

# **A PHILOSOPHICAL EVALUATION OF SOPHIE OLUWOLE'S CONCEPT OF MORALITY AND KANTIAN ETHICS AS IMPERATIVE FOR AN IDYLIC SOCIETY IN AFRICA**

By

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## **Abstract**

The question of the basis of morality remains one of the perennial problems in human society, while diverse thought systems have come up with different arguments for diverse factors, such as religion, humanity, rationality, and consequentialism, among others. This paper explores the compatibility between the Yoruba concept of morality as presented by Sophie Oluwole and Kant's moral principle as bases for an idyllic society in Africa. To achieve the aim of this study, the methodologies employed include conceptual and critical analysis. A combination of these methods will help to analyze and critically consider other various arguments that are concerned in an attempt to arrive at a reconciliatory state. Using this method, it is gathered that the importation of Kant's ethics as a moral succour is a mere formality because we can find all the ingredients of Kant's ethical principle in Yoruba concept of morality. Also, a relationship is established between the concept of humanity, religion, and society. This relationship is argued to be interwoven and impossible to ignore.

**Keywords:** Morality, Sophie Oluwole, Kant, Idyllic Society, Africa

## **Introduction**

Morality has been a significant issue of debate and a serious matter of concern all over the world in general and in the field of philosophy in particular. It has come under critical reflection and other working tools of philosophy. Ethics as a branch of philosophy has been described as the systematic study of the fundamental principles underlying morality. It also serves as the rationale behind the moral and ethical propositions usually made and used in our social interactions. Thus, determination of the moral principle is a central and painstaking task in moral philosophy and an attempt at identifying the justification of our conducts over many times push us in the uncertainties of the source, the basis, limitations and the rationale behind our moral conduct. The problem of justification of human conducts is coupled with the polarization of western philosophy with that of the Africans. This therefore serves as the basis of the question of philosophy in Africa. Although, morality is a global social issue, it does not however look down on the fact of ethical relativism which is the view that opposes the universality of morality and the universal application of moral principles. This is because ethical relativism delimits the moral values of a given society to another. Nevertheless, there are universal moral rules and judgments that are not culture bound, and as such, they extend beyond traditional and cultural norms and values. For instance, it is an indisputable fact that no culture or traditions accept stealing as a morally right action. Consequently, there are some universal moral standards that determine the rightness or wrongness of human conducts. The level of moral decadence in the society is alarming and threatening to a stable world order. This paper will build on the moral philosophies of Sophie Oluwole and Immanuel Kant as a paradigm to foster and engender good moral behaviours and idyllic society where human interest and welfare are prized above self-aggrandizement and self-centeredness.

### **An Examination of Immanuel Kant's Basis of Moral Principles**

Philosophy encompasses the principles underlying human ways of life. As such, Kwame Gyekye (2004) is rights when he maintains that "philosophy is essentially a critical and systematic inquiry into the fundamental ideas or principles underlying human thought, conduct, and experience. The ways of life is embedded in culture. Hence, culture is described as the aggregation of human experience and ideals as put into practices. Very inevitable among the components of people's culture is morality. Morality is a social issue which causes man's wonder and this is why it enters the realm of philosophy. Frankena and John (1974) assert that morality existed in the world long before Socrates and the advent of ethical theory is an attestation to the pre-existence of moral principle in the society. The unreflective and hardly separable from things like religion and myth lead philosophers to activities on morality through ethical theorisation. One and prominent among ethical theories is Kant's ethics. However, several philosophers among which include Plato, Aristotle St Augustine have given various moral principles according to their philosophy. Plato's moral philosophy, for instance, holds that morally virtuous man is one who is in rational, biological, and emotional balance, or in platonic terms, one who is wise, temperate, courageous and just. In the truly virtuous man, desires and passions functions harmoniously under the governance of reason (Ethel, Theodore & Sheldon 1980). It can be deduced that Plato asserts reason as the supreme determinant of virtuous man which is moral.

Aristotle in his *Nichomachean ethics* recognized the aim of morality as happiness through reasonable choice. For Aristotle moral virtues concern the habitual choice of actions in accordance with rational principles. This is said to be enhanced by the possession of some distinct characters which aids moral agent to wisely choose between extremes of one's conduct. Augustine gives a religious perspectives toward the solution of moral decadence in our society. He wrote in his book titled, *Enchiridion* that the will of God is always good and its manifestation is what is needed for our moral uprightness. According to Augustine those who dwell in the city know that peace is not achieved by war, but by love, hence, all men should obey and teach the precepts of god, love God and love thy neighbor as thyself (Ethel, Theodore & Sheldon 1980). St Augustine's position reveals that the concerns of religion about morality is such that both have something to render to each other. However, various ethical postulations by some of these philosophers are not acceptable to Kant. Kant rejected and supplanted his rule-deontological ethics. Rule-deontological ethics is a kind of ethical theory which holds that what makes an action right or wrong is not to be found in the balance of its goodness over the evil produced but that there are other factors that determine its ethical statue. For instance, an action is right because it follows some certain rules and it respects human dignity and prizes human autonomy.

### **Dominant Factor of Immanuel Kant's Ethical Principle**

Kant's rejection of old ethical theories is sourced from his reconciliation exercise between the rationalist and the empiricist which has been defalcating the realm of reason and experience as means of knowledge and its consequential invention of synthetic a priori experience alongside reason as the thrust of knowledge. It can therefore be affirmed that synthetic a priori method was used by Kant to carry out the task which the philosophers of enlightenment failed to accomplish. In his work on *Critique of Pure Reason* and the culture of practical reason, Kant restricted the capacity of transcendental analytic and

transcendental aesthetic to the knowledge from understanding and sensibility respectively. The consequence of this is the exoneration of metaphysics from certain illusions, among which include the concept of morality. The issue is although suggested by pure reason; it could not be answered appropriately by pure reason but by practical reason. While on the other hand, the practicability of pure reason is of much concern for Kant. Meanwhile, Sprigge (1988) affirmed in his work on *Rational foundation of Ethics*, that for Kant, there is an objective moral order. This implies that for Kant, moral law must be grounded ultimately on practical reason. This consequently implies that human conditions and situations do not change or alter the standard of morality following Kant's moral principles. Reason, and not emotions nor maximization of benefits for affected moral agents, is the basis of good moral conduct. Immanuel Kant, a deontological moral philosopher started his moral philosophy by critical examination of what the philosophers before him commonly regarded as "good things" and from such critical exercise, he came out with the postulation of the "goodwill" which he holds as the only good without qualification. Goodwill according to Kant consists of actions that are intrinsically right. The goodness of those actions is known not by the intentions, circumstances and the consequences of them. It is this concept of goodwill that forms one of the basis of Kant's supreme principle of morality called "categorical imperative" which is opposed to hypothetical imperative that supports actions done out of conditional and consequential priorities.

### **Rationality as the Basis of Morality in African Thought System: Sophie Oluwole in Perspective**

In understanding the basis of morality in Yoruba, Oluwole's started by recognizing the ascertained divergence between philosophy and religion. For Oluwole, if reason, experience and religion could not give a sound foundation for morality despite the daily call for moral values to guide our affairs, then a culture like that of the Yoruba which separated the secular from religion in their moral thinking, but upholds a value-system is relevance in solving today's global problems (Oluwole 1992:56). Although the Yoruba have no written moral laws, their culture contains norms and values which dictate the rightness or wrongness of their actions. This resonates with the submission of Gyekye (2011), as noted by Kemi Ogunyemi (2022:2), that "African societies are organized and functioning human communities that... evolved ethical systems, ethical values, principles, and rules which are intended to guide social and moral behavior." This is a critic to Western scholars' demeaning and unreflective assertion that Africa has no clear moral codes and principles as it is in Western ethical philosophy.

The foundation of African morality is characterized by the ability of man to reason. This can be drawn from the meaning of rationality, which is defined as a state or quality of being reasonable. Oluwole (1985) argues for rationality as the basis of African morality. This argument was mainly based on the proverbs, folklore, and norms of the Yorubas. To Oluwole, the acceptance and worship of gods are not enough to conclude that Yoruba morality has a religious basis. She tries to differentiate between accepting religion as the basis of African morality and accepting that religion maybe a form of influence on African moral ideas. An action is good not because they possess divine attributes or nature but because they are inherently right or wrong in themselves. Morality in Yoruba society is considered a social institution that focuses on setting and formulating ideals and moral concepts men are to live by. The rationality of these ideals can be seen in proverbs, myths, folklores, and norms. This suggests that the idea of Yoruba norms being referred to as

divinely originated ideas is questionable. To further understand this perspective, some quotes/proverbs in the Yoruba social institution will be considered:

· “*Ika ko ye omo eniyan*”

Wickedness is abominable to man.

· “*K’a s’otito ka ku, o san ju ka s’ebi ka was laa ye*”

It is more honourable to die for the truth than to live for fraud.

· “*Aja esin o mode*”

A dog born a year ago does not know how to hunt, which means, one learns from maturity and experience.

The above proverbs suggest that the moral norms of the Africans are formulated by their rational ability and we can ascertain that a wicked person is without good character (*iwa*), while a good person has honest and good character. Using the proverb, *bi a ba begi ni igbo, a fi oran to ara eni wo*, which means ‘*whenever one acts, one must imagine oneself in the position of the receiver of that action*’, we can affirm that even without the god factor, the people are rational to justify their actions. The above relates to the norm, referred to as the golden rule “do unto others as you wish to be done unto you.” The important distinction is between proving the existence of gods and rationally justifying the assumption of an empirically non-provable existence made to play a theoretical role at a point when all relevant facts provide no demonstrable direct solution. This, according to Oluwole (1985), is the all-important distinction that most authors fail to draw when they describe African morality as religious. Once we draw clear distinctions between the different rules of behaviour in societies, we will discover that the moral system of the Yoruba is a secular one. From her argument, it is drawn that Yoruba morality is a philosophical system and not a religious system. Morality is hereby a system of evaluating human actions and behaviour and has to do with the reasoning capacity of man.

### **The Compatibility of Kant’s Ethics and Yoruba Concept of Morality**

There is need to make a reconciliation between Yoruba scholars’ position on morality provided a reasonable comparison is to be undertaken between Yoruba ethics and Kant’s ethics. Such reconciliation will show that there is so much difference between Kant and Yoruba ethics. As the basis of explaining the Yoruba concept of morality, the Yoruba scholars, Sophie Oluwole and Bolaji Idowu, used Yoruba cultural heritage to intellectualize the Yoruba culture as far as morality is concerned. Elements of these are proverbs, folklores, norms, etc., which entail moral teachings in Yoruba society. In the same way, the acknowledgement of individual roles in the moral uprightness of a society is given the recognition. Morality is seen as something dependent on personal traits. The trait is referred to as character “*iwa*” which imbibe “honesty, hospitality, kindness, sympathy, charity, justice etc. These concepts are virtues used in describing man’s behaviour in Yoruba society. But despite the personal stature, which is from one person to another, there is no room for relativism. An action is honest or otherwise when it is judged in relation to fellowmen and its social implication at large. Thus, there is interpersonal relationship between persons as it affects societal peace. However, very important point concerning the position on Yoruba ethics is the identification and recognition of Kant’s golden rule which is expressed in the Yoruba proverbs that says “*bi a ba begi ni gbo, a fi oro ro ara eni wo*” meaning, whenever we cut a tree in the bush, we must try to consider

the agony to be experienced by us. This golden rule is the basis for the public enactment.

The purpose of golden rule is to grant and maintain packages which utilitarianism promises. This is because the highest good as we have in utilitarianism will be the consequence of the golden rule as our moral yardstick. However, reconciling Yoruba with Kant's ethical postulation is not to show the ignorance of Oluwole's position on the issue which says: "the Yoruba ethical system is a social institution, which incorporates formulated ideals men are meant to live by, such moral norms, for the Yoruba can't be like Kant's categorical imperative which has no room for exception (Oluwole1992:69)." Kantian's ethics is not totally unknown to Yoruba culture, and this will make it to be in harmony with Yoruba concept of morality. It is true that Kant canvasses universality in his ethics, but that is not to say that necessary exceptions are not allowable. What is demanded is that such exceptions must pass the universalisation test and be free from self-contradiction using the maxim of a moral agent to legislate for the entire moral public. In addition, Yoruba ethics is truly a social practice but the ideals which it incorporates are never impositions from any special body but rather the aggregation of norms, say proverbs, which are summed up in the golden rule. Kant in his ethics emphasized virtue, according to which is stressed that virtue is the strength of man's maxims in fulfilling his duty (Gregor, 1991:197). This virtue manifests when it overcomes obstacles in the way to moral uprightness of an individual and society at large. It is through virtue that Kant discusses the features of human personality in morality. For example, arrogance, defamation and ridicule as vices which are opposed to people's general respect. This is equivalent not only in principle but also in practice to the attributes of *Iwa* character which are embedded in Yoruba moral concept of *Omoluwabi*. Honesty, hospitality and many more are recognized as the components of a moral ethics so that man would be able to build up to societal moral standard. Take for instance, an honest man is able to perform his duties for the duty sake and jettison all natural and sensuous inclinations which might carry him away from the morality through disposition of honesty. In the same manner, it is in the virtues of Kant and *Iwa* character of the Yoruba that the legislation of using man as end in himself and never as means to an end is much enclosed. For the Yoruba, a dishonest man makes opportunity of others to exploit his or her fellow men.

Kant's ethics is also at ease which Yoruba concept of morality in view of Kant's concept of goodwill as the only thing which is good in itself and without qualification. Although Yoruba has no term equivalent to goodwill as we have in Kant's ethics, a thorough analysis of the act of reporting as being used in folklore, enlightened us that reporting is in itself not a moral activity and that it cannot be used as our moral angel because of its ambivalent stature which subjects it to the manipulative capability of human beings. This is the very reason why we found ourselves in dilemma searching for the motives of the reporter which qualifies as good or bad. When Kant reprobates the idea and practice of using another person as means to an end, he substitutes it by canvassing for humanity and its necessary qualities for good relations among the peoples that constitute the society. This is found in the Yoruba ethical perspective when it opposed to the act of selfishness because it is only the self-centered man that will prefer using his fellow man to achieve his own personal ends. Furthermore, both Kant and Yoruba concept of morality are orthodoxical in nature and practice. Kant's ethics is an ethical theory which dines with people's intuitive and basic beliefs on morality. This is seen in his categorical imperative which states that "can you accept it if you were to be the one". This expression is the basic tenet of Kant's categorical imperative which is an intellectual concept that describe

people's basic knowledge about morality in the society. The same orthodoxal tenet obtains in Yoruba moral conception. It is a general belief among Yoruba people that intuitively people should judge their actions through subjecting themselves to the receiver's position because for the Yoruba, morality is a communal and social phenomenon. The orthodoxal nature of Yoruba ethics are in terms of proverbs, norms, taboos, folklores, etc., which are the moral guardians from the time immemorial.

Another convergence between Yoruba morality and that of Kant is in line with Idowu's position that religion sets its stamp on valuable attitudes which are enforced by public enactment. The idea that 'Public enactment rendered religion as a second issue in Yoruba ethics' is equivalent to the concept of legislation discussed by Kant. Legislation in Kant's ethics qualifies every moral agent to be a bonafide member of universal law-making body of a society. Here lies a vivid similarity because the products of the legislative house in Kant's ethics are tantamount to Yoruba public enactment which is nothing but the general will of the people. In addition, every obvious congruous points between Kant's ethics and Yoruba concept of morality is objective moral law and golden rule respectively. The objective moral law is distinguished from the subjective imperative test which recommends that "act in accordance with the maxim of ends that it can be a universal law for everyone to have (Gregor 1991:21). This means that an action is only morally right when the moral agent is willing such action to apply to him and everybody in the society. In Yoruba, morality as recognized by the African scholars, the same thing is obtained when the golden rule is displayed and recommend as the moral yardstick which suppressed egoistic tendencies in our moral disposition. Thus, if there is nothing relevant in Kant's categorical imperative but the universalisation test, and that such a test is replaced fully by the golden rule in Yoruba ethics, then Kant's ethics and Yoruba concept of morality is not only compatible but also equal to each other in progress labouring towards the attainment of moral orderliness in our society. This is because as Kant canvassed for the imagination of oneself in the position of the receiver of an action, so does the Yoruba in their moral conception.

Closely related to the above is the encouragement given to individuals to participate in moral issues in their society. Through the recognition of the maxim that subjective moral formula is to become objective moral law through the universalisation test of Kant's categorized test, individuals are made moral agents. The same occurs when the Yoruba allows every individual in the society to cut tree in the forest only to be morally justified if the moral agents have considered himself in the position of the tree being cut. Hence, individual general contributions to morally sound society are valued by both ethical conceptions and as such hold many responsible for the moral lapses in the society. Another element in Yoruba ethics which gives room for affinity with that of Kant is its utilitarian principle. The utilitarian principle in Yoruba concept of morality is not of the same type found in the ethics of Mill: it is a utilitarianism of kind. This kind of utilitarianism is the aggregation of the overall purposes of Yoruba ethical endeavour and comes about in the secularity of Yoruba moral conception. This is resulted when society at large is given a substantial consideration on moral issues. It is the enjoyment that would be reaped from such a system that is being referred to as utilitarianism. This principle of utilitarianism as emphasized by Oluwole is also congruent to the consequential nature of Kant ethics. Besides, Kant's and Yoruba ethical postulation is brought together by religious issue in morality. Yoruba ethics shows rational basis at the expense of religion. In relation to Kant's ethics there is obvious religious postulation to Kant's ethics which was used to give

adequate conclusion for his ethical postulation. In fact, it is one of the aims of Kant to establish the existence of God through proper articulation of ethical principle as discussed in his deontological ethics. This is witnessed in the moral proofs which he used to argue in favour of the existence of God. What Kant does was to substitute morality which he termed practical reason for speculative metaphysics and theology to prove the existence of God. One can infer that for Kant, all morally upright men willy-nilly believe in god's existence and his concern for orderliness. Apart from using moral proof to defend the existence of God, his ethics is not without objectives, among which is, the realization of the highest good; which is our duty in accordance with the practical law. Thus, Kant and Yoruba ethics make use of religion through the acceptance of God as the final arbiter in their moral conception.

### **Conclusion**

One might be tempted to agree with religio-humanistic idea of Omatseye and Emeriewen (2006), that African Morality is both humanistic and religiously based. Religion, as earlier argued, plays a supportive role in morality achieving the goal of protecting humanity. Supernatural beings and deities are instruments used to compel people into abiding by these moral laws and principles. It has been made clear to us that Africans are a religious set of people, who are willing to do whatever the gods ask. And with the fear that has been created in the people, they become willing to obey these rules especially to avoid doing things that are displeasing to the gods. In the realm of philosophy, religion enters ethics; such entrance comes as a product of people's desperation, since morality is a necessity for humanity. All these make sense in Kant's ethical perception but in a paradoxical approach. Kant holds that we must not seek for moral apostles in the empirical vicinity but this is not to start from the spiritual, it was in order to be consistent with this belief that he merged reason with experience only to delimit their capacity as the source of moral philosophy for a wanting society.

Africans hold a unique manner of the conception of the human person as an inherently communal being. In the African thought system, the fact that a person is born into an existing community suggests a conception of the person as a communitarian being by nature: although it is not agreed upon by everyone, it is a major feature of the African belief. Therefore, Africans do not think of themselves as discrete individuals, but rather as part of the community. There is a unified identity that is given to humanity, which makes every action about the existence of humanity in society. The synopsis can be pointed out that having considered Kant's universalisation test and Yoruba golden rule, it is cleared that while Kant's ethics is a moral philosophy in theory, Yoruba conception of morality is rather a moral philosophy in practice, but still they both remain compatible and helpful to foster a stable world order. The dichotomy between the two concepts is basically on the methodology

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