

RE-THINKING ETHICS AND MORALITY WITH HAIDT: DETERMINING THE ETHICAL MATRIX FOR THE AFRICAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This paper presents Jonathan Haidt's ethical and moral view which to the author is the determining factor in the ethical matrix for the African society. Hence, for Haidt, the knowledge and scope of ethics and morality is beyond the traditional philosophical consequential and de-ontological theories. He therefore forwards three origins: Nature, Nurture and Rationality. In addition, he offer three matrixes': Autonomy: for individuals to determine what is moral for them; Community: for the individual is first a member of the community; and Divinity: For, individuals are abodes of the Divine and should keep themselves pure. These matrixes' are the basis of ethical actions and judgements. The paper explores the nature of the African society and concludes its communal and religious nature. Based on this conclusion, the author invariably deduces and concludes that the matrixes' of the ethical judgements prevalent in the African society is the ethics of Community and Divinity. The author notes that though Haidt work is not philosophical, however, philosophical principles could be deduced understood using a qualitative methodological analysis.

Key words: Ethics, Matrix, Community, Divinity Autonomy, Morality.

Introduction

Two main classifications of ethical theories are the consequentialist and the deontological theories. While the former evaluates the morality of human actions from the perspective of their consequences, i.e. the moral worth of actions, the latter focuses on the actions themselves to ascertain their conformity to certain moral principles. The scope of morality is wider than these two blocs. Furthermore, the origin of ethics and morality can also be thought from different perspectives. Previously, knowledge of ethics and morality was popularly more or less based on these traditional conceptions of ethics. Jonathan Haidt's text, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, puts an appendage and offers perplexing but fantastic insight into ethical and moral

views especially in what he calls origins and matrices of ethics. His views complement and expand ethical conceptions. For the origins Haidt highlights three basic sources: nature, nurture and rationality. Firstly, the origin is nature, if one “believes that moral knowledge is native in our minds” (2012, p. 5). One that holds this view is an ethical nativist. Secondly, those that uphold that morality comes from nurture are empiricists. The third is rationalism and it explains the notion that people choose and determine what is moral for them. Such adherents are ethical rationalist (2012, p. 5). Furthermore, Haidt conceives of three ethical matrices: autonomy, society and divinity and defends that individual ethical and moral orientations are immensely formed by these matrices. To render it intelligibly, Haidt employs three principles of moral psychology namely: *Intuitions come first before strategic reasoning; morality means more than harm and fairness; and morality binds and blinds people*. These three principles form the heading of the three sections of his text. Haidt’s ethical and moral views cover politics, religion, economy indeed all aspects of life. He employs metaphors to explicate his points and brings them home to his readers.

This article explores Haidt’s ethical insight and tries to make sense of it philosophically. Furthermore, in trying to determine the ethical matrix of the African society, it first explores the nature of the society and argues that the communal nature of the African society and the superlative sense of the divine makes the African society very religious thus, offering it the matrices of ethics: ethics of society and ethics of divine in Haidt’s conception. The paper defends that these two ethical matrices offer formidable understanding of the ethics as well as being the basis of the moral judgements in the African society. This paper is delivered in five more steps to this introduction. The second section attempts a sketch of Haidt’s moral views. The third section re-thinks morality with Haidt. The fourth section attempts a presentation of African society and demonstrates that it is both divine and communal in nature and that the socioeconomic and moral lives of Africans are strongly influenced by these. The fifth section upholds that the ethical matrices of Africans swing between the divine and community. The last section concludes that Haidt provides a complement to the consequentialist and the deontological ethical theories.

Haidt’s moral views

Haidt begins the first part of his text with an excellent metaphor of the elephant and the rider to explain the role of moral intuition and reasoning. The elephant represents an automatic process of moral intuition, whereas the rider refers to

reasoning based on moral intuition. According to Haidt, intuition (the elephant) is spontaneous and is prior to reasoning, (the rider). The elephant represents an automatic process of moral intuition whereas the rider refers to reasoning of the moral intuition. He uses this imagery as the operative criterion for describing his moral views. In searching for the *origin* of morality, Haidt identifies three sources, nature, nurture and rationalism. The nativist view of morality asserts that the human mind is preloaded with moral knowledge. In contrast, those who believe that moral knowledge comes from nurture could be classified into the philosophical positions of empiricism and rationalism. John Locke and other empiricists such as David Hume, believe that morality is acquired through experience (Haidt, 2012, pp. 5-7). Proponents of rationality together with evidence from the experiments of Jean Piaget claim that there is a stage- by- stage development of morality in a child. For instance, the moral knowledge of a child grows from what she is told to what she formulates for herself and then to the stage of critical moral behavior where she can defend whatever she does (Haidt, 2012, pp. 5-6). From Haidt's origin of morality, the view that morality comes from nurture is more plausible because it explains the reason for the different moral and ethical behaviors in different cultures, at different times. However, to accept the nativist view would imply a universal knowledge of ethics and morality among different peoples. This would mean universal and objective ethical and moral knowledge. This view that might not be without some presuppositions for instance, religion with the Bible as a guide for Christians. However, universality of moral prescription will make less sense of the idea of nuanced ethical matrices.

In formulating the moral views, Haidt claims that the foundations evolve to satisfy certain need. He links morality to politics and religion and claims that morality in these nuanced perspectives aim at satisfying religious and political need of the adherents. For, Haidt's central claim is that these foundations evolve because of certain wants and the need to satisfy them. He accepts innate moral capacity and thinks that it agrees with the experimental conclusions of the neuroscientist, Gary Marcus who claims that nature endows newborn babies with a complex but flexible brain which explains why they are capable of changing their behavior (Haidt, 2012, p. 130). This point is important because it follows the argument that the origin of morality is nurture. Following the same reasoning, Haidt's idea of innate moral capacity explains the fact that nature provides the first moral draft after which experience revises or reformulates it (Haidt, 2012, p. 131).

Furthermore, Haidt construes morality with what he calls *ethical matrix* and consequently, the three types of ethics: By ethical matrix, Haidt means the environment from which one forms and bases of one's ethical judgement. He defends "I began to see that many moral matrices coexists within each nation. Each matrix provides a complete, unified, and emotionally compelling worldview, easily justified by observable evidence" (2012, p. 107). The three ethical typologies based on their matrices are: ethics of autonomy, the ethics of society, and the ethics of divinity. The ethics of autonomy is founded on the idea of the priority of the individual to groups. As individuals, people have needs and preferences and the compulsion to satisfy them. Therefore, for peaceful coexistence, society formulates moral concept such as justice, right and liberty. The ethics of autonomy is characteristic of western societies because in western societies, people are considered as individuals first and the satisfaction of their individual's preferences is the priority. The ethics of community emphasizes that individuals are first and foremost members of their society. Hence, while people have duties to perform, they are entitled to their protection by the society. Thus, society develops concepts such as duty, hierarchy, respect, reputation and patriotism. The ethics of divinity is based on the idea that individuals are vessels in which divine souls have been implanted. Because of this, the human body is regarded sacred because we are children of God and should behave accordingly (Haidt, 2012, pp. 99-100). Based on this understanding, regarding the ethics of divinity, certain actions involving the use of the body avoided and are prohibited because doing them dishonors and defiles the body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Central to these three concerns is the idea of 'ethical matrix' which is a consensual ethical and moral standpoint. An ethical matrix furnishes people with a complete, unified and emotionally compelling worldview of morality which can easily be justified in one's behavior, arguments or position which are different from another person's interpretation of morality. In essence, when one steps outside of his ethical matrix, morality is perceived differently. Can these nuanced intuitions: origin of morality, moral foundations and types of ethics, be interpreted by philosophy?

Re-thinking Haidt's moral views

Having sketched Haidt's moral view, this section will attempt a connection between the three points raised in Haidt's ethical view and philosophy. Worthy of note here that Haidt's discussion on morality is not normative but a

description of how the moral mind works. It is of interest that Haidt considers nuanced cultural and political traditions, thereby trying to draw some principles upon which ethics and morality inter-depend and crosscuts. Worthy of note also is the fact that Haidt's notion of ethics and morality are not exclusive, otherwise it would amount to a contradiction. For example, Haidt seeks to show that nurture is the origin of morality. He favored this position in order to dismiss the idea of pre-given moral knowledge. This is because accepting the idea of nature as the origin of morality would imply objective and universal moral knowledge. But elsewhere, Haidt accepts the idea of innatism that holds that moral knowledge is given a priori to experience which shapes it afterwards. Logically, this would amount to a contradiction. What is clear is that Haidt is describing morality from different perspectives; anthropologically, religiously, sociologically and psychologically. This paper shall endeavor to contrast these perspectives in order make ethics philosophically intelligible.

From the perspective of the origin of morality and following the 'rationalist's view of the formation of morality, the direction is the domain of psychology. The experiments of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg yield similar observations, namely, change occurs stage by stage in the growth of moral knowledge of a child from the simple to the complex (rational and critical) moral knowledge (Haidt, 2012, pp. 5, 10). It follows from this experiment that moral knowledge is not a given, that is why it differs between cultures, times and places. This idea fits into what could be called moral relativism. Therefore, a philosophical reading of Haidt with regards to the origin of morality ends in relativism.

However, the ethical principle of utilitarianism could be deduced from the care foundation of morality. This is evident when Haidt's views that political parties and interest groups convert their concerns to current triggers of people's moral module. Their aim of getting votes, money etc. becomes the consequence of the action. This liberals' skill follows the consequentialists' ethical theory (Haidt, 2012, p. 113).

Liberal moral matrix generally rests on care foundation. Liberals give the impression that their care is universal. They showcase their party morality and campaign for support by using stickers and badges with different kinds of inscriptions. The liberals contrast theirs with conservatives' morality because they believe the conservatives' care is limited and particular, limited to human beings and particularly to those who are loyal to their group (Haidt, 2012, p. 86).

It is obvious here that from Haidt's description of the care foundation, a consequentialist (utilitarian principle) theory is derived.

Of the three kinds of ethics (autonomy, society and divinity), a brief focus is on ethics of autonomy which is typical of Western societies. The ethic of autonomy is based on the concept of human freedom. For this reason, it presupposes that people are essentially autonomous individuals with the right to pursue their wants, needs and preferences. Autonomy gives the individual freedom to conduct his affairs as he deems it fit. The second supposition here is that society should formulate guiding moral concepts such as right, liberty and justice for proper moral conduct. Individual ethic is the ethical matrix dominant in individualistic societies (Haidt, 2012, p. 99). From his explanation of the three kinds of ethics, the two ethical theories, consequentialism and deontology, emerge. The ethics of autonomy is more of consequentialist theory than a deontologist theory. Effort has been made to capture Haidt's ethical and moral discourse from different perspectives in which people make and justify moral actions and issues. Next, attempt is to unify them into a philosophical ethical position on morality.

Philosophical ethical theories are divided into two broad categories, namely the consequentialist theories and the deontological theories. It is not the purpose of this essay to explore these theories. However, a consequentialist theory of human values judge human action based on the consequences the action produces. E.g. Jeremy Bentham claims that an action that produces the greatest good for the greatest number is a good action. Deontological theories on the other hand stipulate the conformity of actions to certain moral principles. In other words, it focus on the actions themselves. They prescribe moral norms for actions. Thus, while consequentialist theories are result oriented, deontological theories are normative, or rule- based.

From the aspects of Haidt's description of the moral mind which I have summarized above, three points emerge: The first is that morality is not a given; for, culture, place and time constitute the matrix of an individual's moral worldview and knowledge, thus, judgements. Based on these nuance background, there are bound to be differences in people's moral actions and how different people interpret actions and make their moral judgments. Evaluation of a particular moral issue indicates that each person judges from his moral matrix. For example, whereas having sex in the street is absolutely unacceptable for the divine ethical matrix, for the autonomy matrix, so long as it causes no harm to

people, it is acceptable. Those the matrices of society and divinity ethics would reject the action, while those from the matrix of autonomy would have no issues with it. Therefore, one's matrix forms and serves as the origin of one's ethical knowledge and the foundation of one's ethical judgement although it might later be reshaped by factors such as education, politics religion etc. This however is not the position of philosophical ethics. Deontological philosophical ethical principles command the 'ought' here. The care foundation and the ethic of autonomy imply these principles. This forms the basis of the second point, the consequence of human actions mirrored in consequentialist ethical theories.

Utilitarianism is implied in the liberal's care foundation. This is expressed when the liberals convert their concerns to be the current trigger of people's moral module. The liberals' strategies play the utilitarian dual roles of teleology and utility (Haidt, 2012, p. 143). Teleology in the sense that they are able to win peoples' attention and support which is the end of their action. In order to achieve that, the liberals describe their duties and responsibilities as if their interest is to care for all people everywhere. Utility on the other hand because the people vote for them. In this sense, the care foundation of Haidt could be understood philosophically as a utility principle. However, in the ethics of autonomy, Haidt implies in his description the deontological ethical principle, the normative principle for proper order. This is evident in Haidt's suggestion that society should formulate moral concepts such as rights, liberty and justice. It is cogent to examine Haidt's suggestion in a new light. If the concept of society is taken very literally, it would return us to the initial point of departure which is that the ethics of society is both sociological and anthropological. Therefore, a more robust logic is to think of these concepts in terms of norms. Doing this, we are in the domain of deontological ethical theories. In this purview, norms lead to the idea of moral obligation or duty. Thus, morality lies in the agent's recognition and performance of his duty and never in the outcomes of the action. This forms the third point of the struggle to understand Haidt. From this re-think of Haidt's ethical cum moral explanation, ethical position emerges more clearly. At this juncture, an investigation of the African society is necessary in order to underpin its inherent and prevalent ethical origins.

The nature of African society

In exploring the Haidt's notion of the origin of ethics, three types ethics are arrived at: Autonomy, society and divinity. Before determining the prevalent ethics of the African society, a study of the African society is necessary.

According to Christopher Agulanna, “Africans believe that it is only in the community where the life of the individual acquires true meaning...in mutually interacting with other members of the community that the individual can ever hope to realize his social aspirations” (2010, p. 288). The life of the African man is typically characterized by strong community bond. A complement to this is the superlative religious tendencies. These two cardinal features are a given and has been successfully transmitted to generations. It would not be an exaggeration but a truism to claim that the gateways to understanding the life of an African man are religion and the community life. These give an insight into and inadvertently support the interpretation of the African reality. John Mbiti makes sense of this as he claims “by giving people a way of interpreting the world, a way of understanding their own existence, African Religion has equipped them emotionally, intellectually and culturally to go through life and to face many experiences” (1991, p. 198). Drawing from this, the role of African religion is essential in the being and intelligibility of the African essence. It is to say that the religion holds the quiddity (if not a central place in) of the life of the African man, for it is in this context he comes to terms with the reality of the complexity his being. With this knowledge, he formulates laws, interprets and applies same for daily life. Religion informs the (norms) life conduct in terms of belief system, rules, customs and the entire worldview. It is claimed that even in the education system, some answers to questions are ornamented by religion. For example, Maurice Makumba forwards that “African religion was seen to be the gateway to African philosophy and reason for which answers to most questions in philosophy took or have religious undertones” (2007, p. 166). The banality and permeability of religion in the African society makes it impossible to expunge religion from the being of African man. However, religion is practiced in the society in which the communities can hardly be separated from the other.

Community spirit has a formidable impact on the individual in the African society. This makes sense of the strong solidarity among the Africans wherever they find themselves. In agreement with this intuition, Nyerere eulogizes: “In traditional African society we were individual within a community. We took care of the community, and the community took care of us” (1965, p. 166). Live in relation to the community was give and take. It pictured a bilateral relationship and it kept the people going. Community life was a cherished value system among the Africans. That did not only impacted their lives, but also influenced, informed and formed the communal ethos on which life was modeled. The community spirit was also central to some of the African wisdom. For example,

Okon, forwards: "One tree does not make a forest" (2011, p. 397). This wisdom simply presents a picture of the network of persons in communal activity. It promotes the community spirit which is expressed in solidarity among the African people. This solidarity fosters collaboration that genders inclusiveness and team consciousness. Analogous to Okon's claim is Opoku's which claims that "man is a man because of others, and life is when you are together, alone you are an animal" (1978, p. 92). These explain the reason for the strong bond and cordiality among the African people. They illustrate and underscore team consciousness as a value which, however, permeate every facets of life. Furthermore, being so assertive, this wisdom informs the people and accelerate the consciousness of their common patrimony especially community consciousness. By consciousness, we must understand it as "the urgency of a destination leading to the Other and not an eternal return to the self" (Derrida, 1999, p. 2). This notion simultaneously played down on the ego while elevating altruism. The self diminishes in order to uphold communality and the common patrimony. Thus, the community spirit in Nyerere echoes. Community consciousness wells up strong dynamism that unites the people. Furthermore, the community principle enlivens the people's consciousness and promotes solidarity among them. Particularly community spirit promotes shared belief system and common ethos, for instance in societal developmental activities. This wisdom infiltrates into the system of governance which they expressed in the words: "The king does not govern alone" (Okon, 2011, 398). This African wisdom inspires an inclusive consciousness and a system of government where everyone was recognized for what he has to offer. To unpack this wisdom loaded adage entails much but essentially, it entails division of roles and collaboration with one another, as ruler and the ruled and vice versa. The community also served as a repository of the societal ethos of the African people. This seeming legal system, Essien claims contains laws that were transmitted to the people as a sort of patrimony and was adorned with the African society (2011, p. 206). The ethos: the does and the don'ts was best taught in the families and the larger society.

The mix of the divine and the community defined anew the African society. Basically, the individual, a *homo religiosus* lives and practices his religion in the community. In living out his beliefs, he is constantly reminded that he is because the community is and vice versa. Better construe: "Religion recognized this value of the individual in the community, since it is the individual who makes up the community. Through the different stages of life, with their rites and ceremonies, religion told the individual that he exist because of the community" (Makumba,

2007, p. 167). The bond of the individual to the community is so strong and important that the individual would not jeopardize his membership or risk being ostracized, a practice that was prevalent in many African cultures. Makumba (2007) catches this with the claim that “the individual was understood to necessarily belong to the community because that was the only way of being human” (p. 167). This is to say that life was only meaningful in the context of others which makes sense of the ancient Aristotelian expression and definition of man as *zoon politikon* (political being). This definition has close affinity with *zoon logon ekhon* (a living being capable of speech) (Arendt, 1998, p. 27) in so far as man will communicate and whereby speech is the vehicle. This makes the community, the polis a theatre of action via communication with speech, signs and symbols. It makes sense then to conclude in this context that African community is immensely germane to the individual members. However, being essentially communal and religious, these features will not be ineffective in determining the kind of ethical matrix it synchronizes with in Johnathan Haidt’s discourse.

Ethical matrices of African society

It has been plausibly established and robustly defended that the African society is communitarian and religious. This claim defends and defines the life of an African holistically and upholds his human flourishing. It is from this perspective that section further investigates Haidt’s claim of origins of ethics. A brief synopsis of the three kinds of ethics will plunge and set this discussion on its trajectory. Firstly, autonomy (self-regulating) ethics asserts the individual and is presupposed on human freedom, an ethics, typical of the Western societies. Secondly, community ethics defends the priority of the society over individuals by claiming that individuals are foremost members of the society before being individuals. As component members of the society must they fulfil duties and fit into hierarchies and observe the demands of the societal norms and belief system and remain patriotic. Lastly, the ethics of divinity upholds that individuals are dwelling vessels of the divine souls. As dwellings of the divine, individuals are children of God and must so conduct their lives to befit the sacredness of the divine. The crux of this section then is to make sense of the ethical origin of the African people using the nature of the African society and Haidt’s ethical matrices as a presupposition.

A matrix is to be understood as the environment or the tradition from which a practice originates. Therefore, an ethical matrix is the background of an ethical or

moral norm. Following from our exploration of the nature of the African society, we concluded that it is both divine and communal in nature. This invariably means that the ethical matrix of the African society are divine and communal. According to Haidt, the divine matrix of ethic “is based on the idea that people are, first and foremost, temporary vessels within which a divine soul has been implanted” (2012, p. 100). This matrix makes sense in a theistic society where people have the sense of the divine and believe in a supreme creator and ruler of the universe. The people express their belief in the conduct of life in which they uphold certain principles and practices in rejection of others. The credo of this ethical matrix is that individuals are not animals, but as God’s children, they must behave accordingly. The high regard for the sacredness of the body is a presupposition of the religious belief of the body as the temple of the spirit and not a playground of sociobiological desires. The normative prohibitions based on this matrix are not necessarily harmful to health and the society but are based on the belief upon which they are solidly founded. Upon such ideology, is divine ethics built. For Haidt then “many societies therefore develop moral concept such as sanctity and sin, purity and pollution, elevation and degradation” (2012, p. 100). The tenets of the divine ethics in the African society and its belief is compelling because the African society is very religious. This is to the extent that religion plays prominent role in interpreting most African realities. The ethics of divinity recognizes the divine and the profane in their hierarchy. For instance, God at the top of moral perfection, the angels, humans, other animals, monsters, demons and the devil or the perfect evil. This order informs that people should be treated with respect as they deserve (Haidt, 2012, p. 103-4). What makes this idea and list a matrix is its variation from one cultural background to the other. It, at the same time presents a kind of moral model to adherents. Basically, the idea is the good as the ought-approved, and the evil as the don’t- disapproved. This links up to treatment with respect or disgust, that parallels award of honors and banishment respectively.

The reward system and the punishment mirrors the societal life. This confirms the truism that the individual is first a member of the society and as such conformity is obligatory. Haidt (2012) defends “the ethics of the community is based on the idea that people are, first and foremost members of larger entities such as families, teams, armies, companies, tribes and nations” (p. 99-100). The community is greater than an individual and must therefore be protected to ensure its continuity, peaceful and harmonious coexistence. To achieve these goals, norms arise, and the concepts of duty, hierarchy, respect, reputation and

patriotism are created (ibid., p. 100). These ensure communal cohesion and must be kept sacrosanct. The idea of norm here is important because it supports the communal ethical system. According to Diane Perpich (2008, p. 147) “a norm belongs to the class of particular moral statements and share their fate. They are a kind of thematization and sedimentation of the life of a people at a particular time in history”. In this way, the ethics of the people is created, and naturally enforced by the people and within the community. In these ethical matrices, defiance to the ethos is already a misfit that does not go unpunished. Accordingly, dictates such as devotion to the God and the gods, respect to elders, guests, protecting subordinates, accomplishing one’s responsibility are sacrosanct. They help in communal cohesion and continuity as well as define the individual and ensure his flourishing.

Unlike the traditional ethical system, the validity of ethics of matrices is contextual. Therefore, stepping out of one’s ethical matrix means ethical/moral shock where one finds himself higher/lower on the moral ladder. Many ethical matrices coexist but each individual see from his own matrix. Haidt claims that “each matrix provides a complete, unified, and emotionally compelling worldview, easily justified by observable evidence and nearly impregnable to attack by arguments from outsiders” (2012, p. 107). The ethics of the African man is determined by the divine cum community worldviews.

Conclusion

Jonathan Haidt’s description of ethics and morality offers a supplement that broadens understanding of ethical knowledge. Conscious of the fact that his description is not a philosophical analysis of ethical theories and principles, sense could be made of him in his context and perspective thereby philosophize his claims. This informed the caption “Re-thinking ethics and morality with Haidt.” This paper focused on origin of morality, the care foundation, the three ethical matrices the nature of African society and the ethical matrices of the African society. It must be reiterated that Haidt’s notion of origin of ethical knowledge are nature, nurture and rationality. However, the matrices of ethics and morality are autonomy, the divine and the community. Revision of an ethical matrices is possible through education, politics and religion. These are empirical and existential facts we cannot dismiss about such things as the moral judgement of human actions. These matrices provide the different basis for ethical and moral evaluation. We cannot also deny that people make judgement

outside of recognized philosophical moral and ethical principles. In such judgements, effort must be made to unravel the matrix that underpin it.

Transposed on the African society, the paper has argued and concluded, based on the investigation of the nature of the African society that the matrices of its ethics are the community and divinity. The deep-seated reverence for God and divine realities which in turn are practiced in the community and the communal ethos arising from norms offer the matrices for the morality of the African people. Furthermore, individuals' nuanced perspectives: culture, politics religion, education form the matrices which they basis their judgements of ethical issues. Haidt's moral conception, though connected to certain philosophical cum ethical principles, are not philosophical, but could be interpreted and articulated into philosophical principles.

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