Philosophical Challenges of Modernity and Moral Degeneration in Contemporary African Societies

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ABSTRACT: Modern African societies are currently experiencing a moral crisis apparently owing to a generational gap between persons of the old (traditional) communalistic order, on the one hand, and the generation of the new (modern) liberal democratic (individualistic) order on the other hand. The old school alleges that the present generation suffers from a moral decay to which the new "school" objects. In this condition, modern behavioural patterns are viewed as a threat to traditional moral values and conducts. The African philosopher is interested in this situation from the following standpoint: (i) ascertaining the alleged difference(s) between the moral core of indigenous African traditions and that of modern African societies; (ii) examining some salient arguments for alleging a moral decay in modern African societies as presented in majority of available literatures; and (iii) locating essential philosophical grounds for improving the crisis situation. What becomes obvious in the analysis of the issues involved is that sustaining communal living and solidarity is one essential hallmark of African indigenous ethics, and this seems to be lacking in the ethics of modern African societies. We conclude that injecting certain elements of Jürgen Habermas's Discourse ethics into moral discourse in contemporary Africa will help reinvigorate African core moral values in contemporary African societies.

Introduction

Contemporary African societies are characterised by an amalgam of an indigenous cultural heritage founded on a thick cultural substructure of African traditional communalism, on the one hand, and a foreign cultural imposition of a colonial origin, on the other hand. In these societies, Western European ideas of what is good or bad, right or wrong, compete everywhere with traditional conceptions and practices of morals, and

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therefore tend to subdue aground the very moral fabric which bound together the life forces and elements of nature in African communalistic thought system. This situation has for long created social cleavages along the lines of what we refer to in this paper as 'Old' generational school and the 'New' generational school. The latter school consists mainly of persons who are inclined to accept moral behavioural patterns that are 'modern', 'civilised', 'democratic', 'scientific' and 'open to change', whereas the 'Old' school embraces those persons who are considered to be 'traditional', 'primitive', 'archaic', 'dictatorial' or 'authoritative', 'pre-scientific' and 'psychically closed to change' on moral issues.

Consequently, there appears to be a discernible moral crisis in which the old school alleges that the present generation suffers from a moral decay, having gone morally bankrupt on account of the fact that its worldviews (ideology) are no longer in consonance with the received ontological requirements of African traditional communalism. The alleged decay is generally viewed as 'causative' of grievous social strains, distress and disharmony in contemporary African societies. As Kwasi Wiredu puts it, "The issues involved here are of the utmost existential urgency, for it may well be that many of the instabilities of contemporary African society are traceable to this circumstance."[1] Still, the new school tend to feign ignorance of the seriousness of the alleged moral decadence and to remain adrift with the totalitarian currents and dictates of modernity, modern science and technology associated with Western colonization of Africa. The moral situation in Africa today is aptly reflected in Chinua Achebe's description of post-colonial African (Ibo) cultural realities as 'Things Fall Apart'.

The modest philosophical interest which this paper takes in the foregoing problematic situation is: (i) to ascertain the differences between the moral core of African traditional communalistic societies and that of the new (modern) generational order; (ii) to examine some salient arguments for alleging a moral decay in modern African societies as contained in major-postcolonial literatures; and (iii) to locate essential philosophical grounds for ameliorating the African moral crisis situation. The paper endorses the view that African indigenous ethics was directed at sustaining communal living, well-being, solidarity and harmony rather than at parochial interests in modern societies of seeking transient peaceful coexistence, that do not take root in the mind of social moral actors. Consequently, we argue that injecting certain elements of Jürgen Habermas' discourse ethics into moral discourse in Africa could reinvigorate traditional core moral values in contemporary African societies.

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   [1] Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars from an African Perspective*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 61.

The Old *versus* the New Generational School

The distinction between the *old* and the *new* generational schools of thought in contemporary African societies, which we intend to make here is similar to that which Popper draws between the 'closed' and the 'open' society,[2] and that of Horton between the 'traditional' and the 'modern'.[3] Even so, we acknowledge that in all these cases as in our own, a water-tight dichotomy can hardly be drawn, for no society or persons are wholly or entirely closed or open, traditional or modern, nor can they be said to fit into our distinction between the old and the new generational mode of thought. Hence the distinctions are relative, academic and theoretical. However, since we are primarily concerned with the divergent moral orientations of two sub-groups in contemporary African societies, it seems appropriate that our analysis should present itself at two levels – first, at the level of differences in the ontological backgrounds of the old and the new, and second, at the level of the corresponding differences of the moral orientations of the old and new generations in African societies today.

In his *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Popper identifies the distinctive elements of the closed and the open society. He views the closed society as having features similar to a biological organism:

> A closed society resembles a herd or a tribe in being a semi-organic unit whose members are held together by semi-biological ties – kinship, living together, sharing common efforts, common dangers, common joys and common distress. It is still a concrete group of concrete individuals, related to one another not merely by such abstract social relationship as division of labour and exchange of commodities but by concrete physical relationships such as touch, smell or sight.[4]

Popper recognizes that this description of a closed society fits the structural organisation of ancient Greek and Polynesian societies. In this paper, we endorse that Popper's view fits the nature of African traditional communalistic societies.

Like Popper, Horton identifies certain features which distinguish the traditional society from the modern society. He writes,

> What I take to be the key difference is a very simple one. It is that in traditional culture, there is no developed awareness of alternatives to established body of theoretical tenets; whereas in scientifically oriented cultures, such an awareness is highly

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  [2] Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962.

  [3] Robin Horton, first published his "African Traditional Thought and Western Science" in *Africa* 38 (1967), pp. 50-71 and 155-187 but was reprinted in abridged form in B. R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality*. Great Britain: Oxford Basil Blackwell, 1970, pp. 131-71.

  [4] Karl Popper, *The Open Society*, p. 173.

developed. It is this difference we refers to when we say that traditional culture are 'closed' and scientifically oriented culture 'open'.[5]

Horton agrees that his characterisation of the traditional and the modern correspond with Popper's view of 'the closed-the open' societies. But there is an essential difference between them. While Popper's dichotomy is founded on the social structure or organisation of the alleged societies irrespective of the ontological backgrounds, that of Horton is hinged on the intellectual capacities of the societies involved. The implication of Horton's view runs deep and does not receive our attention here. Instead, we are of the opinion that what Popper and Horton have to say could best be discussed in terms of the relative ontological cleavage of the parties or societies involved. In other words, 'the closed-the open' and 'the traditional-the modern dichotomies are mere epochal generations in and within any given society, for there are no societies which are closed or open to change and alternatives.

Understood thus, the alleged dichotomies are no more than generational differences owing to the degree of modern scientific and technological imbibitions, interactions with and influences of other cultures, and, hence, the differences are due to a generational gap. To this extent, we shall refer to the dichotomies simply as the *Old* and the *New* generational schools of perception, their respective ontological cleavages and their corresponding moral values.

The old or older generational school in contemporary African societies consists of persons mostly from the old indigenous social background of communalism and communitarianism, whose custom, fashion, etiquette, and morality are dictated by their understanding of African traditional communalistic life. In African communalistic societies, there are different categories of beings, physical and non-physical, believed to be organised in a hierarchical order. Menkiti identifies them as God or the Supreme Being at the apex, divinities (or lesser gods), ancestors, spirits, humans and things (including animals, plants and objects) at the base of the hierarchy.[6] It is also believed that these beings are united to form a communion of beings. What unifies all cosmic beings is variously referred to as '*force vitale*' (vital force),[7] 'mobile life forces',[8] and 'active principle of animation'.[9] Because all things are thus unified, it is believed that there is

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  [5] Robin Horton, *African Traditional Thought and Western Science*, p. 153.

  [6] I. A. Menkiti, *On the Normative Conception of a Person*. In Kwasi Wiredu (ed.), *A Companion to African Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 328-329.

  [7] Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959, p. 64.

  [8] P. Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspective on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*. London: Lexington Books, 2006, p. 63.

  [9] M. A. Mazama, "Afrocentricity and African Spirituality", *Journal of Black Studies*, 33-2 (2002), pp. 219-220.

an interactive gap between them, and that the goal of the unity of being is to maintain a healthy harmony and solidarity between the whole of natural reality and its composite parts, including the human community and the human individuals within it. In the context of morality, according to Ikuenobe,

> …communalism prescribes that people should act in a way that would enhance their own interest within the framework of pursuing the goal of human well-being and welfare in the context of natural harmony in their communities.[10]

Or, again, in the words of Wiredu,

> It seems to me that, as far as the basis of the traditional ethic is concerned, this claim is abundantly justified. Traditional thinking about the foundations of morality is refreshingly non-super naturalistic. Not that one can find in traditional sources elaborated theories of humanism. But anyone who reflects on our traditional ways of speaking about morality is bound to be struck by the pre-occupation with human welfare. What is morally good is what benefits a human being. It is what is decent for man – what brings dignity, respect, contentment, prosperity, joy to man and his community. And what is morally bad is what brings misery, misfortune and disgrace.[11]

Morality in African indigenous cultures is thus intrinsically hinged on communal harmony and solidarity among beings as an essential factor for the well-being of the community and its individual members. Hence an African ought to act, as a matter of duty, only in a way that will establish, promote and sustain peaceful coexistence between him/her and other beings – visible and invisible – in the community and hence, increase and sustain his/her life force, and promote his/her existence. Thus, actions that ensure fruitful existence by establishing and sustaining a cordial and peaceful relationship with other beings in the community are permissible, but otherwise impermissible. However, the quest for communal or social harmony does not necessarily imply that the person's individual will is completely subdued but only that communal harmony and interest provide the basis for the individual to pursue and achieve his goals and aspirations. For example, among the Edo speaking people of South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria, sexual intercourse in a farmland (with or without a mat), incest, spilling the blood of a fellow tribesman, telling lies on oath in family or communal issues are adjudged to be morally indecent or wrong and capable of bringing about communal disharmony or disequilibrium. In cases of such moral misconduct, it is believed that the community could be visited with disasters such as famine, epidemic, or sudden death of its vibrant work force.

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[10] P. Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspective on Communalism*, p. 65.

[11] Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 6.

If communal harmony is the goal of African morality, it becomes obvious that an African community is saddled with a crucial responsibility of ensuring that the goal is achieved without any disequilibrium in the system. Achieving this crucial responsibility often involves the establishment of institutions and structures which are saddled with the responsibility of ensuring unity among beings through such means as (moral) education, religious rites, art works, festivities, rites of passage, prescription of appropriate norms and values and the like. It also involves, very importantly, the use of ideologies founded on the epistemic authority of the African community to internalize in individual members, ideas, beliefs, norms and values about what is knowledge, truth, or good in a manner that is indoctrinating rather than educative, and tend to override the individual's will.[12] The aim of employing ideologies that are often shaded or garnished with supernatural or religious beliefs is, according to Elechi Amadi,

> …to enforce a moral standard acceptable to a particular society. A secular interpretation leads to the conclusion that moral precepts have always had their origin in the mind of man. Even when deities are said to have laid them down, they have had to do so through the mind of man. It would appear, then, that while man formulates the moral code, he enlists the influence of religion for its enforcement. In other words, *in ethics man proposes, God enforces*.[13]

This is clearly seen in the case of the Africans' relationship with (his/her) ancestors. For fear of being punished by his/her ancestor or an anticipation of reward and blessings for his/her good deeds, he/she is careful in his choice of action. Even when he/she does something wrong, the traditional individual is quick to carry out the necessary appeasement rites such as public confession and performance of necessary sacrifice.[14]

Having highlighted what constitutes morality in African traditional thought, it is essential to note that the African elder who exclaims "The world is spoilt" is *pleased* with the nature of morality in traditional African community for the reason that it ensures peaceful coexistence among beings in the community and yields good fruits in terms of the admirable behaviour and attitude of people living in such communities. But he/she is displeased with the behaviour of the young ones, in more recent times. For him/her, a major challenge of modernity is that there is a gradual moral decay of core moral and cultural values of the African people. Why is this so? What reason(s) can be proffered to explain this moral deterioration? How best can the moral decay be prevented and traditional

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[12] See K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, p. 2.

[13] E. Amadi, *Ethics in Nigerian Culture*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1982, p. 6.

[14] C. E. Ukhun, *Metaphysical Authoritarianism and the Moral Agent in Esan Traditional Thought*, p. 74.

moral values revived? Does the description of the African experience of the West as a predicament prevalent in scholarly discourse on the African colonial and postcolonial experience adequately explains moral degeneration in African societies? Can an appeal or a return to traditional ways of life advocated by some scholars help in addressing the moral dilemma in African societies? And since solidarity and harmony has always been the aim and continues to take a place of pride in African ethics, what contribution can be drawn from Habermas's discourse ethics program with its emphasis on the role of a community of selves in creating binding obligations and norms? Answering these questions form the crux of the present paper.

African Experience of the West as a Predicament

With particular reference to moral degeneration in African societies, many scholars working on the African colonial/postcolonial experience assert that the invasion of the West resulted in the breakdown of traditional institutions responsible for the preservation of moral values, promoting moral education, and the enforcement of a strict moral code. For example, the traditional elite group in African communities, which consists mainly of the king, the priests, the council of chiefs and the elders, played an essential role in the preservation and education of moral values in the community. Individuals within the community looked up to them for moral direction. The elite group were accorded tremendous authority and power in traditional African communities, and they occupied a status where their will and dictates are not questioned, but instead, are taken as representing the will of the community as well as of supernatural forces including the unseen ancestor. The respect and reverence accorded to the elite group in an African community is particularly made obvious in the title given to any elder among the Esan people of Southern Nigeria: *Owaẹn* (or *Owalen*). *Owaẹn* translates as "the wise one". The bearer of this title is deemed to be a repository of the customs, traditions and moral precepts of the people and, by implication, a custodian of the tradition of the people. He is therefore primarily responsible for protecting that tradition and ensuring that it does not recede into oblivion. The *Owaẹn* is therefore, saddled with the crucial responsibility of ensuring communal equilibrium by constantly seeking to inculcate into members of the community the values and norms that bind them together.

The elder, a fully developed moral person, therefore, has important roles in the form of communal and social responsibilities, which include training the youths, prodding or praising others as the case may be, in order to help them achieve moral personhood and elderhood. This duty requires that the elder displays his wealth of knowledge in his moral judgements by exhibiting rich and comprehensive moral sensitivity. An elder expected

to be exemplary is teaching and morally educating the youths. This is why he is a mentor and a role model for the people to emulate. An important part of the process of moral training is the ability of the younger ones to emulate the ways of the elders.[15] This is why eldership positions in Esan traditional community is conferred only on persons who are deemed to have fulfilled the roles expected of them by the community and are conversant with the cultural practices, beliefs and values of the community for the obvious reason that others will look up to them. If an elder is not well informed about his culture, he will become someone who misleads the younger ones. This is thoroughly avoided.

> Informal education in moral values within the community reveals that, the community represents a hierarchy of moral authority and teaching responsibilities. At the top of the hierarchy are those who are entrusted with the teaching and reinforcement of communal values for the young ones at the lower hierarchy. The elders occupy the top of the hierarchy and are both custodian of the tradition and men of wisdom morally and epistemologically. Being an elder is the highest position any man can achieve in the community with the exception of the king or the queen[16] The important and esteemed status accorded to the elders justifies the elders' claim that there is moral degeneration or decay in Africa in contemporary times since they possess the epistemic authority needed to diagnose the moral ills in the society. The common reason given by scholars and members of the elite group for the moral decay experienced in African communities today is the African colonial and postcolonial experiences which have resulted in the diffusion of the traditional communal harmony and weakened social integration. In particular, the traditional elite group which presided over communal moral institutions were disorganised and rendered impotent. As Albert Onobhayedo explains with specific reference to the influence of Western education on African moral values,The power and influence of the traditional elite was to be significantly altered with the introduction of Western education. Many of their ideas and beliefs were challenged or even ridiculed. For instance, traditional rulers whose influence had already been weakened by colonial administration found themselves challenged as Western education emphasized a rational evaluation of ideas before acceptance.[17]

Ihechukwu Madubuike expresses a similar view concerning the influence of French education on the Senegalese:

> French education, without a doubt, has produced individuals who are alienated from their traditional culture, who display a Western model of behaviour (they eat at the table, wear suits and ties, spend their holidays in France) but who all the same are not assimilated because they betray by their social conduct some of the traditional values still clinging to their normal selves.[18]

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[15] P. Ikuenobe, *Philosophical Perspective on Communalism and Morality in African Traditions*, p. 136.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

[17] A. Onobhayedo, "Western Education and Social Change in Esan Land". *IRORO: A Journal of Arts* 7.1&2 (2007), pp. 270-271.

[18] I. Madubuike, *The Senegalese Novel: A Sociological Study of the Impact of the Politics of Assimilation*. Washington DC: Three Continents Press, p. 67. Quoted in M'Baye B. (2006), "Colo-

The point being made here by these scholars as well as the African elder is that the Occident's invasion of African societies resulted in the corrosion of core and basic cultural and moral values which led to the disruption of the equilibrium and tranquillity in these societies evident, for example, in moral degeneration.

Again, the inculcation and enforcement of traditional moral values in African communities involved the use of religiously garnished ideologies about ancestors, divinities, the Supreme Being and the like, founded on the epistemic authority of the African community to interiorize into individual members ideas, beliefs, norms and values about what is knowledge, truth, or good.[19] The aim of employing ideologies was to fulfil a crucial responsibility. According to Elechi Amadi,

> …to enforce a moral standard acceptable to a particular society. A secular interpretation leads to the conclusion that moral precepts have always had their origin in the mind of man. Even when deities are said to have laid them down, they have had to do so through the mind of man. It would appear, then, that while man formulates the moral code, he enlists the influence of religion for its enforcement. In other words, *in ethics man proposes, god enforces*.[20]

This is clearly seen in the case of the African's relationship with his/her ancestors. Due to fear of being punished by his/her ancestor or an anticipation of reward and blessings for his/her good deeds, he/she is careful in his/her choice of action. Even when he/she does something wrong, he/she is quick to carry out the necessary appeasement rites such as confession to the public or to an appointed elder or priest, and slaughtering of a goat.[21]

But the advent of agents of Westernization distorted such traditional ideologies and introduced its own religious, social, moral and political ideologies that were clearly different from the traditional ideologies for the enforcement and sustenance of moral norms. Regarding the effects of Christianity and Islam on African Traditional Religion and its consequent effect on moral values, Bolaji Idowu says that

> Christianity by a miscarriage of purpose makes its own contribution to the detrimental changes in moral values. Somehow it has replaced the old fear of the divinities with the relieving but harmful notion of a God who is ready to forgive perhaps even more than man is prone to sin, the God in whom 'goodness and severity' have been put asunder. So also does Islam unwittingly create the erroneous impression that the fulfilment of the obligatory duties and acts of penance by good works are

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nization and African Modernity". In: Cheikh Hamidau Kane's, *Ambiguous Adventure*. *Journal of African Literature and Culture* 3, 1983.

[19] See K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, p. 2.

[20] E. Amadi, *Ethics in Nigerian Culture*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1982, p. 6. The emphasis is ours.

[21] C. E. Ukhun, *Metaphysical Authoritarianism and the Moral Agent in Esan Traditional Thought*, p. 74.

sufficient for the purpose of winning heaven. The result of all these is that our 'enlightened' products of the two 'fashionable' religions can now steal without any twinge of moral compunction those articles of food placed for sale at cross roads and by roadsides, which used to be quite safe; they can now cheerfully appropriate other persons' property; they can break covenants, or promises made on oath, with brazen indifference.[22]

Therefore, what becomes clear is that the African experience of the foreign cultures is, as Moses Oke explains, the root cause of the problems in postcolonial Africa, namely, the erosion of core and fundamental traditional values that have helped to promote stable social existence over the ages. Such erosion is traced to the advent of colonialism and the consequent introduction of European socio-political systems, values, institutions and structures. The effect of the cultural invasion is that while emphasis was placed on political and economic development to the detriment of social and moral development, Africans' core human values were suppressed or totally obliterated by the Western values. Ironically, Africa, as things have turned out, has lost out on all fronts of development – political, economic, social, psychological and moral – presumably because the indigenous social culture was superimposed upon by the alien colonialist social cultures.[23]

J. Obi Oguejiofor sums up the negative consequences that have resulted from the African experience of the West as including fear, psychological trauma, social insecurity, political instability, incompetent leadership, violence, economic crises, moral decay and cultural alienation.

It is for these reasons that the African elder blames the "white man" for the degeneration and deterioration of (moral) values in his/her society. But what, in the African elder's view, is the best course of action to take in revitalizing moral value in African communities?

A Return to the Past: The Danger of Cultural Nostalgia

When asked what can be done to improve the (moral) situation in the African society, persons of the old generation often argue that if Africans lived the way they used to the current situation would generally improve. A response like this reveals the convictions of the African elder who does not only cherish the traditional/indigenous values of pre-colonial African communities, but also would be pleased with a situation whereby such values can be rejuvenated and sustained today. In other words, the African elder sees an appeal to, or a "return" to, past ways of doing things as the

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solution to the crisis of deteriorating moral standards in contemporary African society.

The quest for a return or an appeal to the traditions of, or to past ways of doing things in, pre-colonial Africa has also become popular in African scholarly discourse as well. It is what Kwame Gyekye has called "cultural revivalism"[24] or what Abiola Irele calls "cultural nationalism".[25] It is also strongly echoed in Davidson's *Black Man's Burden*. We cannot forget to mention George B. N. Ayittey too advocates a return to past ways of doing things, African traditional institutions and ways of life in his *Africa Betrayed*.[26] Peter Kanyandago is "cultural re-appropriation" expresses this same view. Cultural re-appropriation, according to Kanyandago, represents any conscious or deliberate attempt by "Africans to re-appropriate, revalorize, learn about and love their culture… some kind of cultural therapy".[27] This, he believes, is very necessary since Africans have been made to abandon or neglect their cultural heritage in order to embrace a forced modernity through slavery, colonialism and imperialism. Kanyandago therefore stresses the need to go back to experts in African cultural values and traditions, namely the elders, while the education and religious systems would have to be reformed in a manner that will take into account the fact that culture is a basis for one's existence and survival.[28] According to Jay A. Ciaffa, cultural revivalism,

> …assumes a basically reverential attitude toward the African cultural heritage. According to this view, the key to effectively addressing contemporary problems lies in reclaiming and revitalizing indigenous traditions that have been degraded and suppressed in the wake of colonialism… Having achieved political independence, postcolonial Africans must now pursue a more decisive liberation, a "decolonization" of African minds and societies. While revivalists are often sceptical of calls for development and modernization, viewing them as thinly veiled calls for the continued imposition of European cultural norms, it is important to realize that they do not typically view their own project as *antimodern*. For revivalists, the key point is that genuine modernization in Africa can only be realized through the revitalization of African cultural norms.[29]

In a sense, revivalism is a form of revolt or protest against Westernization. It therefore seems a strident way of calling for a revolution, violent

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[24] K. Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 233.

[25] A. Irele, *In Praise of Alienation: An Inaugural Lecture*. Ibadan: Sumgys Printing Company, 1987, p. 22.

[26] B. Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden*, p. 73.

[27] P. Kanyandago, "Rejection of the African Humanity: Search for Cultural Reappropriation". In: F. Mayiwa (ed.), *African Spirit and Black Nationalism: A Discourse in African American Studies*. Lagos: Foresight Press, 2003. Cited in M. Oke, *Cultural Nostalgia*, p. 335.

[28] M. Oke, *Cultural Nostalgia*, p. 335.

[29] J. A. Ciaffa, "Tradition and Modernity in Postcolonial African Philosophy", *Humanitas* XXI.1&2 (2008), pp. 121-122.

or otherwise. Those who dutifully call for revolution often do so in order for the African continent to "break-away" from Western ways. And we may ask: break away from what to what? The underlying idea is still a return to an indigenous system, to institutions that were in place before the onslaught of Westernization. Thus, one can say categorically that many scholars of the African experience that have advocated either a revolution or cultural revivalism as a way out of African predicament often have at the back of their minds a revitalization and regeneration of the African indigenous heritage that flourished in pre-colonial times.

The major problem with cultural revivalism is that it seems borne out of sentiments about the African cultural past. Moses Oke refers to it as "cultural nostalgia".[30] As such, it represents an attitude that can be inimical to bettering the African condition and moving it forward. According to Oke, it is a wrong direction to look for the improvement of African traditions.[31] The West may have perpetuated evil and terrible things in Africa during the eras of slave trade and colonialism to the extent that it is difficult for Africans to forgive and forget. But advocates of cultural revivalism do Africa more harm by not realistically and consciously confronting their problems. They tend to believe that an African past traditional heritage can be transported into the present. As Abiola Irele writes,

> The ideas of cultural nationalism cannot help us out of this agonizing situation. On the contrary, they unfit us mentally for the urgent tasks we have to undertake, which we are undertaking but in a muddled frame of mind, in order to create a new and viable society.[32]

It is thus essential that we understand our problems exactly as it is and find solutions by developing positive aspects within our contemporary experiences.

The attitude of cultural nostalgia is strongly interwoven with the attitude of living in past glories. Many eulogize the glories of African past such as that Africa is the cradle of civilization, and refer, among other things, to the Egyptian pyramids.[33] Irele writes:

> It is of no practical significance now to us to be told that our forbears constructed the Pyramids if today we can't build and maintain by ourselves the roads and bridges we require to facilitate communication between ourselves, if we still have to depend on the alien to provide for us the necessities of modern civilization, if we can't bring the required level of efficiency and imagination to the management of our environment.[34]

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[30] See M. Oke, *Cultural Nostalgia*, pp. 332-343.

[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 337-338.

[32] A. Irele, *In Praise of Alienation*, p. 22.

[33] Cf. I. C. Onyewuenyi, *The African Origin of Greek Philosophy: An Exercise in Afrocentrism.* Nnsuka, Nigeria: University of Nigeria Press, 1993.

[34] A. Irele, *In Praise of Alienation*, p. 22.

Admittedly the African elder finds himself in a dilemma between two quite different cultures; he finds himself in the midst of a dualism that the African experience has created – the perennially debated tradition vs. modernity dichotomy. As Kofi Awoonor says in his poem "Songs of Sorrow",

> Returning is not possible
> And going forward is a great difficulty.[35]

This, however, should not help justify any homesick kind of attitude. For we can romanticize with the past all we can, but our problems will continue to pile up for us until we make realistic efforts to solve them. Indeed, a critique of cultural nostalgia should not in any way belittle the great efforts that some scholars have made to theorize about the African past but only with the intention that such will serve as an encouragement for Africans, i.e. to assure the African people that since they did it before, they can do it again. Such theorizing about the African past plays a vital role at a point where it is greatly needed in the African history. But we should be done now with reminiscence and focus on confronting the present for a better future. Africans need to, in the first place, understand their problems and their causes in order to be able to pinpoint the exact point from where to start seeking for solutions, the areas where mistakes were made, the areas needing amendments and those needing improvements.

Sustaining Solidarity:
Lessons from Habermas's "Discourse Ethics"

An essential ingredient in African morality is the commitment to a communalistic attitude toward life or an emphasis on the need for human action to promote solidarity and harmony among beings in a community. Since it is obvious that a return to past ways of ensuring solidarity in African communities is not feasible, Africa must seek to achieve this through a collective and deliberate attempt to reinforce a communalistic ethos in modern African societies. As we saw above, the use of religiously-garnished ideologies was essential in achieving cooperation with the moral order in traditional African communities. However, the advent of agents of Westernisation, which led to the creation of modern African states quickly resulted in the shattering of such ideologies to the extent that a return to them will be an ineffective strategy to sustain African communalistic morality.

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[35] K. Awoonor, "Songs of Sorrow". In: G. Moore & M. Beier (eds.), *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*. United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 1984.

If the use of ideologies garnished with ideas about the supernatural to impose and enforce a moral standard in African traditional cultures was only effective in the closed structure of the community and became problematic in the appearance of (Western) alternative viewpoints and ideologies, then, it is now only appropriate to replace such ideologies with the use of discourse by a community of selves in reaching mutual, uncoarsed and unhindered understanding, agreement and validation of moral norms. In other words, rather than a nostalgic lingering in past ways of doing things that were obviously unable to withstand the onslaught of Westernization (nay globalization), "the liberated subjects", in Jürgen Habermas' words, "no longer bound by traditional rules have to create binding obligations by dint of their own communicative efforts."[36]

According to D. Moon, "the fundamental intuition underlying the move to discourse is the ideal of a moral community one whose norms and practices are fully acceptable to those subject to them, a society based not on imposition, but on the agreement of free and equal persons."[37] The idea is to place a community of persons at the motivational and interpretative centre of an optimistic restoration of moral values and norms. A major and laudable attempt at theorizing how a community of selves can reach uncoarsed understanding, agreement and validation of ideas, specifically in the realm of morality is that proposed by the most famous member of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, Jürgen Habermas, in his popular and much debated theory of Communicative Action in general, and more specifically, his program of Discourse Ethics. Going beyond Kant's categorical imperative, Habermas clearly states the fundamental assumption underlying the Discourse Ethics program:

> Rather than ascribing as valid to all others any maxim that I can will to be a universal law, I must submit my maxim to all others for the purpose of discursively testing its claim to universality. The emphasis shifts from what each one can will without contradiction to be a general law, to what all can will in agreement to be a universal norm.[38]

To be sure, this is hardly the place and space to elaborate in a clear and critical manner on Habermas's Discourse Ethics program. Conference proceedings, papers and voluminous books have been written to achieve such an aim and it is not often an easy task. What we shall attempt doing here is to highlight the main points in the Discourse Ethics program and

how it can be useful in dealing with the moral crisis faced in Africa and, indeed, in the world in general.

Habermas's aim in Discourse ethics is to propose a shift from solitary reflection to intersubjective agreement on moral norms. On this basis, in fact, Habermas explicates the moral "dignity" of our ability to universalize (i.e., to reason impartially) not in terms of a "noumenal" Kingdom (as we find in Kant), but rather in the phenomenal terms of the intersubjective and, hence, materially or socially constituted nature of psychic integrity. In contrast to Kantian morality, then, discourse ethics attempts to treat the reality of moral pluralism in a post-traditional world, and it does so precisely through a shift from monologic to dialogic modes of normative legitimation.[39]

In order to achieve this, the question remains how norms are to be justified, whereby we come to the foundational level of Habermas's theory. Indeed, it is at this level, that Habermas introduces the principle of universalization (U),[40] which states:

> For a norm to be valid, the consequences and side effects that its *general* observance can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the particular interests of *each* person affected must be such that *all* affected can accept them freely.[41]

While (U) provides a rule of argumentation that constitutes what it *means* for a moral norm to be valid, the discourse ethics principle (D) tells us what sort of procedure is required to test for the validity of a proposed substantive norm (namely, a discourse).[42] According to Habermas

> (D) Every valid norm would meet with the approval of all concerned if they could take part in a practical discourse.[43]

Elsewhere he writes:

> (D) Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity *as participants in a practical discourse*.[44]

A practical discourse, for Habermas, is a discourse in which interlocutors use language *communicatively*, with the overriding aim of "reaching an understanding" – rather than *strategically*, to realize antecedently given ends – in order to contest normative claims. As specified by (D), participants test for the validity of a proposed moral norm in a practical

[39] S. Gaon, "Pluralizing Universal «Man»: The Legacy of Transcendentalism and Teleology in Habermas's Discourse Ethics", *The Review of Politics* 60.4 (1998), pp. 687-688.

[40] D. Enrique, *The Underside of Modernity*, p.163.

[41] J. Habermas *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 120.

[42] J. Habermas *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 199.

[43] J. Habermas *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 121.

[44] J. Habermas *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 66.

discourse; but they must do so by relating their needs, wants, etc., to the meaning of validity as specified by the rule of argumentation in (U).[45]

Habermas justifies (U) by "specifying the role that the transcendental-pragmatic argument can play in this process".[46] A transcendental-pragmatic argument seeks to show – here in the case of (U) – that something cannot be rejected and must be accepted as true because the very process of rejecting it depends on something else – in this case the activity of argumentation – and that argumentation could not exist without the principle of universalizability. For this transcendental-pragmatic argument to work, two things must be true: (i) argumentation must be something unavoidable; and (ii) universalizability must indeed be necessary for the very possibility of argumentation.[47] For Habermas,

> Every person who accepts the universal and necessary communicative presuppositions of argumentative speech and who knows what it means to justify a norm of action implicitly presupposes as valid the principle of universalization, whether in the form I gave it above or in an equivalent form.[48]

Habermas explains the transcendental-pragmatic argumentation in two senses: in *procedural* and *process* terms. In procedural terms, arguments are processes of reaching understanding that are ordered in such a way that proponents and opponents, having assumed a hypothetical attitude and being relieved of the pressures of action and experience, can test validity claims that have become problematic. In process terms, argumentative speech is a process of communication that, in light of its goal of reaching a rationally motivated agreement, must satisfy improbable conditions.[49] On this basis, he recognizes three levels of conditions or rules of argumentation that participants in a discourse must meet for it to be successful:

Level 1 (rules for the logical-semantic level):

1.1. No speaker may contradict himself.

1.2. Every speaker who applies predicate *F* to object *A* must be prepared to apply *F* to all other objects resembling *A* in all relevant aspects.

1.3. Different speakers may not use the same expression with different meanings.

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[45] A. Abizader, *In Defence of the Universalization Principle in Discourse Ethics,* p. 199.

[46] J. Habermas *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 86.

[47] D. R. Rasmussen, "Morality and Modernity: A Critique of Jürgen Habermas's Neo-Marxist Theory of Justice". In: J. Forester (ed.), *Critical Theory and Public Life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985, pp. 3-4.

[48] J. Habermas *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 86.

[49] J. Habermas *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, pp. 87-88.

Level 2 (Pragmatic presuppositions – rules for the search for truth/procedural rules):

2.1. Every speaker may assert only what he really believes.

2.2. A person who disputes a proposition or norm not under discussion must provide a reason for wanting to do so.

Level 3 (rules of discourse/process rules):

3.1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.

3.2. a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.

b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.

c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires, and needs.

3.3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (3.1) and (3.2).

In summary, Habermas holds that argumentation or discourse is unavoidable, that argumentation cannot exist unless universalizability is true, and that universalizability is expressed according to the rules of discourse. Anyone who *argues* against these rules and gains justification for his argument by following these rules is guilty of a performative self-contradiction and is thus rationally defeated.[50]

What makes discourse ethics attractive to the ethicist thus is that the notion of discourse already harbours a stock of normative rules and commitments that can serve as a premise of a normative moral theory which is not already morally weighed. Habermas claims that by rationally reconstructing the pragmatic conditions of discourse, it is possible to isolate a set of ideal conditions that every competent speaker who is oriented toward reaching a reasoned consensus must assume to be satisfied. These rules of discourse formalize the intuitive know-how of participants in discourse. Analysis of these rules shows that, among other things, argumentation in principle excludes no one, renders no assertion immune from question and criticism, and prohibits the use of all coercion except the unforced force of the better argument.[51]

Discourse ethics has thus been assessed by many as formalistic (and procedural), fallibilistic (anti-foundationalist), and anti-realist. Formalistic because it does not presuppose substantive moral contents; any norm must be in accordance with the procedures of discourse for it to be accepted and the quality of the argument for a norm during argumentation deter-

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[50] D. R. Rasmussen, *Morality and Modernity*, p. 5.

[51] J. G. Finlayson, "Does Hegel's Critique of Kant's Moral Theory Apply to Discourse Ethics?" In: P. Dews (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999, p. 32.

mines which norm prevails.[52] Discourse ethics has an anti-foundationalist (fallibilistic) view of justification and an anti-realist view of beliefs; in discourse, no belief or normative norm is held sacrosanct, unalterable, beyond criticism or as a "given". Rather, discourse is expected to be dialogical, fallible or defeasible in the justification of beliefs, empirical or normative. Habermas holds that what makes a belief count as justified is not a property of the belief itself, but the regulative principles that govern the process of justification leading to that belief. The Habermasian theory proposes a discursive, not a criterial, standard for belief-justification: It does not specify properties that beliefs must have in order to count as justified, but it specifies the formal properties that public practices of justification must have in order for the resulting beliefs to count as justified. What lies at the end of the chain of reasons, then, is not some privileged foundationalist set of basic beliefs that need no inferential justification, but a local set of *temporarily taken-for-granted beliefs* that provide the necessary background context against which justification can proceed. Habermas's view is that any discursive justification must take some beliefs for granted in order to proceed.[53]

The fact that any justification will come to rest at some set of taken-for-granted assumptions does not mean that every rationally motivated agreement or belief is ultimately *arbitrary* but that every rationally motivated agreement is *fallible* (defeasible) and a better argument can always change it. It means, by implication, that nothing is held sacrosanct; there is always room for improvement and revision.[54]

John Mingers adds that discourse ethics "is different from other approaches to ethics as it is grounded in actual debate between those affected by decisions and proposals."[55] It seeks to develop a society that enable power-free and open debates among equal citizens as a pre-condition for just practices and a way of taking into account the current practices of the actors within a given society or community without necessarily accepting relativism of moral values.[56]

The habermasian theory of communicative action in general and discourse ethics in particular implies that "The turn to discourse, which

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[52] T. Goossens, The Foundation of Morals in Apel's Discourse Ethics. Short Paper for *Capita Selecta Ethics*. Retrieved on December 11, 2010 from: http://www.tiborgoossens.nl/Documents/Foundation%20of%20Morals%20in%20Apel%27s%20Discourse%20Ethics.pdf (ND), p. 4.

[53] A. Abizader, *In Defence of the Universalization Principle in Discourse Ethics*, pp. 195-196.

[54] A. Abizader, *In Defence of the Universalization Principle in Discourse Ethics*, pp. 196-197.

[55] J. Mingers, *Toward Ethical Information Systems: The Contribution of Discourse Ethics*. A Seminar presented at the Department of Information Systems and Operations Management, University of Auckland, United Kingdom (2010), p. 1.

[56] T. Beschorner, "Ethical Theory and Business Practice: The Case of Discourse Ethics". *The Journal of Business Ethics* 66.1 (2006), p. 128.

includes but is not limited to communicative ethics, is in part a move from a substantive to a procedural conception of moral… theory. Rather than providing values grounded on an account of human nature or reason, discourse-based approaches offer a set of procedures that if followed, would yield principles legitimating moral norms as well as social practices and institutions."[57]

Conclusion

We think that the African community of selves needs to abandon use of ideological beliefs in supernaturalism for enforcing moral standard for an uncoarsed and unhindered discourse regarding moral norms. The aim is to reach agreements and provide validity claims and justification for moral norms and the institutions of society that shore them up. In other words, rather than hiding behind the ideological beliefs, the community can strengthen its communality and commonality by working together, in uncoarsed discourse, for restoring and justifying sound moral values and norms. Habermas' discourse ethics provides the necessary ingredients to embark on such an enormous task. The German Philosopher asks:

> How can we appropriate naïve, everyday ethical knowledge in a critical fashion without at the same time destroying it through theoretical objectification? How can ethical knowledge become reflective from the perspective of the participants themselves?[58]

Habermas's aim is to provide a normative grounding for conflicting claims to legitimation by seeking a point of ethical reflection that is both outside the immediacy of the life-world and at the same time part of it. It is not an attempt to offer an ultimate justification of ethics, which he says is neither possible nor necessary.[59] In other words, ethical claims or moral norms can no longer be at the mercy of unreflective moral and cultural presuppositions. What is required is a deliberative process of discourse which reflects on its own presuppositions.[60]

Indeed, we consider that the habermasian Discourse Ethics has a lot to contribute to the preservation of community life since it includes the participant of all rational members of the community in the discourse process irrespective of the diversity of views that they may have assumed. According to Georgia Warnke, participants in moral-practical discourse

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[57] D. Moon, *Practical Discourse and Communicative Ethics*, p. 143.

[58] J. Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993, pp. 22-23.

[59] G. Delanty, "Habermas and Occidental Rationalism: The Politics of Identity, Social Learning, and the Cultural Limits of Moral Universalism". *Sociological Theory* 15.1 (1997), p. 32. See also J. Habermas, *Justification and Application*, p. 84.

[60] G. Delanty, "Habermas and Occidental Rationalism", p. 32.

take up what Habermas calls a hypothesis-testing attitude toward disputed norms. The norms they consider are those that have been problematic within the cultural context of an ongoing form of life. Discourse disconnects them from the unquestioned validity of the context and examines them in terms of the question of whether they would find an uncoarsed accent of all those potentially affected under ideal conditions. This assent establishes the legitimacy of norms and principles, but it does not yet contain prescriptions for their application in concrete situations of actions which comes later.[61]

In the application of universal norms in concrete cultural situation, Habermas recognizes that there are situations in which a consensus on normative principles such as liberty, equality, the sanctity of life, and human rights in general threaten to split apart as soon as the principles are applied to circumstance where cultural values, traditional doctrines, religious beliefs, national identities and the like are strongly present.[62] It is for this reason that Habermas insists that any universalistic morality is dependent upon a form of life that *meets it half way*. As long as the principles justified in moral discourse are to determine actions within concrete forms of life, those forms of life as well as the orientations, sensibilities, and forms of understanding they permit must already be constructed in a certain way. There must be some agreement or correspondence between moral norms and the socialization or educational practices of the society. Form of lives, cultural values and traditions through which people make their lives meaningful must be of such forms that they do not violate rationally justifiable universalistic principles of human welfare.[63] They must reflect emancipatory tendencies, principles of equality and liberty, and must proceed on the taken-for-granted belief that the goal of any moral norm is human welfare, although always leaving open what constitutes such a welfare. In the end, achieving this will completely rest on the collective efforts and sacrifices made by members, institutions and movements in the community of selves, whether in Africa or elsewhere in the global world of today.

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[61] G. Warnke, "Communicative Rationality and Cultural Values". In: S. K. White, *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 129-130.

[62] G. Warnke, "Communicative Rationality and Cultural Values", p. 130.

[63] G. Warnke, "Communicative Rationality and Cultural Values", pp. 132-133.

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