

MORAL RELATIVISM AND THE NIGERIAN MORAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Moral relativism is more easily understood in comparison to moral absolutism. Absolutism claims that morality relies on universal principles (natural law, conscience). Moral relativism asserts that morality is not based on any absolute standard. Rather, ethical “truths” depend on variables such as the situation, culture, one's feelings, etc. In Nigeria, moral thinking is concerned with the issue of good conduct among those who make up the human community. It is also concerned with the creation of a humane social environment without which those who live in society would hardly realize their goals and aspirations in life. It is for this reason that people are constantly exhorted to lead morally lives worth emulating because, as the argument goes, it is in living virtuously that members of a community can give meaning to their social life and existence. With particular reference to traditional African life, it was the opinion that a life of rectitude help build up society and guaranteed the individual a good place in the world. But then, what exactly do we have in mind when we talk about morals? And in relation to African life, what was the nature of moral thinking among traditional Africans in the pre-European African world? These are some of the issues to be addressed. While we may define moral behaviour as behaviour in accordance with the

recommended patterns of a community, the morality of a community on the other hand consists of those ways of behaviour which each member of the community is taught, bidden and encouraged to adopt by other members. This is where relativism comes in. We shall examine the question of morality in a non-westernized African society drawing from Igala cosmology. From

oral tradition, literary records and observation through the lens of ethical relativism, we mirror morality as a timeless definition of humanity influenced by locality, progressing from hypothetical to categorical imperative, and ensuring progress, as obedience becomes a duty for duty's sake. Thus a fundamental impact of morality involves the domestication of humanity. Our research interests are focused on Nigerian moral context. The arguments cover social, ethical, moral and political issues. Occasionally, these have been the basis of moral relativism and subjectivism in the cotemporary debate on the relevance of Nigerian morality. Our aim is to attempt to navigate this debate from a wide spectrum of ethical theories while at the same time remaining faithful to moral objectivity.

The broad aim of this study is to find out the moral implications involved in applying Nigerian moral values in evaluation of ethical issues such as same-sex marriage. The study also seeks to achieve some specific objectives such as; To seek the relevance or otherwise of the foundation of Nigerian morality in the face of the current demand for legal recognition of same-sex marriage.

To investigate Nigerian context as ethics of duty, not of rights

and why it is believed to be the centre of Nigerian moralism.

To examine existing philosophical arguments for and against moral relativism.

To analyse the various implications of moral relativism in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the various arguments for moral relativity, I propose absolute universal morality that will through the lens of ethical relativism, mirror morality as a timeless definition of humanity influenced by locality. Although many people have different practices of morality, they still share a common morality. For instance, abortionists and anti-abortionists agree that murder is wrong, but they disagree on whether abortion is murder. So, even here, absolute universal morality is shown to be true. Some claim that changing situations make for changing morality—in different situations different acts are called for that might not be right in other situations. But there are three things by which we must judge an act: the situation, the act, and the intention. For example, we can convict someone of attempted murder (intent) even if they fail (act). So situations are part of the moral decision, for they set the context for choosing the specific moral act (the application of universal principles). I plan to divide my work into two phases. The first phase will cover some related ethical theories such as consequentialist theories, nonconsequentialist theories, subjective relativism, cultural relativism, emotivism, egoism, utilitarianism Kantian ethics and Natural law theories including other related theories. This phase will end with an evaluation of arguments for moral relativism. In the second phase, I will dwell on African moral context. What is to be investigated include; ethics and morality, African words for ethics, the notion of character as central to African ethics, the humanistic foundations of African morality the notion of common good and social, not individualistic ethics. These will aid my evaluation of the relevance of

African ethics to ascertain whether it is purely a relative morality or whether its contents have any appeal or relevance to universal moral truths.

Nigerian ethics is a humanitarian ethics, the kind of ethics that places a great deal of emphasis on human welfare. The concern for human welfare may be said to constitute the hub of the Nigerian axiological wheel. The ethics is of duty, not of rights. This orientation of Nigerian ethics takes its impulse, undoubtedly, from the humanistic outlook that characterizes traditional Nigerian life and thought. Humanism—the doctrine that sees human needs and interests as fundamental—thus constitutes the foundation of Nigerian ethics.

Now, the natural sociality or relationality of the human being that would prescribe social ethic would also prescribe the ethic of duty (or, responsibility). The natural relationality of the individual immediately involves one in some social and moral roles in the form of obligations, commitments, and duties (or, responsibilities) to other members of his or her community which the individual must fulfill. Social or community life itself, a robust feature of the African communitarian society, mandates a morality that clearly is weighted on duty to others and to the community; it constitutes the foundation for moral responsibilities and obligations. There appears to be a conceptual tie—perhaps also a practical tie—between the *social ethic* prescribed by the communitarian ethos and the *ethic of duty* mandated by the same ethos.

A morality of duty is one that requires each individual to demonstrate concern for the interests of others. The ethical values of compassion, solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, interdependence, and social well-being, which are counted among the principles of the communitarian morality, primarily impose duties on the individual with respect to the community and its members. All these considerations elevate the notion of duties to a status similar to that given to the notion of rights in Western ethics. African ethics does not give short-shrift to rights as such; nevertheless, it does not give obsessional or blinkered emphasis on rights. In this morality duties trump rights, not the other way around, as it is in the moral systems of Western societies. The attitude to, or performance of, duties is induced by a consciousness of needs rather than of rights. In other words, people fulfill—and ought to fulfill—duties to others not because of the rights of these others, but because of their needs and welfare.

It would be clear from the foregoing discussion that African ethics takes a stand that would be against what are referred to as acts of supererogation. A supererogatory act is defined as an act that is said to be ‘beyond the call of duty’; it is an act that is said to be over and above what a person is required to do as a moral agent. In much of the literature on Western moral philosophy, an act of supererogation is held *not* as a strictly moral duty. Thus, it is neither morally obligatory nor forbidden; therefore, it is not wrong, so the argument concludes, to omit or neglect performing it, even though it is good and commendable by virtue of its value and consequences on others if it is performed. It is supposed to be a meritorious act and yet optional, one that may be performed if the spirit moves you, but need not be performed. Thus, a distinction is made in Western literature between moral duty and a supererogatory act, the former considered obligatory and moral duty ‘proper’ and the latter nonobligatory and optional, not being a ‘proper’ moral duty.

Supererogationism is clearly an oxymoron: for, why should an act that is good and morally commendable and will conduce to the well-being of another person (or, other persons) fail to exact obligation or compel performance? We would normally think that there is a moral connection between ‘good’ and ‘ought’, and that therefore a morally good act ought to be performed: if an act is morally good, then it ought to be performed.

Nigerian morality, which is humanitarian, social, and duty-oriented rather than rights-oriented morality, does not make a distinction between a moral duty and a supererogatory duty—one that is beyond the call of duty and so does not have to be performed. In the light of our common humanity, it would not be appropriate—in fact it would demean our humanity—to place limits to our moral duties or responsibilities. Even though it is true that, as human beings, we are limited in many ways and so are not capable of fulfilling our moral duties to all human beings at all times as such, nevertheless, the scope of our moral duties should not be circumscribed. African humanitarian ethics would seek to collapse moral duty and moral ideals—the latter being the basis of the so-called supererogatory duty—into one capacious moral universe inhabited *both* by the morality of duty ‘proper’, obligation, and justice *and* the morality of love, virtue, compassion, benevolence, and other “moral ideals”. Such a capacious morality would make no distinction between a morally obligatory act and a morally optional act. It would insist that no act that is morally good in itself or that will conduce to the well-being of some individual or group of individuals should be considered morally optional, to be morally shrugged off or unconscionably set aside, if we understand morality to be something that serves (or, should) serve human needs. Thus, as the second part of a previous quotation says,

A native will give his best house and his evening meal to a guest, without the slightest thought that he is doing anything *extraordinary* (Dugald Campbell, section 6 above).

Thus, African ethics—an ethics that is weighted on duty, not on rights—would, in principle, not consider moral duty of any kind as extraordinary, optional, or supererogatory. The African humanitarian ethic makes all people objects of moral concern, implying that our moral sensitivities should be extended to all people, irrespective of their cultures or societies.

Justification of the Project.

The purpose of this study is to expose the relevance or otherwise of the foundation of Nigerian ethics in the face of some contemporary ethical problem which has remained perennial, thereby requiring contextual response for example, the current demand for legalizing same sex marriage in Nigeria. It is worthy of note here that, Nigerian ethics emphasize human relationship. This shows the significance attached to the individual human being, by being perceived as the centre of the relationship, both as an active agent and as a participant in the relationship. In traditional Africa, human relationship and social harmony are vital elements. According to Mbiti (133), it is only in terms of other people that the individual is conscious of his own being, duties, privileges and responsibilities towards other people. The emphasis is not on the autonomy and freedom, but on the status and role of the individual in the ethical system.

While the sense of relationship and community underlies Nigerian traditional ethics, in contrast to the European sense of autonomy, the individual is not perceived as just a mere presence in the community. As an individual, he is perceived both as the centre of the relationship and also as

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contributing to its sustenance, especially through procreation. Hence, he possesses an ethical status and contributes a role in the ethical and entire social spectrum.

Research Method

Analytical and contextual approaches are the research methods adopted in this project. The Free Dictionary Farlex 2011 defines analytical method in research as that method which uses or is skilled in using analysis (i.e., separating whole--intellectual or substantial--into its elemental parts or basic principles); of a proposition that is necessarily true independent of fact or experience. This method is used in this research since the subject matter requires serious reasoning and logic to analyze inferences a priori involving deductive reasoning from a general principle of the subject to a necessary effect; not supported by fact; capable of or reflecting the capability for correct and valid reasoning on the subject matter. Similarly, contextual method will be used in the implications and application of the findings of this research. This is because, any understanding or appreciation of the subject matter can only occur when Nigerians process new information or knowledge in such a way that it makes sense to them in their own frames of reference (their own worldviews, experience and response). This approach assumes that human mind naturally seeks meaning in context, that is, in relation to the person's current environment, and that it does so by searching for relationships that make sense and appear useful.

The Argument from Diversity in Moral Practice

Argument no. 1 states: Since cultures and individuals differ in certain moral practices, there are no objective moral values. Several objections can be made to this argument. First, the fact that people disagree about something does not mean there is no objective truth. If you and I disagree about whether or not the earth is round, for example, this is not proof that the earth has *no* shape. In moral discussion, the fact that a skinhead (a type of young Neo-Nazi) and I may disagree about whether we should treat people equally and fairly is not sufficient evidence to say that equality and fairness have no objective value. Even if individuals and cultures held no values in common, it does not follow from this that nobody is right or wrong about the correct values. That is, there could be a morally erring individual or culture, such as Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. Another problem with this argument is that it does not follow from the fact that cultures and individuals differ in moral *practices* that they do not share common *values*. Although cultures may differ about how they manifest such values as honesty, courage, and the preserving of life, they do not *promote* dishonesty, cowardice, or arbitrary killing. Second, sometimes apparent moral differences are not moral differences at all but *factual* differences. Thus it is a factual and not a value difference that divides our culinary habits. Other examples can be produced to show why this first argument for moral relativism is inadequate. Third, the argument from differing practices puts an undue emphasis on differences while ignoring similarities, in addition to giving the mistaken appearance that all moral conflicts are in some sense insoluble. In discussing moral conflicts in the United States we tend to focus our attention on contemporary issues — abortion, euthanasia, affirmative action, and so forth — over which there is obviously wide and

impassioned disagreement. However, we tend to ignore the fact that the disputants in these moral debates hold a number of values in common, that there are many moral issues on which almost all Americans agree (e.g., “It is wrong to molest six-year-old girls”), and that a number of past moral conflicts have been solved (e.g., slavery, women’s suffrage). Hence, by focusing our attention only on disagreements, our perception has become skewed. Philosopher James Rachels illustrates this point with an example from the sciences:

If we think of questions like *this* [i.e., abortion, euthanasia, affirmative action, etc.], it is easy to believe that “proof” in ethics is impossible. The same can be said of the sciences. There are many complicated matters that physicists cannot agree on; and if we focused our attention entirely on *them* we might conclude that there is no “proof” in physics. But of course, many simpler matters in physics *can* be proven, and about those all competent physicists agree. Similarly, in ethics there are many matters far simpler than abortion, about which all reasonable people must agree.

The Argument from the Virtue of Tolerance

Argument no. 2 for ethical relativism states: Since ethical relativism promotes tolerance of certain cultural practices that members of Western civilization may think are strange, ethical relativism is a good thing. However, although tolerance often is a virtue, ethical relativists simply cannot justify their own position by appealing to it in this way. First, the value of tolerance presupposes the existence of at least one real objective (or absolute) value: *tolerance*. Bioethicist Tom Beauchamp makes this observation:

If we interpret normative relativism as *requiring* tolerance of other views, the whole theory is imperiled by inconsistency. The proposition that we ought to tolerate the views of others, or that it is right not to interfere with others, is precluded by the very strictures of the theory. Such a proposition bears all the marks of a *non-relative* account of moral rightness, one based on, but not reducible to, the cross-cultural findings of anthropologists...But if this moral principle [of tolerance] is recognized as valid, it can of course be employed as an instrument for criticizing such cultural practices as the denial of human rights to minorities and such beliefs as that of racial superiority. A moral commitment to tolerance of other practices and beliefs thus leads inexorably to the abandonment of normative relativism.

Second, tolerance can only be a virtue if we think the other person, whose viewpoint we’re supposed to tolerate, is mistaken. That is to say, if we do not believe one viewpoint is better than another, then to ask us to be tolerant of other viewpoints makes no sense. For to tolerate another’s viewpoint implies that this other person has a right to his or her viewpoint despite the fact that others may think it is wrong. To be tolerant of differing viewpoints involves just that — differing *viewpoints*, all of which cannot be equally correct at the same time. The man who supposes himself tolerant while at the same time he believes nobody is either right or wrong about any moral value is actually no more virtuous than the man who supposes his virginity is chastity even though he was born with no sexual organs. Consequently, real tolerance presupposes someone is right and someone is wrong, which implicitly denies moral relativism. It must be acknowledged, however, that there is a noble motive behind the relativists’ appeal to tolerance. They believe their view of tolerance will help us to better understand other cultures

and people without being hypercritical about their practices. This in turn will keep us from using such criticism to justify the forced imposition of our own cultural practices on them, such as putting blouses on the bare-breasted women of the South Seas or forcing polygamous families to divide and become monogamous. I can sympathize with this view of transcultural tolerance. As I stated earlier, however, a cultural practice is different from a cultural value. It does not follow from different practices that people have different values. The local controversies surrounding the elimination of certain books from public school curricula and libraries is an example of how people can agree on values and yet disagree on practice. Those who favor more conservative guidelines, and who are often referred to as advocating censorship, usually propose that certain materials are not suitable for certain age groups. They argue that parents, not educational administrators, are best suited to know what is good for their children. On the other hand, their opponents, who are often referred to as advocating freedom of expression, usually propose that it should be up to the teacher and the educational administrators to choose what is suitable material, although they do believe that a line should be drawn somewhere. For example, none of these defenders of freedom of expression defend the placing of hard-core pornography in the hands of fourth graders. This, of course, makes the debate all the more interesting, since it means that both sides agree on the following general principles: a line must be drawn, certain materials are suitable for certain age groups, and education is important. Both advocate some kind of “censorship.” They just disagree on who should be the censors, what should be censored, and on what basis the decision should be made. Therefore, they both hold to many of the same values, but they disagree as to the application of these values, and the acceptability of certain factual claims. Although this distinction between practice and value helps us to be tolerant of unusual cultural practices, we are still able to make valuable moral judgments about others and ourselves. First, we are free to criticize those intolerable cultural practices that *do* conflict with basic human values, such as in the cases of genocide in Nazi Germany and apartheid in South Africa. Second, we are able to admit to real moral progress, such as in the case of the abolition of slavery. And third, there can exist real moral reformers, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and the prophets of the Old Testament, who served as prophetic voices to reprimand their cultures for having drifted far from a true moral practice based on basic human values. The above three points — each of which follow from a belief in objective transcultural values — *do not* follow from a belief in ethical relativism. That is to say, to remain consistent the ethical relativist cannot criticize intolerable moral practices, believe in real moral progress, or acknowledge the existence of real moral reformers. For these three forms of moral judgment presuppose the existence of real objective transcultural values. Although much more can be said about the justification and existence of certain values,⁵ the above is sufficient to demonstrate that ethical relativism is enormously problematic. It shows that we can rationally discuss and argue with each other about right and wrong without resorting to the claim that ethical judgments are merely subjective or relative and that all such judgments have equal validity. For to claim the latter logically leads one to the bizarre judgment that Mother Teresa is no more and no less virtuous than Adolf Hitler. I believe this is sufficient to show ethical relativism to be bankrupt. Moral relativism has been rejected by a near unanimous number of both secular and theistic ethicists and philosophers. Yet it is still popular to espouse this view in many of our secularized cultural institutions. It is thought to be more tolerant, more open, and more intellectually respectable than the old-fashioned “absolutism.” As we have seen, however, moral relativism is inconsistent with tolerance, closed off to the possibility of moral truth, and an intellectual failure.

Conclusion

African humanitarian ethics spawns social morality, the morality of the common good, and the morality of duty that is so comprehensive as to bring within its compass what are referred to as moral ideals (such as love, virtue, compassion), which are considered supererogatory in Western ethics. But central or basic to the African morality is character, for the success of the moral life is held to be a function of the quality of an individual's personal life. A moral conception of personhood is held in African ethics, the conception that there are certain basic moral norms and ideals to which the conduct of the individual human being, if he is a person, ought to conform. The recognition in the African ethical traditions of all human beings as brothers by reason of our common humanity is indeed a lofty moral ideal that must be cherished and made a vital or robust feature of global ethics in our contemporary world. It is a bulwark against developing bigoted attitudes toward peoples of different cultures or skin colors who are, also, members of the universal human family called race.

Nigerian societies, as organized and functioning human communities, have undoubtedly evolved ethical and moral systems—ethical values, principles, rules—intended to guide social and moral behaviour. But, like African philosophy itself, the ideas and beliefs of the Nigerian society that bear on ethical conduct have not been given elaborate investigation and clarification and, thus, stand in real need of profound and extensive analysis and interpretation. Attempts should be made to give sustained reflective attention to Nigerian moral ideas. This study is intended to make some contribution to the understanding of Nigerian ethical thinking. Consequently, the study will make the Nigerian moral language its point of departure, for the language of morality gives insight into the moral thinking or ideas of the society. The centrality of the notions of character and moral personhood, which are inspired by the Nigerian moral language, is given a prominent place, the social character of Nigerian ethics will be highlighted with its affiliated notions of the ethics of duty (not of rights) and of the common good.

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