African Ethics

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Introduction

In this essay I critically discuss contemporary work in African, that is, sub-Saharan, moral philosophy that has been written in English (I largely 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, after which I consider some of the major issues in normative ethics, then discuss some of the more noteworthy research in applied ethics, and finally take up the key issues in metaethics. My aim is to highlight discussions that should be of interest to an ethicist working anywhere in the world, focusing on ideas characteristic of the sub-Saharan region that are under-appreciated not merely for the purpose of comparative ethics, but also for substantive ethical argumentation. In particular, I maintain that there are kinds of communitarian and vitalist approaches to morality commonly held by sub-Saharan philosophers that international scholars should take seriously as genuine rivals to utilitarian, Kantian, contractarian, and care-oriented outlooks that dominate contemporary Euro-American-Australasian discussion of ethically right action.

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 among the beliefs and practices of the black peoples below the Sahara desert (thereby excluding peoples of Arab, Indian, or European descent and culture). For a feature to be salient among sub-Saharan cultures implies neither that it is utterly exclusive to them, nor that it is completely exhaustive of them. It means merely that certain properties have been recurrent among 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 been oral cultures and hence lacking in 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 actively imparted Christian intellectual history.

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It was only after independence from colonial powers, which took place largely in the 1950s–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 have only just begun to appear (Iroegbu and Echekwube 2005; Murove 2009).

The classic, and somewhat dated, texts in the field were written by Tempels (1952) and Mbiti (1969). Tempels was a Belgian missionary who sought to make sub-Saharan metaphysical and moral beliefs comprehensible to a colonial mindset, but 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 United Kingdom, and 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 them, but often to 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 African 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 to become acquainted with non-European interpretations of the world, particularly those of their own peoples. These days, however, one often finds more argumentative, critical, and more generally robustly philosophical approaches. For example, one frequently encounters texts in which the more attractive norms of a given African culture are articulated and applied to contemporary issues in business, medicine, and the like (see below). Other texts appeal to core moral principles that could be used to judge certain African practices to be matters of mere etiquette or to be downright immoral (Wiredu 1996: 61–77; Gyekye 1997: 242–58). And still other works are seeking to develop and defend comprehensive African moral philosophies that warrant critical comparison with the utilitarian, Kantian, and Aristotelian grand ethical traditions in the West (Gyekye 1997; Ramose 1999; Bujo 2001; Shutte 2001; Metz and Gaie 2010).

Normative Ethics

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." One encounters such phrases in a variety of societies, ranging from those in South Africa to Kenya in East Africa and Ghana in West Africa. While these phrases do connote the empirical or even metaphysical idea

that one needs others in order to exist, 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 1984; Gyekye 1997: 48–52). Or, using the influential term employed among Zulu, Xhosa, and Ndebele speakers in South 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). Insofar as a large swathe 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 (*see* ANCIENT ETHICS; PERFECTIONISM).

However, unlike the self-realization approaches that are dominant in the West, contemporary African philosophers often spell out what constitutes 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 non-derivative 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 in terms of positive relationships with other beings.

By and large (but not without exception), one develops one's humanity just insofar as one enters into community with others, particularly with other humans, but also with "spiritual" agents who cannot be seen (Magesa 1997; Ramose 1999; Bujo 2001). Traditionally speaking, one's selfhood is partly constituted by communal relationships with ancestors, viz., morally wise progenitors of a clan who are thought to have survived the death of their bodies and to continue to interact with those in this world. In addition, there are variants of African ethics according to which one's personhood is also constituted by relating positively with animals or other facets of nature, particularly those imbued with spiritual significance such as totems.

Although indigenous African norms are often thickly supernatural (albeit in "immanent" forms that differ from much Western philosophy of religion), one need not accept any of the nonphysical metaphysics in order to find something attractive in the ethics. The idea that morality is a matter of realizing one's true self, which one can do only 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). That is, the sense of "community" 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 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 accepted by a group to ground moral obligations (*see* COMMUNITARIANISM). For one major contrast, a typical Afro-communal approach prizes mutual aid, including substantial unassumed and special positive duties to help others (*see* BENEVOLENCE).

Taking such a conception of community as morally basic 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 (*see* FEMINIST ETHICS; CARE ETHICS; SYMPATHY). For one, the African approach also values belonging and cooperative engagement, which are not essential to standard construals 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 interests.

These contrasts should enable the reader to see how a sub-Saharan prescription to realize oneself or to obtain *ubuntu* by prizing community with others also differs from dominant Western moral theories such as Kantianism, contractarianism, and utilitarianism. Some would say that African morality is complex or particularistic so as to be inconsistent with the search for a single basic and comprehensive principle that would capture what all wrong actions have in common (cf. Ramose 1999; Ikuenobe 2006: 116–18). However, others would point to several tentative formulations of such principles that one finds in the literature, even if they have not been articulated and defended nearly as systematically as in the contemporary Anglo-American tradition, perhaps because of the newness of professional African moral philosophy and the lack of resources for higher education in the sub-Saharan region.

One such principle is that actions are right insofar as they prize community, construed as the combination of identity and solidarity, and wrong if and only if they fail to do so, and especially to the extent that they express support for the antisocial disvalues of divisiveness (thinking of oneself as separate from others and undermining their ends) and ill-will (trying to harm others and exhibiting *Schadenfreude*) (Metz and Gaie 2010; cf. Shutte 2001). Such a conception of rightness differs from the major players on the global stage. Kantians honor the capacity for autonomy, not people's capacity for community, or the way they have actualized it in the form of a shared way of life among 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 formulation I am aware of grants any 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 moral theory 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, and feminism. Nonetheless, African ethics, as usually philosophically interpreted, differs in important and interesting ways from mainstream Western moral theories.

The most salient category in African ethics is community, but a fairly close runner-up is life, with some sub-Saharan philosophers taking the latter, and not the former, to be morally fundamental. Another proto-moral theory that one will encounter in the literature is the principle that actions are right insofar as they promote life-force (Tempels 1952; Magesa 1997; Bujo 2001). Life-force, as traditionally construed among some 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 spiritual agents have more than humans; and God, as the source of all life-force, has more than anything else. Appealing to this metaphysics, some African philosophers propose a variant of a self-realization ethic according to which one's fundamental moral aim should be to increase one's own life-force, which one can do only by entering into community with others. (If one takes a vitalist principle as basic, then community must play a secondary role when it comes to morality; rather than being constitutive of right action, it will be argued either to facilitate awareness of it or to be a cause of it.)

One will also find less metaphysical forms of vitalism that are at least suggested 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 – 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. Given such physicalist understandings of what counts as "life," or what I suggest one might more aptly call "liveliness," another promising moral principle with an African pedigree is this: actions are right just insofar as they foster (human) liveliness.

Taking liveliness to be the fundamental moral value again differs in intriguing ways from standard Western views that focus on autonomy, rationality, agreement, pleasure, desire-satisfaction, care, or the like. I submit that both the vitalist and communitarian 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 community and then teasing out its implications for a contemporary issue in medicine, business, or politics. One readily encounters 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. Often, the positions taken on these issues consist of playing down the value of autonomy, at least as "individualistically" construed in the West, and defending a requirement to respect 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 is little in terms of quantity, and more sophistication and depth are usually needed in respect of quality (*see* AFRICAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY).

African ethicists have arrived at conclusions on certain topics that differ in fascinating ways from those common in the West. For instance, when it comes to criminal justice, one recurrently finds an approach that focuses neither on deterrence, nor on incapacitation, nor on desert, nor on fairness, nor on censure. Instead, a characteristically African concern for communal relationship includes the judgment that wrong-doing should be responded to by human beings in a way likely to foster reconciliation between the offender, his immediate victims, and the wider community (Magesa 1997: 211, 234–43, 270–6; Ramose 1999: 115–19; *see* RECONCILIATION). Seeking reconciliation need not rule out punishment, but the latter must be likely to rehabilitate the offender or otherwise make it easier for people to re-establish ties with him. In cases where punishment would probably be counterproductive with respect to fostering cohesion, that would be strong reason for humans not to punish (though retribution imposed by spiritual 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 influenced by it (Louw 2006).

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 (Magesa 1997: 115–59; Bujo 2001: 6–7, 34–54; Ikuenobe 2006: 298–302; *see* PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS). 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 moral perspectives.

There are additional areas in applied ethics where typically African conclusions differ in striking ways from standard Western ones. For one final example, consider the issue of confidentiality in a medical context. Suppose that a basic duty either to foster liveliness 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 one's ill health to them, supposing it threatens to impair one's ability to fulfill one's obligations toward them (Kasenene 2000 349–53, 356; Murove 2009 [2005]: 170–1). 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).

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 in 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 a function of God's will is often interwoven with debate about whether a certain African people or group of them believes that they are.

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 the rules 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 community with spiritual 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: 129–46; 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 (*see* EPISTEMOLOGY, MORAL). Here, there are two interesting topics. First, what is the relationship between metaphysics and ethics? The default position among sub-Saharan moral

philosophers is that the latter 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; Ramose 1999; 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 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 epistemically 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.

***See also*:** AFRICAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY; ANCIENT ETHICS; BENEVOLENCE; CARE ETHICS; COMMUNITARIANISM; DEMOCRACY; EPISTEMOLOGY, MORAL; FEMINIST ETHICS; PERFECTIONISM; PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS; RECONCILIATION; SYMPATHY

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