African Perspectives on Some Contemporary Bioethics Problems

African Perspectives on Some Contemporary Bioethics Problems

By

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To my children and grandchildren
and to all African scholars and researchers

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INTRODUCTION

This book is sequel to my *Elements of African Bioethics in a Western Frame* (Langaa Research and Publishing CIG, Mankon, Bamenda, 2010) which was intended to provoke and inspire African scholars interested in the field of bioethics. That book opens with an interview I had had (2006) with the medical students' magazine of the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, in the course of which I gave some biographical snatches about myself. The present book fittingly ends with another interview with the *International Journal of Ethics Education* (2016) in which there are further biographical snatches about myself. I am basically an African villager and one of the un-forget-able lessons I learnt growing up in my village of Ndzenshwai-Shisong in the Northwestern grasslands of Cameroon is about the inestimable value of the human being simply as a human being and the absolute moral equality of all humans. All my efforts in bioethics have been underpinned and informed by this simple conviction.

Critics of my substantive views and ideas in bioethics have usually argued that the idea of 'African bioethics' does not exist and may have possible applicability only in the future. If the idea of an 'African bioethics' does not yet have a thoroughly convincing extra-mental referent, the same is not the case with the idea of an 'African perspective on bioethics' and I have not wished to claim more than the existence of the latter for the time being. I have not proposed a coherent substantive theory of African bioethics and I accept this fact as one of my limitations to the extent that such a theory is necessary or desirable; but I hope that, under my provocation and inspiration, some other mind will propose such a theory.

The Western academic enterprise has put a lot emphasis and value on peer reviewed publishing. While this has led to desirable quality control in publishing, it has also been

linked with commercial and market forces with the consequence that these publications have not been easily accessible or affordable to many academics and knowledge seekers especially in the so-called developing world. Knowledge ought to be considered a human good and ventilated to all and sundry as freely as possible or at minimal cost. In 1992 or thereabouts, I had published a paper in a Western journal on the problematic of African philosophy. I was sent two copies of the journal and a number of off-prints of my article which I had to pay for. The journal was neither available nor accessible nor affordable to academics in Africa, with the result that my thoughts and arguments on a relevant and important issue at the time were lost to those who would have critiqued them and possibly advanced knowledge on the question at issue. The question at issue was the existence of African Philosophy which, like African Bioethics today, was being denied existence, doubted or called into question. Twenty five years later, I wanted to have the said article republished in a book edited by some African colleagues. It needed a lot of efforts and the help of one of my former students abroad to access the article, which had already gone electronic and accessible by paying a respectable fee, and to obtain permission to have it reprinted. So, in real terms, my only reward as author of the article in question were the two free copies of the journal I got at first publication and perhaps the fact that I could present the article as an academic achievement towards promotion to a higher academic grade. I have no idea how much the publishers of my article reaped financially from selling it to knowledge seekers, but can the fact that I had no share at all in the harvest pass the test of ordinary fairness and justice?

More recently, a peer review journal invited me to an interview as one of the 'global leaders of ethics education' (See the last chapter of this book). For publication of the interview, I was prompted electronically online to choose between open access and closed access publication. I quickly chose open access in line with my strong belief that knowledge products should, as much as possible, be made as widely accessible as possible to all and sundry. I expected

to be asked to pay some money for the open access option but, in the worst case scenario, I thought this would not exceed about 300 US Dollars; but it turned out that the fee for having the interview published open access was 2200 Euros! and it was already too late to reverse my open access option. I did not readily have that sort of money and, while I was still running around in an effort to raise it, the publisher started threatening me with legal action for non-payment of the open access fee. The industrialized Western world is the global role model for all other worlds, regions and countries of our planet, especially in domains such as profitable commerce, but it seems to have a fundamental impulse towards opportunistic exploitation, a moral ailment that ought not to be taken lightly.

Apart from the problem of accessibility and affordability of intellectual and academic end products, it is not easy for someone of a different socio-cultural and economic background to get published in Western peer-review journals, and not only for reasons of quality control. Sometimes one cannot escape the impression that the peer-review system is used as a sort of intimidation or discouragement and even censorship against ideas that attempt fundamentally to challenge Western paradigms and generally accepted ideas and practices. Below is a telling sample of a peer-review of an article I submitted for publication and my attempted responses to the reviewers' comments. My original paper as submitted, before peer-review, correction and publication, is published here unedited as Chapter 9 of this book. While the published journal article correctly expresses my ideas, they were forced in many instances, through compliance with the demands of peer review, into a mode and mould that was not originally theirs. What I wanted to communicate in the article and how I wanted to communicate it are better expressed in chapter 9 below than in the published article. In a cross-cultural conversation the manner of saying what one says as well as the idioms one employs in saying it are as important as what is said.

Response to Reviews

Comments for the author

Reviewer 1

Comment 1

> There is a huge gap between the over-detailed history of the CIOMS negotiations and some rather absurd generalities concerning universalism and relativism. In the end the author seems to subscribe to a variety of Millian liberalism as being a supposed ethical universal; yet he also declaims at length against Western philosophy. There are a number of other major contradictions, such as his assertion on p. 2 of the abstract that there is a permanent and ineradicable tension between the universal and the particular, and his claim elsewhere that we can easily get from the universal to the particular by modifying the universal to fit the shape of each community's particular requirements. The language is bombastic and emotive, and the entire piece generally not of the level one would expect of a JME article.

My response

> I am unable to agree with the above comment. There certainly is a difference in the level of abstraction and generality in my discussion of the work of the CIOMS writing group and my more general opening discussion of the concepts of universalism and relativism; but they are connected, and the opening general discussion is meant to dress the broad philosophical background and framework for the more practical and particular issues discussed in the rest of the paper. My general discussion may be challengeable in whole or in its details, but it does not contain any 'absurdities'.

> Any 'declamations' in the paper are not directed against Western philosophy as such, within which I

not only have had my broad formal philosophical formation but from which I draw heavily in my arguments. My critique of aspects of Western philosophy in no way implies its rejection.

The 'assertion on p. 2 of the abstract' which the reviewer considers 'one of a number of other major contradictions' has been removed from the abstract. However, it may appear contradictory only if the nuance of the word 'tension' is overlooked. But nowhere in the paper is it claimed that 'we can easily get from the universal to the particular by modifying the universal to fit the shape of each community's particular requirements'. My claim rather is that any universal <u>norm</u> (of thought, talk or conduct), in its practical application, inevitably is 'shaped' and 'coloured' by context, perspective and other particularistic data that necessarily impinge on it.

My language may in parts be emotive because of my involvement with and passion for the issues I am discussing. None of my arguments, however, is emotive in the sense of being directed to the reader's emotions; all my arguments are directed to the mind and aim to achieve acceptance through rational persuasion. My language is certainly not 'bombastic', if I correctly understand that term to mean "pompous".

As to whether the entire article is up to the standard expected of JME articles, is not for me to judge.

Comment 2

There is some interest, however, in the narrative surrounding the CIOMS guidelines negotiations, in which the author was personally involved. I'm not sure whether this would make a full article, or something like an update of the sort Anne Sommerville's BMA team provide. If the sections on the CIOMS negotiations were to make a full article, the narrative would have to be signposted much more

clearly and given some overall coherence. Name-calling would also have to be eliminated, as would the blanket assertion that Western interests have all been on one side in these negotiations and African on the other. Many African commentators (e.g. Fred Mhalu in Tanzania, or Nicolas Meda in Burkina Faso) have argued on the same side as those Western commentators who favour laxer, differential standards for African trials, whereas some Western commentators (e.g. Marcia Angell) are on the side of the 'angels' (sorry about the pun). Ruth Macklin does recognize this in the quote reproduced, but the author seems not to have picked up the point.

My response

I cannot reduce my article to a mere narrative about the CIOMS guidelines negotiations without abandoning its main purpose and aim, which are to use that narrative as an illustration and a rider to a discussion of the problematic of developed world research in the developing world and to suggest a general framework for the formulation and application of such guidelines, from the point of view and perspective of a developing world thinker.

There is no 'name-calling', in the sense of *ad hominem* arguments, in my paper. I have, nevertheless, further suppressed all personal allusions or attributions from the discussion of the revision of the CIOMS guidelines in my revision.

I have introduced further qualifiers and rephrased certain sections of the article to remove any impression that the article is treating of earthly angelology versus daemonology or in any sense claiming that in this discussion all Africans are on one side pitted against all Westerners on the other side.

Reviewer 2

Comment 1

> The author addresses a fine set of issues and provides an interesting and engaging summary of the major controversies and outcomes of recent attempts to revise and update international ethical standards of research. As a whole I found the article to be honest, clear, and thought provoking. However, I was vaguely dissatisfied at the end and ultimately found the ethical analysis almost disappointing. I found myself hoping that the author would provide a more compelling argument to support his own prescription. For example, the author's conclusion that CIOMS Guideline 11 places "purely scientific and economic consideration ahead of ethical considerations" needs to be supported. At times I felt that I needed to know more about the opposing view, and that the author was simplifying the ethical arguments invoked by those the author disagrees with.

My response

> I have retouched the concluding sections of my article in the light of the above comment. I cannot, however, elaborate more arguments in support of my point of view and prescription without further lengthening what already is a long article I am at pains to shorten.

Comment 2

> The author states that the answers to some of the questions raised by international research should be arrived at with the input of all the relevant parties and diverse communities and cultures and a balancing of different points of view. This is not controversial, but one wishes the author could give more direction to that view.

> The author touches on the issue of ethical imperialism and the need to "complete the process of decolonization", but does not explore it in depth, nor does the author explain its practical implications.

My response

> I have again rephrased parts of the concluding sections of my article in the light of the above comment. One of the possible practical implications of completing the process of decolonization would be the enhancement of the input of developing world partners, stake-holders and communities in any joint process seeking ethical answers to international research problems or dilemmas. An example of such a joint process of deliberation, as against starting off with a set of externally pre-determined rules, is currently being attempted by Ezekiel Emmanuel and his team of the Department of Clinical Bioethics, NIH, with remarkable results. The approach has permitted them to pose the question: "What makes clinical research in developing countries ethical?" and to come up with a set of "Benchmarks". Thoroughly elaborating on my view here and drawing its full practical implications would require another full article.

The first chapter of this book reuses some of the material in my chapter (Chapter 7: Ethics in African Education) of the *Handbook of African Educational Theories and Practices: A Generative Teacher Education Curriculum,* edited by A. Bame Nsamenang and Therese M.S. Tchombe, Bamenda: Presses Universitaires d'Afrique, 2011, and was previously presented as a Keynote Lecture at the 30th International Congress on Occupational Health (ICOH), Cancun, Mexico, 18-23 March, 2012. The second chapter was previously published in *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics,* Volume 38, Number 2, pp. 101-110,2017. The third chapter was previously published in the *Encyclopedia of Global Bioethics,* DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-05544-2_421-1#; Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2015. The fourth chapter was previously published

Some of my favourite arguments and narratives reecho across several chapters of this book, the prize or price of the strength of my convictions and my intellectual passion for my subject matters.

I hereby thank all previous publishers for their kind permission to republish the materials here.

CHAPTER ONE

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF ETHICS

[This chapter reuses some of the material in my chapter (Chapter 7: Ethics in African Education) of the *Handbook of African Educational Theories and Practices: A Generative Teacher Education Curriculum,* edited by A. Bame Nsamenang and Therese M.S. Tchombe, Bamenda: Presses Universitaires d'Afrique, 2011, and was previously presented as a Keynote Lecture at the 30th International Congress on Occupational Health (ICOH), Cancun, Mexico, 18-23 March, 2012.]

Abstract

Four fundamental ethics principles are identified as having been widely discussed in current moral literature. These are, namely, respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. It is argued that, while these principles are couched in the language and idioms of the industrialized Western world, they have cross-cultural relevance and validity in their overarching and plastic nature, even if they may not everywhere be thought of or stated in the same terms and idioms. They form a set of values which complete and balance one another and none can be said to be more important than any other, although situational and contextual pressures may result in the tendency to lay emphasis on some over others.

These principles are equally relevant and important in all fields of human endeavour and activity within all possible human contexts and perspectives. Given diverse and ever changing existential and situational conditions, ethical reflection/deliberation is necessarily a perennial and

continuous human imperative; and nowhere is this more evident than within professional occupational ethics with its daily dilemmas and perplexities.

Introduction

Four moral principles, describable as 'fundamental', have been widely discussed in the contemporary ethics literature. These principles are respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice or fairness. While these principles are couched in the language and idioms of the industrialized Western world, where they have been most discussed and debated, they have cross-cultural relevance and applicability, even if they are not everywhere conceived or expressed in the same terms. The principles are also relevant to, and applicable in, all fields of human endeavour and activity, irrespective of context, situation or perspective. They are particularly important for professionals in any domain because their specialized knowledge and skills greatly increase their capacity for doing both good and bad.

What is ethics?

An easy description of ethics is that it is an articulate field of study that deals with the morality of human actions and behaviours. Morality consists in judgments of human acts, actions or behaviours as right or wrong, as good or bad. Ethics can also be defined as the study of the fundamental principles of morality and their applications in actual concrete situations. The terms 'ethics' and 'morality' are often used interchangeably, but the concept of morality is much broader than that of ethics. Even before we start dealing with or studying ethics, or articulately discussing ethical problems, we already have a sense of morality, and we have made many moral judgments without necessarily consciously and explicitly reflecting on the principles underlying them. Human beings everywhere seem to have a sense of moral intuition from which they immediately can judge some acts or actions or behaviours as right or wrong,

good or bad. Ethics presupposes that we already have a sense of morality, and consists partly but importantly in articulate reflection on the general principles underlying our moral judgments and intuitions.

Ethics is a normative discipline because it seeks to study or to lay down the norms of acceptable human conduct or behaviour. Systematic moral reasoning, or articulate ethical reflection, can be applied to any issue in any domain of human activity. Ethics is therefore inescapable since it is pervasive and important in all domains where human beings operate or act, or simply live their lives. Ethics is, of course, particularly important for professionals and other people with special skills (Pellegrino 2002, pp. 378-384), because their specialized knowledge, expertise and endowments increase their capacity to do good or bad. In traditional societies, the conduct, behaviours and actions of professionals are typically regulated by sundry taboos and ritual restrictions, and in modern societies by written codes and ceremonial oaths.

Natural allies and companions of ethics

The natural allies or road companions, to use a common metaphor, of ethics are law, human rights theory and practice, civics, religion, and the customs, taboos and traditions of communities or societies. All the above are necessarily mingled and interwoven with ethics, but ethics is separable from each and all of them. Ethics is, moreover, rationally more compelling than any of its road companions. For example, no law, custom, or cultural or religious practice is justifiable if it is unethical, i.e. if it can rightly be judged as morally wrong or bad, because, in a sense, all these road companions are meant to serve morality, and morality is more important than all of them. As Rebecca Cook and colleagues have rightly pointed out (Cook et al., p. 90):

"...law aims to serve the ethical principle of justice. Accordingly, it is not an ethical justification of a policy simply that it is legal. It is not even an ethical justification

that a democratic government of a country had a popular mandate to introduce or support the particular law, and that it has been upheld by a country's most significant court according to the country's constitution. These features alone, while legally and politically significant, do not show that the law is ethical".

Ethics is, however, limited to acts, actions and behaviours that are free, purposive and intentional, and liable to impact on other creatures. Un-free or externally compelled acts/actions are not voluntary or responsible acts/actions, and cannot therefore be qualified as morally right or wrong. It can also be argued that acts/actions that have no possibility of affecting other creatures are not relevant to ethical appraisal. That is why it is plausible to argue that, if only a single individual existed in the universe, s/he would have no need for ethics or morality, as anything s/he chose to do would be right, or rather neither right nor wrong. If you were the only creature in the world, you could act and behave in any way you liked without bothering about morality, except perhaps to the extent that you believe another superior being such as God exists, and expects you to behave in certain ways rather than in others.

Natural challengers of ethics

The natural challengers, adversaries or enemies of ethics are amoralism and egoism. An amoralist is someone who sees no reason why s/he should do what is morally right or avoid what is morally wrong, especially as doing what is morally right does not always pay off personally, whereas immorality is often personally beneficial. The defiant question 'Why should I be moral?' is one that is very difficult to answer satisfactorily. It is a challenge objectively to justify morality because morality is something that is both objective and subjective. If someone truly does not have any moral intuitions, and feels no need at all to be moral, there may be no third-party arguments that would be convincing to him/her. It is doubtful whether it is possible for a human being to be completely destitute of a sense of empathy and

sympathy, i.e. a sense of identification with and kindred feeling towards, at least, other human beings, if not other non-human creatures; if that were truly possible, such a person might be called an amoralist.

Egoism or selfishness may be related to, but cannot be justified by, the fact that humans are necessarily egocentric beings. Egocentrism simply means that each human being is self-centered, and cannot perceive and appreciate the world other than from his/her own point of view. This need not, but sometimes does, lead to egoism or selfishness. The disputable theory of psychological egoism is that human beings are, by nature, selfish and self-seeking in everything they do. According to psychological egoism, therefore, human beings are naturally selfish and cannot help being selfish. But to the extent that human beings are capable of genuine altruism (concern for others) and selfless love, the theory of psychological egoism is false. Some human beings do sometimes make sacrifices, even of their lives, for others. How would this be possible if psychological egoism were true? Morality is not possible without altruism, empathy and sympathetic impartiality, and it can be argued that they are also part and parcel of human nature.

What is culture?

Culture is basically a way of life of a group of people, underpinned by adaptation to a common environment or ecological niche, a common worldview, similar ways of thinking and acting and doing, similar attitudes and expectations, and similar ideas, beliefs and practices, etc. There is a remarkable diversity and variety in the human cultures of the world and in the ecological niches in which cultures and individuals flourish. This diversity, an observable fact, is similar to the equally remarkable diversity of the biological world, of the different species that populate the earth. Cultures and sub-cultures are like concentric circles (Tangwa 1992, pp. 138-143), and there is no human being who does not fall within at least more than one such circle; the nuclear family or, more ideally, the extended

family in its African conception, might, in fact, be regarded as delimiting the smallest of such cultural circles. Thus, like biological diversity, cultural diversity is an observable fact, something that is there for us to notice, recognize and appreciate.

Unlike culture, morality is grounded on human rationality and common biological nature, and on basic human needs (for food, shelter, clothing, self-expression, etc.), which – being common to all irrespective of culture – may be regarded as defining what it is to be human. For this reason, divergence of moral opinion, both within and across cultures, is a descriptive fact that falls short of the prescriptive ideal. Moral imperatives are necessarily universal. That it is morally wrong to kill, steal or lie, that truthfulness, honesty, kindness and reliability are good in themselves, are universal imperatives not limited to any particular people or culture. But moral thinking and particular practices may differ from culture to culture, and even from person to person within the same culture. This is because of environmental constraints, existential pressures and human limitations, which include the impossibility of perceiving from more than a single point of view, the impossibility of being an experiential participant in all human existential situations, and their couplings with human ego-centrism and fallibility. It is for this reason that some human practices or behaviours, such as homosexuality, polygamy, circumcision, paedophilia, incest, prostitution, abortion, capital punishment, rape, etc., are controversial; they are considered by some, or at times, as morally wrong and by others, or at other times, as permissible. In discussing such issues, personal or cultural prejudices are likely to induce a perception of self-evident rightness or wrongness, where in fact the case may not be so clear. We therefore always need both critical self-awareness and sympathetic understanding when dealing with issues concerned with self and others.

No human culture is perfect

Human ego-centrism, coupled with ethnocentrism (the tendency to be too firmly implanted within one's ethnic group, thereby allowing it to define all of one's perceptions and relations with all outside groups), naturally leads individuals to perceive their own culture as *the* culture, but critical observation and reflection can help to correct any such mistaken perception. Professor Michael Novak in his book, *The Experience of Nothingness* (Novak 1970, p.16), remarks that every culture differs from others according to the 'constellation of myths' that shapes its attention, attitudes and practices. In his view, it is impossible for any single culture to perceive human experience in a universal, direct way.

> "...each culture selects from the overwhelming experience of being human certain salient particulars. One culture differs from another in the meaning it attaches to various kinds of experience, in its image of the accomplished man, in the stories by which it structures its perceptions."

"Of course, men are not fully aware that their own values are shaped by myths. Myths are what men in other cultures believe in; in our own culture we deal with reality. In brief, the word 'myth' has a different meaning depending upon whether one speaks of other cultures or of one's own. When we speak of others, a myth is a set of stories, images and symbols by which human perceptions, attitudes, values and actions are given shape and significance. When we speak of our own culture, the ordinary sense of reality performs the same function. In order to identify the myths of one's own culture, therefore, it suffices to ask: What constitutes my culture's sense of reality?"

Culture is like a congenitally tinted pair of spectacles through which we look at reality. We inevitably impose our particular cultural tint on everything we perceive, but critical awareness can lead us to the realization that 'objective reality' is multi-coloured. It is very important always to try to see or imagine things from the point of view and perspective

of the other. No human culture or community is perfect, although some may be more advanced or better-off in some respects than others. There may be activities/skills at which any one culture is 'better' than all the others, but a culture in general cannot be described as being 'superior' or 'inferior' to another on that basis. In Cameroon, for example, it would be generally agreed that, while both the Oku people and the Nso' people engage in wood-carving, the former by far excel the latter in this activity; but it cannot on that account be said that the Oku culture is superior to Nso' culture. To say that one culture qua culture is 'better' or 'superior' to another is like saying that a donkey is better than or superior to a horse. A donkey qua donkey cannot be superior or inferior to a horse qua horse because a donkey is not a horse, nor vice-versa; they are two different creatures with very different evolutions, aims and purposes.

Cultures qua cultures can be said to be equal in the same sense in which human beings are equal, in spite of great differences in their individual and individuating attributes and characteristics. We could qualify such equality as 'moral' equality, not to be confused with other senses of equality. From most other points of view, human beings are rather demonstrably unequal but, in spite of their un-equality in those respects, they are all equally human, for which reason they should always be treated with fairness and equity. All human cultures are, however, perfectible, because none is perfect; and none can be perfect, given that human beings, the creators of culture, are imperfect beings.

The limitations of cultures are directly related to the limitations of human beings who, both as individuals and as communities, are the creators of culture. Human limitations, especially human fallibility, are impossible of complete eradication, in spite of the very strong impulse, present to varying degrees within all individuals and all cultures, to strive for certainty and infallibility under the invincible impulse and optical illusion that they can be achieved. Such an impulse euphemistically may be described as 'the desire to be God'. However, human limitations need not be a

hindrance to striving for perfection or to making clearly recognizable moral or cultural progress.

Ethics in African traditional education

Moral strength and uprightness was one of the focal concerns of education in traditional Africa. Such education, unlike the Western education that has since become the norm in Africa, was not uniform throughout Africa, because it was not based on any formal syllabus. Nevertheless, it was derived from the same metaphysical worldview and its aims and purposes were generally the same, namely, to instil discipline, strength of mind, body and character in the young. It was both formal and informal. The formal aspects of traditional education were dispensed through traditional lodges, such as Ngiri and Nwerong among the Nso' of Cameroon, and through all manner of initiations and apprenticeships in various trades and professions. The informal aspects were inculcated everywhere at all times through a social system and cultural practices where there was great respect for age and the elderly, who in turn spared no opportunities to teach and to correct the young, through communal activities such as collective work, ceremonies, rituals, song, dance, the narration of tales, fables, parables, proverbs, riddles.

The formal aspects of traditional education in Africa usually lasted several years and required various degrees of concentration and seclusion from the general public. To take some examples again from my own natal background among the Nso' of the grassy highlands of Bamenda in the North West region of Cameroon, education in the two principal lodges attached to the royal palace, Nwerong and Ngiri, lasted for about 8 years, during which, for purposes of avoiding distraction among others, the trainee wore a mask when going out of the seclusion and after which one earned the title of 'Shey' with the privilege among others of founding a lineage. The procedure for the acquisition of wives for graduates of these lodges was well laid down in the tradition. (Fonka and Banboye Undated, p. 28). Apprenticeship in

professions and trades such as blacksmithing, wood carving, healing, wine tapping, basket making, mat weaving, drumming and dancing, etc. took variously anything from 3 years upwards. It would be very interesting to know the detailed content of these formal aspects of traditional African education but we are not able to go into such detail here. It is one of the aims of this chapter to inspire such further detailed research.

Regarding the centrality of the moral impulse of traditional education, the practice of any profession or trade in the traditional setting always involved ritual restrictions and taboos, calculated to prevent abuse of specialized knowledge. It was, for example, strictly taboo for a herbalist or other medicine practitioner, who generally had a thorough mastery of the particular characteristics and effects of the flora of their particular environment, to give a pregnant woman any substance with the aim of causing an abortion; or for a hunter, who equally had thorough mastery of the fauna, to sell or otherwise give a non-edible species of any animal to others under false pretext. Violation of such restrictions and taboos usually called for ritual expiation, cleansing and purification; otherwise, the violators were liable to encounter serious misfortune.

Communal consciousness and the extended family system ensured moral compliance as the moral uprightness of the individual was not an individual/private affair but the concern of a large number of people with kindred feelings who shared in the fate of the individual, good or bad, in more than a vicarious or standoff manner. When it comes to moral matters, to matters concerning God and the ancestors – the main addressees in daily prayers and supplications - , to ceremonial matters connected with birth, initiation, marriage or death, to matters concerning fortune/misfortune, adversity and well-being, Africans are first and foremost relational beings, belonging to a series of ever widening concentric circles of relationship. This is one reason for the obsession with moral uprightness and the centrality of morality within the African traditional educational system. An individual's immoral acts/actions are perceived as

directly threatening to a wide circle of relations. This might be contrasted with the situation within Western culture where individualism makes of personal morality a largely individual affair, even though ethics, both private and public, does have an important place in the Western educational system, both traditional and modern.

The basic/fundamental principles of ethics

A principle is a general rule or formula that applies to many particular cases/instances. It is a standard of reference, and is necessarily universal rather than particular. It is abstract rather than concrete. Of course, the pre-conditions for and fundamental principles of morality ought to be the same for all societies and all cultures, because these are based on human beings being rational and social beings, imbued with some sense of morality that underlies ethical thinking. Those who study the peculiarities of different societies, such as social scientists, might often end up with an exaggerated highlighting of the differences, resulting in moral relativism, and fail to realize, for example, that the *mores* of the various societies are derivable from principles or considerations that are common to them all.

Acceptance of the moral equality of all human beings is perhaps the first pre-condition for morality. Where this initial moral equality is denied some human beings, acts will be carried out – such as colonizing, enslaving or massacring – which come across as highly immoral, like a slap in the face, thereby indicating that human moral equality is a moral imperative imposed by human reason itself. Other fundamental moral principles have been widely discussed in the moral literature of the Western world, notably, respect for the autonomy of others, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. In simple terms, these principles have to do with respect for all other humans as moral equals, making sure that our actions are well-intended/motivated and calculated to achieve good ends or results, avoiding the infliction of harm, and treating others with fairness and equity (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001).

Autonomy

The word *autonomy* comes from two Greek words: *nomos* ('rule') and *autos ('self'),* giving it the literal meaning of 'self-rule' or 'self-governance'. Autonomy implies an individual who is master of himself/herself and can act, make free choices and take decisions without the constraint of another. The principle of autonomy therefore implies both the freedom of each individual to act and the obligation of others to respect that freedom. The principle is thus alternatively described as 'respect for autonomy' or simply 'respect for others'. The necessary pre-conditions for autonomy are competence (the capacity to be a moral agent) and liberty or freedom. Individual autonomy may be diminished or completely absent, as in the case of minors, aged people with diminishing mental capacities, the mentally handicapped or incapacitated persons, prisoners, etc. The principle of autonomy can be said to be the first, though not necessarily the most important, of the fundamental principles of ethics. It is based on the moral imperative of respect for other human persons as moral equals. Such respect demands treating them as 'ends' in themselves and never merely as 'means' to any other end, treating them with consideration, giving due regard to their point of view, and respecting their well-considered choices. Without supposing autonomy in others, societal ethics would be a non-starter. Personal autonomy and freedom are ethically limited by the autonomy and freedom of other persons; that is why, in every society/community, discussion, compromise and legislation are indispensable to harmonious living.

The principle of autonomy accords very well with an individualistic perspective of life and may be overemphasized in discourse within individualistic cultures like Western culture, and de-emphasized in communal cultures where the community is usually given precedence over the individual. But it is equally important in all cultures, including communal cultures like African culture, in which individuality, as distinguished from individualism, is also highly respected. It is quite possible for a culture to be communal in the sense of recognizing or affirming the superiority of the community

over the individual, while at the same time recognizing the uniqueness and importance or individuality of each person. The recognition of such individuality in African culture can be seen during naming, initiation and burial ceremonies. In all such ritual ceremonies, it is the individual strictly before God, the ancestors and his/her destiny.

Justice

Justice is *fairness* or *desert* or *entitlement;* it implies giving to each his/her due. Justice requires that 'equals be treated equally and un-equals unequally', unless there is a reasonable justification for treating them differently. The general moral idea or intuition underlying the principle of justice is that which states: '*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you if you were in their place and they in yours'*. According to John Rawls (Rawls 1999, p. 3):

> "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory, however elegant and economical, must be rejected or revised, if it is untrue; likewise, laws and institutions, no matter how efficient and well-arranged, must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust."

An untrue theory, no matter how attractive, must be rejected; an unjust system or procedure, no matter how convenient or profitable, must be reformed. Society/community is a collaborative venture, and distributive justice is concerned with the fair distribution of the goods, benefits, advantages, etc. that result from collaborative ventures. However, morality/ethics not only includes but also goes beyond strict justice. Philanthropy and supererogatory acts/actions are also part and parcel of morality. Philanthropy is helping others in need without getting or expecting anything in return, and a supererogatory action is a good action that benefits another person but that is in no way obligatory or required, and can be neglected without incurring any blame. That is why Rawls also argues for a procedural principle according to which inequitable distribution of goods in any