The distinction between morality and ethics

A closer analysis of the two words, ethics and morality, show that they are closely related in terms of their original meaning. In one of his works, *Moral philosophy in African context*, Joseph A Ilori (1994:40) argues that “moral” comes from the Latin *moralis* and “ethics” from the Greek word *ethos*. In their original meaning, the two words meant “the custom or way of life”. Ilori explores this point further when he argues that there is a tendency in today’s world to use “morals” and “morality” to refer to the conduct itself, and “ethics” and “ethical” to refer to the study of moral conduct or the system or code that is followed. When Ilori searches for morality in the philosophic tradition, he concludes that the conception of morality in this sphere has been more comprehensive. His point becomes clearer when he says (Ilori 1994:5): “While the everyday idea of the moral is based on conformity to a specified and limited code of conduct, the comprehensive definition extends the concept to include every area of human experience”.

According to the broad view, moral judgements are not limited to such particular concerns as sexual relations, gambling, drinking, and murder, but are relevant also to such matters as choice of friends, selection of occupation, and manner of pursuing it, participation in civic affairs, and decisions about recreation.

It appears that by considering every area of human experience in his attempt to clarify morality, Ilori points out that the human life is a moral life. Ilori (1994:5) goes further to point out the defining characteristics of the moral as follows. Firstly, the moral is in the realm of decision. There is no morality without a choice among alternatives. Thus morality is concomitant of freedom. Secondly, the moral concerns values. The moral problem is to decide between alternative possibilities on the basis of their respective values. A moral choice is a decision for the better alternative, while an immoral choice is a decision for the inferior alternative. The choice between equally valuable possibilities is morally neutral. Ilori (1994:5) contends that “the definition of morality [referring] to [a] deliberate decision among alternative values locates the moral in the person rather than in the act”. The above point clarifies the commonly held assumption that morality relates to particular acts. Hence sexual offences, stealing and murder are accounted as immoral deeds, while sobriety, honesty, faithfulness and gentleness are regarded as moral.

Our introductory remarks in this chapter bring to the fore the following points:
✓ Instead of promoting the autonomous individual, morality in African thought tends to focus on the communal nature of human society. An act is viewed as good provided it enhances both the good of society and the individual. Principles such as personhood, Ubuntu and humanising of economic action reflect this approach. Human solidarity and harmony in social relationships are some of the important elements of morality that are promoted in African thought.

✓ Morality in African thought is organic in nature, in the sense that it grows within the community and permeates every sphere of communal life. Morality manifests itself in daily communal life and activities, in which members of the community carry out their different roles. What is good or evil is articulated by the community within the parameters of its own experience; hence African proverbs are significant in articulating and preserving these experiences. The Akan saying onipa na ohia (it is a human being who has value) hinges on Akan (African) experience. In the above context it can be argued that morality in African thought is concrete. In traditional Africa, morality does not have an abstract source but grows from within, because communities themselves are the makers of morality.

✓ Some of the concepts that are presented and argued have universal significance, despite their being originally African concepts. A good example is the following: if the concept of Ubuntu is applied anywhere in the world, it acquires a universal dimension. But having said that, we should understand that being universally applicable does not necessarily nullify Ubuntu’s particular dimension. As such, we can conclude that Ubuntu as concept displays both particular and universal features.