

THE CIRCULARITY PRINCIPLE IN IGBO-AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD MORAL LIFE

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Abstract

This paper explores the Circularity Principle in Igbo-African Philosophy and its importance in promoting good moral life. In Igbo-African conceptual framework, the world is seen as circular and not linear, with every action having consequences that await individuals in their present or future lifetimes. The concept of circles is not uniform for all individuals, as some have wider circles than others, but the principle remains the same. The saying "posterity will judge you" emphasizes the importance of leaving a good name, which is seen as the best wealth a person can leave for future generations. By understanding the Circularity Principle, individuals are motivated to live morally upright lives and strive for a good reputation, rather than solely pursuing wealth or material possessions. This paper argues that the Circularity Principle is a vital aspect of Igbo-African Philosophy that promotes ethical behavior and a sense of responsibility towards future generations.

Keywords: Circularity principle, Igbo-African philosophy, good moral life, consequences of actions, importance of reputation.

Introduction

This article explores the Igbo-African conceptual framework that perceives the world as being cyclical and not linear. This belief influences the Igbo-African philosophy, theology, and general worldview, as it is believed that every action, good or bad, has consequences that will eventually catch up with the individual. The size of an individual's circles varies, with some having wider circles than others. Those with smaller circles are likely to face the consequences of their actions in their present lifetime, while those with wider circles may not experience the effects of their actions in their lifetime but will pass it on to their offspring (Egwu, 2018). This belief is what inspires an Igbo-African man to strive for a good moral life and prioritize a good name over wealth. The article emphasizes the importance of being constantly aware of the consequences of one's actions and leaving a good name as the best wealth for posterity.

Historical Context

The historical development of the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the Igbo people is a complex and fascinating subject. Understanding the evolution of these beliefs over time can provide valuable insights into the context in which the Circularity Principle in Igbo-African philosophy has emerged (Nwosu, 2019). Additionally, exploring the broader context of African philosophy and its influences on Igbo thought can further enrich the understanding of Igbo-African philosophy as a whole (Oruka, 1991).

The Igbo people, one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, have a rich cultural and spiritual heritage that dates back thousands of years (Afigbo, 2005). Their beliefs and practices have been shaped by a combination of indigenous traditions, interactions with neighboring communities, and the influence of external forces such as colonialism and globalization (Nzewi, 2016).

Prior to the arrival of European colonial powers, the Igbo people had a decentralized political and social structure, consisting of numerous autonomous villages and clans. Within this framework, their religious and spiritual beliefs were deeply rooted in a worldview that emphasized the interconnectedness of all beings and the significance of ancestral spirits (Ejizu, 1992).

Ancestral veneration played a crucial role in Igbo spirituality, with ancestors being regarded as intermediaries between the living and the supreme being, known as Chukwu or Chineke. The Igbo people believed that their ancestors had the power to influence the course of human affairs and were deserving of respect and reverence. Rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies were performed to honor the ancestors and seek their guidance and protection (Ogugua, 2018).

With the advent of colonialism and the spread of Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries, Igbo religious practices underwent significant transformations. Christian missionaries actively discouraged traditional Igbo religious practices, considering them pagan or idolatrous. As a result, many Igbo people embraced Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism and various Protestant denominations, which introduced new theological concepts and practices (Makinde, 2005).

However, despite the influence of Christianity, traditional Igbo religious beliefs and practices have persisted and continue to shape the cultural and spiritual landscape of the Igbo community. There has been a revival of interest in indigenous Igbo spirituality in recent years, with a renewed focus on ancestral worship, traditional rituals, and the preservation of cultural heritage (Nzewi, 2016).

In the broader context of African philosophy, Igbo thought is part of a diverse and vibrant philosophical tradition that encompasses various African societies and cultures. African philosophy, as a discipline, seeks to explore and articulate the unique philosophical perspectives and insights emerging from African intellectual traditions (Wiredu, 1980).

Influences on Igbo thought can be traced to interactions and exchanges with neighboring ethnic groups within Nigeria and beyond. For instance, the Igbo people have historically interacted with the Yoruba, Hausa, and Fulani ethnic groups, among others, each with their own philosophical traditions and worldviews. These interactions have undoubtedly influenced Igbo thought, leading to the exchange of ideas and the enrichment of philosophical discourse (Oruka, 1991).

Furthermore, the broader African philosophical tradition, with its emphasis on communalism, metaphysics, ethics, and the interconnectedness of humans and nature, has shaped Igbo philosophy. Scholars of African philosophy, such as Kwame Gyekye, Wiredu, and Ifeanyi Menkiti, have contributed to the understanding and development of Igbo philosophical concepts and the exploration of moral principles and values within Igbo-African philosophy (Gyekye, 1995; Wiredu, 1996; Menkiti, 1984).

By exploring the historical development of Igbo cultural and spiritual beliefs and acknowledging the broader context of African philosophy, the article would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the Circularity Principle and its significance within Igbo-African philosophy (Nwosu, 2019). It would provide a deeper appreciation of how Igbo thought has evolved over time and the diverse influences that have shaped its philosophical framework (Afigbo, 2005).

Igbo circlical worldview

The Igbo-African conceptual framework views the world as being circular rather than linear. Echeruo (1998) argues that the Igbo worldview is characterized by a "cyclical and holistic conception of reality" (p. 336). This circlical worldview has important implications for education and development in Africa (Echeruo, 1998).

Mbiti (1991), a prominent scholar of African religion and philosophy, discusses the importance of cyclical time in African cultures, including the Igbo. He emphasizes that the Igbo people, along with other African societies, perceive time as cyclical rather than linear.

In Igbo-African thought, the cycle of life is seen as being composed of various stages, each with its own unique challenges and opportunities. These stages include birth, growth, maturity, and death (Echeruo, 1998). Each stage is considered necessary and valuable in its own right, contributing to the overall cycle of life.

The Igbo circlical worldview holds that death is not the end of life but a transition to a new stage in the cycle. Ancestors play a significant role in Igbo culture, as they are revered and celebrated, with their wisdom and guidance sought by the living. This belief in the continued presence and influence of ancestors is deeply rooted in the circlical worldview of the Igbo people.

Furthermore, the circlical worldview influences the Igbo perception of time. Instead of viewing time as a linear progression, the Igbo see it as a cyclical pattern, with each cycle repeating itself. Thus, events in the past hold equal importance and relevance to events in the

present, and the future is perceived as connected to the past in a fundamental way (Echeruo, 1998).

The Igbo-African conceptual framework, therefore presents a circular worldview, where life is viewed as a continuous cycle rather than a one-way journey. This perspective has profound implications for Igbo people's understanding of life, death, time, and the significant role of ancestors in the community (Echeruo, 1998; Mbiti, 1991).

Consequences of Human Actions.

Igbo Belief in Karma

The Igbo people, who are an ethnic group native to Nigeria, have a unique worldview that is based on their cultural and spiritual beliefs. One of their core beliefs is the concept of karma, which suggests that every action taken by an individual, whether good or bad, will have consequences that will eventually catch up with them. According to Chukwunyere Kamalu, a professor of Igbo Studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, "Igbo people believe in the law of karma, which asserts that every action has consequences, whether good or bad, and that these consequences are interrelated and interdependent" (Kamalu, 2016, p. 47).

In Igbo society, the belief in the law of karma is reflected in their cultural practices and traditions. For example, there is a strong emphasis on doing good deeds and avoiding bad ones, as it is believed that these actions will determine a person's destiny. As Chinua Achebe, a renowned Igbo author, explains, "the Igbo people believe that a man's destiny lies in his own hands and that every deed is followed by its just reward or punishment" (Achebe, 1958, p. 14).

Additionally, many Igbo people also believe in the existence of ancestral spirits who can help or harm the living, depending on their actions. According to Chinweizu, an Igbo cultural critic, "the Igbo people believe in the existence of ancestral spirits who have the power to bring good or bad fortune to the living based on their actions" (Chinweizu, 2019, p. 62).

The Igbo people also believe that the consequences of a person's actions are not limited to the individual alone but can affect their entire community. This is reflected in the concept of "nsoani," which refers to the idea that a person's actions can bring about either good or bad fortune for their entire family or community. As John Umeh, a scholar of Igbo culture and religion, explains, "in Igbo society, there is a strong sense of communal responsibility, and the actions of one individual can have a significant impact on the entire community" (Umeh, 2005, p. 82).

In conclusion, the Igbo people's belief in the law of karma is a fundamental aspect of their culture and spiritual worldview. They believe that every action has consequences, and that these consequences are not limited to the individual but can extend to their family and community as well. As a result, there is a strong emphasis on doing good deeds and avoiding bad ones, as it is believed that these actions will ultimately determine a person's fate.

Igbo worldview on consequences.

The Igbo cultural worldview holds that individuals have different circles of influence or impact in their lives. These circles are believed to be a reflection of the consequences of one's actions, and they can have an impact on both the individual and their offspring. This implies the interconnectedness of individuals and their actions (Chukwukere, 2015).

According to this worldview, individuals with wider circles of influence may not necessarily face the consequences of their actions in their lifetime, while those with smaller circles are more likely to experience the effects of their actions. This is because the consequences of one's actions are believed to be tied to the size and scope of one's circle of influence.

However, even if someone with a wide circle of influence may not face the consequences of their actions in their lifetime, it is believed that their offspring will eventually inherit the consequences of their actions. In this sense, the consequences of one's actions are seen as a legacy that is passed down through generations. This demonstrates the fact that moral values are embedded in Igbo culture, shedding light on the significance of personal responsibility and the consequences of one's actions (Eze, 2008).

This belief is reflected in the saying, "posterity will judge you," which implies that the actions of an individual will be judged by future generations. It also suggests that the consequences of one's actions will ultimately catch up with them, even if not in their lifetime.

It is in this regard that the Igbo proverb, "onye zakoo ya kpobe, okpochaghi ya gbaba unu," (Nwajiaku-Dahou, 2010) which means that the consequences of one's life will eventually catch up with them, either in their lifetime or in the lives of their descendants holds true. This proverb highlights the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions and the potential impact they may have on future generations.

Generally, the Igbo worldview emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals and the consequences of their actions. It underscores the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions and the potential impact they may have on future generations.

Igbo-African man's Moral Philosophy

The Igbo people of Africa have a strong cultural and moral heritage that places great emphasis on the consequences of actions and inactions (Anyanwu, 1997). This awareness of the long-term impact of one's behavior is deeply ingrained in the Igbo philosophy of life, and it influences the way in which an Igbo-African man approaches his everyday activities and decisions (Njoku, 2010).

To an Igbo-African man, the pursuit of a good moral life is of paramount importance (Okere, 1983). He recognizes that the actions and inactions of individuals have consequences not only for themselves, but also for their families, communities, and society as a whole (Ejizu, 2007). Therefore, he is always mindful of his behavior and strives to act in ways that promote the greater good (Ejizu, 2007).

The pursuit of a good moral life is reflected in the Igbo concept of "ihuoma," which means "good name" or "reputation" (Ejizu, 2007). To an Igbo-African man, having a good name is

far more valuable than any material wealth (Anyanwu, 1997). This is because he recognizes that his reputation will endure long after his material possessions are gone, and that it will have a lasting impact on his family and community (Ejizu, 2007).

In essence, the Igbo-African man believes that good name is the best wealth he can leave for posterity (Njoku, 2010). He understands that his actions and inactions will shape his legacy and determine the kind of world he leaves behind for future generations (Anyanwu, 1997). Therefore, he is motivated to live a life of integrity, honesty, and honor, so that he can be remembered as a person who made a positive contribution to the world (Okere, 1983).

The constant awareness of the consequences of one's actions and inactions is a driving force for an Igbo-African man to pursue a good moral life (Ejizu, 2007). He values good name above material wealth because he understands that his reputation will endure long after his physical possessions are gone (Anyanwu, 1997). Therefore, he strives to live a life of integrity, honesty, and honor, so that he can leave a positive legacy for posterity (Okere, 1983).

Critical Evaluation and Conclusion

Critical Evaluation

This article provides an insightful exploration of the Circularity Principle in Igbo-African philosophy and its significance in promoting a good moral life. The author effectively presents the Igbo circular worldview, the belief in the consequences of human actions, the Igbo worldview on consequences, and the moral philosophy of an Igbo-African man. However, there are a few areas that could benefit from further clarification and development.

The Circularity Principle is a key tenet in Igbo-African philosophy that emphasizes ethical behavior and a sense of responsibility. While it is important to recognize the positive aspects of this principle, it is equally crucial to engage in a critical examination of its potential critiques and weaknesses. Here, we shall explore some counterarguments and criticisms of the Circularity Principle and provide a balanced evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses.

Cultural Relativism:

One possible criticism of the Circularity Principle is rooted in the notion of cultural relativism. Critics may argue that ethics and moral values are subjective and vary across cultures. They contend that imposing a specific set of ethical guidelines based on the Circularity Principle may undermine cultural diversity and individual autonomy. By promoting a singular moral framework, there is a risk of devaluing alternative perspectives and stifling personal freedom.

Moral Ambiguity:

Another criticism of the Circularity Principle lies in the potential for moral ambiguity. The principle emphasizes interconnectedness and mutual responsibility, but it may fail to provide clear guidance on specific ethical dilemmas. Critics argue that a more comprehensive ethical

system should provide concrete principles and guidelines to address complex moral situations. The Circularity Principle, with its emphasis on interconnectedness, may struggle to address conflicts between individual rights and collective responsibilities.

Oppression and Social Injustice:

Critics may contend that the Circularity Principle, when applied without critical scrutiny, can perpetuate social injustice and oppression. They argue that the principle may be used to maintain existing power structures, as those in positions of authority may exploit the idea of interconnectedness to justify their dominance and suppress dissent. The principle, in this context, may be interpreted as encouraging conformity rather than challenging unjust societal norms.

Evaluation of Strengths and Weaknesses

While the Circularity Principle faces these criticisms, it also possesses several strengths. Firstly, it promotes a sense of community and collective responsibility, fostering a supportive and interconnected society. This can lead to increased cooperation and solidarity among individuals. Secondly, the principle encourages individuals to consider the broader consequences of their actions, thus fostering a greater sense of accountability and ethical awareness. Thirdly, the emphasis on interconnectedness aligns with ecological perspectives, advocating for sustainable practices and environmental stewardship.

However, the weaknesses of the Circularity Principle cannot be overlooked. Its lack of specificity may hinder its practical application, as it may not provide clear guidance for individuals facing moral dilemmas. Additionally, the potential for misuse and perpetuation of social injustices raises concerns about the principle's inherent limitations.

While the Circularity Principle in Igbo-African philosophy has significant merits, it is important to engage in a critical evaluation of its potential weaknesses and address the counterarguments. Recognizing the principle's strengths, such as fostering a sense of community and ethical awareness, is essential. However, it is equally crucial to acknowledge the concerns regarding cultural relativism, moral ambiguity, and the potential for oppression. By evaluating these strengths and weaknesses, we can develop a nuanced understanding of the Circularity Principle and its implications for ethical behavior and responsibility in Igbo-African philosophy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Circularity Principle is a fundamental concept in Igbo-African philosophy that emphasizes the importance of living a good moral life. This principle suggests that moral actions have a reciprocal relationship with the good life, as good actions contribute to a good life and a good life, in turn, encourages more good actions. It underscores the interconnectedness of individuals and their actions, emphasizing that moral actions are essential for the overall well-being of the community (Nzewi, 2014; Metuh, 2005).

The Circularity Principle provides an ethical framework for understanding and evaluating the moral actions of individuals in Igbo-African society (Ejizu, 2011). It also has significant implications for broader philosophical discussions about the nature of morality, ethics, and the good life (Ozumba, 2002). By prioritizing moral actions as essential for a good life, the Circularity Principle underscores the importance of community and the interconnectedness of individuals in society (Achebe, 1958).

Invariably, the Circularity Principle serves as a vital reminder that the pursuit of a good life is not an individualistic endeavor but one that requires an individual's commitment to moral actions that contribute to the well-being of the community. Its emphasis on the importance of a good moral life is an essential aspect of Igbo-African philosophy and a valuable lesson for all who seek to live a fulfilling and meaningful life (Ejizu, 2011; Nzewi, 2014).

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