

## FUNDAMENTAL DISCOURSE ON MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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### **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to examine the fundamental elements upon which issues and discourses in Ethics as a core area of philosophy are discussed. The issues as it were have been analyzed as fundamental because they are the principles upon which other issues can be interpreted as right or wrong, good or bad. These fundamental items form what can be regarded as the metaphysics of Ethics. This forms the main structure of metaethics as one of the divisions of Ethics. The paper develops by drawing the evolution of ethics from community or institution to the self or individual. Thus, the subject matter of ethics as discussed in this paper is the human person or individual. It elicits further that when the self is invoked, issues of freedom, autonomy and morality are provoked. With morality, the issue of judgment is implicated and discussed. The paper thus, argues that morality, good or bad are not geographically-bound but universal. It further concludes that a new moral order needs to be etched from the relativism that have webbed moral actions and decisions from an hitherto wrong and mistaken foundation of ethics. This moral order seeks to establish that morality must go beyond the limitations of personal judgment and authority but on universal principles that are open and accessible by the commonality and universality of human reason. This is the basis for a new moral order.*

**Keywords:** Ethics, Freedom, Moral Agency, Autonomy, Moral Order, Truth and Error

### **Introduction**

Ethics as a philosophical discipline is one that permeates virtually all aspects of life. It is a core area in interdisciplinary research both because of its scope and content. It is a prescriptive and normative discipline and this has made the issues within this discipline heavily contentious. Kurt Baier cited in A. O. Echekwube (1999) notes that "the subject matter of ethics is incurably contentious that it is a mistake to hope for a breakthrough in understanding or in method that could lead to an authoritative resolution of the disagreements or doubts" (146). Because the matters are not empirical, they have remained both polemical and contentious. Nevertheless, this dialectics of contending with claims have been the oils on the wheels of its development as a discipline and it has similarly helped to guide man and the way he relates in society. However, morality is not as easy as perceived. There is hardly a society that is

guided by a set of norms without some detracting from its canons. This is because, when issues of morality is involved, then, the problem of choice, what constitutes morality, what we regarded as good and bad, right and wrong is immediately implicated and this makes the discourse more complex. Again, morality are not isolated behaviours, they are behaviours of persons or moral agents that are exercised in society. Thus, both the issue of moral agent, and the societal perceptions have become issues of discourse in this area of metaethics otherwise understood as moral philosophy.

The continuous evolution in human society has also spiralled the challenges that ethics as a discipline has also witnessed. "The evolutionary point of view has had more than one important result for philosophical thought. Not the least important among these has been the conception of the evolution of evolution. Not only can we trace in the history of thought the evolution of the conception of evolution, but we find ourselves with a consciousness which we conceive of as evolved; the contents and the forms of these contents can be looked upon as the products of development" (George Mead, "The philosophy" 311). The evolution of ethics has continually helped to shape the focus of discussion in the discipline. From the Greek times, ethics was associated with family and societal customs, modes of comportment and behaviour in which the individual felt homogeneous with their members and identified with them (Echekwube 147). This was the operational understanding of ethics from ancient times through the middle ages. However with the intellectual, Copernican revolution and the rise of modern science in the 16th and 17th century brought a change in the way things are seen and understood. With the revolution against the Church and tradition, there was a sweeping and pervading ideology which took authority from institution and placed it on the individual. This was the opening of great liberalism. The consequence of this for ethics was an emphasis of individualism and personal freedom. This point was even incensed by Descartes emphasis on *ergo* (I) as the subject and determinant of actions. Thus, since then, new elements and issues have taken fundamental concern in moral philosophy. This is the attention of this work, to give a synoptic reading of these elements as well development by Anthony Echekwuebe in his book, *Contemporary Ethics: History, Theories and Issues* (1999).

### **Moral Agency, Autonomy and Freedom**

The first fundamental principle in the discourse in moral philosophy is the place of the self. The place of the self opens up the realm of justification of moral actions. Thus, with the individual one can lay claim to an action as his and he can be vindicated on the basis of choice for another. With reference to the self,

two issues are interwovenly referred to with reference to moral philosophy and that is autonomy and freedom. Autonomy is central in certain moral frameworks, both as a model of the moral person – the feature of the person by virtue of which she is morally obligated – and as the aspect of persons which ground others' obligations to her or him ("Autonomy" in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) . For Kant, the self-imposition of universal moral law is the ground of both moral obligation generally and the respect others owe to us (and we owe ourselves). In short, practical reason – our ability to use reasons to choose our own actions – presupposes that we understand ourselves as free.

Freedom means lacking barriers to our action that are in any way external to our will, though it also requires that we utilize a law to guide our decisions, a law that can come to us only by an act of our own will (Hill in Christman 8). This self-imposition of the moral law is autonomy. And since this law must have no content provided by sense or desire, or any other contingent aspect of our situation, it must be universal. Hence we have the (first formulation of the) Categorical Imperative, that by virtue of our being autonomous we must act only on those maxims that we can consistently will as a universal law.

A moral agent is a person who has the ability to discern right from wrong and to be held accountable for his or her own actions. Moral agents have a moral responsibility not to cause unjustified harm. Traditionally, moral agency is assigned only to those who can be held responsible for their actions. Children, and adults with certain mental disabilities, may have little or no capacity to be moral agents. Adults with full mental capacity relinquish their moral agency only in extreme situations, like being held hostage. A moral agent is, we believe, necessarily a conceptual agent – i.e., an agent that possesses and employs concepts. (The converse need not be true: a conceptual agent (Parthemore and Witbly, 2)

The capacity to impose upon ourselves the moral law is the ultimate source of all moral value – for to value anything (instrumentally or intrinsically) implies the ability to make value judgments generally, the most fundamental of which is the determination of what is *morally* valuable. Some theorists who are not (self-described) Kantians have made this inference central to their views of autonomy. Paul Benson, for example, has argued that being autonomous implies a measure of self-worth in that we must be in a position to trust our decision-making capacities to put ourselves in a position of responsibility (Benson in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Thus, autonomy and human freedom without responsibility is meaningless. This understanding gives

meaning to human actions and gives it ethical value. This also withdraws man from the pro-machine claim because of human freedom and rationality. Theories and ideologies to the contrast which has undermined the faculty of the human will and freedom has lead to moral depravity because, they do not believe in the ethics of an action, perhaps just the utilitarian value and this has continually put creation, man and the world we live in moral depravity. Even advocates who have undermined the facultative principle of human autonomy and freedom have seen the depravity in the world and this itself has beginning to renew fresh discussions in the area of bioethics, environmental ethics, medical ethics, political ethics and even social ethics. The resultant consequence is that human actions and behaviour are continually subjected to the crucible of ethical evaluation. The long neglect of ethics has raised the twin evils of relativism and consumerism as Pope Benedict XVI puts it, it has formed a "dictatorship (50). The reactions to these have led to new ethical formulations which have also formed the fulcrum of contemporary ethical discussions. These include discourse on truth and error, intellect and liberty, and the role of reason in moral judgment.

### **Truth and Error in moral discourse**

The concept of truth can elicit strikingly different responses. For those in the natural sciences, for example, the concept of truth is vital and indispensable. Belief in truth gives point and purpose to the scientific enterprise. (Hannan, 1). Same way, the concept of truth is important in the moral discourse. In epistemic sense or generally, truth is evaluated by three tests, (1) agreement with fact which is known as the correspondence theory of truth, (2) the test of consistency which is the coherence theory of truth and (3) the test of utility, which is the pragmatic theory of truth (Nolan 244-247). In moral discourse, there are different concepts of truth that are invoked in ethics, from inflationism, deflationary theory of truth, to presentential theory, etc. McDonald enlists these theories clearly (McDonald, "Does Moral Discourse" 1-25). Echekwube describes truth as "a person's satisfaction to know that what has been presented to him or her is indisputable fact of a situation and in all cases and conditions, such can be guaranteed to conform to what he or she has believed it to be" (153). Dorsey defines it descriptively that "A normative sentence x is true if and only if it is part of a normative system and that system is coherent" (Dorsey 495). Truth however is a dynamic phenomenon. The concept of truth finds relevance in ethics with so much with reference to content but with communication to the other. Thus, truth that is not well presented can lead to error or confusion. To receive truth, it means comprehension for it would be incongruous to maintain that truth is believe and not yet practiced.

The concept of error is only discernible in the light of truth. Error and error theories are antithetical to realism if truth is understood to be conformity to reality. The error theory is most generally categorized as a form of moral antirealism. Insofar as the error theory denies what moral realism affirms, this is correct. But the error theory should be worrying not just for moral realists, but rather for anyone who accepts the claim that there are at least some true moral claims. Moral constructivists and subjectivists have as much to fear from the error theory as moral realist (Dorsey 498). Echekwuebe regards error as an "anti-thought because it is not the primary object of the human mind. It is by the sole effort of the searching intellect that error is eradicated. Therefore, the intellect is to be so used to decipher the truth at all times and eradicate error or falsehood as much as possible" (155).

### **Intellect, Reason and Moral Judgment**

The concept of reason first bring to fore the faculty of thinking. The intellect is the cognitive faculty. This has been radically distinguished from the senses. Both the intellect and the senses have two different meanings. The earliest demarcation of this is traceable to Plato's theory of knowledge in his theory of recollection. For Plato, the intellect has to do with knowledge of the world of ideas and form, while the sense organs are circumscribed to the physical worlds which are mere shadows. The cognitive faculty has two fold function which is to form concept and the other is to unite the single concepts and form them into a unified whole. This is exactly what St. Thomas Aquinas tried to describe in how we form knowledge of the world. Aquinas claims that the intellect is both passive and active. As passive, it receives its raw materials from sense experience. However, in sense experience we are not bombarded with a meaningless, random confusion of isolated sense data, because the objects of experience are created entities, they are intelligible and contain forms or universal. However, the active part of the intellect must process sense experience in order to recognize the universals within particular objects (Lawhead, 170-171). The cognitive faculty thus deals with the activity of differentiation and then the activity of combination. The intellect is more circumscribed to the former, while the reason is the concern of the latter.

All forms of differentiation are done by the intellect. They must be established, because otherwise the world would appear to as blurred, obscure chaos which would form for us no unity except in the sense that it would be utterly indeterminate. Reason on the other hand, leads to the unity of all being, which had before been felt or only vaguely sensed. While the intellect is used to

penetrate the most ideal conditions for human survival, the reason is at the principle of choosing. It is the intellect that furnishes the means and methods or raw materials for which choices can be taken. This view is well summarized by Trocouer in Echekwuebe,

It is the intellect that supplies the will with a light and an object recognized as perfect. The first stage in the advance towards freedom is the judgment which refers particular ends to ultimate end and reveals the purpose of personality. The second stage is the acceptance of this judgment by the will which assumes control over it and implements it by bringing it to bear on the realm of existence. This control of the judgment by the will is the fundamental basis of the free act (157).

When discourse on reason is raised with reference to moral decisions, the dialogue of conscience and the will have an interplay. Reason services the will in making choices. And when choices are made, by which we can choose freely, but reason it must be noted is necessary for morality - animals and young children simply act on their desires, and so we don't think they are capable of acting morally. There are however, what can influence our reasoning, which is known as emotions and this can invariably affect moral judgment as well its rightness or wrongness. Kant believed emotional forces to be sources that tainted the process of moral thinking, primarily because they were antagonistic to the reasoning process (Pizarro, 356). Emotions are partial. They are notorious for playing favourites, arising at times from causes that have little to do with morality.

Nevertheless, Kant opines that, reason works in a way that is independent of our desires. This is easy to see when doing maths or science. For example, you have N200, and there's a book and a CD you really want to get. But the CD is N130 and the book is N80. Despite the fact that you want N200 to be enough for both, it isn't and you know this. The same is true, Kant argues, for reasoning about what we ought to do. Morality is independent of what we want. Third, it is rational for everyone to believe that N200 is not enough for both the CD and the book. What it is rational to believe is 'universal' - the same for everyone. This 'universality' is just a feature of reason; reason doesn't vary from one person to the next. So when it comes to what it is rational to do, this is also the same for everyone. It is only rational to do what everyone can do (Lacewing, "Is morality"). Morality is also the same for everyone

This last point leads Kant to a moral test for our choices. When I choose to do something, my choice may depend on other people behaving differently. For instance, if I want to steal something, I can only do this – by definition – if someone else owns it. However, if everyone stole whatever they wanted whenever they wanted it, then the system of ownership would break down. (Imagine everyone walking into shops and simply leaving with what they wanted...) But if no one owned anything, then it would be impossible to steal from them! So I can only steal if other people don't steal. This must go against reason, Kant argues, because acting rationally means acting in a way everyone can act. This test of reason is also the test of morality: you should act only those choices that everyone else could also act on. In *Groundwork to a Metaphysic of Morals*, Kant expresses the test, called the Categorical Imperative, like this: Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Reason helps to set the standard in moral judgment. It helps to evaluate people's actions and give criteria for judging which of the actions is morally good or bad, right or wrong (Echekwube 159). Reason can be argued to help dictate the moral dimensions of an action. Thus, a person can kill two persons, in one instance it is regarded as murder and in another; it is regarded as manslaughter, due to the reason. Thus, reason, here is tied to intentionality. Thus, if the human reason is weak, it would affect moral judgment and if it is strong, it would also influence it. This point raises the whole argument of intentionality and emotions in reason. Pizzarro notes that emotions play a strong role in moral judgment (355- 375) and Kant has long opined that emotional forces are sources that taint moral judgments. In this Pizzarro has advanced that emotions are partial and notorious for playing favourites arising at times from causes that have little to do with morality (356). John Rawls (1973) has famously argued in his *Theory of Justice*, that judgments should be made behind the hypothetical "veil of ignorance" in which factors such as personal relationships do not affect our judgments or conclusions of situations or persons. It is this partiality of emotions that raises the question of their elimination from moral judgment. Further, emotions are not only partial, they are also passive and arbitrary, whereas, moral judgments should be impartial, well-grounded and free. The resultant synopsis is that emotions are detrimental to moral judgments, and are to be avoided in decision making. It is important to distinguish that emotions and reason are two different things. Emotions periodically act on our reason and blurs moral judgment. The safeguard of human reason is the task of ethicist and moral agents. Reason is the distinguishing faculty of our rationality and the differentiating mark of humans

from all other species. Once this is lost, hence we do not regard the person as a moral agent.

It is reason alone that can help solve moral controversy among ethical theorists. It must be said that this is not easily achievable, because of the challenge of objectification and relativism of moral judgments. Nevertheless, reason is not arbitrary. Kurt Baier is probably the most influential figure in moral philosophy after the Second World War. He tried in to in his book, *The Rational and the Moral Order: The Social Roots of Reason and Morality*, "to reconcile relativism and universalism, holding that each society has its own morality, but that each of these moralities can be judged by a universal standard, namely, whether the rules of the society's morality were for the good of everyone alike" (Gert 37) . It suffices to quote Baier elaborately.

... we examine a person's performance in the light of the best judgment given the best available resources (i.e., the best scientific given the best available resources (i.e., the best scientific theories, the wisdom of hindsight and so on) about the sort of case to which his performance was directed (e.g., how he explained, proved, or deliberated about something) and see whether his performance matches, or to what extent it falls short, of that best judgment... of course, we may also wish to evaluate a performance in the light of the special circumstances in which it was performed. Judgments of this kind are made in terms of rationality/irrationality or reasonableness, unreasonableness, and the like. ... Reason is best thought of, not as an individual psychological power analogous to sight or intelligence, but rather as a whole range of capacities and acquired abilities whose use presupposes the availability of general learned or even taught methods for attaining certain specific high-level ends, such as, certainly, understanding, the best belief, and so on... (Baier in Echekwube 161-162).

Thus, reason in ethics is the tool for ethical resolutions. It has within, the tools of truth and intelligibility. It is this use of reason that displaces the influence of emotions or emotivism. This understanding of reason can make of talk of objectivism in moral judgment.

### **Evaluative Conclusion: Towards a new Moral Order**

The discussion above has opened up a new moral order in the moral concerns. The new moral order is one when we cannot talk of our behaviour as simply personal affairs alone. Morality is not adjudged by what a person feels alone or

by what he thinks. Peschke argues for moral autonomy on the basis and objectivity of reason. Reason is common to every person. It is not a cultural or geographical and it is neither tribal. Just the way moral norms of Christian ethics can be arrived at by reason, so to other forms of ethics. Peschke notes that, "(moral norms) must be legitimized before the tribunal of reason in order to have obligatory force. It must also be possible to establish their validity independent of Christian revelation or any other positive revelation for that matter. From this the conclusion has been drawn that every valid form of ethics, Christian ethics included, must be autonomous (92). All moral norms need rational justification and this weakens the dictatorship of relativism.

Relativism has led to what Benedict XVI has described as "negative tolerance". This negative tolerance has led to moral compromise all in the name of not offending other sensibilities, have led to the sacrifice of reason. This negative tolerance has come in different forms, what sometimes has been regarded as political correctness as different from moral correctness. Ethics have continually found itself in a controversy over this tension and pressure and try to deprive it all in the name of ostensible rationality (Benedict XVI 53). It is this clash that has resulted in secularism and all forms of moral tensions that there are today. It is true that man's moral behaviour cannot be controlled today with just direct reference to ecclesiastical authorities; it nevertheless can be controlled with recourse to reason.

If we recourse to Natural Moral Law, we would be charting a new moral order. Peschke helps with an apt understanding of this term, to refer to "those moral insights which man is able to know by means of his reason, independently of the verbal revelation of God. The word "natural" in the term has the meaning of (1) not supernatural, i.e. not communicated in a supernatural way; (2) not positive, i.e., not the result of a command of a legislative authority, as in positive human or divine law; (3) found in and derived from the nature of man (96). Thus, by the light of reason, we can adjudge what is good and bad, right and wrong.

Human freedom is not meant to be an impediment, but a bridge to aid human advancement and foster morality. Thus, moral agents must continually live in a manner that justifies their rationality. The goal of the ethicist should be primarily to get the moral agent to understand the universal principles of morality and utilise them creatively in his own circumstances. If man does not take advantage of his rationality, he may be steeped on a path of self-annihilation. There is a strong correlation between reason and morality and

between morality and conscience. It is within this we can talk of virtues. Conscience Ashley argues is the practical judgement of what is right and wrong; it is the act of moral wisdom through the instrumentality of its auxiliary virtues of good counsel and good judgment, both in common and in exceptional cases (118). Once we ventilate human reason from emotions, we have position the individual to make right judgment.

Further, our understanding of the issues raised in this work makes us to understand that government and public legislation that is not consistent with right reasoning lacks merit to be a rule to run moral behavior. In many parts of the world today, there are legislations by states on some moral issues like abortion, capital punishment, etc. This new moral order that is advocated seems to say, there can be institutional conspiracy against moral rightness or wrongness. It also seeks to understand that morality is not a subject of popularity, or majority vote but on principles of universality of moral reasoning. The essence of this work is to hijack ethical decisions from the dictatorship of arbitrariness and relativism. There is a moral safeguard for our actions which is innate in the human mind and reasons. This also is accessible for verification. Thus, moral principles can be determined and adjudged regardless of the leaning of the moral agency. Thus, our understanding should lead to a saner moral order.

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