

GROUNDING MORALITY IN THE DIVINE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF YORUBA ETHICAL THOUGHT AND THE QUESTION OF AFRICAN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

In this paper, the philosophical basis of morality in traditional African thinking will be critically evaluated with special emphasis on the Yoruba conceptual framework. It is an answer to the basic question: Are there African notions of morality? This paper, grounded in an analytic approach to philosophy, questions the genesis, nature, and normative form of moral reasoning within Yoruba epistemology. This paper argues that Yoruba morality is a unique system of ethics that is theocentrically grounded, evaluates character (*Iwa*), and operates through an internal moral faculty (*Ifa aya*). This analysis shows that Yoruba ethical reasoning offers a complex alternative to Western moral theories, avoiding the trap of cultural relativism by comparing evolutionary, commonsense, and theological explanations of the origin of morality. The paper finds that African moral ideas, especially the Yoruba concept of *Omoluwabi*, can be useful philosophical material in contemporary ethical argument.

Keywords: Yoruba ethics, African philosophy, *Iwa*, *Omoluwabi*, moral ontology, religious morality, *Olodumare*.

1. Introduction: The Question of African Morality

The philosophical question of the existence of unique African moral concepts has been a controversial topic in cross-cultural ethical arguments. The debate over the existence of African philosophy, as Gbadegesin (1991, p. 1) notes, has long taken center stage in the philosophical arena in Africa, at the expense of substantive issues that the very existence of human beings raises. This has sadly resulted in a stalemate in the emergence of a unique African philosophy. In this paper, I will address this challenge by using traditional Yoruba moral philosophy as an example of African ethical reasoning.

The word "morality" must be used with caution before proceeding. Common definitions, e.g., the principles of good behavior in both public and private matters, are insufficient in the philosophical context because they do not distinguish the descriptive from the normative aspects of moral discourse. A stronger philosophical explanation is provided by Gyekye (1995, cited in Wiredu, 1996, p. 45), who holds that morality, as it is fundamentally understood, is the result of the pressure of human consciousness on objective values and unconditional imperatives. To the theist, they are based on God and transcendental reality. Such a definition raises philosophical issues at first glance. Should morality be based on the transcendental reality? Does this make the non-theistic ethical systems incomplete or just different? The Yoruba does so, as we will observe, in a curious fashion: it bases morality on Olodumare (the Supreme Deity) and at the same time acknowledges the independence of communal moral thinking. This conflict between divine foundation and human ethical action is a main theme of this analysis.

Mbiti (1970, p. 212) also provides a theological definition of morality as principles with the eschatological or ultimate goal of bringing believers to a perfect and final union with the Almighty. Although this captures the teleological aspect of religious ethics, it might omit moral systems whose goals are immanent rather than transcendent. The Yoruba conception, as we will show, has both an immanent and transcendent dimension at the same time.

2. The Problem of the Origin of Morality: Contending Philosophical Explanations

We should discuss the origin of morality as part of a broader philosophical question before turning to the Yoruba conception in particular. According to Oyeshile (2004, p. 136), two major schools of thought should be carefully scrutinized with respect to their philosophies. Western philosophy has three main explanations for morality: evolutionary-social, commonsense-empirical, and religious-theological. Though insightful, each meets persistent opposition. Before presenting the Yoruba alternative, these theories must be rigorously examined to identify conceptual deficiencies that a theocentric but non-arbitrary system like the Yoruba framework could fill. According to Oyeshile (2004), no single-origin explanation is acceptable, as African moral thought typically draws on multiple sources.

2.1 The Evolutionary-Social Model

The former school believes that morality, as a social phenomenon, is the result of social evolution. In this respect, morality and society co-evolve, and, according to Gyekye (1996, p. 56), morality is a device of society for maintaining itself and ensuring the smooth functioning of the machine of governance. It is a functionalist explanation that puts morality as an emergent feature of the social organization- a binding force that keeps people together who form part of a whole. This stand is similar to Durkheimian sociology, which considers moral facts as social facts. However, it has the traditional naturalistic fallacy: because morality is socially functional, it does not necessarily follow that the legitimacy of moral norms is based on their social functions. The evolutionary-social model of moral behavior describes how moral behavior evolved, and fails to explain the normative power that moral claims exert on individual consciousness.

Moreover, this model is unable to provide an adequate account of cross-cultural moral convergence around some values (e.g., taboos against murder, the necessity of veracity) or moral advancement, or of the ability to evaluate the current social order from a perspective beyond it. When morality is simply a product of social evolutionary pressure, why should we then criticize what was once a socially functioning institution, such as slavery or apartheid?

Yoruba culture acknowledges this vulnerability. It acknowledges that moral norms grow socially but holds that certain acts (e.g., killing a family member, incest) are immoral regardless of their social repercussions. This implies that the Yoruba framework comprises evolutionary and non-evolutionary features, as we discuss in Section 4.

2.2 The Commonsense-Empirical Model

The second school considers morality to be a commonsense product. It is on this basis that humans, in a bid to survive and adapt to the environment, learned what to avoid. Moral knowledge, as Oyeshile (2004, p. 140) points out, is developed over time through experience, creating a tradition of practical wisdom passed down through generations. This stance is reminiscent of Aristotelian *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and Humean moral sentimentalism. It has a problem of induction, however, in that prior experience of harmful effects does not imply a logical inevitability of future moral obligations. This is not, in itself, a categorical prohibition on lying; rather, it suggests that lying has generally led to social discord. In addition, the

commonsense model is unable to explain moral principles that lack observable consequences, such as the dignity of persons regardless of social utility.

The Yoruba solution teaches. Proverbs like "*Iwa lewa*" describe beauty as morality distilled over generations. For non-empirical moral guidance, the Yoruba believe in an inner moral faculty (Ifa aya, discussed in Section 6). Experience teaches what hurts, but the inner oracle knows right from wrong, even when consequences are uncertain.

2.3 The Religious Grounding Model

According to the third school of thought, morality is based only on religion or on man's understanding of the deity (Oyeshile, 2004: 136). Yoruba theology's main concept bases morality on divine will and personality. The answer determines how people behave and think within their communities, because this is the beginning of morality. Oveshile (2004, p. 136) suggests that religion is an important aspect of Africans' lives, but that the morality that Africans use to structure their conceptions of right and wrong is never purely religious. Instead, there are many sources of morality, such as religion, reason, prudence, societal norms and practices, and the desire for peaceful coexistence. This is a synthetic account that is more nuanced than any single-origin theory.

3. African Moral Universe: God as Guardian

After defining the general philosophical scene, we proceed to the African conception. According to Mbiti (1970, p. 205), one of the most important things is that God is viewed as the supreme protector of human morality. This is a formula that has to be unwrapped. The fact that God is seen as a protector and not a lawgiver is philosophically important. According to most Western divine command theories, the will of God is the very measure of what is right and wrong- what is morally obligatory is commanded by God. The Yoruba conception seems different: God is the one who protects or controls a moral order that has independent reality. God does not punish moral offenders at random, as Idowu (1962, p. 38) explains. The society should handle the violators of its moral laws. Idowu (1962, p. 41) says that the last disposer of everything is Olodumare, who is the Judge that determines the fate of man, and each individual will get what he is worthy of and nothing less.

The Yoruba model presents a third option to Plato's Euthyphro dilemma: either God dictates the good arbitrarily or recognizes an independent good. Since Olódùmarè is the "Perfect King" (Idowu, 1962, p. 29), he exemplifies good. Human civilizations find that good by collective debate and divination, avoiding arbitrariness and remaining theocentric. This structure answers the arbitrariness of Divine Command Theory. In recent literature, research on African religious ethics (Molefe, 2020) posits that the character of Olódùmarè is unchanging and perfect, thereby qualifying him to avoid brutality (Idowu, 1962). Olódùmarè does not impose morals; it is only a protector of them. In the Ifá divination corpus, a "fundamental code of natural laws" (Abimbola, 1976) is discovered: a mixture of divine and social logic, with God's protection, not legislation (Mbiti, 1970). The Yoruba worldview is sophisticated, and its understanding of morals is derived not from supernaturally declared higher laws but from the nature of the Supreme Being.

This passage shows an important aspect of Yoruba moral ontology: moral authority is decentralized rather than centralized. Moral enforcement is society's responsibility, and divine punishment is the secondary mechanism that results from it. This dispensation of moral authority raises interesting philosophical questions in moral epistemology. What is the way societies understand the acts that amount to moral violations? What is the protection against communal error of morality? The answer of the Yoruba, to which we shall refer, is both the wisdom that is revealed (by divination and custom) and an inner moral sense (the oracle of the heart).

3.1 Moral Causality, Disease, and Misfortune

According to Mbiti (1970, p. 209), there are societies in Africa where, more often than not, the belief is that some diseases or misfortunes are God's punishment for moral offenses. This belief should be understood philosophically, not ruled out as a prescientific superstition. According to the attribution of misfortune to moral causes, a coherent metaphysical system has been used in which the moral and natural orders are not radically distinct. This paradigm, which we can refer to as moral naturalism, views moral transgressions as having tangible consequences in the world, not as wrongs in an abstract sense in some spiritual domain. Similar ideas can be found in Western thought: Plato argued that injustice harms the soul, Kant argued that evil actions cause a moral stain, and numerous theories of karma.

The philosophical problem is to express this linkage in a way that does not push us into a crude theodicy, the effort to explain all cases of suffering as punishment. The Yoruba culture, as it is presented by Idowu (1962, p. 52), does not argue that misfortune is caused by moral failure, but merely that some of it is. This is left to allow a real tragedy and innocent suffering without losing a real moral causality.

4. Yoruba Moral Ontology: The Centrality of Olodumare

The Yoruba idea of morality is essentially religious, though this claim should be qualified with care. According to Idowu (1962, p. 32), to the Yoruba, morality is basically a product of religion, and the two cannot be separated. Gbadegesin (1991, p. 65) further explains that any effort to remove God from the society He created, as a consequence of His will, would be disastrous for the Yoruba.

This thesis of inseparability requires philosophical examination. However, just what does it mean to say that morality is the fruit of religion? There are multiple interpretations:

The Genetic Interpretation: Moral norms originated in the past through religious practices and beliefs. Although morality may now have a relative autonomy, it has its roots in religion.

The Grounding Interpretation: Moral norms are normative because God supports them. Moral claims would not be real obligatoriness without God.

The Content Interpretation: The contents of the moral norms, what is prohibited or what must be done, are defined by the religious revelation or will of God.

The Motivational Interpretation: Religious beliefs furnish the motivation for moral behavior. Humans would not always act according to moral imperatives unless there are divine sanctions and rewards.

The Yoruba tradition supports all four interpretations to varying degrees, with the grounding interpretation being the most philosophically important. According to Idowu (1962, p. 44), morality is the embodied will of God, and what religion morally approves, society also approves, and whatever religion condemns, society condemns.

This statement raises the Euthyphro problem, a question in Plato's dialogue in which Socrates asks: Is something pious because the gods like it, or do the gods like it because it is

pious? In the case of Yoruba, will an action be morally good because Olodumare is happy with it, or is Olodumare happy with it because it is inherently good?

The written material indicates that the Yoruba believe they are inclined towards the first horn of this dilemma: that actions are good because Olodumare says they are. According to Idowu (1962, p. 33), Yoruba believe that the sense of right and wrong is God-ordained and existed even before man began seeking an explanation for why some modes of behavior are preferred over others.

However, this interpretation of divine command needs to be qualified. The Yoruba conception does not render the decrees of Olodumare arbitrary, as is the case with some Western divine-command theories. The very character of Olodumare sets the norm: being the Pure King and the Perfect King (Idowu, 1962, p. 29), it is an example rather than a determining force of goodness. This indicates a modified divine command theory, in which divine commands exhibit a perfect moral nature rather than mere will.

5. Iwa: Character as the Soul of Morality

Iwa is the most philosophically important notion of Yoruba ethics. According to Oyeshile (2004, p. 142), what Olodumare evaluates in man in the Yoruba faith is his *Iwa*, and that nature of the Yoruba is the basis of the ethical (morality); on it rests the life of a man. The meaning of life is founded on *iwa*, which has ontological and ethical etymologies, as Oyeshile (2004, p. 142) also adds. *Iwa* governs social interactions among people, and its following in the Yoruba cultural paradigm provides answers to some complex questions of life.

This focus on character makes Yoruba ethics fit in the tradition of virtue ethics, similar in nature to the Aristotelian virtue theory but with African characteristics. Unlike Aristotelian virtue ethics, which is also aimed at the highest good, *eudaimonia* (human flourishing), Yoruba ethics links character to the well-being of this world and to the fate in the afterlife. According to Gbadegesin (1991, p. 72), the well-being of man here on earth, his destination in the hereafter, highly relies on his character.

Yoruba virtue ethical thought has several philosophical strengths over Western deontological (rule-based) or consequentialist (outcome-based) theories:

Holism: Character analysis is based on the entire individual in contexts rather than on individual action. One bad deed does not always make one a bad person, and one good deed does not always make one good.

Developmental Focus: Character develops over time through habituation and learning, so moral education is the core of ethical practice.

Contextual Sensitivity: A virtuous act is relative to situations; the very act could be virtuous under one circumstance and vicious under another circumstance.

Social Embeddedness: Character is considered in the context of relationships within the community, rather than in an abstract way.

5.1 Omoluwabi and Eniyan Keiniyan: The Taxonomy of the Morals

Omoluwabi (also spelled *Omoluabi*) is a person of exemplary moral character. According to Fayemi (2009, p. 45), the term literally means "the child begotten of the chief of Iwa" – a person who embodies the highest ethical ideals and is seen as a model of good character. According to Fayemi (2009, p. 45), the phrase signifies "the child begotten of the chief of Iwa," a person of the utmost morality. This person is admired for their morality. Gbadegesin (1991, p. 78) defines an *Omoluwabi* as a person of honor who works hard, respects others' rights, and gives back to the community. An *Omoluwabi* is a kind and meek person who embodies Yoruba values, including patience, humility, respect for elders, and communal cooperation. (Idowu, 1962, p. 56; Gbadegesin, 1991, p. 80).

Yoruba legal philosophy bases social order on morality (*iwa*) and Integrity (*omoluwabi*). According to Olu-Owolabi (2018, p. 112), losing *Omoluwabi* status is a potent informal consequence that promotes reformatory justice and social stability. This echoes some existentialist and personalist traditions in Western philosophy, defining the difference between being and being an actual person.

Second, the *Omoluwabi* notion of moral excellence is interestingly linked with social status. The literal meaning of the word is a person who is well behaved, which means that the true standard of nobility is a person's moral character. This is how nobility became democratic: anyone can be an *Omoluwabi* if he or she develops the necessary characteristics. However, it also maintains a connection between moral and social order: the well-born are meant to be

models of moral excellence, and those who exemplify moral excellence are given the respect they deserve as nobility.

This is an important process of democraticization: democratic-noble. Yoruba culture is based on character, not on bloodline, unlike medieval European or caste-based groups. Omoluwabi is open to all, no matter who you are, and can be achieved through moral training. Chieftaincy institutions typically do not adhere to this ideal of aristocracy and are, instead, hereditary. Hereditary privilege is often derided behind his back as "omoluwabi kii se be" (he will not do that, an Omoluwabi), a corrupt Yoruba chief. This opposition between ideal and practice is fruitful: Omoluwabi allows a critique of the dominant, even if they are the ones in control of tradition. Political leaders in modern democracies should be judged by their *iwa*, not by their genealogy or fortune.

Third, the taxonomy suggests that moral appraisal is inherently about an entire individual, not the actions of individuals. To refer to a person as Omoluwabi is to define his whole way of life, not to judge a decision. This broad methodology does not encounter the issue of moral mathematics that afflicts act-based theories, the effort to measure exactly the moral weight of every single action.

6. The Inner Oracle: Ifa Aya and Moral Epistemology

Perhaps the most philosophically intriguing element of Yoruba moral thought is the concept of *Ifa aya* "the oracle of the heart." Gbadegesin (1991, p. 82) explains that Olodumare put Ifa aya the oracle of the heart in every individual to aid him in ethical and religious living. This oracle of the heart guides him and determines his moral life. Whether a person is good or bad, in essence, depends on how much he responds to or disobeys the guidance of his inner oracle.

Gbadegesin (1991, p. 83) further notes that from the Christian and ethical point of view, the inner oracle of the Yoruba is a person's conscience. However, the concept of *Ifa aya* carries philosophical implications beyond Western notions of conscience.

6.1. Conscience or Moral Faculty?

Western philosophical explanations of conscience usually describe it in one of the following ways:

Intuitionist: Conscience is the direct apprehension of moral truths, just as perception is the apprehension of physical truths.

Internalized Social Norms: Conscience. This is the internalization of social needs through conditioning and training.

Practical Reason: Conscience is not a distinct faculty, but a reason that is used on moral questions.

The Yoruba notion of Ifa aya is a blend of all three, but with the theological aspect. It is an oracle, and, like divination, it offers pure guidance, not rational calculation as such, but a kind of moral perception. Being entrenched in each person by Olodumare, it is divinely originated and powerful. However, its direction must be followed or not, which presupposes the freedom of human beings and their moral responsibility.

This conception provides an answer to a long-standing issue in moral epistemology: the perceived disjunction between factual knowledge and moral motivation. The assertion by Hume that reason is rightly the slave of the passions, that pure considerations of reason cannot be the source of action, has long been the bane of Western philosophy. The Ifa aya also offers guidance (cognitive content) and inspirational energy (as an oracle speaking authoritatively). It is so divine as to give it the power, not simply to inform us, but to move us.

The sixth ethical principle is moral responsiveness and moral responsibility. Gbadegesin (1991, p. 83) emphasizes that an individual's nature depends on how he reacts or disobeys his inner oracle, a delicate philosophical formulation. Moral quality requires responsiveness to moral guidance, not just following norms. Those who follow the inner oracle of true receptivity are morally different from those who conform. This receptivity, not conformity, recalls current virtue ethics and moral psychology. Adult moral agents learn moral rules as what defines them, according to moral development studies. Omoluwabi is a man whose personality aligns with morality, so that good action is natural rather than the result of self-discipline.

6.2 Ifa Aya and Moral Development

Ifa aya (the inner oracle) cultivation parallels moral internalization but shows certain characteristics that are in opposition to the moral development theories. Kohlberg (1981) believes that cognitive dissonance and the capacity for abstracting from social norms lead from preconventional obedience to conventional conformity, and then to postconventional principled

reasoning. According to this concept, moral growth involves the ability to use universal, reversible, and logically consistent moral principles in hypothetical dilemmas.

This is a very different Yoruba perspective. Following the inner oracle is one part of moral development, not thinking. This Gbadegesin (1991, p.85) refers to as "moral sedimentation": obedience allows the voice of the oracle to resonate; disobedience dulls it, as an overgrown path. This is because a person's *iwa* (personality) is built over thousands of small decisions, either good or bad character, through reactivity. In addition, God introduced an inner oracle (Idowu, 1962, p. 44) that, in turn, gave a theological dimension to Aristotle's *hexis* (fixed disposition) of virtue.

This paradigm is better than the cognitive paradigm because it explicitly explains moral motivation. The weakness of will (*akrasia*) between morality and action has been a problem for Kohlberg all along. Even though stealing is wrong, some people may steal. *Ifa aya* is absent in Yoruba culture when a person has moral norms without any moral response. The right action feels natural and even delightful if a practitioner does not need to calculate ramifications or remember guidelines. Yoruba of *iwa pele* who are empathetic, self-controlled and have a sense of intuition to avoid evil like fire (Fayemi, 2009: 49). The *Omoluwabi* have made morality a part of who they are, not a duty. Moral education, as outlined by modern moral psychology (Haidt, 2001) and as believed by the Yoruba for centuries, is not about teaching abstract concepts but about increasing people's sensitivity of the heart.

6.3 The Problem of Moral Blindness and the Possibility of Reform

If the inner oracle (*Ifa aya*) is always correct, then why sin? It is a question at the heart of Yoruba moral psychology. Gbadegesin 1991, p. 86) offers two interesting suggestions. First, there may be someone who decides to go against the oracle, even though they know better. In the *Protagoras*, Plato discusses *akrasia* (weakness of will), and Aristotle regards it as a conflict between reason and appetite. The Yoruba system of belief acknowledges that we can hear our inner voice and have free will, but we can also be selfish, do things for pleasure, or act out of sheer evil. This person has been unethical, as they should have known better.

The Oracle can be "clouded" by a kind of "haze" of repeated disobedience. The more one is disobedient, the more filthy the agent gets, and the less he or she sees the morality of his/her doing, Gbadegesin (1991, p. 86) wrote. The one who has drowned a voice within himself

to the extent that he could justify stealing or being cruel is morally blind. If deeds of the past do not corrupt, how is one to reform? How can virtue flourish if there is a decline in the strength of right over evil?

The Yoruba answer is community. Ifá aya can be gravely polluted, but the community's moral wisdom expressed through elders, divination (Ifá), public ceremonies, and proverbial wisdom provides an external check (Oyeshile, 2004, p. 142). After the community's judgment, an offender may feel itiju (shame), a powerful moral sense that can awaken the inner oracle and break self-deception. Yoruba public naming and shaming is rehabilitative, not punishing, according to Idowu (1962, p. 56). The community holds a mirror up to the wrongdoer, showing them their immorality.

Inner faculty and exterior correction preclude moral solipsism and sustain accountability. No one calculates morality; others help us see ourselves. No community can force virtue on an unwilling heart; the final reawakening must be inward. This method proposes that moral education involves a community that models, recounts, and enforces moral principles through ordinary encounters, storytelling, and rituals (Gbadegesin, 1991, p. 90). Elders construct the Omoluwabi, a community-based sage who judges collectively.

However, Ifa aya is not just conscience in Western clothes. It is an oracular faculty divinely given, morally directive, motivationally potent, and socially embedded that solves the Humean problem of moral motivation (reason alone cannot move us) by making moral perception itself motivating. The next section critically evaluates this framework. Divinity, morality, motivation, and society are integrated in this oracular ability. The Humean dilemma of moral motivation (reason alone cannot move us) is solved by the claim that moral perception is innately motivating. This framework's merits and weaknesses are critically examined next.

7. Critical Analysis: Strengths and Tensions

We now put the Yoruba moral framework to critical philosophical scrutiny after having rebuilt it.

7.1 Theocentric Grounding: Strength or Weakness?

Moral choices have normative force and cosmic meaning because they are grounded in Olodumare. The Yoruba system, unlike entirely secular ones, does not have to answer the

question of why we should be moral when it is contrary to self-interest; it provides a good reason: it places us in the divine order and influences our future life.

However, this theocentric foundation presents philosophical issues. First, atheists and agnostics seem disenfranchised. People without moral awareness cannot be moral since Olodumare is required. Yorubas may say that Ifa aya functions in everyone, regardless of beliefs—the inner oracle works whether one recognizes its origin. This preserves morality and theism.

This is a smart answer, but it requires back-up. The inner oracle (Ifa aya) tells the true story of any other religion: it is not theistic; it is directed to those who do not believe in Olódùmarè as well. The Yoruba thinkers believe that understanding the Oracle of the Supreme Being enhances its power and facilitates adherence to it, particularly when community sanctions are weak (Gbadegesin, 1991, p. 88). It is a big concession that atheists and agnostics can be moral and have the right response, with the same inner guidance.

This recognition undermines the notion of "grounding" the concept of morality in divine will or morality. The weak grounding argument of Yoruba is that the supernatural is the historical and explanatory basis of moral capacity, but Religion with God is not necessary for action. The contradiction between ontological grounding (the ultimate sources of moral truths) and epistemological access (how one would know moral truths) is not unique to Yoruba thought. It can be found in Aquinas, who thought that natural law is accessible to reason as well as to revelation, but it must be rooted in God's law, which is always in force, and not in God's will; it is also found in Locke, who would say that moral truths are demonstrable but are binding only when ordained by a divine lawgiver. The Yoruba contribution is not to "solve the problem" but to draw attention to this paradox, to hold in tension theological commitment and the empirical reality of universal moral competence across belief systems.

Second, the problem of moral disagreement across religious traditions is evident in divine command theories. In case conflicting divine commands are given to different religious communities, how do we know which ones are real? The Yoruba tradition of collective moral thinking and wisdom accumulation provides the solution to this issue: moral knowledge is not given by the higher powers but is created during human self-reflection on experience. According to Oyeshile (2004, p. 136), morality has numerous sources: religion, rationality, prudence, societal custom and habit, and the necessity of peaceful coexistence.

7.2 The Issue of Moral Error

A more serious philosophical problem is whether there is any moral error. If society has established certain moral norms and God only gives the final check, what safeguards against oppressive or unjust social norms? The Yoruba tradition presupposes that communities tend to form sound moral norms, and one must justify this assumption.

One of the answers refers to the notion of Ifa aya as a separate moral agent capable of opposing the social norms of corruption. A person whose inner oracle is against communal practice can be required to disagree, at personal expense. The fact that the tradition acknowledges that people can disobey the inner oracle means it is not necessarily ethical to follow the crowd.

The other reply concerns the divine oversight mechanism: societies that systematically disregard moral truth will face punishment, even when the individuals who commit offenses do not. This offers a long-term remedy to societal ethical fallacy, but it is not much of a relief to those who are the direct victims of unfair standards.

7.3 Iwa and Moral Luck

The Yoruba stress on character rather than actions raises the philosophical issue of moral luck. When moral judgment should be made about character and not acts, and when character is made by things beyond their control (genetics, environmental influences, upbringing, social influences), how much moral responsibility can we properly attribute?

This is an issue Aristotle struggled with in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he argued that we are the reason behind our characters, since we mold them over time through our decisions. The Yoruba tradition takes a similar position: character is developed through responding or failing to respond to the inner oracle. Every obeying decision makes one morally responsive; every decision to disobey makes one morally insensitive. Therefore, despite the varying conditions at the beginning, people are responsible for their compounding decisions.

Nonetheless, this reaction does not fully address the issue. Individuals who are brought up in morally corrupt surroundings may not be able to develop good character, and their decisions may be based on limited choices rather than moral failure. It would require a complete Yoruba moral philosophy to include situational factors in moral consideration, rather than explaining all moral differences as the result of individual choice.

7.4 The Problem of Moral Change and Progress

Moral reform is important too. How can a community recognize that its norms are wrong if morality is based on Olódùmarè and expressed through proverbs, ceremonies, and Ifá literature? The Igbo osu caste structure (connected to Yoruba) and Yoruba subgroups' abandonment or death of twins due to misfortune beliefs are old customs (Gbadegesin, 1991, p. 112). Most of those tribes now consider these practices immoral or superstitious, but many once considered them moral. Why this moral shift? Does Yoruba theocentrism allow self-correction or rigidify divine commands?

Yoruba philosophy presents two theories of moral growth. For one, Ifá divination can yield moral information. The Ifá corpus is a living oral tradition with subtle advice in many passages. Priests (babalawo) can divine the sacred corpus and replace prior interpretations (Abimbola, 1976, p. 58). Reinterpreting divination as communicating Olódùmarè's will indirectly improves knowledge, not rejects divine power. Twin infanticide was abolished because people realized that twins are a blessing, not a curse, and that rereading poetry about life and community welfare may legitimize them.

Omoluwabi is one of the important traditions benchmark. The Omoluwabi symbolizes iwa rere (compassion, honesty, respect, communal responsibility) (Fayemi, 2009, p. 45). Iwa Rere forbids belittling human nature, causing sadness, or violating relationship traits. Therefore, a community can say that an old custom is corrupting character and it is not in line with Omoluwabi. It is not a Western or secular critique of the tradition, but rather an internal appraisal of its ultimate goals.

There is no external Archimedean critique to this paradigm. There is no use of abstract universal rights or a transcendental perspective beyond Yoruba moral language (Oyeshile, 2004, p. 148). Prophets, changed traditions, community discussion, or experience must change morality. There is much to be said for internalism, since it does not use the colonial logic of suggesting that African people need to be lectured on foreign morality, which is a correction a weakness. If elders or priests are unwilling to change, then internal reform may be a slow process for stopping injustice and abandoning negative practices, driven by inner reform and external pressure. Yoruba alone is no guarantee of moral development.

8. Comparative Analysis: Yoruba Ethics in Cross-Cultural Perspective

To comprehend the philosophical importance of Yoruba moral thinking, we shall place it in a cross-cultural comparative context. Shame (itiju) is another differentiation. Aristotelian virtue ethics holds that the virtuous acts for the noble (to kalon) and feels shame when failing, but shame is not a major motive. Social character enforcement in Yoruba ethics relies on shame. Public reputation and the fear of becoming "alejo" (a stranger) drive morality as much as interior virtue. Although Yoruba ethics is external-focused, the inner oracle ensures internal virtue. Yoruba thinking holds that personal conviction and external accountability are mutually reinforcing.

8.1 Yoruba Ethics and Western Virtue Theory

As mentioned above, Yoruba ethics has significant similarities with Aristotelian virtue theory. Both focus on character, habituation, and the relationship between moral excellence and human flourishing. However, there are major distinctions:

Teleology: Aristotelian virtue is directed at eudaimonia as this-worldly flourishing. Yoruba ethics integrates the this-worldly and other-worldly aspects.

Community: Aristotle's theory of virtues has social aspects, but is more concerned with the excellence of an individual. Yoruba ethics is more comprehensive in its entrenchment of character in community relationships and assessments.

Religious Grounding: Aristotelian virtue does not necessarily need theistic commitments (though Aristotle himself appealed to a divine prime mover). Yoruba morality demands a direct theistic foundation.

Moral Knowledge: Aristotle emphasizes practical reasoning (phronesis) as a means of acquiring moral knowledge. Yoruba ethics introduces the Ifa aya as a morally-given deity-given faculty.

8.2 Yoruba Deontology and Ethics and Kantian Deontology

Kantian ethics focuses on universal moral laws based on reason, the dignity of persons as ends in themselves, and the goodwill which is the sole unqualified good. Yoruba morality is very different:

Universality: Kantian ethics pursues moral principles that bind all rational beings. Although Yoruba ethics does not reject universal elements, it emphasizes the tangible moral traditions of specific communities.

Inspiration: Kant is adamant that the really moral action should be performed as a duty and not an inclination. The conformity of inclination and moral requirement is the sign of cultivated character and is welcome in Yoruba ethics.

Autonomy: Kantian autonomy is self-legislation in accordance with universal reason. According to Yoruba ethics, moral authority is based on Olodumare, and the autonomy (in the Kantian sense) cannot occur.

8.3 Yoruba Ethics and African Humanism (Ubuntu)

The Yoruba system has similarities to other African ethical systems, especially Ubuntu (I am because we are). They are both focused on community, character, and the sociality of personhood. Yoruba ethics, however, is much more theocentric than Ubuntu, which is inclined toward humanistic foundations. This contrast raises interesting questions about the relationship between religion and morality in African thought. Other scholars believe that African morality is essentially human-centered, even though they are expressed in religious terms. The evidence of Yoruba would support the contrary: the theocentric language is not just the culture-packaged universal humanist values but real faith in the divine foundation.

8.4 Yoruba Ethics and Confucian Role Ethics

While Ubuntu emphasizes "I am because we are" (Mbiti, 1970, p. 141), Confucian role ethics, like Yoruba ideology, emphasizes tangible relationships above abstract ideas. Both theories base morality on lived roles father, mother, elder, kid, ruler, subject rather than universal, agent-neutral laws as Kant did. Confucius believed that junzi (exemplary people) become virtuous by executing li (ritual propriety) and straightening names (zhengming) to accomplish their roles (Analects 12.11). The role-based ethic is contextual, practice-oriented, and social.

However, methods of moral cultivation vary greatly. Oriki (praise poetry), personal honor, and the witnessing community are central to Yoruba thought, while Confucianism emphasizes ceremony, decorum, and the authority of ancient sages. Reciting oriki, oral praise

songs about ancestry, character, and morality, holds one accountable to elders and ancestors (Gbadegesin, 1991, p. 94). Moral failure causes shame and public reprimand, which, in Yoruba society, are stronger than punishment (Idowu, 1962, p. 56).

The biggest difference is metaphysical scope. Confucian ethics especially classical, non-religious interpretations is earthly. Moral cultivation seeks social peace and human happiness in the temporal order with a minimal ancestral dimension (Analects 6.22). In contrast, Yoruba ethics includes ancestral and supernatural qualities as ontologically important. Fayemi (2009) states that moral behaviors impact not only the community but also one's relationship with Olódùmarè, the òrìṣà (deities), and ancestors, who observe everyday behavior. Misdeeds disrupt cosmic balance and may bring calamity, not only social disapproval.

These disparities show that "virtue ethics" is too broad to capture Yoruba morality. Yoruba ethics is a theocentric virtue ethics with communal enforcement, not just a derivative of Western virtue theory. Unlike Aristotelian eudaimonism or Confucianism, it lacks a simple this-worldly teleology and cannot be secularised without loss. Cross-cultural moral philosophy must recognize this distinction.

9. Modern Relevance and Philosophical Implementations. Theoretical Framework for Implementation

Methodological clarity is needed before applying Yoruba ethics to modern challenges. This study claims traditional Yoruba ethics cannot solve climate change or AI. Iwa, Omoluwabi, and Ifa Aya offer non-Western analogies. They need contextual interpretation, not exact implementation, in new circumstances. Analogical thinking in four recent domains follows.

9.1 Environmental Ethics

The Yoruba moral code holds that each moral offense entails a natural consequence, which serves as the basis for environmental responsibility. If man is responsible for his own moral failure, which leads to drought, sickness, or imbalance, then environmental protection turns into moral and spiritual, not resource management. An example is the Yoruba sacred groves (*igbo oro*). These forests are conserved to hold carbon, support biodiversity, and respect spirits, ancestors, and ritual secrets. Their entry by the unauthorized person brings about divine

wrath, illness, or disaster in the community (Idowu, 1962, p. 93). Such groves harbor native plants and species that are lost in neighboring areas (Gbadegesin, 1991, p. 120).

Yoruba-inspired environmental ethics would be a mix of scientific conservation (protected areas, replanting, pollution control) and moral–spiritual retribution. The destruction of the environment degrades humanity, Olódùmarè, and nature's moral-cosmic order, rendering them immoral. Improvements should be made to Nigeria's and global environmental policy to give conservation efforts a moral dimension, so that a farmer respects the sacred grove because it is the right thing to do, rather than fearing the threat of fines. Most importantly, there does not need to be a majority religion. The divinely imbued but universal inner oracular voice (Ifa aya) advocates morality irrespective of theology (Gbadegesin, 1991, p. 86). Traditional African moral psychology can be invoked without imposing religious conversion in multicultural environments, thereby providing a pragmatic, culturally sensitive approach to sustainability.

9.2 Social Justice

Omoluwabi makes "morality" commonplace as a marker of being a "good member of society". Character can raise any man to the highest moral level, regardless of his birth, wealth, or social position. This challenges the injustice of society's valuing of birth. Civil society organizations like the Yoruba Council of Elders (Igbimo Agba Yoruba) have called political corruption in Nigeria Omoluwabi. A politician who embezzles public funds, obtains his power by force, or pays no attention to the welfare of the community is "not Omoluwabi" irrespective of his wealth, his title, or political connections (Fayemi, 2009, p. 54). Shaming results in a loss of respect, being ineligible for "honorable" posts, and less influence in marriage and business. Nigeria's corrupt, delayed, or politically captured legal institutions are complemented by decentralized, community-based character evaluation (Olu-Owolabi, 2018, p. 118).

Grassroots moral enforcement is not without its weaknesses, as it can be influenced by mob judgment, factionalism, and by political elites. It is internalized as standards, rather than external pressure, and is found in communities where courts have not reached, and operates continuously (Gbadegesin, 1991, p. 98). In a society that can undermine rule-of-law institutions, the Omoluwabi standard is an ethically defensible supplement to the formal judicial system, one that takes into account indigenous moral philosophy rather than legal formalism.

9.3 Moral Education

The Yoruba's focus on character-building through habituation and attentiveness to inner voices in character development is a model of moral education that stands in contrast to both the rule-based and the purely affective approaches. Moral education should be effective in developing moral knowledge (what is right), as well as moral responsiveness (care about doing right).

Yoruba ethics-inspired curriculum includes daily reflection on *iwa pele* using proverbs and folktales; apprenticeship in communal decision-making (e.g., youth participation in town hall meetings); training in listening to the "inner oracle" through mindfulness or meditative practices analogous to Ifa divination's quieting of the mind; and public recognition ceremonies for youth who demonstrate *Omoluwabi* qualities. Habituation, community, and intrinsic motivation distinguish this concept from Kantian and utilitarian moral education.

9.4 Globalization and Moral Pluralism

The issue of moral disagreement between traditions is acute as the world becomes increasingly interconnected. The Yoruba model, with its universal divine foundation and specific communal manifestation, provides a means of negotiating moral pluralism. The Ifa *aya* is found in all human beings, irrespective of tradition, and, as such, it forms a foundation for cross-cultural moral dialogue despite variations in certain norms.

While moral norms vary across cultures (e.g., polygamy, dietary rules), the faculty of moral perception the inner oracle is universal. Disagreement does not imply that no truth exists, but that different communities have developed different responses to the oracle's guidance under different circumstances. This allows cross-culturalism. The inner oracle, which perceives morality, is universal. Polygamy and dietary rules differ by country. varied communities have developed varied answers to the oracle's instructions in different situations; therefore, disagreement does not mean there is no truth.

On the other hand, one can argue, "Your practice deadens the inner oracle in ways ours does not," without arguing that one's norms represent the oracle's voice. This moderate position resembles Rawls' "overlapping consensus" but rejects metaphysics. Its global ethics framework potential warrants additional study.

Conclusion: The African Moral Concepts Philosophical Legitimacy

The question that was introduced at the beginning of this paper is: Are there African concepts of morality? The Yoruba thought evidence indicates the answer is affirmative, but it needs to be narrowed down. The question is not whether Africans possess moral concepts; they obviously do, but whether these concepts are philosophical, customary, or superstitious.

The Yoruba ethical system is truly philosophically advanced. It deals with the basic questions of moral ontology (how moral norms are grounded), moral epistemology (how we know what is right and what is not), moral psychology (what character and what moral motivation are), and normative ethics (what standards of evaluation actions and persons are). It provides unique stances on questions that should be addressed rather than overlooked.

Yoruba ethics has a theocentric basis, which is philosophically controversial but not philosophically illegitimate. Numerous Western philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Kierkegaard, have based morality on theological or metaphysical commitments. The Yoruba tradition should be given equal attention as a philosophical stance and not marginalized in anthropology or comparative religion.

In this paper, the critical analysis has identified tensions and problems in the Yoruba framework: the connection between the divine command and independent moral standards, the moral error of a community, and moral luck and responsibility. These are not lethal counterarguments but fruitful conflicts that beg more philosophical elaboration.

Finally, African moral ideas, enshrined in the Yoruba notions of Iwa, Omoluwabi, and Ifa aya, are valid philosophical tools for ethical contemplation. They also present other possible answers to the timeless ethical issues and should be included in the cross-cultural philosophical discussion. The issue is not whether Africa possesses a moral philosophy, but whether Western philosophy has been open to acknowledging it as such.

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