Review

Foundations of morality in Ghana: an ethical inquiry

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Abstract

This article is an ethical inquiry into the source of morality in Ghana. By this method, the article reviews the two main stance in the argument—the humanitarian basis and the religious basis. The article reveals that morality in Ghana has an eclectic foundation. Thus various aspects of the Ghanaian moral system originate from these two sources. Further, the article shows that the Ghanaian moral system is sustained by both the human community and the spirit world. Thus it concludes that morality in Ghana is derived and sustained by both religious experience and the human experience.

Keywords: Morality, Humanity, Brotherhood/Sisterhood, Common good, Humanitarianism.

INTRODUCTION

Generally, the norms of the Ghanaian society are fixed in the ideals and beliefs about what is right or wrong, what is a good or bad character (Mbiti, 1991: 174). These ideals and beliefs shape the conceptions of satisfactory social relations and attitudes held by the members of the society. Again, they give rise to the forms or patterns of behavior that are considered by the members of the society to bring about social harmony and cooperative living, justice, and fairness. The ideas and beliefs about moral conduct are articulated, analyzed, and interpreted by the Ghanaian society in its own context. But what determines this moral context? Can it be said that the context of morality in Ghana is based solely on religion? Or that it is founded solely on human experience? In the following discussion, we will argue that the basis of morality in Ghana is an eclectic one.

The Nature of Morality in Ghana

Like other organized and functioning human communities in Africa, the Ghanaian community generally has ethical values, principles, rules, and taboos that guide social and moral behavior. The concept of sociality 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 general feature of the Ghanaian communitarian society (Mbiti, 1991: 175), mandates a morality that is clearly weighted on duty to others and to the community (Opoku, 1978: 160). Thus it appears that the natural sociality of thehuman being in Ghanaian moral worldview prescribing social ethic also would prescribe the ethic of duty (or, responsibility).A morality of duty is one that requires each individual to demonstrate c oncern for the interests of others   (Gyekye, 2011).   The ethical values of compassion, solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, interdependence, and social well-being, which are counted among the principles of the communitarian morality, are seen to primarily impose duties on the individual in Ghana with respect to the community and its members (cf. Abotchie, 1997: 45).

The nature of morality in Ghana, which appears to be largely humanitarian, social, and duty-oriented rather than rights-oriented morality, does not seem to 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. Opoku (1997: 153) notes that the desirable ideal of this moral system is "social harmony and peace for the good of man and society." In 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 constrained.

The nature of morality in Ghana, therefore, would seek to fold moral duty and moral ideals—the latter being the basis of the so-called supererogatory duty—into one big moral universe inhabitedboth by the morality of duty 'proper,' obligation, and justiceand the morality of love, virtue, compassion, benevolence, and other "moral ideals" (Mbiti, 1991: 176).Such a capacious morality would make no distinction between a morally obligatory act and a morally optional act. If morality is understood to be something that serves (or, should) serve human needs, then, 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 be considered morally optional, to be morally shrugged off or unconscionably set aside.Thus, aspects of Ghanaian ethics—an ethics that seems to be weighted on duty, not on rights—would, in principle, not consider moral duty of any kind as extraordinary, optional, or supererogatory. Rather, human beings become "objects of moral concern (Mbiti, 1991: 176)" implying that our moral sensitivities should be extended to all people, irrespective of their cultures or societies. According to Opoku, "man is never alone and that to be a real human being he must belong to a community…it is only when an individual is in relation with others—in his family, his clan, and society—that he is a full, living human being… (1978: 160)."

There appears, therefore, to be a conceptual tie—perhaps also a practical tie—between the *social ethic* prescribed by the communitarian ethos of Ghanaian morality and the *ethic of duty* mandated by the same ethos. As a result, the ideas and beliefs of the Ghanaian society that bear on ethical conduct have been variously studied. This has led to various speculations regarding the basis of Ghanaian moral awareness. Whereas some (cf. Opoku, 1978: 52; Danquah, 1944: 3; Sarpong, 1972: 41; Busia, 1967: 16) are of the view that religion is the sole source of morality in Ghana, others (cf. Gyekye, 1997: 320; Mbiti, 1970: 141) are of the contrary opinion that humanitarianism is the basis from which all ethical presuppositions are made in Ghana. In succeeding pages, the researchers engage in a discussion about the foundation of Ghanaian moral system as a way of building or forming a concept of rational scheme for understanding the ethos of morality in Ghana.

Religion and Morality

A general study of the Ghanaian society is likely to induce one to conclude that religion deeply permeates all spheres of the Ghanaian life that it cannot be distinguished from secular aspects of life. This is because total life of the community is "wrapped up in religion (Opoku, 1978: 11). Such conclusion has led some scholars to maintain that there is a connection between religion and morality in Ghanaian ethics. At the extreme, the apparent connection between religion and morality in Ghana has been taken by most scholars to mean that Ghanaian moral values and principles solely derive from religion (Opoku, 1978: 152, 153; Danquah, 1944: 3; Sarpong, 1972: 41; Busia, 1967: 16). Opoku, in particular, avers that "religion is a crucial factor influencing moral values; for it is believed that God, the ancestors, and the deities punish those who do not keep the moral code, and reward those who uphold it (1978: 160)."

This claim implies that religion provides the necessary justification for moral values and beliefs, and that moral concepts, such as good, bad, right and wrong, are defined (or, must be defined) in terms of religious prescriptions or commands, such as the Divine Command Theory. In other words, the Ghanaian can only know that an action is wrong or right from the dictates of either the *Supreme Being* or any of the spirit beings such as the *abosom* or the ancestors. Another considerable implication of this position lies in prayer to divinity as substitute for action and decision. Sometimes prayer can be used to gain personal fortitude to resist fear, which can be beneficial on occasions. It also reinforces the attitude that there is no need to understand or be awed by things that are beyond our comprehension. So, instead of seeing*good* in creation without a deity, only impossible *evil* can be seen. Such an attitude reinforces the belief in the supernatural. Thus religion has become a self-reinforcing element in the development and sustenance of morality in Ghana.

Further, such a religiously-based morality implies an easy maintenance of order and nullification of dissent by citing religious grounds. Often this can be achieved by simple peer group pressure. Religious "ethics" are cited in support of many seemingly spurious theories and taboos. The basis of many of these is that the life force is somehow sacred; that life is the sole preserve of the supernatural. Abotchie (1997: 54, 55) has observed

> that the mind of the traditional individual holds him accountable to the omniscient gods for each and every act, thought, or omission to act, whether these are manifested through the norms governing economic or political behavior, or within kinship and marriage norms, or the norms of socialization.

At a personal level, a religiously-driven morality fulfills the role of offering a standard for individual decision-making in the face of ethical dilemmas. In his book, *Can Ethics be Christian*? Gustafson (1977) advances three main ways by which a religiously-based morality achieves this objective. These ways are: the sort of person one is; reasons for being moral; and the impact of religion on the individual's interpretation of particular circumstances of action.

Fundamentally, general aspects of the moral life of individuals flow not from moments of crisis decision-making. Rather, it flows from the habits of character and dispositions they bring to action. Gustafson argues that this duty is achieved very well by a religiously-driven morality. This is true in terms of Ghanaian moral system. For example, thinking of respect for life as the fundamental moral requirement from a deity and to have that value illustrated from one's infancy in folk-stories like the Good Samaritan, stories of Kweku Ananse, and proverbs shape the individual's fundamental personality and style in ways that shape subsequent actions. This, in no small measure, communicates in a powerful and yet-pre-rational way the kinds of persons one should be in the community.

Again, religious ideals, symbols, and communities often serve to provide reasons as to why one should care about being moral. It is true that religion is not alone in doing this. Possible answers may range from being true to one's own rational nature (Kant), because one aspires to human fulfillment (Aristotle), or because keeping one's contract with one's brother is necessary to prevent social chaos and warfare (Hobbes). However, those who are informed by ethical ideals and practices from the religious perspective commonly understand why they should be moral. For such persons, gratitude to *Onyame*, for example, for creating and sustaining the universe often serves as a basic motivating factor for moral actions. Thus the Ghanaian cares about the welfare of the "universe and fellow creatures (Ganusah, 2002: 70)" because the *Supreme Being* has given him or her "stewardship over the created order (Sarpong, 1972)." Moreover, it could be stated that religious symbols, stories, and ideals fill the imagination of religiously sensitive individuals with analogies and metaphors which spontaneously inform their perceptions of the circumstances of action. By means of such interpretation and religiously-colored predispositions, they approach moral choices in particular ways.

However, taking religion as the only source for morality in Ghana seems to be limited in perspective and in practice. Over the years, proponents of this view have been battling with the question, can the irreligious be moral? Though they have attempted possible answers, such answers appear inadequate. For example, if a child has been forbidden to touch or take a particular object earlier on, they know enough to slowly look over their shoulder to see if they are being observed before touching the object in question. There is no need for this behavior to be taught; it is instinctive. Once, however, any form of discipline is applied to modify the child's behavior, the child now gains the capacity within himself to distinguish his or her right behavior from his or her wrong behavior. The choices that are made by an individual from childhood to adulthood are between forbidden and acceptable, kind or cruel, generous or selfish actions. A person may, under any given set of circumstances, decide to do what is forbidden. If this individual possesses moral values, going against them usually produces guilt. On the other hand, there will not be any guilt feeling in individuals who do not possess moral values. Further, the requirements of a religiously-based morality have to be interpreted or judged by one on the basis of one's own moral insights, which may or may not be influenced by religion. Therefore, with or without religion, individuals can be moral.

This is a telling point that implies independence (autonomy) of the moral attitudes of the people with regard to the conduct of the spiritual beings. This is the reason why Busia observed that "The gods are treated with respect if they deliver the goods, and with contempt if they fail....Attitudes to (the gods) depend on their success (that is, the success of the gods), and vary from healthy respect to sneering contempt" (cited in Forde, 1954: 205). The moral disapprobation of the people with regard to the actions—particularly the unsuccessful actions—of the deities, therefore, seems to constitute the ground for the extinction of some of the deities from the Ghanaian pantheon (Busia, 1967). The fact that the behavior of a supernatural being is thus subject to *human* reflections and subsequent censure implies that it is possible for a deity to issue commands that can be considered unethical by the practitioners of indigenous religion. This characterization has made some to suggest that the basis of Ghanaian ethics is independent of religion. Thus it is independent of religious prescriptions and commands.

Human Experience and Morality

Proponents of this human-experience-based morality argue that the Ghanaian ethical system is based on the community and shared life of the Ghanaian. This claim is supported by some scholars of African Religion. The relationship between the individual and the community, or the social nature of the Ghanaian, in particular, has its roots deep in the concept of communitarianism. Mbiti describes this relationship as "I am because we are, since we are therefore I am" (1970: 140). By this statement, Mbiti (1970: 141) seems to suggest that the human being cannot develop and achieve the fullness of one's potentiality "without relationships with other individuals." Only in terms of other people does one become conscious of one's being, duties, privileges, and responsibilities towards oneself as well as towards other

people. What this means is that as far as Ghanaian value system is concerned, the reality of the community takes precedence over the reality of the individual (cf. Opoku, 1978: 160). This is revealed in some Ghanaian proverbs. For example, the Ewe proverb *Atidekametua xo o*(One pole cannot build a house) indicates the need to work together with others. Similarly, the Sisala proverb *Tel dintelningagbele* (When I fall and you fall, it is fair play) stresses on the need to maintain a healthy relationship in the human family. The Dagbaniproverb *Nubilyimikupiikugli*(One finger cannot pick a stone) illustrates the ease with which two or more people do a piece of work together. Further, the Nzema proverb *Bakakoyeengolaengakyiehoayele* (One tree cannot be a forest) also serves to highlight the essence of unity.

According to Menkiti (1984: 171, 172), the primacy of the community over the individual has an epistemic consequence. Thanks to the centrality of the community, the individual has epistemic accessibility to his or her self. Gyekye (1997: 318) notes that the sense of the community that characterizes relations among individuals is a direct consequence of communitarian social arrangements. For Dickson (1977: 4), the sense of the community is what defines the Ghanaian identity. From an ethical perspective, therefore, the primacy of the community means that the community alone constitutes the context, the social, the cultural space, and the moral matrix in which one can fully actualize oneself. In other words, the community is prior to the individual in so far as it is the medium through which one works out and chooses one's goals, life plans, values, and ends. Thus, a person is constituted by "social relationships" in which one necessarily finds oneself (Gyekye, 1997: 320). This constituted social relationship finds expression in the Ghanaian concepts of humanity and brotherhood/sisterhood.

The Concepts of Humanity and Brotherhood/ Sisterhood

These two concepts, humanity and brotherhood/sisterhood, feature prominently in Ghanaian social and moral thought and practice (Gyekye, 1997). They are among the moral or human values that apparently constitute the basic— perhaps the ultimate— criteria that not only motivate but also "justify human actions that positively affect other human beings" in the Ghanaian community (Mbiti, 1991: 174). In Ghanaian terms, humanity is not just an anthropological term; it is also a moral term when it comes to considering the relations between members of the human species (Mbiti, 1991). The Ghanaian concept of humanity is a doctrine that apparently takes human welfare, interests, and needs as fundamental. Indeed, prayers and other acts of worship are full of requests to the supernatural beings for material comforts, such as prosperity, health, and riches

for the wellness of the entire community.

The term 'brotherhood/sisterhood' has come to refer generally to an association of men and/or women with common aims and interests. But the notion of brotherhood/sisterhood is essentially a moral notion, for it is about the relations between individual human beings that make for their own interest and well-being. This finds expression in the indigenous concept of the common good.

The notion of the common good seems obvious in Ghanaian ethics. In Akan moral thought, for example, the notion is expressed most vividly in an art motif that shows a 'siamese' crocodile with two heads but a single (that is, common) stomach. The part of the motif relevant to moral thought is the single stomach, and it is to the significance of this that attracts some attention. The common stomach of the two crocodiles generally indicates that at least the basic interests of all the members of the community are identical. It can therefore be interpreted as symbolizing the *common good,* the good of all the individuals within a society.

The *common good* is not a substitute for the sum of the various individual goods (Opoku, 1978). It does not consist of, or derive from, the goods and preferences of particular individuals. Rather, it essentially embraces the needs that are *basic* to the enjoyment and fulfillment of the life of each individual. It includes peace, happiness or satisfaction (human flourishing), justice, dignity, and respect. Viewed this way, the common good becomes intrinsic to human fulfillment and survival to which all individuals desire to have access (Dickson, 1977). When it is achieved, then the individual *good* is also achieved. Thus, there should be no conceptual tension or opposition between the common good and the good of the individual member of the community; for the *common good* embraces the *goods*—the basic goods—of all the members of the community.

The unrelenting support by people in the Ghanaian community for such moral values such as social justice and equality on one hand, and the spontaneous, universal denunciation of acts such as murder and cruelty on the other hand, are certainly inspired by beliefs in the common good.Similarly, the institutions of various kinds—such as legal, political, economic, and moral in Ghana—are set up in pursuit of certain commonly shared values and goals. This then becomes the common good which the Ghanaian society "desires to achieve for all of its members (cf. Opoku, 1978: 153)." The institution of government or legal system is surely based on a common understanding of the need for societal values of social order and social peace. It is, thus, pretty clear that the common good is that which inspires the creation of a moral, social, political, economic, and legal system for enhancing the well-being of all members of the Ghanaian community.

Reflections

An analytical view of the forgoing presents convincing arguments from both positions that the source of morality in Ghana is either religious or humanitarian. However, we propose an eclectic position. By this position, we argue that Ghanaian morality is founded both on the indigenous religion and the traditional principles determined by indigenous human experience, widely conceived. That a connection exists between religion and morality is conceivable in an environment that is widely alleged to be pervasively religious.

But the nature of the connection needs to be fully clarified. This is because morality exists outside the confines of religion making the irreligious moral in his or her behavior. This implies that indigenous human experience, expressed in indigenous concepts of humanity and brotherhood/sisterhood, has a significant place in determining morality in Ghana.This could explain why human interests and welfare are basic to the thought and action of the people. Such concerns have generally induced a communitarian ethos of moralityin Ghanaian.

Generally, the eclectic foundation of Ghanaian morality creates a communitarian society involving the spirit world within which individual welfare and interestis achieved. The communitarian ethos is also borne out of beliefs about the natural sociality of the human being and the universe. In this vein, social or community life is not optional to the human being in the community. Social life, which follows upon our natural sociality and our stewardship from the *Supreme Being*, involves the individual in a web of moral obligations, commitments, and duties to be fulfilled in pursuit of the common good or the general welfare of the universe as a whole.

Thus, Ghanaian humanitarian ethics, like that of the African, spawns normative requirements of the divine world, 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 to the Ghanaian 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. Moral consciousness, therefore, arises from the conceptions that there are certain basic moral norms and ideals to which the conduct of the individual human being, if he or she is a person created by the *Supreme Being*, ought to conform. One of such conceptions is the recognition in the Ghanaian ethical traditions of all human beings as brothers/sisters by reason of our common humanity as well as the protection of human life for the sake of its incomparable value.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the strong communal ethos of moral values in Ghana has led some scholars of Ghanaian morality to propose that concern for human welfare and interests is the sole basis of the Ghanaian moral system. In contrast, other scholars have also referred to the strong religious characterization of the Ghanaian community itself to argue that religion is the sole source of morality in Ghana. However, a critical study of moral values in Ghana suggests that morality in Ghana is founded on both concern for human welfare and interest and religion. Evidently, both social and religious sanctions enforce morality in Ghana.

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