

**The Golden Rule Principle in an African Ethics  
and Kant's Categorical Imperative:  
A Comparative Study on the Foundation of Morality<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

*This research attempts to throw light on and show the fundamental similarities and differences between an African and Western ethical conceptions by examining the foundation of ethics and morality in the two systems, using the Golden rule principle in an African ethics and Kant's categorical imperative in Western ethics as tools of comparative analysis.*

*An African indigenous ethics revolves round the "Golden Rule Principle" as the ultimate moral principle. This principle states that, "Do unto others what you want them to do unto you". This principle compares favorably with Immanuel Kant's whose main thrust is found in his "Categorical Imperative", with the injunction for us to "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." The categorical imperative becomes for Kant, the principle of reason and universalizability, which according to Kant, is categorical and must be equally binding on everyone.*

*This idea of Kant, we argue, compares with the "Golden Rule Principle". Both are rationalistic and social but the limitation of Kant which I hope to point out is the idea that moral intentions can be fully grounded on reason. I argue that human interest or welfare is the basis*

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*for morality. This refusal to see the wider horizon of morality is precisely the limitation of Kant's principle, which makes it quite insufficient as the foundation of morality. The African's which is more humanistic describes morality and is better served. The main difference between the two ethical systems lies in the fact that whereas the "golden rule" starts from the self and considers the consequences on the self before others, the universalizability principle on the other hand considers the consequences on others first before self.*

**Keywords:** *golden rule principle, Kant's categorical imperative, African ethics, Western ethics.*

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### Introduction

This discourse shows how the traditional African experiences, comprehends, conceptualizes and communicates moral reality within his thought system with the "Golden Rule Principle". We situate this against a western paradigm and examine the foundation of ethics and morality in African thought system against Kant's "universalisability principle" in western system of thought. We shall examine the adequacy or otherwise of the two principles with regards to value judgment or moral valuation. We argue that both are rationalistic and social but that that of Kant is insufficient as the foundation of morality and that the African's, which is more humanistic and pragmatic, describes morality better.

We begin by clarifying some of the central concepts: "ethics", "morality" and "African ethics", in order to better situate our discourse and teleguide the reader.

Ethics in general, consists in the study of the fundamental principles guiding the good of the individual within the context of the social interactions and the community. It is that branch of knowledge that deals with human behavior or conduct. It studies the "whys" and "why-nots" of human action or conduct. There are different senses of ethics;

- (1) There is the sense of ethics as a theoretical enterprise. Here ethics deals with the fundamental questions of moral law – questions like, how I am supposed to behave? What is good and what is bad?

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Ethical are bound that try to give answers to these questions. It is in this respect that we define ethics as that branch of philosophy which deals with principles underlining human conduct or behaviour.

- (2) There is a sense ethics as a science – a normative science (as opposed to empirical science) of human conduct – normative because it sets out to describe how things *ought* to be, not how things *are*. The empirical sciences are concerned with *facts* while ethics is concerned with *values*.
- (3) There is ethics as a value system. The judgment which ethics makes concerning issues is referred to as values. Value refers to the desirable good, a worthwhile and worthy pursuit. Value can be individual or social, subjective or objective, instrumental or intrinsic, but it is contextual.
- (4) There is a sense of ethics as a mode of moral conduct, action or behaviour. This is morality. Ethics is referred to as the study of the principle of morality and morality refers to a set of rules and norms for guiding and regulating the conduct of people in the society or their behavior patterns. Morality is the basis for ethics because we already had a sense of morality before ethics; which is a reflection on the principles underlying our moral conduct. Morality is the rule of conduct for harmonious living in the society.
- (5) There is a sense of ethics as a set of conduct, governing principles, code of conducts, governing the moral behaviour or activity of a people, group or organization, like work ethics, professional ethics, etc.
- (6) There is also a sense of ethics as applied – the application of ethical theories and principles to controversial problems and topics like euthanasia, abortion, suicide, homosexuality, prostitution, etc.

The sense in which ethics is used in this study is in the fourth sense of ethics. Ethics as a principle is universal; there are always principles that others can share and adopt because of our *human beingness*, whereas morality is cultural, societal and relative. Morality is the practical, while ethics is the theoretical. Furthermore, ethics is a defined system, while morality is often based on a personal or social belief. Ethics especially in a profession can be more compelling than morality. In fact, ethical systems are enforceable whereas moral systems are not.

African ethics is that branch of African philosophy, which deals with

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the critical reflection on the manner, or nature of life, conduct, behavior and character of the African. African ethics is defined by K. Wiredu “as the observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the interest of the individual to those of others in society” (Wiredu, 1998, p. 210), it is the conceptualization, appropriation, contextualization and analysis of values within the African cultural experience. African ethics presupposes a regional ethics. Even though theories and ideas of universal character are propounded in ethics, they do not diverge from their prevailing cultural experience, the philosophical spirit of their age, challenges of the time, history, tradition and civilization that they find themselves. This is the basis then for the appellation “African ethics”.

### **The Golden Rule Principle in an African Ethics and Kant’s Universalizability Principle**

An African indigenous ethics revolve round the “Golden rule principle” as the ultimate moral principle. Bolaji Idowu in his book *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Religion* maintains that the Yorubas have a fundamental ethical principle and he identified this as the Golden rule principle. This principle states as follows: “Do unto others what you want them to do unto you”. This principle dates back to the biblical days. Jesus Christ in 32 AD admonishes, “All things whatsoever you would that men should do unto you, do even to them”. The principle is also similar to the biblical injunction “love thy neighbor as thy self” and also as far back as 500BC, Confucius is credited with the view that: “Do unto another what you would have him do unto you and do not to another what you would not have him do unto you. Thou needest this law alone. It is the foundation of the rest” (Ilawole, 2006, p. 50). These principles of Confucius are contained in the nine ancient Chinese works handed down by Confucius and his followers.

For the purpose of this work however, I am throwing my philosophical nest into an African indigenous territorial waters; the Esan cultural paradigm, in order to avoid the charge of over-generalization and to better situate an African ethics within a socio-cultural context. The Esan community is found in Edo State, Nigeria, to the south east of Benin Kingdom in the old Midwestern region of Nigeria. The Esan community lies between latitudes 6.15’ and 6.36’ north and longitudes 6.15’ and 6.25’ east of the equator (Okojie, 1994, p. 1). It consists of about thirty tribal groupings or sub-cultural divisions, namely Ekpoma, Egoro, Opoji, Uromi, Urhohi, Irrua, Ewu, Ugboha, Oria, Ubiaja, Udo,

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Okhuesan, Emu, Ohordua, Ewohimi, Ewatto, Ewossa, Ekpan, Ebelle, Okalo, Amahor, Ogwa, Ugun, Ujiogba, Ugbegun, Igueben, Ekekhenlen, Orowa, Ukhun and Idoia.

The absence of a written tradition has necessitated the Esan people to document their ethics and morality, especially in the traditional setting, in proverbs, music, poems, maxims, incantations, aphorisms, arts, sculpture, etc.

There is the ontological, religious and communal foundation of African ethics. *The Ontological Foundation* revolves round the basic assumptions of African metaphysics and African morality is a derivative of African ontology – a wrong moral action is one, which offsets and diminishes the set-up and man's life force. African morality Temples tells us is something demanded by the very nature of things. It is "ontologically understood and has social dimension to it" (Temples, 1963, p. 121).

The *Religious foundation* has to do with the recourse to the gods, ancestors and deities who are custodians of justice. In fact, African ethical system has been said to be based on religion. John Mbiti in his book *African Philosophies and Religions* and Bolaji Idowu in *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Religion* hold this view. To these scholars religion is surely a foundational theory of morals in African societies. But African ethics is not based on religion; rather religious elements are only part of the moral scheme. Ethics is not founded on religion, rather, where man becomes handicapped in the enforcement of moral violations; he takes recourse on the Gods. In all situations, the African adduces reasoned arguments why one ought not to do that which is wrong. So, authority of morality is not identifiable with the Gods. Oluwole (1992, p. 67), puts the argument this way:

... As a matter of fact, social cohesion will elude the African if he identifies the authority of morality with the Gods. This is because his is a society, which grants the freedom of religion. The implication of making morality a religious concern is therefore unthinkable in a society where there are almost as many gods as there are families.

Rather, what is moral is what promotes the well being of the society by way of harmonization of interest and peaceful co-existence. The role of religion in morality in African ethics is that the Gods are only agents of moral *sanctions* rather than *sources* of morality. The Gods are the last court

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of appeal in matters of moral justice. There is the retributive spirit – this is the tendency to seek compensation and or reconciliation and in cases where extra-human forces are thought to be estranged; *purification* not just punishment. This is where the idea of reincarnation comes in. So, the force of religious sanctions only enhances the African value system, not that it is based on religion. The gods are custodians of morality. They can bring to limelight what was done in secret.

The justification of the religious assumption, which is the relegation of *final judgment* of moral actions to the gods, is one of acknowledgement of man's limitations to produce an objective, adequate and reliable system of arriving at moral judgments. The traditional African seems to realize that no matter how much we try, we are limited by our natural ability as man and this makes it impossible for us to have a conclusive, objective knowledge of the intension of a moral agent. The history of morality has shown that the other possible alternative to the religious assumptions are neither philosophically convincing nor are they more naturally or emotionally satisfying. If for example, we push moral justice to man, we discover that we cannot expect reliable system of justice. And we should not be tempted to accept the dictum of Protagoras that "man is the measure of all things", because, here, we discover the danger and shortcoming of ideally leaving justice to man as the last arbiter. Moreover, this dictum of Protagoras is based on emotional repulsiveness, which is rather an arrogant conclusion. Man cannot predict with certainty that what he sows he will reap, he cannot always plan and know for sure that his plans will succeed, no matter how much care he himself may take. We are very much aware that there is a limit to human knowledge; we are limited by our natural ability as man. On the other hand, if we decide to push moral justice to the wind, what we shall have is anarchy. The best we could do, perhaps, is to allow he who has the power or the ability to know all the factors to pass the final judgments; after all human efforts have failed. Bolaji Idowu puts it this way: "God is the searcher of hearts, who sees and knows everything and whose judgment is sure, and inescapable" (Idowu, 1968; p. 161). So it is the Gods who bridge the gap between man's limitation and absolute justice. The Gods take over where human knowledge stops. The gods are only agents of moral sanctions rather than authorities whose moral prescriptions man must obey (Oluwole, 1982, p. 14). The gods in traditional Africa are just safeguards of morality, the way the police are in modern society. So there is a conceptual separation between Religion and Morality. The point we are making is that ethics/morality in African

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thought system is a rationally derived principle.

### The Communal Foundational Theory

J.C. Ekei in his book *Justice in Communalism* (2001, pp. 119-123) informs us that moral justice within the African traditional system is communal. This, according to him is explained in four essential dimensions of communal responsibility, namely, personnel, social, cosmic and metaphysical. These are various channels of the expressions of the principle of communal/moral justice.

The influencing factor or guiding principle for moral valuation/judgment in which the Golden rule rests is empathy - what the Esan people call *arumere* - the valuer or judge has to place himself or herself in the position of those concerned, he or she must relate what is in question to himself, see if it can be done to him or her, if he could tolerate or accommodate the thing in question. By so doing, one would be able to make fair decisions and move from subjectivism to objectivism, since whatever answer one gets from the self-examination will be applied to those before them. This principle of empathy is the basis of the Golden rule. The principle has to do with initiative, cooperation, mutuality and mediation. This principle is further buttressed and finds similarity in the Socratic dictum 'man, know thyself'. You know yourself first, before others - charity begins at home. Scholars have given a reductionism approach to the golden rule principle by propounding other similar theories, among which are: Ethical Egoism, (selfishness), for example, Thomas Hobbes (1651), Altruism (selfishness), for example, Auguste Comte (1798), Utilitarianism (the greatest happiness of the greatest number), for example, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (1789), Moralism (putting the interest of others alongside one's interest), for example, C.S. Momoh (1991), Ethics of consensus (sacrificing or adjusting the interest of the minority to that of the majority, even at the cost of some self denial), for example, Kwesi Wiredu (1999).

All of the above ethical principles have been analyzed along the golden rule principle as having some areas of confluence and congruence with the golden rule principle. But the Golden rule principle compares favorably with Immanuel Kant's *Universalizability* principle contained in his book, *Ground Work for the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Lectures on Ethics*, where he proposes a new approach to ethics and morality, by attempting to establish the supreme principle or foundation of morality (Kant, 1972,

pp. 390-392). The main thrust of Kant's thesis is found in his "categorical imperative", with the injunction for us to "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law". The categorical imperative becomes for Kant, the principle of *universalizability*. The moral imperative of *universalizability*, according to Kant, is categorical; must be equally binding on everyone.

To Kant, all moral concepts have their seat and origin wholly a priori in human pure reason (Kant, 1974, p. 710). Thus, to Kant, there is no giver of law or author of morality outside of man. Since reason endows man with the capacity to be moral and law abiding, it follows that morality for man is a self-imposed duty and this is what is meant by an "imperative". An imperative is a maxim, which states a universal principle of morality, intended to achieve justice, or what Kant dubbed the "universal Kingdom of ends". The willing of a maxim to become universal for the good of all is what Kant calls the principle of *universalizability*, which imposes.

The Golden rule principle is however different from Kant's principle of *universalizability*. The main difference between them is that whereas the Golden rule starts from the self and considers the consequences of the self first the *universalizability* principle on the other hand, starts from other and considers the consequences on other first before the self. Furthermore, the Gold rule principle transcends the self and extends same to the interest of the others – friends, family and community for cooperation, solidarity and fellowship. To the Golden rule theorist, like for Kant, using a fellow human being as a means to an end is immoral. Kant in fact urged us to treat others as end and never as means, which is to further one's own self-interest.

### Comparative Critique

Kant's position that there is no giver of law or author of morality outside of man has an existential relevance. Kant pays man's rationality a complement and develops the idea of moral autonomy, intended to debunk the theory of the Natural Law Doctrine that God or the superhuman or the spiritual is the originator of morality. It is from this Kantian doctrine of "moral autonomy", according to Popper that Sartre developed his theory of "absolute atheism" in his existential ethics (Popper, 1969, pp. 182-183).

But then, by his doctrine of "noumena", Kant is aware that total justice is not achievable here on earth, as such allowance should be made for



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virtuous people who could not obtain justice in this life to do so in the hereafter. This is also the basis of the African appeal to the Gods and the theory of reincarnation, as hoped for redress.

Both principles have suffered devastating criticisms. For Kant, the decisive consideration is that one cannot consistently will the maxim of an action that is contrary to good morals to be universalized. But Kant's theory does not solve the problem of morality or value for the society. Kant's principle of universalizability is not a test of morality of human action - it presupposes a morally right action, rather than prove it. If a person for instance, is willing to see the maxim of his action become a universal law, it does not mean that the action in question is morally right since it is quite possible for a person to want the maxim of an immoral action became a universal law especially if he is anti-social sadistic or wants to further disorganize the society and break it up. This is precisely why Wiredu observed that Kant universalizability theory is quite insufficient as the foundation of morals. If it were, the principle of non-contradiction would be the supreme law of morals, but it is not (Wiredu, 1995, p. 392). Simply put, the problem with Kant's moral theory is that it does not solve moral problems of what is good. Kant has forgotten that what is good for the goose may not be good for the gander, precisely because one man's meat is another man's poison.

According to Kant, reason is required in rational beings in order to deduce actions from the principle of morality; therefore he identifies the will for rational beings with practical reason. However, David Ross in his book, *Kant's Ethical Theory*, (p. 38) pointed out that Kant can hardly be right in his theory because reason as we know it, is the faculty of apprehending truth, while practical reason as such is the faculty of knowing the truth of what should be done. Ross maintained that it is possible to know the truth of what should be done and yet not will to act accordingly (This is *akrasia*; human weakness). The point is that Kant's principle is limited and insufficient as the foundation of morality, especially because it is a rule of reason, generalization and universal application. But moral intention cannot be fully grounded on these. Morality also has to do with other factors like welfare, human interest, justice, happiness and the will. These are also principles that we share as human beings and they are principles we can adopt.

Both the Golden rule and Kant's universalizability are rationalistic and social; they are both principles of reason. The Golden rule is more humanistic and describes morality better. However, the Golden rule, unlike the universalizability principle, is not a rule of generalization or

universal application. It deals with particular situation, such that every situation will determine its own rule of application.

C.S. Momoh criticizes the Golden rule principle, stating that it has a ring of immediate reciprocity. He opined further that: "This principle is responsible for some of the problems in our society because it is always nursing and fanning the prospects of immediate personal returns without consideration for any larger interests of the society or the world" (Momoh, 1991, pp. 127-128). The point is that the Golden rule principle is too personal and neighborly. But the Golden rule is more than reciprocity; it is also about empathy, understanding and participating. It portrays that no one is an island unto himself – it makes for harmony and interrelatedness in the scheme of things. Hence, the African proverb: 'if you want to go *fast*; go alone, but if you want to go *far*, then go with others, go together, speak together; let your minds be of one accord'.

Finally, it has been suggested that Kant in making his formulation on the universalizability theory was influenced by Rousseau's doctrine of the "General Will", which he (Kant) purified by his categorical imperative. For Rousseau, the general will is necessarily moral but Kant purified this by making the categorical imperative bid us to will only those maxims which are in conformity with the law in general.

### Conclusion

The foundation of morality for an African Golden rule principle is *empathy* that of Kant is in its categorical imperative dovetailing into the universalizability principle, reason, duty and goodwill. Although religion and the Gods have their roles and place in African morality/ethics, man as a rational being also has a role to play in formulating patterns of behavior and moral principles to regulate human life and conduct. The foundation for morality must be linked with human interest. So, human interest as posited by the Golden rule not just human reason, goodwill, duty and the maxim underlying it, or universalism as Kant's theory wants us to believe, describes morality. In morality, there are no uniformities but differences, there are no *absolute* but the *objective*. There are no absolutes because morality can change, depending on whether or not it serves human interest. It is objective because it is not based on personal predilections and subjective enterprise.

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Endnotes

1. Being a revised version of the paper presented at the XXIV World Congress of Philosophy held at the National Seoul University, Seoul, Korea, on July 30<sup>th</sup> – August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

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