African Morality: With or Without God

STEPHEN NKANSAH MORGAN

STEPHEN NKANSAH MORGAN Holds a PhD in Ethics Studies from the School of Religion, Philosophy & Classics at the University of Kwazulu-Natal in South Africa. He lectures in the Department of Philosophy & Classic at the University of Ghana.

ABSTRACT

Traditional African societies are noted for their religiosity and so one would naturally expect that when it comes to matters of morality they will appeal to some divinities or gods for their moral jurisdiction and interpretation of their moral codes. Yet, according to Wiredu (1992) and Gyekye (1996), this is not true of traditional African societies when it comes to finding the source of their moral codes. For the two, an appeal to religion as a source of African moral values is a mistaken position. This paper challenges their position by showing the defects in their arguments and argues that the fabric of traditional African morality may tumble if God or religion is removed as either the source or part of the source.

Introduction

Many people look to religion for moral guidance. The concept of God in the major world religions-Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam-is intimately connected with that of moral goodness. People worship God, in part, because God represents moral goodness (Boss, 1999, p.17).

Traditional African societies have been tagged as 'notoriously' religious[1] and so one would naturally expect that when it comes to

---

[1] John Mbiti is popularly known for using the phrase 'Africans are notoriously religious'. See Mbiti, J. S. (1991). *Introduction to African Religion.* Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers Ltd.

matters of morality they will appeal to some divinities or gods for their moral jurisdiction and interpretation of their moral codes. Yet, according to Kwasi Wiredu (1992) and Kwame Gyekye (1996), the above quotation from Judith Boss is not true of traditional African societies when it comes to looking for the source of their moral code. For the two, an appeal to religion as a source of African moral values is a mistaken position. According to Wiredu (1992) and Gyekye (1996), African moral values do not appeal to religion and as such religious laws and precepts are not the determinant of what is morally right or wrong. What this means is that one should not expect to find the moral norms that govern the behavior and character of traditional African people embedded in religious doctrines or in an appeal to a god.

Gyekye (1996) was of the view that even though the religion of the people has some moral import and influence on their moral choices, it is not the essential determinant for their acting morally or not. Now, if African moral values are not derived from religion or an appeal to a god or divinity, as Gyekye claims, how then do they come to possess their moral values? For Gyekye, the answer to this question is that African moral values, for him, are derived "from the experiences of the people in living together, or in trying to evolve a common and harmonious social life" (Gyekye, 1996, p.57). This means that African moral values are essentially 'socialistic' and 'humanistic' in character. Socialistic in the sense that their moral norms are derived as a result of their relation with each other as members of a community, and humanistic in the sense that they judge the rightness or wrongness of a moral act based on the ability of the particular moral act to either promote or degrade human dignity. Thus, in the words of Gyekye:

> In African morality, there is an unrelenting preoccupation with human welfare. What is morally good is that which brings about human well-being-or is supposed, expected, or known to bring about human well-being. (Gyekye, 1996, p.57).

Kwasi Wiredu also corroborates this humanistic position. Commenting on the Akan moral outlook, he asserted that:

> What is good in general is what promotes human interests…thus, the will of God, not to talk of that of any other extra-human being, is logically incapable of defining the good (Wiredu, 1992, p.194).

The above quotes from Wiredu and Gyekye imply that for the traditional African person, an action is right not because it has been ordained or prescribed by the gods as right but rather the rightness of an action is judged on the resulting effect, that is, its ability to promote human well-being. So here, neither the Supreme Being (*Onyankopon*), the smaller gods (*abosom*) nor any other forms of divinities are looked up to as an authority or source of what is morally acceptable or unacceptable. This will therefore imply that the 'Divine Command Theory' (the theory which claims that an action is morally right or wrong only because God or a divinity prescribes it as right or) does not apply in traditional African moral ethics. African moral values, by drawing the rightness or wrongness of an action on its effect or outcome implies a consequentialist theory of morality which generally bases its prescription to a moral act on the after effect of an action. In the traditional African context, the kind of outcome for your act, if it is to be considered morally right, should aim at the promotion or enhancement of human well-being.[2] What arguments led Wiredu and Gyekye to the conclusion that African moral values are social and humanistic in character and as such had no appeal to God or religion?

Gyekye and Wiredu's Argument

One major reason given by Gyekye and Wiredu towards the above

---

[2] It's not aim of this paper to show what constitute human well-being or enhancement. That can make for a different paper because it may divert the focus of this paper which is to dispute the claim by Wiredu and Gyekye that African moral values are not derived from their religion.

conclusion is this: Gyekye (1996) was of the view that African morality could not have its source in an appeal to a divinity because traditional African religion is not a 'revealed' religion like that of the Christian or Islamic religion. Wiredu (1992), similarly, held that African religions do not have institutionalized worship as that of the Christians or the Moslems. In effect, what both Wiredu and Gyekye are saying is that whereas both Christianity and Islam are revealed religions, in the sense that they both claim that the dictates and precepts of their moral code were revealed by God through some individuals (Jesus Christ in the case of the Christian religion and the Prophet Mohammed in the case of Islam), traditional African religions profess no such revelations. This is coupled with the fact that both the Christian and Islamic religions have holy books which contain a list of their moral norms and conducts as revealed by their God through their holy prophets, whereas traditional African religions do not have any holy books which they can use as a source, or an authority of their moral code. Gyekye, therefore, argues that traditional African religions, not being a revealed religion, could not have access to the commandments of God to use as a basis of their moral system. In other words, since traditional African people do not have a handbook given to them by God or their gods, there is no way traditional African people could have come to the conception of the morally good and bad if they had to depend on God or the gods for them. Thus, Gyekye emphatically claims that:

> Traditional African religion is not a revealed religion and therefore the people do not—how could they? —have access to the commandments of God to use as a basis of their moral system. (Gyekye, 1996, p.56)

The implications of these arguments by both Wiredu and Gyekye may, upon first encounter, appear grievous to someone who has for all his life time looked up to the gods as the ultimate source of all moral codes without whom there could be no conception of what is right or wrong. This person will be baffled to know that, given the arguments raised by Gyekye and Wiredu, morality can thrive in traditional African societies even if they had no beliefs in the existence of gods or in the Supreme

being, that is, you can expect a traditional African to act morally or have knowledge of moral norms even if there were no gods he so much reveres.

Gyekye and Wiredu think this is possible. For them, what makes it possible is that traditional African morality has its basis in what promotes the well-being of the people and not necessarily in what this or that god says. Wiredu and Gyekye's arguments could be further supported by the argument that given the reality that there exists the belief in the existence of plurality of gods in the traditional African metaphysical world outlook there are bound to be some amount of conflict when it comes to deciding whether some actions are morally acceptable or not. Traditional Africans, apart from the belief in the existence of a Supreme God, also believe in countless number of smaller gods whose spirits are believed to dwell in nature. Thus, the spirits of these gods are to be found in trees, stones, mountains, rivers, in the sun, the moon and in the sea. Apart from gods that belong to one entire community there are also gods that belong to clans and families (nuclear), as well as the existence of personal gods. Because of this multiplicity of gods, there are bound to be inconsistencies to what constitutes a morally right action if traditional African societies were to rely on the dictates of their gods as their source of moral code. Thus, it makes sense to look for the source of their morality outside of their religion.

I think here readers should note that I am not concerned with the metaphysical question of whether these gods actually exist or not in this paper. This needs not to be established in order to make sense of this discourse. This discourse is only making a philosophical analysis of what is already held or believed to be true by traditional African societies. Let us now examine this humanistic alternative as suggested by Wiredu and Gyekye as the source of African moral values further.

Wiredu and Gyekye's Humanistic and Socialistic Position

Traditional African societies are known to be communal in nature, such that they think and act always in the community's interest rather than in their own personal interest. Thus, in traditional African societies there is

some close affinity among family members which create a strong sense of belonging and solidarity among individuals in the family, which further extends to the rest of the community at large. There is also direct community participation in the affairs of the community and everyone shows or is expected to show some altruistic concern for his or her neighbour. In these communal societies everything done must be done towards the promotion of the common good which is similar to the good of all.[3]

Wiredu and Gyekye held that given such social formation where everything is done towards the good of all, it only makes sense to say that the promotion of the common good or that which interests all is also the source of the people's moral code. Thus, one can expect that the people's moral conduct or behavior is guided by the principle of the promotion of human wellbeing. Gyekye (1997) referred to this as the 'ethic of responsibility' of which he meant "a caring attitude or conduct that one feels one ought to adopt with respect to the well-being of another person or other persons" (Gyekye, 1997, p.66). He added that such responsibilities include the responsibility to help others in distress, the responsibility to show concern for the welfare of others, the responsibility not to harm others, and so on. Gyekye believed that in traditional African societies, bringing up children to feel that they have these responsibilities towards others is part of the whole process of socialization, moral and character formation.

Despite these arguments given by Wiredu and Gyekye to explain why they think African morality can prevail without an appeal to a god, it is my position that both Wiredu and Gyekye have belittled the important

---

[3] For a more vivid description of the features of a traditional communal society and for a better appreciation of the notion of common good as understood in traditional communitarian African societies see Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and Modernity*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 35-76.

role that God, the gods and other divinities play in the moral affairs of traditional African people.

The Problem with Gyekye and Wiredu's Position

A morality based on humanism, as argued by Gyekye and Wiredu, suggests a consequentialist approach to morality and as such faces all the difficulties that any consequentialist moral theory might face. For example, do traditional African people have in mind the entire consequence of all their moral actions in every moral decision they make? If no, how then are they able to tell the overall or immediate effect of their action on humanity or even on their immediate community? In practice, this will become a major headache for any person making a moral decision if we are to go by Gyekye and Wiredu's approach. This is because a consequentialist theory does not take into account your intention to do good by your action but only the end result of your action which for Gyekye and Wiredu, should be geared towards the promotion of human well-being.

Similarly, Wiredu and Gyekye's humanistic perspective of morality suggests that everyone in the society will have to know what exactly promotes human well-being or at least have a common notion of what constitutes human well-being. This is highly improbable since every individual has his or her own definition of what should constitute human well-being. This may lead to having contingent moral rules that treat each moral case differently based on your estimation of what constitutes human well-being In effect, Gyekye and Wiredu's humanistic perspective of morality as the source of traditional African moral code, if true, will be a burdensome approach to adopt in making moral decisions.

In a similar outcome, if traditional Africans are to judge the moral rightness or wrongness of their action on its ability to further human well-being or not, then it will mean, as already established, that they are able to tell which actions are moral only after the action has been effected and the resulting consequence is evaluated. If the consequence was able to promote the well-being of humanity or the common good then the action is judged to be moral. If this is accepted then it will make what is acceptable as moral and immoral be determined upon a try and

error basis. This is because no two moral situations are ever the same in every facet. No matter what, there will be some distinguishing contingencies that will not allow one to use the same moral yardstick for two moral situations. And since the two moral situations are different in a way or two, they might lead to two different overall outcomes depending on the choice made. This will mean that an individual faced with a particular moral dilemma has to compare his current situation with other past situation(s) he considers similar and upon that decide on how or how not to act in other to enhance human well-being. Since no two moral dilemmas are entirely the same, the moral agent will have to resort to his own calculations and predictive prowess most of the time in making moral decisions. He will then have to wait to see how events turn out after making his moral choice before he can either tap himself on the back for a job well done or hate himself for making a bad moral choice. All these add to the burdensomeness of Gyekye and Wiredu's humanistic moral perspective on African morality.

Let us now move on from the resemblance the humanistic moral perspective has with other forms of consequentialist moral theory in regards to its problems and challenges to other important challenges it faces. One major argument raised by Gyekye and Wiredu to show that religion is not a source of traditional African moral values is the fact that African traditional religion is not a revealed religion or an institutionalized worship and as such there are no books in which one could find the stipulated moral will of the gods, as it is for the Christian or Islamic religion. The fact that there are no written moral codes in traditional African societies may be undeniably true, yet, one does not need a revealed or holy book from God in order for God to be the source of one's morality. African Traditional religions hold the Supreme Being as the source of all goodness. God or the Supreme Being is seen to be the ultimate good, as Gyekye (1996) himself conceded: "God is held by Africans not only to be the overlord of human society but also to have a superbly moral character" (Gyekye, 1996, p.57). One can logically infer from this that God will naturally expect His creation to pursue good as well. As such, a person without any revealed or holy book from God can commit himself into doing morally right actions since doing so, in his view, constitutes what God will expect from him. Thus, he does good

deeds like giving to the poor, helping the weak and welcoming strangers to his place of abode not because he has read in a holy book somewhere that God says he should do them, but because he has belief in the existence of a Supreme Being who represents perfect goodness and who will expect all who revere Him to seek to be good as well. Here, the individual source of morality is found simply in his belief in the perfect goodness of God and in his belief that God rewards good deeds. He does not need a written book to know what individual acts God approves to be good or not good but in every moral situation he asks himself the question—what will a good God expects from me? —and then does it. It is therefore possible for African moral values to thrive just on the belief in the perfect goodness of God. It will therefore be erroneous to hold that without a revealed holy book of a sort or some form of institutionalism, it will be impossible for one to derive the source of one's moral code from God. Thus, Beld (2001) was spot on to note that:

> …because DCT (Divine Command Theory) is silent on the way the divine will is made known, it does not follow from the theory that God's commands are exclusively mediated through Scripture or the Church (Beld, 2001, p.397).

A likely question that arises is, how anybody will come to know what a good God expects of him if he does not have any idea of what 'goodness' is all about? Here, I resort to a popular Akan proverb that translates 'everyone is a child of God, no one is a child of the earth'. Now, if everyone one is a child of God, then we expect that everyone will bear some attributes of God in them. As mentioned above, the Akans perceive God as the ultimate source of goodness. This, Gyekye himself pointed out:

> …God is considered to be good. Thus, the proverb, goodness is the prime characteristic of God (*papa ye Nyame su a edi kan*). God is identified with goodness (*Nyame ne papa*) (Gyekye, 1995, p.136).

So, it is possible that man has this attribute of goodness in him inherited

from his creator. As another popular Akan proverb goes, *obi nkyere akora nyame* (no one directs a child to God), so in effect no book is needed as such to teach man what constitutes a morally good act.

Again, Gyekye (1996) acknowledges that traditional African societies are very religious. In fact, he held that it is because of the overwhelming influence of religion in almost every aspect of their lives that had made many to commit the error into thinking that the source of their moral values also lies in their religion. The religious attitude of traditional African societies has also been corroborated by many other African philosophers. If religion had always affected traditional African people in almost every aspect of their lives then it creates a problem for Wiredu and Gyekye's theory that religion is not a source of African moral values. It makes it difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to test the truth in their thesis. That is, how are we able to tell that truly the source of African moral values is found not in their religion but rather in their humanism, when one agrees that the totality of their lives is highly influenced by their religion? Surely, the religious attitude of the traditional African people, the fact that religion is believed to permeate every aspect of their lives, makes it difficult for anyone to draw that sharp divide between what has religious influence from those that does not. Based on this, it makes sense to say that the religion of the African people or their belief in God, to a large extent, has some influence as a source of their moral code.

In all fairness to Gyekye, I must acknowledge, as noted earlier, that Gyekye gives some credence to the role religion plays in the lives of traditional African people but only limits it to the motivation to act moral. He held that "religion constitutes parts of the sanctions that are in play in matters of moral practice" (Gyekye, 1996, p.58). That is to say, even though religion is not the people's source of morality, it plays a vital role in motivating the people to act morally. Gyekye may be quite right to say religion does play a motivating role in making people act morally but I argue that a person's relation with God does not only provide him with moral motivation, it also enables him to see his moral obligations as derived from that particular relation. This is what seems to prevail in the African context. When faced with a moral dilemma, it is more practically conceivable for the African to think of what might be acceptable by the

gods than what will further human well-being.

What makes this position more plausible is the existence of taboos in traditional African societies as part of their moral norms.
Taboos are certain behaviors or activities that are supposed to be avoided in society. There is, for example, a taboo that says 'do not have sex on the farm or with a woman in her menstrual period'. Another taboo says 'a menstruating woman should not go to the stream or step into a river or cook for the husband' and a whole lot of others were said to attract punishment from the gods in the form of curses that could affect not just the perpetuator of the 'abominable' act but the entire family, and sometimes generations yet unborn. At other times, the repercussions could extend to the entire community.

One can clearly see the humanistic import of some of these taboos. Not having sex on the farm, for example, may help the people to prevent snake bites and perhaps respect the dignity they give to sex. Again, not allowing menstruating women in the streams and rivers could prevent the spread of communicable diseases since the rivers and streams are the people's source of drinking water. Despite these humanistic values found in these taboos, one will however be belittling the import of the gods here if one assumes that the gods were just used as motivation to prevent the people from breaking the taboos. The gods are to the people more than just a motivation to act morally. They are also seen as authenticators and validators of these taboos. The gods' ascription to the taboos makes the taboos credible and acceptable. This is, perhaps, the reason why when someone breaks a taboo he does not just go and say I am sorry to the chief or to the victim but have to undergo certain rituals to pacify the gods. He does so because he has not just failed to enhance human well-being but has broken a sacred law of the gods.

Now a dilemma that comes as a result of the argument above is this: if traditional African religion is not a revealed religion, such that there is no holy book telling the people what they should do and not do, how can the people have access to taboos especially if I am claiming these taboos are seen by the people as God-given? Herein lies the importance of the priests in African traditional societies. The priests are seen by the people as the servants of the gods. The people, in fact, believe that the gods are able to possess some individuals and use them to do their

bidding. Thus, the priests serve as direct link between the people and the gods, as well as, the ancestors.[4] These priests are therefore seen as custodians of the moral expectations of the gods and are consulted when the need arises. They are also the final determinant of what punishment to be given to the person who breaks a taboo even after the chiefs and elders' verdicts are appealed. Abdulai (2000) reports of two African proverbs that actually corroborate this; the first one says "any case that God has settled no man can subvert (Abdulai, 2000, p.25)" while the second reads "God's case no appeal (Abdulai, 2000, p.66)." These two proverbs demonstrate that God was considered to have the final say in any moral matters. The people believed they could come to know of God's verdicts through the priests. If the humanistic claim was enough then one would expect the people to just rely on the effect of the action and give their verdict and then these two proverbs will have no relevance to the people.

Furthermore, despite the fact that most African proverbs concerning morality use nature as its reference, it is also possible to find many African proverbs on morality that have God used as reference. For example, consider this Akan proverb that speaks about humility: *obosomakotere se: oye ahobrease ma onyakopon nti na obiara nkyen na ahode*e. This proverb, according to Appiah (2000), literally translates "the chameleon says: he is humble before God; therefore no one is wealthier than he is (Appiah, proverb number 1153, p. 228)." Thus, this proverb, in effect, implies that God rewards the humble.

Another example of a moral proverb with God as its reference is this proverb that speaks against cheating: *wo bu koto kwasia a, onyame hwe wo to*. Appiah (2000) literally translates this proverb to mean "if you

---

[4] Ancestors are considered to be spirits of certain dead relations who are believed to have led an exemplary life during their time spend on earth. These ancestral spirits are believed to have both the experience of mortal life and spiritual life having lived in the world of man and now in the world of the spirits. They are also known to have supernatural powers to bless or curse the living. They are also believed to be protectors of clans against bad omens and spirits.

cheat a crab, God sees your bottom." This is a proverb that suggests that God abhors cheating and sees everything we do.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have, in this paper, shown that Wiredu and Gyekye have belittled the important role traditional religion and their gods play in the making of African moral values. Religion may not theoretically be the entire source of their moral code, yet its role is not to be relegated to just a motivation to act morally but instead, religion is to be seen as somewhat part of the people's sources of morality in practice. Traditional African religion may not be a revealed religion, nevertheless the people do look to the Supreme Being and smaller gods for answers to their moral dilemmas. "Religious attitudes are indeed a powerful source of morally good and praiseworthy behavior" (to borrow the words of Ton Van Den Beld),[5] for the traditional African people. The suggestion by Wiredu and Gyekye that African moral values only have their source in humanism, that is, in the promotion of human well-being will not be adequate or a true reflection of what actually is the case. To take God or religion away from morality for the traditional African people will bring down the whole moral system, at least not until the people learn to properly distinguish religion from other aspect of their lives. Thus, I am in agreement with Ton Van Den Beld (2001) assertion that:

> …if a theistic metaphysic is given up and replaced by a naturalist atheist metaphysic, this move cannot but have repercussions in the moral thought which was supported by it (Beld, p.390-391).

African moral codes cannot stand entirely on their own without their religion, without a belief in a God who is seen to be the embodiment of goodness.

---

[5] Beld, T. V. D. (2001), p. 385.

Bibliography

Abdulai, D. (2000). African Proverbs: Wisdom of the Ages. Accra. Dawn of a New Day Publications.

Appiah, P. (2000). Bu Me Be: Akan Proverbs. Accra. The Centre for Intellectual Renewal.

Beld, T. V. D. (2001). 'The Morality System With or Without God'. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 4. Is Theological Ethics Relevant for Philosophers?

Boss, J. A. (1999). *Analyzing Moral Issues.* California. Mayfield Publishing Company.

Gyekye, K. (1995). *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Philadelphia. Temple University Press.

Gyekye, K (1997). *Tradition and Modernity*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

Mbiti, J. S. (1991). *Introduction to African Religion*. Nairobi. East African Educational Publishers Ltd.

Williams, B. (1972). *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Wiredu, K. (1992). 'Moral Foundation of an African Culture'. In Wiredu and Gyekye (Eds.), *Person and Community*. Washington D. C., The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy.