion of being, for there is no being without force. As observed by Tempels (1959; 31), “force is the nature of being, force is being, [and] being is force”. Everything in the universe including humans, animals, vegetables, and inanimate has vital force of their own, and these forces are capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation, which happens to be man (Tempels, 1959, 31). In other words, man can renew his vital force by tapping the strength of other creatures. Accordingly, as contained in the work of Tempel, “Vital force is believed to be a peculiar trait of African philosophy and the cosmology which defines and shapes the framework within the interwoven concepts of personhood and community...” (Ngangah, 2019). Every movement in the universe has a causal effect on other existence because an action emanating from one force (being) has influence on others. That is: “One force is determined to weaken or strengthen another” (Mbaegbu, 2015). Hence, contrary to the western thought of the independency of beings in the world, the interconnectedness of every existence as contained in the Bantu philosophy cannot be denied.

Also, Bantu philosophy believes the interaction of forces, and no force can exist independently of other forces. This brings us to Mbiti’s (1969) assertion, when he avers that: “I am because we are, since we are, therefore I am”. Simply put, no man can survive without others. Moving further, Bantu conception of man did explicitly portray the coming to be of man out of nothingness or probably out of non being, by God. Accordingly, it exposes the superiority of man over every other creature, and man’s capability to extract from them (other creatures) whatever could help enhance their own existence, and “God is regarded by the Bantu as the causative agent, the sustainer of these resultant forces, as being the creation cause” (Mbaegbu, 2015;4). In Bantu, there are hierarchy of existence, and Man is the centre piece of existence for it is superior to every other creature and can extract from their vital force. In essence, every other creature exists for the better living and development of man.

Placid Tempels, having been able to give a detailed analysis of Bantu ontology, invariably gave rise to the study of African Philosophy in general. Tempels has been criticized by many African scholars that his Bantu Philosophy or Ontology is not enough to generalize that the whole African thought system thinks in the same direction as with the Bantu of Congo thought system.

The Afro-Humanistic and Ontological Perspectives to Human Action

Verily, using the Yoruba traditional society as a case study, there is no doubt that human actions has always been consonance in most cases with the instructions of the gods. In the chain heirachy in the traditional yoruba system, the people believed humans cannot reach out to the supreme being without going through the appropriate channel, which are the gods. That is, the gods are not just divinities, but they are as well intermediaries between the people and the supreme being (Olanrewaju, 2009; 44). And like a father to child relationship, the Supreme being in the yoruba system have been considered to be the father (Supreme) figure of the people (Dopamu 1999: 5, 6), and hence, a must to obey.

With the above, it is clear to expect that the peoples' obedience of the Supreme being's decrees and instructions, is contingent to the fact that like a father, he meets some certain needs of theirs, which justifies their submikssiveness to the divine rules, for continuity on meeting their needs is all they seek. In this vein, we can argue that the core foundation with which the African socioety operates is tied to religion. Even, morality, which has been argued by several philosophers to be the sole factor binding the creation of society, is belived to be guarded by the gods, in the yoruba traditional system, as supported in the expression of (Quarcoopome 1987:73), and narrated by Olanrewaju (2009),

Aside from the relationships of dependence and benevolence that exists between people and the divinities in Yoruba culture, the divinities are also recognized as the guardians of morality in society (Quarcoopome 1987:73). As in any other culture, there are rules and norms to be obeyed in Yorubaland in order to enhance the welfare and peaceful coexistence of the people. On one hand, Yoruba believe that whenever someone disobeys the norms of the society, the divinities punish the person by bringing calamity and misfortune on him or her. On the other hand, the divinities bestow blessings on those who are obedient to the rules and norms of the land (Olanrewaju, 2009; 44-45).

From the above, it is inferrable that the people are bound to obey the rules brought by the gods from the supreme being because the flourishing and progressive development of their society and their individual selfs is dependent on their level of obedience. And importantly, we ought to be aware that any calamity on a particular individual, is same as calamity on all because the yoruba system believes that every possible phenomenon in the society or on any individual, is shared, for the existence is a collective one. This is supported in their proverb that: *Bi ara ile eni ba nje kokoro buburu ti a o so fun, here-huru loru re ko ni je ki a sun.* which means: If you fail to warn your neighhbour of danger of eating bad insect, his cries at night will prevent you from sleeping. In essence, both the calamity and blessings from

going against and obeying the rules or the gods, respectively, will be shared by all, but however, it might be in different proportion, as the victim would be entitled to a larger share. Hence, it is pertinent to assert that the actions of the people in the Yoruba system, which reflects their moral status, has the guidance of the gods, and as well as answerable to natural consequence. Also, it can as well be deduced that truly, morality, according to the Yoruba traditional system is a major part of their religion, but not the total account of it. However, the relationship with the gods is as well engaged in by some selected priest. That is, the narration about the messages of the supreme being are as well narrated by humans, whereby there is no viable means for the people to verify whether or not the prophesy is fabricated by the priests.

Given all of the arguments raised regarding the ontological foundation of an African ethical system, it may be easily deduced that it has a close affinity to religion. Of course, a proper understanding of African ontology would not neglect a proper grounding in the idea of God or the Supreme Being. This, however is where the major problem lies. The idea that there is a set of rules decreed by a Deity is untenable (Oladipo, 2004:361), because the verification of it cannot be assessed by any other individual, even when the setting of the society is a communal based one. Most of the scholars on the subject regarding the foundation of an African ethics, begin with a construction of the African understanding of the divine. However, if an ethics can be deduced from such perspective, it is to be asked which particular individuals are these moral and ethical precepts revealed to? Are these ethical principles known intuitively by the African mind? It needs to be stressed that these questions are of paramount concern because the ontology and religion of African societies are communal and not individualistic. In other words, no particular individual may be said to have gotten 'illumination' from a divine to put down certain rules. Hence, there is a blurry line between the ontological foundations of African ethics and how such a framework actually serves as a basis for moral norms. Given this notion, it is very obvious that the peoples' conception of right and wrong is nothing but a product of "their own moral perception, understanding or knowledge" (Gyekye, 1987:6).

Secondly an analysis of many African proverbs and way of life also reveals the affinity between their ontology and their pragmatism towards the divinities. The pragmatic stance has been supported by Owomoyela (1981), (Oluwole, 1984), and Oladeji (1988). A scenario that clearly depicts this intent may be gleaned from William Alabi who writes that:

There are 21 denominations of Churches in Arogbò-Ijaw Kingdom...Yet, they (the people) seem to relate more with Egbesu than with the Almighty God. And the reason for this, given by a Chief at Arogbò, is that Egbesu (the local deity) responds

more quickly to their demands than the Almighty God. Thus, although they believe in God, they take their immediate problems to Egbesu (Willaim, 1998:29).

From the above, it is clear that African religion and ontology play a vital pragmatic role in the lives of the people. In the above example, it is clear that *Egbesu* may have its own moral codes which would be followed and such morality ensues. This however, is still a corollary to our previous claims that there is no way we can certainly ascertain if these deities from an ontological perspective prescribe moral precepts or they are just as Kwame Gyekye (1987) announces, derived from the people themselves.

Conclusion

The African value system cannot be fully understood and appreciated outside the way they conceive the human being in the universe, on the one hand, and among others, on the other hand, the way we understand the human being in his universe and among others cannot be divorced from the African ontology or notion of being. Though there is controversy regarding whether Bantu ontology should be generalized to the whole of Africa. However, it is also necessary to point out that Bantu ontology even if it was relegated to the study of only the Bantu speaking people of Congo, it nevertheless set the pace for the development of a documented African Philosophy.

The African foundation of moral values or ethical principles may be laid with the knowledge of the communal people themselves as Kwame Gyekye (1987) informs. There is no doubt that the morality of human action has to do with some measures of understanding the people and their ontology. It is the conviction of this work however that there is a humanistic approach to the morality of human action which is derived from their knowledge of the ontology or being of the society. And this morality, we call 'Communal-Consequentialism'. By communal consequentialism, we mean an ethical concept which considers the consequences of actions on the collective interests before initiating, because the people have a shared reality whereby there is a causal relation of reality and a communitarian existence of all things in the universe. In other words, actions with positive benefits and those with vices would be shared amongst all even if acted by a single individual. This peculiarity is owed to the communal foundation with which the African system operates on. Supported in Bantu philosophy, every movement in the universe has a causal-effect relationship on other existence because an action emanating from one force (being) has influence on others. That is: "One force is determined to weaken or strengthen another" (Mbaegbu, 2015).

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