

ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN UGANDA

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Introduction

The world philosophy day is celebrated annually on the 16th of November. On such a day, it is worth reflecting on the major contributions of philosophy to the world. In as far as these contributions are concerned; other presenters will deal with in this conference. On the other hand, though philosophy has contributed significantly to the world and its development, it has also met several challenges. Among the challenges we can identify are those in the area of ethics.

Ethics is defined as the critical reflections on morality. Morality on the other hand is defined as the accepted standards of right and wrong according to a given society. By critically reflecting on the standards of right and wrong of different societies, we can derive principles or theories that can inform and justify our standards of behaviour.

Ugandan indigenous communities had their own moral standards of behaviour. But the Ugandan society of today is has both the indigenous standards of behaviour and the standards of behaviour introduced by western civilization and philosophy. When we critically reflect on these standards of behaviour we can derive different sets of ethical principles that should guide our behaviour both in the public and private sector. These double set of ethical principles in itself is big source of confusion to individuals, institutional and public ethical practice. This confusion has created a number of ethical challenges in our society as we grapple with different ethical issues that are eating the very moral fibre of our society like corruption, tribalism, nepotism etc. We shall now try to identify some of the challenges that arise out of these ethical issues.

Failure to expand the principle of communal responsibility beyond tribal lines

We can acknowledge the fact that western normative ethical principles derived from utilitarianism, rule-based ethics and virtue ethics are insufficient to guide human behaviour in Africa. Instead African indigenous ethics emphasizes the following; principle of life, principle of individual responsibility, and the principle of communal responsibility. In practical terms, which of these set of principles should guide the behaviour of the individuals, institutions and the public members of our society?

While western ethics emphasizes individual responsibility, the indigenous African ethics emphasizes communal responsibility. The communal responsibility underscores the fact that we have a shared origin and destiny, so whatever affects a member of our traditional societies, whether negatively or positively, should be the responsibility of all the members of that society to mitigate. The success of an individual member of a traditional society was considered the success of all the members of that society, while the downfall of one member of that society was the downfall of all the members of that society. In contemporary Africa, this principle has been continually lived in many ways. For

instance, a quarrel between two individuals belonging to two different ethnic groups often sparks off tribal wars between these two ethnics communities. The commonest examples can be cited from northern Nigeria. In Uganda for example, the atrocities committed by Idi Amin and his supporters was translated into hatred and persecution of the members of Amin's tribe, the Kakwa and their close allies the Madi and the Lugbara tribes, by other Ugandans in the 1970s. In the 1980s, the atrocities committed by Milton Obote were translated into hatred and persecution of the Acholi and Langi tribes by other Ugandans. The worse example of such communal responsibility has been seen in the case of Rwandan genocide of the early 1990s.

The ethical principle of communal responsibility derived from the indigenous African societies has greatly affected the Africans in various ways; public sector, private sector and at interpersonal relationship levels. In Uganda today, tribalism, nepotism and favouritism is still widespread and in my opinion, this finds its roots in this indigenous ethical principle and the practice that arise from it.

The bigger challenge is that Africans, since independence, have failed to expand the boundaries of this communal brotherhood beyond their tribal or ethnic boundaries. Unless Africans and Ugandans in particular, begin to treat one another as brothers and sisters in this indigenous sense, by expanding our tribal brotherhood and sisterhood to include all Ugandans and beyond Uganda to include all humanity, then we are still in for many more problems.

The challenge of wrong ethical education

The second ethical challenge I would like to underline is in the area of ethical education. While in line with Plato, our African traditional ethical system emphasized the good man theory; that ethical goodness does not reside in isolated acts of goodness, but must spring from the ethical wealth of a good personality, modern ethical practice tend to emphasize the rule-based ethical theory. More often than not, the rule-based theory tends to state that coherence with the law is the best ethical practice. The dualism created between coherence theory and value-based theory often confuse in practical terms. According to a number of authors in this field, African indigenous ethical education, emphasis of placed on cultivating morally good characters as a basis of good ethical behaviour. Anthony Kirk-Greene, for instance, said *mutumin kirki*, according to the Hausa people in Nigeria, refers to man's intrinsic goodness and which rests in the *hali* or his character.¹ It is in the character that *kirki* reposes, so that *halin mutum*, a man's character, is at once the wellspring of his virtue and the mirror of his moral make-up.

In a similar way, an Acholi of northern Uganda would describe a man of good character as *ngat ma kite atir* or *ngat ma cwinghe leng*. So the two terms expressing this moral

¹ Anthony H. M. Kirk-Greene, "Mutumin Kirki", the Concept of the Good Man in Hausa, in *African Philosophy: An Anthology*, Oxford (UK), Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p.121.

character are *kit* and *cwing*.² *Kit* expresses an inner quality of a person, much deeper than mere acts of a person; it is the centre of one's activities. From such an innermost part of a person's character, performance of goodness or badness by a person springs. Similarly, *cwiny* is the innermost part of a person from which true goodness or badness springs.

The main ethical challenge according to this indigenous ethical principle is that today our educational system does not offer this training in cultivating good character. Instead, we are offered several regulatory frameworks and rules to guide good ethical behaviour. Unfortunately, presence or awareness of rules by themselves do not provide the necessary motivation and strengths to live up to these rules. On the other hand most ethical education in Uganda is geared towards awareness creation about what is right and wrong, with the aim of persuading people to act ethically. Despite all the regulatory frameworks, including those of public and private institutions like the churches, most Ugandans have never been persuaded to acting ethically and with integrity.

In my opinion, *the real challenge is to do with the wrong approach to ethical education*. While the indigenous informal ethical education emphasized the cultivation of values and virtues of the human person; today's general education emphasizes knowledge of the subject matter other than concentrating on the knower themselves. Indeed, philosophy of idealism should be admired for that matter, since according to idealist's philosophy of education, the most important component of learning is the learner and not the knowledge the learner acquires. They do not say knowledge acquisition is bad, but by itself knowledge does not change the world. It is the person who knows that is the change agent in the world. Consequently, the moral uprightness of the learner is all that is important in the field of ethics. This also does not mean the knowledge of what is right or wrong is not important, but by itself, it does not provide the motivation for acting rightly. The human person must be trained to cultivate good character and virtues attitudes as the wellspring of his or actions. In Uganda, this is missing in our education in general and in ethical education in particular.

Personal and institutional integrity does not simply develop on the basis of well set rules to guide that individual or institution. Institutional integrity depends on the integrity of well behaved members of that institution, who together create a culture of integrity. Likewise, personal integrity is not created simply by the fear of punishment; it must spring from a well of goodness in-built in one's personal character. It is this character of an individual or character of an institution which is a result of well cultivated culture of integrity that is the origin of goodness and ethical behaviour.

When values are turned upside down

In Uganda today, values are turned upside down. When an individual struggles to earn his/her wealth genuinely and takes a long time to make any big financial gains, he/she is termed foolish, dull and not enterprising. On the other hand, wealth gained overnight

² Lajul Wilfred, *Impact of African Traditional Ethics on Behaviour in Uganda*, in MAWAZO: The Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University, Vol. II No. 1 April 2011, (p.131) Makerere University Printery, Kampala

through fraudulent ways, thus exalting the financial status of that individual, such a person is considered successful, serious a hero etc.

This wrong attitude springs from a misguided interpretation of the Holy Scripture. When Jesus called a repentant thief a good thief because he repented and acknowledge his mistakes by asking for mercy and help from Jesus, some Ugandan would call a person who misappropriates the public wealth and invests that wealth in Uganda a good thief. This misinterpretation of the scriptures has helped in turning our values systems upside down. People who amass wealth from dubious sources are considered successful, enterprising and therefore have become models for our young people to imitate. This has created a great ethical challenge in Uganda.

When political practices and activities become amoral

Niccolo Machiavelli, an Italian political philosopher recommended that, political activities must not be subjected to moral principles; other, political leaders would become ineffective and weak. This view marked a break between the classical political theories and practice from the modern ones. From then on most political leaders in world think like Machiavelli, that if their political activities were subjected to moral principles, then they would become weak. This has created a culture of impunity in the political world. Most political leaders do not care about the ethical implications of their actions, thinking Machiavelli has licensed them to act amorally. This is another source of great ethical challenge in world and in Uganda too.

When the end justifies the means

Another ethical challenge comes from the fact many people have wrongly misinterpreted the utilitarian philosophy, where emphasis is put on the end as a way of judging the rightness or wrongness of human action. For many now, so long as the end of an action is good, they totally ignore the means used to arrive at such ends. Yet good moral principle would emphasize that both the end and the means must be correct if an action is to be ethically right.

When freedom becomes a licence to do what we want

Many people in the world today sing of human freedom, which indeed is a noble value to be respected. However, very few do have the right understanding of human freedom. For them, freedom is the ability to do what one feels like doing regardless of any consideration for others.

Immanuel Kant underscores that true freedom has two dimensions; namely, freedom from and freedom for. True freedom requires that human beings should be seen free from both internal and external hindrances to self determination. That is becoming what one is capable of becoming. However, this negative freedom must be complemented by the positive dimension as commitment to self chosen values, either as individuals or as institutions or communities. This is freedom for. Many people want to be free from but

are not willing to commit themselves to meaning values systems that should guide their development or becoming. Short of this freedom become a vice other than a virtue. In Uganda many are not aware of this; we do not know we have gained our independence for instance. What values systems have we committed ourselves as Ugandan on which our constitution and legal system hinges. This is one of the biggest ethical challenges to Uganda.

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