



# AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

## ISSUES AND INSIGHTS

**EDITED BY:**  
**KOLA BABARINDE**  
**OLUDARE OLUFOWOBI**

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*Issues and Insights*

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**Editors**

Kola Babarinde  
Oludare Olufowobi



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## CONCEPTIONS OF A GOOD PERSON: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN EDUCATION AND GOVERNANCE

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Christopher Olusola Omoregie  
Michael Olalekan Olatunji

### Introduction

This chapter raises questions typical to applied aspects of Philosophy such as Philosophical anthropology, Virtues ethics and Socio-political philosophy which have been described for proper narrative. These fields have implications for educational discussions and practices. Without attempting to block exposition of earliest African philosophers that the conception of person in Africa is more of communitarian than that of a separate individual, this analysis does more than a categorical explanation. It situates the conceptions of persons in Africa or Nigeria, despite the social, moral and political problems being faced, within a more critical pedestal where there can be more honest affirmation of identities not limited to location, ethnicity and religion. Ultimately, human persons share a common attribute of being rational, social and cultural at the same time.

The arguments are interwoven and implications are derivable from them but herein separated into questions about human persons,



conceptions of a person, and the attribute of goodness in a person, education for good governance (socio-political implication is drawn), epistemological and ethical implications of a good person and implication for contemporary governance form part of the conclusion. This chapter analyses person, goodness in a person, examines epistemological and ethical implication of a good person while drawing socio-political implications of a good person for African education and governance.

### **Questions about Human Persons**

The questions arising from the topic are intriguing because they are both basic, easily taken for granted and at the same time complex when one considers those arguments in the history of philosophical anthropology<sup>1</sup>. Pansera summarises these as human beings have always constructed images of themselves out of the need to discover their nature and give a sense of their existence. From classical philosophy up until the contemporary era, there have emerged multiple visions of the human being that are closely tied to the general philosophical conception from which they originated. In the twentieth century, the need was felt to consider the human being and to understand it in its entirety, synthesising, integrating, and harmonising the results of the scientific investigation in order to recompose in a unity, the multiple aspects investigated and thus achieve a corresponding global image<sup>2</sup>.

The questions are: if there are different conceptions of a person are they only from the African, Western and Oriental beliefs as if human beings are not essentially the same? If persons have the same distinctive characteristic of being rational as Aristotle described them, why do we still experience varied levels of reasoning? It can be noted that even in the developed societies of those with sophisticated facilities, there are elements of being still nasty and brutish, using the language of Hobbes when he postulated human condition as if persons in an organised state would have overcome their savage tendencies.

In these advanced societies, there still exist shooting of people who do not possess arms, discrimination by sex, religion and age, high level of corruption and embarrassing leadership deficit. As against earlier positions of some African thinkers who presented a person in Africa as completely different from persons in other societies.

For instance, Ukpokolo believes that individuals are bound to the values of community because it is in community that, as it were, the individuals exist and have their beings<sup>3</sup>. Rather than take this position as sacrosanct, it would be more progressive to discuss the dominance of some characteristics such as thinking, feeling, socialising and creating in persons as dictated by individuality, place, situation, organisation and culture where people have found themselves. It is in this sense that we present the communitarian characteristics of persons as not only peculiar to Africans but in every person. Each person seeks personal fulfilment through participation in the evolving social structure of the community. Communitarians further have argued that not only is the communitarian conception of the person a more accurate description of human life but that it is the cultural ideal informing policies and institutions, strengthening community bonds and reinforcing the character of its members<sup>4</sup>. Institutions and initiatives that deploy communitarian outlook of the human person appear to exist more in Europe and America, whereas most Africans wish they live in those places for those benefits.

### **Conceptions of a Person**

In former usage, man was a generic term for both male and female. It later became human beings and much later 'persons' were usage for both male and female. Development studies have argued from different perspectives for the change in usage of the term man. The ancient philosophers used the term 'man' to refer to both male and female as found in classical literature. That usage should not be seen as archaic or outmoded. The use of man can still show that sex is only an accident in the formation of the human image but can a man ever be referred to as a woman? This will not be conventional except we say that in a woman there is a man and vice versa. The point is strengthened by the concept of androgyny<sup>5</sup>.

The term, person, rids any human being of being superior or inferior and places everyone on the same level of equality. The content of neutrality became important in addressing both male and female as humans because the thoughts of the contemporary time argued that male-female dichotomy is an accident of humans rather than

the substance. One is sure that this argument would not convey its real meaning to an expectant mother who wants a particular sex and had many of one kind without another. This is still a great issue in African belief system that is predominantly patriarchal. Again, efforts in removing gender barriers and breaking of glass ceilings are more noticeable in the global north.

Apart from gender neutrality, there was also the need to emphasise the individuality of humans, especially from the psychological viewpoints that human beings, though share so many common characteristics, also have their unique differences which existentialists believe show the mark of differences from the common attributes shared by everyone. What was described as the point of departure in describing the nature of humans in Africa, that is, we are therefore, I am, as opposed to the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am"<sup>6</sup> will no longer be exclusive to Africans. There are acts of communality in every human person. Although the statement that 'Africans find it difficult to conceive human nature as a purely contemplative being: for them, human qualities presuppose a world of human relations'<sup>7</sup> can still be accommodated without creating strictly Western African divides that would compromise rationality, the most essential trait in all persons. While Busia suggested group consciousness as the motivating influence of African ideas and thoughts<sup>8</sup>, Wiredu argued that regardless of one's race, truth-telling is an indefeasible obligation on everyone.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Attribute of Goodness in a Person**

Good as an attribute of a person or thing saves the discussion from an attempt of a definition to the level of evaluation. According to Moore, "good if we mean by it that quality which we can assert to belong to a thing when we say that the thing is good, is incapable of any definition, in the most important sense of that word, good has no definition because it is simple and has no parts"<sup>10</sup>. From everyday conversation with simple greetings of good morning, good afternoon, good evening and good night, there is no much judgement on how the period of the day is, what it is not and what it should be. When a regular good morning or good night is absent, it could mean something else than mere failure to greet.

Sometime when 'Goodness' which although can be someone's name is used as an attribute," it could mean the ability of the person to follow a set of rules and regulations, desist from crimes, tell the truth and abhor cheating others. Friends, neighbours, family members and co-workers can also determine goodness in someone. In a scale developed by Riggio Ronald, 'you can tell if you are a good person if you leave the world a better place, doing what groups refer to as acceptable deeds, saving lives, raising children in ways that people consider to be exemplary and making others happy. This has been criticised as subjective and failing as a moral theory because of egoism even from the view of virtue ethics<sup>11</sup>. So when someone says others are good, it could be interpreted as good for the persons<sup>12</sup>. A good person could be one that abides by the principles of communal interests and must necessarily exhibit those non-material qualities associated with goodness. Such a person stands for common good and when self-interest conflict with the common good, the overriding consideration is to promote common good<sup>13</sup>. It was earlier analysed<sup>14</sup> when Peter Jarvis ascribes the word "good" to moral and non-moral in his distinctions between the two terms. Moral goodness according to him relates to people's behaviour, especially when that behaviour affects others.

Moral good refers only to certain forms of human action that impinge on the other, while non-moral good refers to both of all forms of goodness ascribed to non-human phenomenon and to some non-behavioural assessments of people.<sup>15</sup> Moral good consists of being concerned for the other and one of the characteristics that can be described as moral is that its intention, process and consequences must all be in social interest, to promote peace and harmony which are essential for the development of the individuals in it.<sup>16</sup> When the word good; is used subjectively indicating something of the perspective of the speaker, it can be said to be non-moral. For instance, when some students say that they had a good class, they invariably suggest that they enjoyed the class or that they understood what was taught. What they refer to as "good" in this case reflect the biases of the speakers and not whether the class conformed to the norm of teaching judged from the content and method of teaching.

From the position of Jarvis, one is left with moral good which refers to the good of a person which this chapter is concerned with and not non-moral good of things. This position is important for the human person as the only educable specie and the one that possesses the most sophisticated organisation. Freire reaffirms that man as beings of the praxis differ from animals, which are beings of pure activity. Animals do not consider the world; they are immersed in it. In contrast, men emerge from the world, objectify it, and in so doing, can understand it and transform it with their labour<sup>17</sup>. This allows us to focus on holistic education as against training, instruction, indoctrination and mere schooling. Enoh wrote on the confusions that result from the misuse of related terms to education causing what he called an 'educational wasteland'. He concludes that, "while it is no contradiction to say that a man attended school but did not learn a thing, the same cannot be said of education, for education covers a range of tasks as well as achievement on the part of the learners for any level of schooling should translate to an experience<sup>18</sup>." Education should be a compulsive urge and a curiosity to know, to learn, to acquire knowledge for its own sake and for service to the wider society, to humanise, to make one a citizen of the world<sup>19</sup>. However, global citizenship is a complex, fluid and sometimes delicate balance between the particular and the whole, between the individual and the group and between the local and the global<sup>20</sup>.

This chapter also focuses on democratic principles usually acclaimed to be the best form of government although under serious threat in African societies, Representative government made possible orderly succession without hereditary dynasty, opened feedback channels between top and bottom in the society provided an arena in which the differences among various groups could be reconciled peacefully but people have only intermittent opportunities through voting to give continuing feedback to their approval or disapproval of the government and its actions. Representative government—what we have been taught to call democracy was in short an industrial technology for assuming inequality<sup>21</sup>.

## **Education for Good Governance**

Without engaging so much in the debate of which one comes first between education and governance, it can be assumed that education ought to be in good standing before governance. Although it can also be argued that there cannot be good education without good governance that gives prime of place to education of citizens. Every education should have as its target the focus of making learners good persons. From the informal education at home and immediate environment of the child to formal education and to the inclusive non-formal education both in the community and workplace, the citizen should be formed to becoming a good person.

In most African countries, there are reminiscences of the good education that was handed over by colonialists to nationalists who mostly had their education outside their countries. The worry then will be: has education become better than the nationalist met it when they took over the leadership of their countries. A leader like Obafemi Awolowo in Nigeria led his region with the policy of free education which was not the case in the other regions that were not under his control then but the idea later became a national policy called universal basic education. Unfortunately, with growing number of private institutions, can Nigerian government still say there is equal educational opportunity?

Julius Nyerere of Tanzania had one of the rare opportunities not only to conceive an educational system for self-reliance, but was also able to administer such system when he was the president of Tanzania. Good governance as a key element of democracy is that which has the potential that promotes human development, entrenchment of effective and efficient institutions, and suitable political environment for economic growth, effective public services and installation of infrastructural facilities<sup>22</sup>. Specifically, good governance supports public good while bad government promotes private ownership to the detriment of the majority of the people. Thus when resources are distributed to promote inequality or to achieve personal or group ambitions, the essence of good governance is defeated<sup>23</sup>. So, what type of education will bring about good governance? It should be an educational system that promotes equity, equality, social justice

and integration of the society. Unfortunately, the educational system in Nigeria does not have provision for adequately meeting these key elements. So, if it is not in the educational system that produces good citizens how do we expect the products to practice good governance when they are in government?

Noticeable in African countries are lopsidedness in educational provision which could be traced to the policies and programmes of those years of Awolowo's free education and Nyerere's education for self-reliance. Instead of only seeing those days as the good old days, it is better to attempt a critique which can highlight the problems of such policies that have failed in order to achieve better citizenry.

We have often read that African countries have good educational programmes but lack the capacity to implement them. Perhaps this explains why Nigeria inherited and has since formulated various educational systems without much success of achieving the desirable objectives as stated in the national goals on education. The five objectives of education should aim at achieving:

- i. a free and democratic society;
- ii. a just and egalitarian society;
- iii. a united, strong and self-reliant nation;
- iv. a great and dynamic economy; and
- v. a land of full and bright opportunities for all citizen<sup>24</sup>.

Are these goals products of well thought out discussion among the people and all those whom society has entrusted the care and education of students to? All subjects in schools should have elements of these goals which will serve as practices founded on terms and issues in socio-political philosophy.<sup>25</sup> They would not be achievable if they are just wishes as copied from other countries, goals of education without critical engagement with all citizens taking into consideration the culture of the people. These objectives of education are meant to achieve good person in learners who would not only be useful to themselves but also to the society in which they belong. In these goals, education as a common good is justifiable.

## **Epistemological and Ethical Implications of a Good Person**

The saying usually used among lawyers that ignorance is not an excuse protects the procedures for punishment so that people will not claim or feign ignorance when they truly know. While it is not possible for anyone to know all the law, the exceptions of minors, the insane and mentally deranged even by the law serves as a way of maintaining a standard and assumption that people know as long as the law has been publicised in whichever way. So if someone is adjudged to be good, does the person keep all the laws because it is known?

It has been argued earlier from Socrates view on good as documented in the writings of Plato and Aristotle that knowledge presupposes good behaviour by showing that knowledgeable people can still decide not to do the good they know. This fact would not make those who have some form of education absolve from the demands that knowledge places on them for good citizenship in the society. Among the Yorubas, *eko* (knowledge) and *iwa* (character) are used as one word which means that knowledge imposes character on whoever possesses it. Epistemic goodness refers to a kind of value which is attached to true beliefs and justified beliefs. Truth becomes an epistemic good.

## **Conclusion**

Education should aim at developing goodness in both instructors and learners so that they can create a good society. As a mark of goodness, truth-telling should be a way of life and a hallmark of educational system in that it is consistent with the reality in the society. The best method of transmitting truth should be through dialogue or discussion that allows learners and instructors to engage in unhindered flow of communication in every learning situation.

Beyond the democracy that only allows the majority to rule, the new democracy in both classroom and larger society should take into cognizance the voice of the minority and consider sound reasoning, critical thinking and creative engagement that can lead to resolute belief and pursuit of truth rather than mass ignorance that old democracy tend to promote. After all, the majority can be wrong and every aspect of lives should not be politicised as we have in developing countries.



Instructors should be bearers of truth and those that have dispositions which will allow learners to be open to learning. Learners also have to be open to truth as revealed, as handed over in the past and as discovered by their personal efforts. Here, project work should be given as a matter of duty to all learners to get information for themselves in the activities of the classroom. Efforts should be made by those in charge of educational activities to encourage deliberate activities that will create a balance in decisions that would benefit both individuals and the society where people live. One of the ways of doing this will be to live exemplary lives of giving hope to the poor, the disadvantaged and the physically challenged.

Being good would not end with one-off act; rather, it will continue to be an ongoing exercise. This means that society will not have good persons if good persons suffer for being good. This means that good acts should be rewarded and bad acts should be punished. The good person is also culturally determined. A good person is at home with self and others in the community.

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