AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE GLOBAL BIOETHICS DISCUSSION

Godfrey B. Tangwa, PhD
Professor of Philosophy
University of Yaounde 1
P.O. Box 13597, Yaounde
CAMEROON

Email: gbtangwa@yahoo.com / gbtangwa@iccnet.cm
GLOBAL HEALTH: AN OVERVIEW

- Characterized by great disparities and contradictions
- Enormous health resources exist in the world
- Medical knowledge has greatly grown and medicine has recorded remarkable achievements
- The 10/90 gap in global distribution of medical resources versus burden of disease
- Increasing talk about scarcity and rationing in the midst of plenty
- Emergence of formidable epidemics (AIDS, Ebola)
- Prospect of reemergence of previously completely eradicated scourges (Smallpox)
CONTRASTIVE BALANCE SHEET

- One of the most remarkable human achievements of the last century
- From culture based art into a global science
- Victory over many formidable diseases and epidemics
- Positive role of scientific spirit, research and technology
- Positive contribution of commerce and industry
- Medical malpractices/abuses
- Inverse relationship between medical resources and burden of disease
- Corresponding gap in life expectancy
- Rise and spread or reemergence of deadly diseases and epidemics
- Negative role commerce and the profit motive
- Breakdown of traditional health systems
THE HUMAN BEING ACROSS CULTURES

• Self recognition as important/special and valuable amongst creatures
• Human capacities: consciousness, self-consciousness, rationality, sociality, morality
• Other attributes: biological functions, psycho-social functions, vulnerability
• Mortality
CONTRASTING AFRICAN AND WESTERN CULTURES

• AFRICAN CULTURE
  • Predominantly an oral culture
  • Eco-bio-communitarian
  • Marked by great variety and diversity
  • United by certain metaphysico-religious ideas, values, attitudes, practices and experiences
  • Tolerant, cautious, non-aggressive, non-proselytizing, inward-looking
  • “Be and let be, live and let live”

• WESTERN CULTURE
  • Predominantly a literate culture
  • Anthropocentric, (androcentric?): Genesis
  • Technologically advanced and industry based
  • Certainty-driven epistemology, against background of dichotomous Manichean syndrome
  • Dominant/domineering, proselytizing, outward-looking
  • “We know all there is to know; what we do not know does not count as knowledge”
Is there such a thing as African Religion?

- Who was its founder?
- Who is the head of the faith?
- How many are its faithful?
- What is its sacred script or holy book?
- Who are its most authoritative theologians?
- What architectural style is used in building its places of worship?
- How are its liturgical vestments and what form does the liturgy itself take?
One Case, Two Verdicts

• “How can the untutored African conceive of God? Deity is a highly philosophical concept that savages are incapable of framing!”

• “Africans are incorrigibly religious! Religion permeates their life in all its aspects.”
Is there such a thing as African Philosophy?

• “Philosophy is the result of reflective critical thinking”

• Philosophy may be written or unwritten, individual or collective, forensic or latent
Is there such a thing as “Traditional African Bioethics”?

• Given certain *assumptions* or *presumptions*, an affirmative answer to the above question is as difficult to demonstrate as the claim that there is traditional African religion.

• Is Bioethics something to be encountered only in books and journals, academic lectures, conferences, workshops and symposia?
BIOETHICS: A DEFINITION

- A domain of concern and inquiry based on perplexities and problems arising from the facts of existence, life and health, particularly in modern Western medicine and biomedical research
PRINCIPLES VERSUS PRACTICE OF BIOETHICS

• The principles of Bioethics, like those of morality in general, are universal; they have cross-cultural validity and relevance.
• They possess a special status which makes them rationally more binding and compelling than law, custom, and social practice.
• Ethical norms and rules derived from universal ethical principles can be recognized and distinguished from non-ethical norms and rules by the presence of an implicit ethical imperative.
• They are, however, not absolute and can justifiably be violated if particular situation and circumstances clearly so warrant.
• Moreover, to be applied in particular concrete contexts, they necessarily need to be adapted, taking the shape, colour and size of that context.
APPROACHES IN BIOETHICS ARE CULTURE-BASED

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UNIVERSALISM OR RELATIVISM?

• Culture is necessarily relative; it is basically the result of the adaptation of a group of human beings to a given environment at a given time; from within, such adaptation may be described as more or less adequate or satisfactory but, from without, no adaptation can be described as being better or worse than another.

• Ethics (morality) is necessarily universal; the litmus test of genuine moral judgment is its universalizability and appearance of being spatially and timelessly valid; it primarily addresses the question: “What ought I/We to do or not to do?” and not one about what others ought or ought not to do, except secondarily by analogy.