THEMES, ISSUES *and* PROBLEMS *in* AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Themes, Issues and Problems in African Philosophy

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An Overview of African Ethics

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Introduction

In this chapter I critically discuss work in sub-Saharan moral philosophy that has been written in English in the post-independence era. (I set aside Francophone texts, as they have not been nearly as influential in ethics as they have been in metaphysics and method.) I begin by providing an overview of the profession (section "Nature and History of the Profession"), after which I consider some of the major issues in normative ethics, particularly concerning the nature of good character (section "Normative Ethics: Good and Bad Character") and right action (section "Normative Ethics: Right and Wrong Action"). Then, I discuss some of the more noteworthy research in applied ethics (section "Applied Ethics"), and finally take up the key issues in meta-ethics (section "Metaethics"). My aim is to highlight discussions that should be of interest to an ethicist working anywhere in the world and to focus on ideas characteristic of the sub-Saharan region that are under-appreciated not merely for the purpose of comparative ethics, but also for substantive moral

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argumentation. In particular, there are communitarian and vitalist approaches to the good and the right commonly held by sub-Saharan philosophers that international scholars should take seriously as genuine rivals to the utilitarian, Kantian, social contract, divine command, care-oriented and Aristotelian outlooks that dominate global discussions of how to be and act.

Nature and History of the Profession

By 'African ethics' I principally mean work done by contemporary moral theorists that is significantly informed by features salient amongst the beliefs and practices of the indigenous black peoples below the Sahara desert (thereby excluding peoples of Arab, Indian or European descent and culture). For a feature to be salient amongst sub-Saharan cultures implies neither that it is utterly exclusive to them nor that it is completely exhaustive of them (see Silberbauer 1991 for discussion of the ethics of many small-scale societies). It means merely that certain properties have been recurrent amongst many of those societies for a long span of time in a way they have tended not to be elsewhere around the globe.

African ethics as a field that is systematically studied by academics is new, having been properly established only in the 1960s, with the advent of literacy and the decline of colonialism. Traditional African societies are well known for having most often been oral cultures and hence lacking written documentation of ethical practices. Furthermore, nearly all African countries were subjected to various forms of European colonialism for hundreds of years. Public institutions such as universities not merely neglected, but also denigrated, indigenous worldviews, as did private religious institutions, which mostly imparted Christian intellectual history. It was only after independence from colonial powers, which took place largely in the 1950s through the 1980s, that substantial numbers of Africans began attending university and becoming academic staff members able to write about their own cultures. Indeed, substantial anthologies devoted to work in African ethics began to appear only in the 21st century (Iroegbu and Echekwube 2005; Odimegwu 2007; Murove 2009).

The classic, and somewhat dated, texts in the field were written by Placide Tempels (1959) and John Mbiti (1969). Tempels was a Belgian missionary who sought to make sub-Saharan metaphysical and moral beliefs comprehensible to a colonial mindset, and he is reported to have been the first European intellectual to dignify African thought with the title of 'philosophy'. Mbiti was a Kenyan who obtained a doctorate in the UK, and he was one of the first

Africans to write a sympathetic and systematic account of the worldviews of a wide array of traditional African peoples. Both authors tend not to speak of the beliefs of a given African people or group of peoples; rather, they often generalize to 'Africans' as such, which is one major factor leading many to doubt the accuracy of their interpretations. However, Tempels and Mbiti are today cited often enough by those doing African ethics as at least recounting some notable strands of moral thought and practice below the Sahara.

With the greater influence of Africans over the curriculum of their public universities has come growth in the professional study of indigenous sub-Saharan morality. For a while, discussion of sub-Saharan ethics in the academy followed the work of Tempels and Mbiti in being largely a matter of moral anthropology. That is, much of the initial material mainly recounted the mores of a given sub-Saharan people, sometimes noting contrasts with a typical Western approach, an appropriate task given the desperate need for Africans to overcome colonialism and become acquainted with non-European interpretations of the world, particularly those of their own peoples.

These days, however, one often finds more argumentative and critical approaches, with African ethicists wanting to know not only what merits keeping from their tradition but also what should be taken seriously by those outside it. For example, one frequently encounters texts in which the more attractive norms of a given African worldview are articulated and applied to contemporary issues in business, medicine and the like (see below). Other texts appeal to core or deep moral principles from African cultures in order to judge certain common cultural practices to be matters of mere etiquette or to be downright immoral (Wiredu 1996: 61–77; Gyekye 1997: 242–258). And still other works seek to develop and defend comprehensive African moral philosophies that warrant critical comparison with the utilitarian, Kantian and Aristotelian grand ethical traditions in the West (Bujo 1997, 2001; Gyekye 1997; Ramose 1999; Iroegbu 2000; Shutte 2001; Odimegwu 2008; Metz and Gaie 2010).

Normative Ethics: Good and Bad Character

Many friends of sub-Saharan morality would sum it up by saying what is most often translated (overly literally) as either 'A person is a person through other persons' or 'I am because we are'. While these phrases do connote the empirical or even metaphysical idea that one needs others in order to exist and have a certain identity, they also convey a normative outlook. In particular, personhood and selfhood in much African moral thought is value laden,

meaning that one's basic aim as a moral agent should be to become a *complete* person or a *real* self (Menkiti 1979; Wiredu 1992a; Gyekye 1997: 48–52; see Nkulu-N'Sengha 2009 for a survey of several African peoples). Or, using the influential term employed amongst Zulu, Xhosa and Ndebele speakers in southern Africa, one's fundamental goal ought to be to obtain *ubuntu*, that is, to develop humanness or to live a genuinely human way of life (Ramose 1999: 49–53; Tutu 1999: 34–35; Shutte 2001).

Insofar as a large swath of sub-Saharan thought takes one's proper ultimate end to be to become (roughly) a *mensch*, it may be construed as a self-realization morality, not unlike Greek and more generally perfectionist standpoints. However, unlike the self-realization approaches that are dominant in the West, contemporary African philosophers often spell out how to realize one's true or valuable nature in a thoroughly relational or communal way. That is, most Western accounts of morality that direct an agent to develop valuable facets of her human nature conceive of there being important and basic self-regarding aspects of it, such as properly organizing one's mental faculties (Plato's *Republic*) or understanding parts of the physical universe (Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*). In contrast, sub-Saharan theories of self-realization characteristically account for it entirely, or at least nearly so, in terms of positive relationships with other beings.

By and large, one develops one's humanness or becomes a genuine person to the extent that one enters into communion with others, particularly with other humans, but also with invisible agents who have survived the deaths of their bodies and remain on earth (Paris 1995; Magesa 1997; Bujo 2001; Murove 2007). Traditionally speaking, one's selfhood is partly a function of communal relationships with ancestors, the morally wise progenitors of a clan who have shed their bodies and continue to interact with those of us in the visible world. In addition, there are variants of African ethics according to which one's personhood is also developed by relating positively with animals or other facets of nature, particularly those imbued with religious significance, such as totems.

Although indigenous African norms are often thickly spiritual (albeit in 'immanent' or 'earthly' forms that differ from much non-African monotheism), one need not accept the metaphysics in order to find something attractive in the ethics, even if many African philosophers believe that the latter should be derived from the former (on which see the metaethical discussion below). The idea that morality is a matter of realizing one's true self, which one can do only (or mainly) to the extent that one engages communally in a certain respect, is a promising ethic, at least upon a suitable articulation of what is involved in a communal relationship.

For much recent African moral philosophy, communal relationship can be analytically construed as the combination of two logically distinct kinds of interaction, namely, identifying with others and exhibiting solidarity with them (Metz and Gaie 2010: 276; Metz 2013a: 278–279; cf. Wiredu 1992b for a different interpretation). That is, the sort of communion that is to be prized is the ideal of people sharing a way of life by thinking of themselves as a 'we' and engaging in cooperative projects, on the one hand, and by caring for others' good by seeking to help them, often out of sympathy and for their own sake, on the other. Such a conception of communal relationship, often captured with terms such as 'harmony', 'cohesion', or even a broad sense of 'love', differs from the most influential contemporary forms of communitarianism in the West, which tend to value interaction at the political level or to deem norms to be binding if accepted by a group. For one major contrast, a typical Afro-communal approach essentially prizes mutual aid, including weighty, unassumed duties to help specific others, say, one's kin (Appiah 1998) or those with whom one has communed (Ramose 2003: 385–386).

Taking such a conception of communion as central also differs from standard forms of feminist or care ethics, where the key duty is to express concern for the well-being of those with whom one is related, or perhaps would be related upon being so concerned. For one, the African approach also values a sense of togetherness and cooperative participation, which is not essential to standard understandings of care. For another, while African morality characteristically directs an agent to be concerned for another's well-being, it also prescribes a focus on the good of another's nature; that is, one way to realize oneself is by helping others to realize themselves, and not merely by satisfying their welfarist needs.

African ethicists differ over precisely why communal relationships are central to developing personhood, exhibiting humanness or exemplifying good character. For some, these states are constituted by communion, so that it is identical to virtue itself; that is, it is the final *end* (e.g., Paris 1995; Tutu 1999: 34–35; Odimegwu 2008; Behrens 2010). For others, a communal orientation is an essential and reliable *means* to some other more basic value, whether that is the promotion of life or vital force (e.g., Tempels 1959; Dzobo 1992; Bujo 1997, 2001; Magesa 1997) or the advancement of the common good (Gyekye 1997, 2010). The field has yet to rigorously examine, let alone come to any consensus about, which value is best taken as basic. Is communing good for its own sake, something that makes one a better person in itself, or is it rather of mere instrumental worth for realizing virtue *qua* production of vitality or utility? Which approach is most African? Which one is most philosophically defensible?

Competing answers to these questions will have some important divergent theoretical and practical implications (on which see Metz 2013a, b). Even so, African ethicists tend to hone in on many of the same kinds of attitudes and dispositions as instances of virtue. For example, the Ghanaian Kwame Gyekye remarks, in an essay titled 'African Ethics', 'Used normatively, the judgment, "he is a person", means "he has a good character", "he is generous", "he is peaceful", "he is humble", "he has respect for others"' (2010: sec. 4). Similarly, the South African Desmond Tutu says of those described as having *ubuntu*, 'This means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate' (1999: 34; see also Paris 1995: 130–152; Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2009: 74). Conversely, animality or vice, for much of the African tradition, is largely a matter of insensitivity, hard-heartedness, cruelty, stinginess, selfishness and intolerance.

Challenges to the dominant African conceptions of virtue or personhood appeal to more individualist or self-regarding properties. Critics might suggest that uniqueness, creativity, autonomy, authenticity, self-reliance, temperance and possessing certain kinds of theoretical knowledge are forms of virtue. Are these merely Western notions that are to be dismissed? Or are there, say, communal or vitalist dimensions to them that make them African? Or might African values need to be supplemented by cross-cultural engagement with the West?

Normative Ethics: Right and Wrong Action

Whereas the previous section discussed personhood, or good character, this one focuses on right action. Many African ethicists maintain that only the former should be one's focus, or that the latter is ultimately a function of the former. However, some do hold the contrary view that thought about how to act has its own logic, one distinct from how to be.

One natural question to pose is whether all right (permissible) actions have one basic thing in common that makes them distinct from wrong (impermissible) ones. Some say that African morality is complex or particularistic, and therefore inconsistent with the search for a single principle that would capture what all wrong actions have in common (probably Ramose 1999; Ikuenobe 2006: 116–118). However, one can point to several tentative formulations of such principles in the literature, even if they have not been articulated and defended as systematically as in the contemporary Anglo-American tradition (which for several decades has worked back and forth between particular judgments or 'intuitions' of right/wrong and general principles in search of an 'reflective equilibrium' between them).

One such principle is that actions are right insofar as they promote (or prize) communion or harmony. For example, one finds statements such as the following about morality in indigenous African contexts: 'What is right is what connects people together' (Verhoef and Michel 1997: 397); 'Social harmony is for us the *summum bonum*—the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague' (Tutu 1999: 35); and 'The vast majority of norms, taboos and prohibitions is directed towards protecting the community and promoting peace and harmony' (Ejizu 2011) (see also Kasenene 1998: 21, 67; Murove 2007: 181; Metz and Gaie 2010). From this standpoint, immorality is roughly failure to commune, with grave wrongdoing consisting of producing or expressing support for outright discordance such as division (thinking of oneself as separate from others and subordinating them) and ill-will (trying to harm others and acting out of cruelty).

Such a conception of rightness (and, correspondingly, wrongness) differs from the major players on the English-speaking global stage. Kantians honor the capacity for autonomy or rationality, not people's capacity for communion or the way they have actualized it in the form of a shared way of life amongst people who care for one another's good. Contractarians appeal to norms that would be rational to agree to by those who would have to live in accordance with them, which in no prominent formulation I am aware of grants intrinsic moral weight to either sharing a way of life with others or trying to help others develop valuable aspects of their human nature. Similar remarks go for utilitarians.

The claim here is not that sub-Saharan ethical philosophy, or the particular theory of right action sketched above, is utterly unique. There are likely overlaps with the normative worldviews of other small-scale, indigenous peoples. And there are obvious similarities with some aspects of Marxism, Aristotelianism, feminism and the like. Nonetheless, African ethics, as usually philosophically interpreted, differs in important and interesting ways from mainstream Western moral theories.

One salient category in African discussion of right action is communion, but another is life, with some sub-Saharan moral philosophers taking the latter, and not the former, to be basic to distinguishing the permissible from the impermissible. Another moral theory one finds suggested in the literature is the principle that actions are right insofar as they promote vitality. For example, one encounters these principles: '[A]ny action which increases life or vital force is right, and whatever decreases it is wrong' (Kasenene 1994: 140); and '[A]ll people and activities that diminish life are in all cultures considered as evil, while those that promote it are regarded as good' (Iroegbu 2005: 447).

If one takes life as basic, then communion must play a derivative or secondary role when it comes to right action; rather than being constitutive of the latter, communion will be argued either to facilitate awareness of it (Bujo 1997, 2001) or to be a reliable cause of it (Dzobo 1992; Magesa 1997; Tangwa 2010).

Life or life-force, as traditionally construed amongst sub-Saharans (particularly in southern and central Africa), is an invisible energy that permeates everything in the world in varying degrees. The 'inanimate' mineral kingdom has the least degree of life-force; plants have more than rocks; animals have more than plants; humans have more than animals; ancestors and other imperceptible agents have more than humans; and God, as the source of all life-force, has more than anything else.

However, one will also find less thickly metaphysical forms of vitalism that are at least intimated by the literature. For instance, often enough talk of 'life' and 'life-force' is cashed out using concepts that do not essentially connote anything immaterial or supersensible—notions such as health, strength, growth, reproduction, generation, activity, self-motion, courage and confidence. Correspondingly, a lack of life-force is frequently construed to involve the presence of disease, weakness, decay, barrenness, destructiveness, lethargy, passivity, insecurity and depression. African theorists have yet to thoroughly establish whether either a spiritual (invisible) or physical (visible) interpretation of life is best (but see Molefe 2015).

A third influential theory of right action in the African literature is Kwame Gyekye's moderate communitarianism (1997: 35–76), according to which acts are right insofar as they promote the common good without treating people's dignity disrespectfully in the process. According to a fairly recent statement from him in an encyclopedia entry on African ethics (2010), 'Actions that promote human welfare or interest are good, while those that detract from human welfare are bad'. This is not Western utilitarianism, however, partly because Gyekye focuses on objective needs (rather than subjective pleasure or desire satisfaction) and partly because he prescribes advancing welfare only in ways that do not harm or degrade individuals.

As with conceptions of good (and bad) character, the field has yet to thoroughly discuss which of the above three accounts of right (and wrong) action is most promising. Regardless of whether communion, life or the common good is taken to constitute rightness, however, each differs in intriguing ways from standard Western moral theories that focus on autonomy, agreement, pleasure, desire satisfaction, God's will, care or the like. All three conceptions of rightness that one will find prominent in the work of contemporary sub-Saharan moral philosophers are worthy of global attention.

Applied Ethics

A large majority of sub-Saharan applied ethics involves appealing to the value of life or communion (and, interestingly, not so much the common good) and then teasing out its implications for a contemporary debate in medicine, business or politics. One can readily acquire articles and chapters on topics such as abortion, euthanasia, suicide, sexual relationships, confidentiality, informed consent, criminal justice, environmental ethics, the death penalty, political power, compensatory justice, workplace organization and corporate social responsibility. Usually the positions taken on these issues consist of playing down the value of autonomy, at least as typically construed in the West, and defending a requirement to promote life or communal relationships that would leave fewer issues to be determined by individual choice or mutual agreement. Although there are also discussions of animal rights, military ethics, engineering ethics, media ethics, education ethics, legal ethics and similar applied fields, there has been little in terms of quantity, and more sophistication and depth have been usually needed in respect of quality (at least until very recently).

African ethicists have often arrived at conclusions on practical topics that differ in fascinating ways from those common in the West. Here are just a handful to give the reader a sense of the field.

First off, when it comes to criminal justice, one recurrently finds an approach that focuses not on deterrence, incapacitation, just deserts, fairness or censure—the major players in Anglo-American philosophy. Instead, a characteristically African concern for communal relationship includes the judgment that wrongdoing should be responded to by human beings in a way likely to foster reconciliation between the offender, his immediate victims and the wider society (Aja 1997; Magesa 1997: 234–243, 270–276; Tutu 1999; Louw 2006; Krog 2008). Such harmonization need not rule out punishment, but the latter must be likely to rehabilitate the offender or otherwise make it easier for people to reestablish ties with him. In cases where punishment would probably be counterproductive with respect to fostering communion, that would be strong reason for humans not to punish (though retribution imposed by invisible agents could still be seen as appropriate). Such an Afro-communitarian approach to crime, which originated in small-scale societies, is often thought to be relevant to large-scale ones, too, with South Africa's influential Truth and Reconciliation Commission and contemporary discussion of restorative justice having been decidedly influenced by it.

For another example of divergence from standard Western conclusions about applied issues, many sub-Saharan philosophers believe that one has a

moral obligation to wed and to procreate in the first place, as well as a moral obligation to look after the extended family of oneself and one's spouse, perhaps even one's clan as a whole (Magesa 1997: 115–159; Appiah 1998; Bujo 2001: 6–7, 34–54; Ikuenobe 2006: 298–302). Such obligations far transcend the duty merely to look after one's nuclear family once one has elected to create it, and they would appear to spring naturally from either communal or vitalist sub-Saharan perspectives.

For a third example, consider the issue of confidentiality in a medical context. Suppose that a basic duty either to foster life or to prize communal relationships entails weighty obligations on an individual to aid others, particularly (extended) family members. In that case, medical professionals would probably be permitted to disclose information about the one's illness to them, supposing it threatens to impair one's ability to fulfill one's obligations towards them (Kasenene 2000: 349–353, 356; Murove 2005: 170–171). When other people have a legitimate stake in an individual being healthy, many African ethicists think that they ought to be aware of his illness and play a role in discussing how he ought to treat it (which is not to say that norms of informed consent may be overridden).

Fourth, in the business context, there have been many calls by African ethicists to share power in light of indigenous values. When it comes to decision-making, a major theme has been 'interactive', 'transformational', 'servant' or even 'loving' leadership. The core idea is that those in charge of a firm should consult widely with workers before formulating policy, and perhaps even enable and encourage the latter to participate democratically in its formulation (Nussbaum 2003; Khoza 2006; Boon 2007). Unilateral, top-down instruction of the sort typical in a Western (or Chinese) firm is often viewed as wrong in itself, a failure to create a community or extended family of a sort.

Fifth, and finally for now, whereas Western environmental ethics usually ascribes either full moral status to animals (utilitarianism, biocentrism) or no moral status to them (Kantianism, contractarianism), African perspectives tend to be different. A common sub-Saharan approach is to think in terms of a 'great chain of being', where human beings are more important than animals because of the former's greater life-force, but where animals nonetheless matter morally because of their noteworthy vitality, such that we have direct obligations to avoid treating them in harmful or degrading ways (Etieyibo 2017; cf. Horsthemke 2015). In addition, African thought about nature more broadly is often relational, appealing to analogies with a family and using talk of 'harmony' (Oruka and Juma 1994; Kelbessa 2005: 23–26; Behrens 2010), an approach that differs from both the individualist and holist environmental approaches that dominate English-speaking philosophy.

Metaethics

Recurrently in the literature, one finds African worldviews described as 'religious', with religion deemed to permeate all aspects of traditional life (Mbiti 1969 is the *locus classicus*). Nearly equally recurrently, however, one finds African morality described as 'humanistic', focusing on the good of human beings. Much metaethical debate in African moral philosophy is in effect a matter of sorting out this tension, that is, of getting straight on the respect(s) in which supernatural elements do, or should, figure into African approaches to morality.

In the following, I recount some of this debate, noting here the paucity of metaphysical discussion about, for example, whether universal moral truths obtain by virtue of real properties or mental constructions. While contemporary African moral philosophy offers quite a lot to any open-minded normative ethical theorist and applied ethicist, it currently has comparatively little to contribute to a metaethicist, with an important exception concerning moral epistemology, as I discuss below.

With regard to the relationship between morality and religion, it is useful to distinguish between the source, content and enforcement of morality. The most controversy concerns the source, and here issues of moral anthropology and moral philosophy are not always rigorously distinguished. That is, debate about whether correct moral norms are entirely a function of God's will is often interwoven with debate about whether this is what African peoples believe (Gbadegesin 1991: 76–82; Wiredu 1992b; Kelbessa 2005: 22–23).

The issue of 'where morality comes from' (or is believed to come from) differs from what the content of the moral rules is (or is believed to be) and how they are enforced (or are believed to be). With regard to content, it was noted above that it is common for traditional sub-Saharan cultures to believe that communion with imperceptible beings, such as ancestors, is part of the right way to live. And with respect to enforcement, most indigenous African societies believe that ancestors and other spirits punish human beings for not living up to the correct moral norms. Those who argue in favor of a nontheistic foundation for morality often grant that what one is obligated to do, and how one may be sanctioned for failure to do so, are usually 'religious' in these ways below the Sahara. What they dispute is that morality could not exist without God or that Africans believe that it could not, sometimes pointing out that African religions tend to differ from, say, Islam in not appealing to any individual who purports to have become acquainted with the mind of God (Gyekye 1995: 129–146; Wiredu 1996: 61–77).

More interesting to most readers than the old *Euthyphro* issue of the metaphysical status of right and wrong will probably be the epistemic debate about how moral judgments are known or at least justifiably believed. Here, there are two interesting topics. First, what is the relationship between metaphysics and ethics? The default position amongst sub-Saharan moral philosophers is that the latter not merely can, but also must, be grounded on the former. Specifically, it is common to find the view that a certain ontological position, about the nature of the self or of the world, directly entails a particular moral standpoint (Gyekye 1997: 35–76; and several essays in Imafidon and Bewaji 2013). The 'is/ought' gap, as it is known in the Western tradition, is widely repudiated.

Second, one also finds thoughtful analysis of whether sub-Saharans can be epistemically justified in believing moral judgments by virtue of the judgments having a traditional status or having been recounted by elders. Does taking testimony to be an independent source of knowledge entail that tradition and elders can provide good epistemic reason to believe an ethical claim? If elders are those with moral virtue, does a reliabilist approach to knowledge entail that one can be justified in believing that one ought to conform to their directives? And if what counts as evidence sufficient to warrant (dis)belief deeply depends on contextual considerations, then could not beliefs about morality formed in the absence of contact with the rest of the globe be justified? Some of the most recent 'social' trends in Western epistemology have been invoked to support fairly 'premodern', even authoritarian, approaches to moral belief formation (Ikuenobe 2006: 175–214), yet another facet of African moral philosophy that should give the inquisitive ethicist working anywhere in the world something to consider.

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