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Humane-Welfarism Approach as the Basis of Morality in African Thought

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The paper seeks to assess moral theories and the intellectual foundation of morality and to make the further claim that forgetting human wellbeing may be unjustifiable in considering what constitutes morality in African thought

Design/Methodology/Approach: The approach used in this study is conceptual and a critical analysis to evaluate and explore relevant arguments to accomplish the arguments proposed.

Findings: It is argued that there is a strong relationship between the concepts of humanity, religion, and society, which cannot be separated,

Implications/Originality/Value: The paper reveals that morality has a humanistic foundation rather than a religious one.The paper concluded that African ethics prioritizes the welfare of people by considering the humanistic basis of African ethics as explained by Kwame Gyekye and KwasiWiredu.

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1. Introduction

One of the enduring issues in African philosophy is the question of what constitutes morality, as there are numerous justifications for various theories, including consequentialism, humanity, religion, and reason. This paper seeks to assess these proposed elements as the intellectual foundation of morality and to further claim that forgetting human well-being may be unjustifiable in considering what constitutes morality in African thought. The survival and well-being of humans are proposed in the study as the humanistic foundation for African morality. The approach used in this study is conceptual and a critical analysis to evaluate and analyze relevant arguments to accomplish the arguments proposed. Not forgetting that there is a strong relationship between the concepts of humanity, religion, and society, which cannot be separated, the approaches adopted reveal that morality has a humanistic foundation rather than a religious one. This paper concluded that African ethics prioritizes the welfare of people by considering the humanistic basis of African ethics as explained by Kwame Gyekye and KwasiWiredu.

Concerning the concept of morality in Africa, one of the issues that has been successful in garnering attention is the question of the foundation of morality in the African worldview. Different points of view regarding the origin of morality in the African thinking system have been critically defended on a variety of grounds. It can be concluded that morality is the reason why African society has survived for so long. KwasiWiredu (1998, 337) emphasizes the importance of morality when he asserts that any community that lacks even a semblance of morality must fall apart.This statement is implicated in the view that no society can survive without a moral instrument. So, one might ask, what is the foundation of this morality in African thought? Or what is the cornerstone of African morality? Finding the foundation of morality is one of the goals of ethics. Understanding the underlying principles of African moral systems is the aim of this essay.

Various thinkers, including BolajiIdowu (1962), John Mbiti (1969), and Moses Makinde (1988), suggest that African morality is based on religious beliefs. According to these scholars, morality and religion are interconnected, and both theories revolve around the value of human life. However, some scholars like Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye have strongly opposed this idea and argue that African morality is rooted in humanity, community, reason, and other aspects. In other words, by rejecting the religious basis of African societies, they offer substitute explanations for the origins of morality in Africa.For Wiredu (1983, 13), as noted by SegunGbadegesin (1991, 68), at least for the Akan culture of Ghana, the moral outlook is "logically independent of religion." SegunGbedegesin's arguments on the foundation of morality in traditional African thought resonate with the views and position of Wiredu and Gyekye. Gbadegesin (1991, 77) asks the question, if we agree that religion is the basis and foundation of morality in Africa as argued by theologians and some philosophers, does it not imply that people cannot be moral or be morally responsible without religion? For him, it is plausible to assert that one could be morally responsible without necessarily being religious. Just as he asked, is it the case that we do not have people who are bothered about spiritual issues among the traditional Yoruba (Gbadegesin 1991, 77)? Oni (2023), however, also makes the case in his work that humans are made up of moral, intellectual, spiritual, and bodily components. Human creation in the image and likeness of God demonstrates his dignity, and since he is the only free, creative, and purposeful dynamic in the universe, man can choose his moral code based on how he interacts with other members of his community. One can assert that there is no firm consensus regarding the morality of Africans because of the differing perspectives and viewpoints. As a result, this paper will concentrate on African morality in its philosophical framework. To reach a definitive conclusion, a variety of arguments and viewpoints about the theoretical underpinnings of the African thought systems will be taken into consideration.

2. An Understanding of African Moral Theory

In the past, some foreigners wrongly believed that Africans lacked a moral compass and were unable to distinguish between right and wrong. A well-known example is Placid Temples (1952), who claimed that African people are morally illiterate and do not adhere to universal moral codes. Nevertheless, Wiredu (1998) argued that any society that lacks a moral basis is destined to fail and collapse

African ethics, according to Omoregbe (1993), is a scientific study that examines what is considered right and wrong in human conduct from an African perspective. Therefore, African ethics is presented as scientific because it evaluates, investigates, and questions moral concepts, principles, and human behavior within the frameworks of African moral theory. It also examines the nature of these moral concepts and the reasoning behind their rightness or wrongness. African ethics can be defined as character-based ethics, which asserts that an individual's character is the most essential aspect of their moral existence. In the view of Thaddues Metz (2022, 114), "a moral theory counts as African if it is informed, not so much by Western cultures, but rather by many of the long-standing ethical beliefs and practices of a variety of peoples in the large sub-Saharan African region." It is believed, according to Yoruba tradition, that a person's moral worth is determined by his character – *iwa*- regardless of whether they are good or bad. This concept is centered on an individual's character and behavior. To some philosophers and theologians, African religious beliefs are the source of what is known as African ethics.

While it is worthy of note to recognize the importance placed on humans in Africa, it is also crucial to acknowledge the existence of multiple ethical principles across various cultural groups and communities throughout Africa. The preservation of social order and self-actualization are two key focuses of human ethics. All communities, including those in Africa, have their definition of morality. Generally, it is a set of laws and customs that are meant to maintain social order and help individuals achieve self-actualization. Morality is seen as a tool to reach self-actualization, which is the goal of every community. The laws are used to peacefully adjust individual interests to those of the community. According to Wiredu (1995), the African moral system aims to improve the peaceful coexistence of society's members by methodically lining up their disparate interests; in other words, African ethics aims to line up an individual's interests with those of society members. It follows that the primary tenet of African ethics is that man cannot exist alone and that it is not about "me," but rather "us," or "ours," about the shared spirit that drives Africans forward – *Cognatus Sum, ergo sumus*, which means "I am related, therefore we are," Bujo (2001). Studies from differing scholars have shown that African ethics place a premium on the importance of the communal spirit. This means that every individual in the society is responsible for contributing to the well-being and survival of the community. This further suggests that the community prioritizes the best interests of the community over individual interests and avoids any actions that could potentially harm or endanger it. On the African moral theory based on communalism, Desmond Tutu (1999, 35), a renowned and distinguished religious leader, has this to say:

> "... a person is a person through other people." It is not "I think, therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong." I participate, I share... harmony, friendliness, community are great goods. Social harmony is for us the *summumbonum* – the greatest good.

The majority of ethical principles in African communities are passed down through oral traditions across generations, and these principles remain largely unchanged over time. According to Ayantayo (1999), certain positive principles should be followed to maintain a healthy social relationship. These principles include hard work, dedication, kindness, thankfulness, honesty, loyalty, and adherence to one's duty. On the other hand, Brandt (1961) identified several negative principles, including deception, exploitation, hostility, oppression, and irresponsibility, which should be avoided. These negatively perceived principles still fall within the discourse of morality as morality is about the good and the bad, the right and wrong. These principles are believed to be socially constructed to influence how people behave towards each other.

3. The Idea of Humanism conceptualized

The quest for morality is more concerned with the survival of humanity; however, the word humanity is indistinguishable to man. Jacques Maritain (1938, xii), as noted by Awe Solomon (2024), avers that "humanism is an unclear term. It is obvious that whoever uses the word immediately introduces a whole metaphysic, and that the concept of humanism will have completely different implications depending on whether or not we believe that there is something in human nature that transcends time and has a personality whose deepest needs are greater than the order of the universe."

The Humanist Magazine (2022) presents an explicit explanation of what Humanism entails:

> Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion... Free of supernaturalism, it recognizes human beings as a part of nature and holds that values- religious, ethical, social, or political- have their source in human experience and culture. Humanism thus derives the goals of life from human need and interest rather than from theological or ideological abstractions and asserts that humanity must take responsibility for its destiny.

It is evident from the explanation above that humanism is centered on affirming the humanity of people and that all values stem from the presence of people. Thus, humanism is a way of life that prioritizes and considers the well-being of all people over the well-being of a presumed god or gods. It places a strong emphasis on kindness and understanding for people. It is a philosophy that strives for a decent existence and is unaffected by theism or the impact of supernatural concepts.

Humanism is the ideology that views human well-being, interests, and needs as important in the cultural setting of Africa. Corliss Lamont (1997, 16) unequivocally states that:

> In this sophisticated and disillusioned era, Humanism emphatically rejects, as psychologically naïve and scientifically unsound, the widespread notion that human beings are moved merely by self-interest. It repudiates the constant rationalization of brute egoism into pretentious schemes on behalf of individuals or groups bent on self-aggrandizement. It refuses to accept the reduction of human motivation to economic terms, to sexual terms, to pleasure-seeking terms, or any one limited set of human desires.

Humanism, in addition to being an anthropological phrase, also refers to a moral idea that takes into account interpersonal relationships within human society. It encourages and defends deeds that benefit other people. All other moral ideas in the African thinking system are drawn from this, which serves as the basis for morality. It advances the well-being, contentment, and safety of people. It is difficult to have a meaningful conversation about morality without considering humanity's wants, interests, and dignity. These characteristics are crucial to morality, making it reasonable to assume that humankind is the source of morality in Africa. In addition, according to Wiredu, "humanism" is the belief that every human being is valuable. Therefore, the human person is the foundation of all values, including moral worth. Since African ethics are rooted in the shared humanity of its people, character and behavior towards others reflect this understanding.

4. Humanity and Society in Perspective

It is crucial to understand that the primary objective of moral standards, legal frameworks, and codes of conduct is the survival of humanity. These principles were established because it was realized that they are essential for humankind's survival. Thus, among the fundamental question that needs clarification is how individuals can coexist in society with others since it is a fact that humans cannot thrive alone; man needs other people to survive. As Aristotle famously said, “A person who is naturally inclined to socialize is either superior to us or less than human. Human beings are social animals by nature (Mckeon 2009, 67).” For humans to live in a society where relationships are harmonious with other members, it is necessary to establish norms and moral principles. This relationship can be described as mutual dependency, thus, one of the adages asserts that, “A person is not a palm tree to survive alone.” This emphasizes the interdependence of individuals in society and highlights the fact that humans rely on each other to survive

It is reasonable to say that the community is valued more in Africa than the person, particularly in light of person and community in African Traditional thought. This means that every moral precept and choice that needs to be taken takes the community's interests into account. The community's existence is necessary for a person to exist. Since everyone is a part of this common world, the communal world must be given precedence. This helps us understand the dynamics that exist between people and their communities in Africa. However, humanity and its continued existence in the world continue to be the fundamental concerns. Therefore, morality exists to safeguard people's interests and lives rather than to fulfill God's will. According to Wiredu, the assertion that the will of God or any other extra-human being defines what is good is logically impossible. Morality cannot be predetermined by God's will. Therefore, Wiredu denies, for instance, that moral thought has a supernatural basis to any extent. He specifically rejects the notion that moral ideas are based on supernatural beliefs.

In discussing Wiredu's moral theory of African morality, it is essential to consider his concept of welfarism. The doctrine of welfarism asserts that human welfare should be the foremost priority and should take precedence over all other considerations. Wiredu argues that the ultimate aim of any action that an individual may justify should be directed toward the well-being of people and society at large. This indicates that morality is primarily concerned with the welfare of the community's members. The moral notions and principles of a society are primarily focused on the social conditions, wants, and interests of its people concerning their communal lives. As human well-being is the foundation of morality, sayings that emphasize harmonizing interests are crucial reminders of the importance of human welfare. The ultimate goal of moral proverbs is to ensure human welfare, and all moral endeavors are based on the benefit of humans. Because it prioritizes the needs of the individual over those of others, this attitude lends credence to the anthropocentric theory of morality. Morality is based on man, therefore, morality is meaningless without man. African society grows and progresses when good deeds coexist peacefully, while acts of evil cause the community to become decadent. For this reason, peaceful coexistence is desired, which results in the evaluation of good deeds. To put it briefly, Africans oppose anything that could make it more difficult for people and objects to live in harmony inside the community. As a result, African ethics is a humanistic morality that is focused on and concerned with the welfare of people.

This brings us to a point where we may discuss the universality of morality; that is, the idea that all morality has as its ultimate purpose the belief that people are the highest ideals of existence and ends in and of themselves thereby giving us acceptable objectives like a peaceful and harmonious society, human happiness, human survival, and human well-being. One can highlight this idea of morality's universality by citing Bewaji's (2004) assertion that “the pursuit of a balance of individual, with communal wellbeing” is the source of morality and ethics in African societies. Accordingly, African morality sought to uphold everyone's rights and ensure that no one was left behind in promoting communal life. Therefore, the concept of morality promotes the equality of all people in society. There have been arguments for and against a variety of problems that are considered to be necessary for a proper understanding of the basis of African morality.

5. Humanity as the Basis of Morality in Africa Thought System

Humanity in its generic notion entails putting humanity at the center of all decision-making; in other words, every choice or action will take into account how it will affect humanity. The defense of humanity is perceived as a kind of criticism of religion as the source of morality. Distinguished academics espousing this viewpoint primarily contended that African moral conceptions, theories, and ideas are not dependent on supernatural forces but rather are thought to have their roots in humanistic conceptions. They contend that the effects of an activity on the interests and well-being of people decide what can be deemed good or harmful. Good deeds include things like kindness, fairness, activities that lead to happiness or peace, integrity, love, respect, and so on. This clarifies why it is desirable to take actions that advance human welfare and interest, while it is bad to take actions that jeopardize those goals.

According to Wilson (1971), African morality is based on living in harmony with one's neighbors and kin and fulfilling one's obligations to them.According to the African view, moral values thus spring from the fundamental existential circumstances in which people arrange and carry out their lives to achieve peace. Africans' perceptions of human nature, relationships, society, goals, and the meaning of life with all of its emotional facets influence and develop their morality. According to Wiredu (1998), in traditional Africa, morality is defined as what is decent for man and what gives him and his group respect, dignity, satisfaction, prosperity, and joy. What causes suffering, poor luck, and shame is what is ethically wrong.

This implies that concern for the welfare and well-being of people is the basis of all African moral beliefs because it centers moral ideals on man; this is sometimes referred to as the anthropocentric basis. As stated by Bewaji (2004), “the pursuit of a balance of individual with communal well-being is the wellspring of morality and ethics in African

society." This implies that since morals and ethics are the foundation of human rights, they are safeguarded by them. Consequently, morality evolved to ensure humankind's continued existence. Human life has a worth that transcends other considerations.

Thus, humanity is the core of all that is morally and ethically right. It should be underlined that the place of mankind, which is stressed in the foundation of morality, is being considered rather than the place of gods. According to Gyekye, morality in traditional African communities emerges from interpersonal relationships and is fundamentally social. This implies that morality would not exist if there were no such thing as human civilization. By implication, morality is a product of human existence alone; hence, humanity is the foundation of African morality. African societies develop their moralities via insight and knowledge of human nature, human goals, human interactions, and human life values.

6. Conclusion

This work concludes that the African thought systems consider humanistic foundation for morality as preferable to other systems after carefully weighing the pros and cons of each. References to Wiredu and Gyekye's view are given significant weight in the discussion of arguments supporting the humanistic perspective over other considerations as the foundation of African morality. It is important to highlight that "humanism" in this sense is understood in light of the previously proposed premise. This is because all other bases are found to be interwoven since they all have the same end in mind, which is to safeguard human well-being. It is impossible to discuss the concept of "humanism" as the foundation of morality without taking into account the communalistic relationships that exist among Africans, their religious perspective, which compelled them to be moral, their rationality, which led to the development of morality, and their consequentialist perspective on morality. The main contention is that African morality is based on the idea that man is the center of emphasis rather than on supernatural forces. The quest to distinguish between right and wrong to achieve a harmonious human existence in society gave rise to morality in every extant society. It should be mentioned that the influence of all other reasons on the foundation of African morality cannot be disputed.

To refute the widely held belief that African morality is founded on religion, Wiredu and Gyekye's view on the indispensability of culture and mutual social relationships support the view that African morality is predicated on human collective existence, togetherness, shared identity, shared values, solidarity, harmony, and cooperation with one another other. This aligns with the submission of Thaddues Metz (2022, 112) when he comments briefly that "the preferred philosophical interpretation of African values is communal, placing harmonious or friendly relationships at the heart of right action. They both believed that the well-being and interests of humans should always come first while constructing morality in Africa. It follows that the moral worth of humanity is determined by the consequences of its deeds.

In Africa, the moral code is centered on the welfare of humanity. The objective of every moral principle, concept, and notion is the well-being of people in society. According to Wiredu's theories of African ethics, human well-being is an essential presupposition of all morality, and every moral endeavor is a particular form of pursuit of human well-being (1996:65). Religion and this moral underpinning are distinct. It's crucial to remember that African morality and religion are not mutually exclusive. The people's perceptions of human nature, relationships, society, goals, and the meaning of life with all of its emotional facets all influence and shape African morality.

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