The Ethics of Work in the Music of Sholla Allyson Obaniyi

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Ethics and aesthetics as axiological disciplines

Axiology can simply be defined as the study of values. In philosophical parlance, ethics and aesthetics are regarded as value oriented disciplines. Such disciplines are concerned with evaluation of ideas, thoughts, statements and expressions in relation to standards that are not purely empirical. The history of the relationship between ethics (human conduct) and aesthetics (beauty) has been a chequered one. Thus, for instance, Plato (2000) had advocated for an intimate connection between the good and the beautiful thereby drawing some substantive implications for how human beings ought to live; while Kennick (1965) held that it is a mistake to hold that there is a logical symmetry between moral judgments and aesthetic judgments. Kennick based his views on the belief that ethics has a standard of evaluation while aesthetics does not.

Moreover, some thinkers about Western axiology (Ayer 2001) have held that the value disciplines in philosophy, such as ethics and aesthetics can be analyzed in purely scientific terms and if this cannot be done, then such disciplines can only be regarded as performing only emotional functions without any cognitive values. There are also analytic philosophers, for instance, Moore (1978) who had gone as far as to claim that terms like “good” and “beauty” are unanalyzable because they are already simple notions. It was only in the era of pragmatism as witnessed in the works of Dewey (2005) and Rorty (2001) that we are witnessing the existential and cultural dimensions of the value disciplines and a discouragement of the water tight distinction between science and values. Rorty, in particular, has suggested a kind of ecumenical relationship between all disciplines, identifying them within solidarity with the community.

Given the predominant view within the African conceptual scheme that entities bear organic relationship with one another, the connection between ethics and aesthetics becomes perspicuous. With the exemption of the philosophers that have been tagged “African neo-positivist”, scholars that have examined the relationship between ethics and aesthetics have identified logical, epistemic, ontological and existential connections between the two disciplines. In this connection, Hallen (2000, 113) has this to say: I have chosen the term (values) because it is a way to avoid the arbitrary division that has been introduced into English-language discourse by the use of the separate terms “ethics” (arising from art) as if naming two different intellectual realms. For in the discussions with the onisegun, the transition from the “good” to the “beautiful” was as systematic and coherent as was the case with that between the epistemological and the moral” And Bewaji (2003, 161-162) asserts that “Songs (a form of art) are a useful medium for the development of the sense of right and wrong (ethics) in members of society as they teach the young and the old accepted codes and norms of socio-political, cultural and religious behaviour”.

There are two essential lessons that could be learnt from the linkage of ethics with aesthetics. The first is that the African world view does not condone individualistic and atomistic conception of reality; rather it sees all the items in the conceptual system as being related to one another- humans are related to non-human, living to non-living, the sacred to
the profane, and the living to the dead. The second lesson is that values do not exist in themselves; rather they exist in relation to particular existential and practical experiences of the people. Gbadegesin (1998) for instance, has observed that Yoruba ethics is a pragmatic one.

**Aesthetic expressions as reflection of existential realities**

One of the philosophical problems of aesthetics is concerned with the relationship between the artist and what he/she expresses by his/her work. The predominant view in Western philosophy is that “art and beauty is expression of feeling or emotion” (Charlton 1970:84). However, feelings and emotions have objects and the further problem is the relationship between these feelings and emotions and what they are about, that is what they represent. Different philosophical (cultural) traditions have given responses to these questions on the basis of their own peculiar world views.

Onyewuenyi (1984, 141) explains this feature in the following way: “Much emphasis is placed on the “perfection” of art works, the prestige possess because of a long history of unquestioned admiration. Descriptive terms such as ‘lively expression’, ‘naturalistic’, ‘disinterested gratification’, ‘ugly’, ‘beautiful’, etc. characterize European/American evaluation of designs and motifs of art works. Thus they are separated from conditions of history and origin and operation in experience.”

Duran (2006, 38) is essentially in agreement with the views expressed by Onyewuenyi when she observed: "Historically speaking, we can trace the notions of detachment in European aesthetics to a period far beyond the Enlightenment; we can, of course, trace notions to Plato. Because Western philosophy is rooted in the notion of give account of, where the term to be given an account of is divorced from contextual considerations, we can with a fair degree of accuracy say that the notions of beauty found throughout Western aesthetics are lineal descendants of some sort of Platonic conception of Beauty."

In contrary to the above position, Duran later observed that in the late twentieth century things started to change in respect to this conception of aesthetics. The reason for
this change is connected with the current attitude of human beings to nature, where nature is regarded as a kind of force. One of the implications of this belated understanding of nature is that human beings nowadays regard degradation of the environment as their own degradation and therefore aesthetics is no longer seen in detached and disinterested perspectives.

In contrast to Western conception of aesthetics, the Yoruba (African) aesthetics is closely and inextricably linked to her metaphysics. As Onyenwuenyi (1984, 242) observes: “Its (aesthetics) theory or standard of evaluation must conform to the theories of its sister disciplines and stem identical metaphysical foundations. Hence African art is functional, community-oriented, depersonalized, contextualized, and embedded”. In the same vein, Duran (2006, 39) while comparing European aesthetics with Yoruba aesthetics observes that Yoruba aesthetics is predicated upon the Yoruba world view in the sense that “one cannot remove oneself from one’s ‘self concerns’ and ‘peculiarities’ because these concerns are intimately linked to cosmological functioning”.

The essential point being made by these scholars is that aesthetics cannot be divorced from specific cultural and historical realities. The position has captured the kernel of sociology of knowledge in our time, to the effect that all branches of knowledge are interconnected and that they serve the function of connecting knowledge with the concrete realities of human beings in different cultures and in different historical periods. Thus, aesthetic expressions, judgments and attitudes are always related to concrete life situations of the artist and his/her socio-cultural realities, be it ethical, social, economic and political.

**Yoruba art forms and ethical, social and political behaviours**

Most of Yoruba art forms- proverbs, music, poems, films, story telling and oratory are didactic in character. They are meant to inculcate in persons, good behaviours both at personal and institutional levels. They do this by special appeal to the consciousness of the audience in order to bring about certain ethical, social and political attitudes which are meant to promote harmonious relationships between individuals and the community of which individuals are integral parts. These art forms are not just expressed in ordinary language; rather they are couched in aesthetically fascinating fashions that are captivating to the audience. Art forms are meant to induce particular ethical/political/social behaviour and this requires that the speaker or performer is well attuned to the existential realities around him/her at a particular time in the history of the people. Thus, *ewà èdè* (beautiful language) is meant to induce *ewà ìwà* (beautiful character) in the participants in any Yoruba art form.

Music/songs (*orin*) is an important art form among the Yoruba. According to Levinson (2005, 232) music is “sounds temporarily organized by a person for the purpose of enriching or intensifying experience through active engagement (e.g. listening, dancing and performing) with the sounds regarded primarily, or in significant measure as sounds” Within the Yoruba context, the function of music goes beyond mere listening, dancing and performing to the sounds of music; rather it is meant to induce a particular (ethical, social, courageous) behaviour on the part of a given hearer or audience. Music is capable of effecting change in behaviour or action of a person to whom the music is intended. Two illustrations of what we are saying here suffice from Fagunwa books: *Oqboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* (1950, 2005) and *Igbo Olodumare* (1949, 2005). In the first of the two books, Olóhun Iyo, one of the Courageous Seven (*Akoni Méje*) who volunteered to travel to Òke
Lángbòdó for the well-being of their state, used his melodious song to overwhelm Èrù (Sinister spirit) who cannot be defeated by bullets and arrows of the most powerful among the group, Kako, Oníkúmọ Èkùn. By the same token, Olówò Aye, in the second book, having engaged Èsù Kèkèrè Èdé in a seemingly no win fight decided to sing a song that is capable of inducing a compromising attitude in Èsu Kèkèrè Èdé. As a matter of fact, both occasions worked in favour of Àkàrà Oògùn and Olówò Aye; Èrù ran away from the Courageous Seven and Èsu Kèkèrè Èdé made peace with Olówò Aye. These two examples illustrate the Yoruba saying that ‘ohún rere lo nyo obì lapò, ohún burukú ál yó ofà niní apó’. (Good exchange draws a kolanut (gift) from the pocket and a bad one draws an arrow from its sheath). In the next section we shall briefly discuss conceptions of work in order to illustrate how art music expresses an ethical position about work as a productive activity.

The Ethics of work: A philosophical overview

Work as productive activity is a universal phenomenon. However, Gbadegesin (1991) has made a distinction between many human activities that are productive and work. According to him, the need and raison d'être of work is embedded in both oral and written narratives across cultures. According to Gbadegesin (1991) work is one of the essential activities of the human condition. Through work, nature is transformed in various ways, directly or indirectly, to produce the material conditions of life.

Work has been categorised as manual and non-manual. This can further be divided into two according to the degree of freedom of choice and operation which the worker enjoys, as well as the amount of satisfaction he/she derives from work. Manual workers are either wage labourers, working for a person or an organisation and artisan/crafts people who are on their own. Non-manual workers can also be divided into two-those that are often called white collar workers who work either in the private or the public sector. The other group falls to persons who make use of their talents towards their own unique development of their potentialities. Whether a person works for another person, organisation or for herself, the commitment to what one is doing in form of work is always valued.

Philosophers across different ages and culture have disagreed about what constitutes the meaning of work. While some have identified work with the physical exertion of the body, others believed that it is only the mental exertion on nature that constitutes work. Experience shows that both manual and non-manual works are essential to transform nature for the production of the material conditions of life. What is important is that human beings are made up of physical and mental attributes and it makes sense to suggest that both attributes play important roles in the transformation of the natural and social environment for the production of the material conditions of life. The Yoruba saying that “alagbara ma lero, baba ole” (A person having physical strength without (mental) plan is really a lazy person) exemplifies the roles played by both physical and mental abilities in the meaning of work.

There is no culture that condones laziness; for laziness is antithetical to the essential need for transformation of the natural and social conditions of life for the purpose of producing the material conditions for life. Within the African society, persons frown upon laziness. A lazy person is not even regarded as a genuine person, given the fact that she or he does not contribute to the material welfare of the community, especially when he/she has the opportunity and the physical and mental abilities to do so. Nyerere (1995, 67) for
example, noted that, “in traditional African society, everybody was a worker. There was no other way of earning a living for the community. Even the elder, who appeared to be enjoying himself without doing any work and for whom everybody else appeared to be working, had in fact worked hard all his younger days” Nyerere also believed that everybody must work in order to contribute to the public wealth. Consequently, apart from the child or the infirm, nobody is expected to be an idler.

Certain ethical conclusions could be drawn from this short analysis about the concept of work. The first is that work is essentially bound with the human person. This is evidenced in the Biblical and philosophical accounts of work in which it is believed that it is human labour that creates wealth. The necessity for work is replicated in an aspect of the “original sin” in which all human beings have been condemned to work, just like the Sartrean phrase that human beings are condemned to freedom.

The belief in work as a universal phenomenon could be linked to the values of freedom, fairness and equity. This is because every person is expected to contribute his/her own effort into a common wealth and by so doing, nobody will feel cheated within a community in which its essential nature is tied to the necessity to work in order to produce the material condition for its well-being.

Furthermore, no person is expected to be a parasite on another person. Even when the traditional African society believes that hospitality is a virtue, the society does not believe in one person being parasitic on another. Again, Nyerere reminds us of the Swahili saying translated as, “Treat your guest as a guest for two days; on the third day, give him a hoe!”

In the next section of this paper, this conception and ethics of work will be illustrated by a track in one of the albums of Sholla Allyson Obaniyi, ADUN (Galaxy Music, September, 12, 2012). In the track, Sholla Allyson Obaniyi expresses the Yoruba ethical view concerning the necessity for human beings to engage in productive activity, thereby illustrating the existential connection between a work of art (aesthetics) and human conduct (ethics)

Sholla Allyson Obaniyi: Music as expression of ethics of work.

In line with other classical and modern thinkers like Aristotle and Mar, the Yoruba believe that work is essentially a human activity. This is exemplified in one of the age old Yoruba poems:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yoruba Poem</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isé loògün isé</td>
<td>Work is the antidote for poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Múra sísé ré óré mí</td>
<td>My friend take your work seriously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isé la fì n’èni gíga</td>
<td>It is work that uplifts a person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bí’ a ko bá réni fehíntí</td>
<td>If there is no supporter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bí’ òle là á rí</td>
<td>One is like a lazy person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bí’ a ko bá réni gbékêlé</td>
<td>If there is no one to rely upon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A tera mọse eni</td>
<td>One takes his/her work seriously</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ìyá’ rẹ le òjówó ìwọ̀</td>
<td>Your mother might be wealthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kí’ bába lèsin leékan</td>
<td>And your father exceedingly rich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bí o bá gbọjú lè won</td>
<td>If you rely on their riches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O tè tān ni mo so fún o</td>
<td>You will be terribly disappointed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ìyà nbe fún omo tí kò gbón</td>
<td>Suffering awaits the unwise child</td>
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Obaniyi adopts this poem in track three of her Album, ADUN (Galaxy Music, September, 2012) as follows:

1. Òrè mì ma roṣè
2. Ma fasíkọ sọ fọ, múrọ gírí sí sè rẹ
3. Má dúró, má roṣè
4. Ise lọọgùn iṣe, múrọ sí sè rẹ órè mì
5. Bí a kò bá réni fèhìnì, bí òle làà rí
6. Bí a kò bá réni gbékèlé, a tera móṣé eni
7. Ìyà re lè lówó lówó, kì bàbá lèsin lèèkàn
8. Bí o bá gbojú lè won o tè tān ní mo so fù n o
9. Tètè tera mó sè
10. Eniti'ó lapa ti o fì sìsé
11. Aso ìyà ní o fì bora sùn
12. Ma fasíkọ sofọ múrọ sìsé ojọ n lo
13. Òrè mì ma roṣè
14. I se lè fì nđé n gì, ápàlàrá igùnpá níyèkan
15. Òníṣé ijọba tepá móṣé, a ki sìsé ijọba láàgùn
16. Òníṣé owo tepá móṣé
17. Ìsé dí e, oorùn dí e, ònà ìsẹ ní yen
18. Òníṣówò múrù sí sè rẹ
19. Má fòle ko letà sèbìta
20. Èmì so tèmì
21. O o níse lowo won pe aláàrù o sàrè lo
22. Wọ̀ọ̀ ebi á pà o ènu re à gùn dé ìbàdàn
23. Tete múra sí sè
24. Ìlẹ̀ jí lówúrò, ó yí aso múrí
25. Ìsàn pó ò sàrè kiri

My friend do not be lazy
Waste no time, do your work with all seriousness
Do not tarry, do not be lazy
Work is the antidote for poverty, take your work seriously
One appears to be lazy when one does not have a supporter
When there is no one to rely on, we face our work squarely
Your parents may be very wealthy
If you rely on their riches you will be disappointed
Please, work very hard
One who has hands and does not want to work
He/she will be covered with poverty
Do not waste time, time is moving fast
My friend, do not be lazy
One is uplifted through hard work, one's hand is one's total being
Civil servants work hard, do not take public job as nobody's job
Artisans, take your work seriously
Mixing work with idleness paves way for poverty
Business person, take your work seriously
Do not employ laziness to pave way to poverty
I have spoken
The unemployed person hardly have a choice in relation to a job offer
You will be harshly treated with hunger.
Take your work seriously
A lazy person is always uncomfortable at the beginning of a new day
Only becoming serious when it is noon, when the day has gone so far.
26. Ò di ojú alé ó n sáré kiri Running helter-skelter seeking for help when it is too late
27. Ènìyàn mí e tera mósé My people take your work seriously
28. Eniti ó bá sí sê kò gbodò jeun He who does not work should not eat
29. Òrò Olúwa lò wí bèé This is God’s injunction
30. Onjìyān nke e wojú iyàn One who works advertises her business
31. Òlòbè nke e wojú obè A worker has something to advertise
32. Àtìje àtimu ní gbogbo wá náwá kiri Everybody works in order to eat
33. Òlè tíó fí nkankan bole A lazy person who does not plant anything

34. Kìni Elèdùwà màá búsí? What would God bless?
35. Rírí lò nṣajú jíje You have to work before you eat
36. Eniti ọ ríkan kó lè jé nkàn Without working you cannot become somebody

37. Ènìyàn mí e tera mósé My people, work hard
38. Ise loogún ise, e tera mósé Work is an antidote to poverty
39. Ojó nlo e tera mósé Time waits for nobody, work hard.

A Philosophical analysis of the song

Lines 1-3. In these lines, the artist (Sholla Obaniyi) exhorts her audience about the need to work and shun laziness.

Lines 4-6: The artist stresses the human virtue of autonomy as a means to self-fulfilment

Lines 7-9: The artist emphasises the ethical position that persons should be independent through hard work and that they should not wholly rely on the achievement of their progenitors, especially their immediate parents. In the African society, it is always regarded as a self-deception when a young man/woman wholly relies on the wealth of parents in order to make it in life.

Lines 10-12: The artist stresses that poverty is a logical outcome of laziness and given that poverty is a negative human experience, persons should work in order to avoid poverty. On a critical reflection, however, these lines are oblivious of the fact that poverty may not necessarily result from lack of work; poverty may be as a result of the structural relations between persons in a given society.

Lines 13-15: Obayemi stresses the fact that there is dignity in labour and that a person who believes in work- hard-work, is an ethically regarded person.

Lines 16-20: Obayemi does not discriminate between the commitment to work in whatever situation we find ourselves, whether as a self-employed person or as a civil servant. This is a warning to certain civil servants who entertain the belief that public service is a means to cheat given the fact that whether one works hard on not one is going to get paid at the end of the month.

Lines 21-23: In these lines, the artist points attention to the need for the unemployed not to shun any employment offer. This is because half bread is better than none. This is an admonition to the young graduate who is insisting on a particular job as the only alternative to unemployment.
Lines 24-26: In these lines, Obaniyi draws attention to the consequences of laziness. According to her, laziness is the cause of lack of achievement and the consequence is that such a person will live an unfulfilled life.

Lines 27-29: The artist emphasises the necessity to work as a universal experience given the fact that work is an injunction which dates back to the beginning of time and which is still regarded as a defining attribute of the human person.

Lines 30-36. In these lines, Sholla Allyson Obaniyi recognises the metaphysical doctrine of cause and effect. For her, one who does not work cannot expect any material thing which can add to the quality of human life. This also stresses the importance of human freedom in our world where persons sometimes pray to God for the good things of life without necessarily putting enough effort to transform nature in order to produce the material conditions of life.

Lines 37-39: Finally, The artist re-emphasises the fact that work, productive work, is the only antidote to poverty. This is a position that has been recognised across all civilizations.

Conclusion

What this paper has sought to do was to argue that there is an existential relationship between the two axiological disciplines in philosophy. This position is a response to a prevalent view that only seeks to find a logical connection between the two disciplines and that if this connection cannot be found, then there is no other connection available. The paper suggests that in the works of art, especially in music, the artist musician sometimes uses songs to reflect on certain existential situations, whether as experienced by him/her or as reflective of the social and cultural practices of a given people. This position was illustrated by the music of a Yoruba art musician, Sholla Allyson Obaniyi. On a broader philosophical note, the paper is an exemplification of the need to relate the philosophical discipline to all areas of human endeavour in an attempt to understand and appreciate the ethical, metaphysical and epistemological underpinnings of human cultures.

References


