Akan Metaphysics of Morality (20171229)

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Is alcoholism a disease or a moral failing?

What about drug addiction?

In my writing, I have distinguished between morality and medicine according to whether people could use praise and condemnation effectively to change the behavior in question. Where praise and condemnation is effective, we could call the individual a responsible moral agent and effectively apply these tools – praising the agent to promote virtue, and condemning the agent to discourage vice. Where praise and condemnation has little or no effect, our best option was to call the errant behavior a medical problem and seek a morally blameless medical treatment (or confinement or some moral their solution rendering the agent otherwise unable to or uninterested in performing such actions).

I should clarify that the relevant effectiveness of praise and condemnation is its effect on people generally – not just on the person praised or condemned. Morality is a social institution.

It seems to be the case that this is the way the Akan of Africa treat issues of moral responsibility, at least according to Kwame Gyekye. [1]

When I first started reading about Akan moral philosophy, I questioned whether I could find anything interesting in it. It contained some supernatural tribal beliefs may be of interest to an anthropologist, but would render it irrelevant to a modern materialist such as myself interested in real-world right and wrong.

Eventually, I came to the opposite conclusion. The Akan moral philosophy did not require these strange entities; we could set them aside without having a significant impact on their moral system. However, the Akan have no reason to take seriously the bizarre metaphysics of modern Western philosophy. Specifically, they have reason to reject the Western metaphysics of the autonomous individual and "free will" on which much Western moral philosophy depends, which their system does not use.

Personhood

First, there is the idea in Akan moral philosophy that each person within a community is entitled to a basic level of care and consideration. This is explained in virtue of that person's *okra* or "divine spark".

In Western philosophy, a standard view is that each individual is born with certain rights – such as a right to life and not to be harmed that implies a duty on the part of others not to cause harm. People are said to have a duty to care for young children and those who cannot care for themselves.

However, when it comes to the metaphysics that provide the foundation for these rights, western philosophy is built on a metaphysical foundation as weak as that of the Akan. Many in the Western tradition would claim that these rights come from God. Others argue that they are inalienable rights that individuals have merely in virtue of being human. Still others would ground these rights on some

[1] Gyekye, Kwame, "The Akan Concept of a Person", in *African Philosophy: An Introduction* (3rd Edition), Richard Write (ed.), University Press of America, 1984.

fundamental consequence of pure reason, or on the basis of decisions that people would make in the establishment of some sort of fictional social contract.

It is far beyond the scope of this paper to determine the one and true correct foundation of human rights in Western philosophy. However, I do not need to. The question that I am investigating is whether somebody in the West needs to accept the metaphysics of the Akan in order to embrace their moral principle that all beings have a basic moral right to life and a consideration of their interests. This would only apply to a Western philosophy that denied that infants, as a paradigm example, have a basic right to care and a right not to be harmed, or to those who held that they exist that could provide a better metaphysics to explain their existence.

Ultimately, I would argue that neither system has a compelling explanation for these fundamental moral rights, and their accounts give ups no reason to prefer one over the other.

Of course, there is no single "Western moral philosophy" – and likely no complete agreement among the Akan either. Some subsystems may claim to have an answer to these difficulties. However, this analysis must remain general.

Communalism

In addition to this foundation for basic rights, the Akra have another concept of personhood whereby infants are not (yet) persons. They are, of course, persons in the first sense that gives them the basic right to care and good treatment, but not in a second sense. Personhood, in this sense, grows as one's relationships within the community grows. If it grows.

> *It is instructive . . . to note the differing ways in which an infant and a non-achieving adult are considered to fall short of personhood. The infant is not a person because it is still in preparation for that status. Adult "do-littles," on the other hand, fail to be persons for lack of pulling their weight. Opprobrium attaches to the second condition of life, not to the former.*[2]

These elements of "pulling one's own weight" include a number of activities that make the individual a functioning part of the community. It includes marriage and having and raising children, participating in the governance of the community, helping others in the family – one's *lineage* – particularly in times of transition that includes new births, marriages, deaths, participating in community projects, and participating in the governance of the community. The more one becomes a part of the community, the more one grows as a person. There is no declared upper limit that an individual can achieve on this measure. Instead, the status of personhood in this sense seems boundless.

We must distinguish the specific elements of this theory – e.g., the obligation to marry and have children – from the more basic claim that who we are depends substantially on our relationships. One can (and, in some cases, should) reject some of these specific duties without denying a fundamental relationship between ourselves and our communities.

You and I cannot even think about who we are, think about what it is to be a person, except by thinking of these things in terms of the language we learn from the community in which we are raised. The vast

[2] Wiredu, Kwasi, "The African Concept of Personhood", in *African-American Perspectives in Biomedical Ethics,* Harry E. Flack and Edmond D. Pellegrino (eds), Georgetown University Press, 1992.

majority of what we come to believe comes to us from what we are told and what we experience as a member of that community – society's people, its rituals and ceremonies, and its relationships. This means using the concepts – including value concepts – built into that language.

Furthermore, our tastes and preferences in clothing, food, and entertainment may change over time, but for the most part they change though a community and determine what currently is and is not in style.

Our sentiments – and, most importantly, our moral sentiments – are given to us by the community we grow up in. We learn them by noting what the people around us praise and condemn, much as we learn their language by hearing what they say.

We see this not only in the different sentiments that dominate different communities, but the changes that come to a community over time. There are reasons why whole communities could accept slavery before 1860s and racial segregation in the years after the civil war as 'natural'. It is because people grow up in a community, and communities tend to do a good job of teaching its values to its members.

The idea of the truly autonomous individual – of the person outside of the community – is actually difficult to grasp. Some moral theories like that of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes ask us to imagine autonomous human beings in a state of nature, alone, coming together to form a state. Yet, most people, if asked to describe "man in a state of nature," would describe somebody who is substantially like us. He speaks our languages, he has our concerns, and he has something like our understanding of the world and of himself. We forget that we got these sentiments from the community that we grew up in – we could never have had them independent of that community, just as we could never have had a developed language.

Here, it may be the case that we would need to adopt something of Akan metaphysics of personhood in order to adopt Akan ethics. However, this is not a metaphysics of mysterious supernatural entities or powers. This is a metaphysics that suggests that "who I am" cannot be easily distinguished from "who we are". Adopting such a metaphysics should not be seen as a burden as it seems fundamentally correct.

Growing as a Person

We have a legal distinction whereby an individual goes from being a "minor" to an "adult" at the age of 18. However, this is a somewhat arbitrary line drawn in a field of ever-increasing rights and responsibilities. States allow children to hunt alone at the age of 10 or younger. One can get a driver's license at the age of 15, but is not permitted to drink alcoholic beverages until reaching the age of 21. . To serve in the House of Representatives one must be at least 25 years old. One must be 30 to serve in the Senate and 35 to serve as President.

We also recognize rites of passage, from graduation ceremonies, college, military service, getting a job, marriage, raising children and grandchildren, and various ways in which one can contribute to a society. We do not recognize exactly the same stages of life. Nor do different subcultures in the United States recognize the same stages of life.

The Western concept that seems to most correspond to the Akan concept of "personhood" is "self-sufficiency". A "self-sufficient" person has a job, a family, and is making contributions to the society rather than being a "taker" who lives off of the hand-outs of others.

Yet, this correspondence is weak.

First, there is the issue already discussed that the Akan value contributions to society without actual pushing self-sufficiency.

Second, even in the West, we are not so self-sufficient. A computer programmer, for example, depends on a society that has developed computer codes, computers capable of understanding the code, manufacturing companies to build the computer, power companies to provide the power, regulated roadways and shipping lanes on which to transport them, a system of laws defining intellectual properties. . . teachers, hospital workers, and users. This western concept of self-sufficiency is, at best, a misnomer.

Freedom and Responsibility

The most significant area where it seems that the metaphysics of Akan morality has an advantage over the metaphysics of Western morality is on the question of free will and moral responsibility.

Akan morality seems to have no trouble with a materialistic or causal account of behavior. Rather than basing moral responsibility on a distinction between caused and uncaused (free) behavior, the Akan distinguish between two different types of causes.

There is behavior caused by character traits that are subject to moral conditioning and argument, and there is behavior caused by other things. If a person behaves badly, the first response is to apply moral conditioning and argument. Insofar as the agent is responsive to this, to that degree the agent is morally responsible for his actions. In short, morally right and wrong behavior is behavior caused by entities subject to modification by the application of moral reasoning and instruction.

> *"The problem in Akan is simply, "When is an individual responsible?" And the answer . . . is that an individual is responsible to the extent that his conduct can be modified through rational persuasion or moral correction. Conversely, an individual is not responsible to the extent that his behavior cannot be modified through rational persuasion or moral correction."*[3]

If the behavior is caused by outside forces, then the response switches from that of moral reasoning and instruction to what may loosely be described as medical treatments – discovering the causes and dealing with them the way that one would deal with an illness or injury.

I question the mention of “rational persuasion” as a relevant component here. If I were to convince somebody not to turn in the lights because a terrorist has connected it to a bomb, I have not made him a morally better person. His moral character has to do with how he handles that information. On the other hand, there is a matter of epistemically responsibility – an obligation to discover the truth of the matter – to determine that there are no cars coming before proceeding into the intersection – that suggests that an immunity to rational persuasion may, itself, be morally culpable.

Specifics of Akan metaphysics may be relevant to determining what type of treatments are applicable. For example, the belief that the affliction is caused by the malevolent influence of a distant relative

[3] Wiredu, Kwasi. “The African Concept of Personhood,” in Flack, Harley E. and Pellegrino, Edmund D. (eds.) African-American Perspectives on Biomedical Ethics (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1992). p. 108-109.

would recommend that the healers and patient take steps to eliminate that influence. However, we do not need to accept the metaphysics that underlie specific treatments to accept the principle. We may attribute the behavior to damage to the prefrontal cortex. The same principle applies. If the agent's behavior is subject to modification by means of moral persuasion, then it is a moral concern and moral persuasion is used. If it is caused by something immune to these types of treatments, then we turn to a treatment that is suitable to that type of cause.

Conclusion

I started this investigation by asking whether a westerner would have to accept Akan metaphysics to accept Akan ethics. That metaphysics had supernatural and immaterial entities that many Western philosophers would find hard to accept. If the ethics depended on those entities, this would be an obstacle.

However, the course of this examination gives us reason to ask a separate question. Would the Akan need to accept some of the questionable metaphysics of western philosophy to accept western ethics. The two systems are about on equal footing regarding the difficulty in explaining basic human rights. However, the western "autonomous individual" and "free will" seem to require metaphysical commitments that are questionable at best. The Akan may have good reason to keep to their own metaphysics of individuals shaped by their communities, and of behavior that is susceptible to moral conditioning and persuasion versus that which requires some other type of change.