

**SHOULD THERE BE A PLACE FOR ETHICS IN POLITICS? A  
REFLECTION ON THE NIGERIAN SITUATION**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the relationship between ethics and politics on the one hand, and its implication(s) within the Nigerian context on the other hand. The question about the connection between ethics and politics has a long history in philosophy, traceable to the ancient philosophers. Divisions abound among philosophers and scholars, about whether politics should be considered as a different world from everyday life, where morality applies, or whether ethical standards apply in politics as in everyday life. This division is clearly characterized by the moralists and the realists, represented intellectually by Aristotle and Machiavelli, respectively. The age long debate ranges on and remains relevant in our world today, because politics is about the state and the state has become more complex. Thus, the focus of this paper becomes significant, because human beings need more answers to such unresolved issues and this study provides an adequate academic approach and further public discussion. The research's overarching questions are: Is ethics relevant in politics? Are pragmatic considerations the ultimate goal in politics? What are the threats to morality when doing politics? What threats does morality pose to politics? Is individual morality enough to bring about the required leadership cum developmental changes in Nigeria? The last question is relevant because it appears that the focus on moral leadership by Nigerians is yet to yield the desired outcome. The argument of this paper is centered on a middle point between the moralists and the realists. It is our argument too that ethical virtue of individual politicians is not*

*enough to navigate the stormy waters of politics, instead, we propose that more emphasis should be on institutional ethics. The methodology of this research is philosophical analysis which would chiefly consist of analysis, exposition, argumentation and synthesis.*

**Keywords:** Ethics; Morality; Politics; State; Nigeria.

### **Introduction**

Politics is a fundamental human activity; fundamental in managing resources, building societies, managing conflicting interests and values. As a vital aspect of the human society, politics is a complex endeavor because it calls for responsibility, accountability and commitment from leaders, citizens and other institutions in the society. However, there is a general skepticism about the genuineness of politicians. For many, politics is seen as a “dirty game” and politicians are often seen as selfish, skewed and corrupt people, pursuing their selfish interests rather than the utilitarian goal. This perception of politics and politicians has made it almost a taboo to talk of ethics in politics.

This study is an exploration into the possible relationship between ethics and politics. The question about the connection between ethics and politics is highly contentious and has a long history in philosophy traceable to the ancient philosophers. Divisions abound among philosophers, scholars, politicians and moralists about whether politics should be considered as a different world from everyday life, where morality applies, or whether ethical standards apply in politics as in everyday life. The different perspectives abound, because of the significance of politics and ethics in the society. This division is clearly represented by the moralists and the realists, symbolized intellectually by Aristotle and Machiavelli, respectively. The age long debate ranges on and remains relevant in our world today, because politics is about the state and the state has become more complex. The complexity of the modern state, the role of globalization and the deteriorating nature of our value systems in no small way have made the subject matter a re-occurring issue in intellectual discourse. Thus, the focus of this paper becomes significant because human beings need more answers to such unresolved issues and this study provides an adequate academic approach and further public discussion. The research’s overarching questions are: Is ethics relevant in politics? Are pragmatic considerations the ultimate goal in politics? What are the threats to morality when doing politics? What threats does morality pose to politics? Is individual morality enough to bring about the required leadership cum developmental changes in Nigeria? The primary objective of this study is to show the possible nexus between ethics and politics, and to argue for a middle point between the moralists and the realists, especially as it relates to Nigerian politics. In the next session, we would be conceptualizing the idea of ethics.

### **A Brief Exposition on Ethics and Morality**

What is Ethics? What is Morality? Simply put, Ethics can be defined “as a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong conducts.”<sup>i</sup> It is the study of morality. That is, the study of what is good, bad, right, or wrong. In the words of Ujomu, “morality has to do with a set of rules for guiding human behavior and a set of reasons or grounds of moral obligations.”<sup>ii</sup> Maurizio observed as follows that morality is a set of deeply internalized rules and convictions or strong feelings that an individual believes to be rationally justified. While taste and aesthetic preferences need no rational justification and the presence of a feeling is self-justifying, moral attitudes are supposed to be supported by universally accepted reasons. Such are either empirical facts relevant to the issue or ethical principles accepted by everyone or at least by society as a whole.<sup>iii</sup> Ethics “...is the study of the concept that refers to practical reasoning for good, proper, duties and obligations, values and virtues, freedom and liberties, rationality and free choice in life.”<sup>iv</sup> Thus, ethics, morality are needed as mechanisms of social control, as tools to harmonize our different interests, choices and most importantly, to cement the significance of the human person as an end in itself. Consequently, there is the ‘end’ and ‘means’ debate: between an ‘end’ and ‘means’ which one is supreme when examining moral issues. This debate extends to the question of the proper object of moral judgment. On the one hand, we have the consequentialist or teleologist who emphasizes the results of an action. In other words, the consequence of an action determines the morality or otherwise of an action. On the other hand, we have the advocates of motive as the determining factor in measuring the rightness or wrongness of an action. Basically, the consequentialist (teleological) theories are concerned with the consequences of an action while the nonconsequentialist (deontological) theories are based on some other factors other than consequences of a person’s actions. For the proponents of nonconsequentialist theories, the morality of an action must be solely determined by the rightness or otherwise of that action regardless of its consequences.

One popular consequentialist theory is utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is an ethical theory founded on the greatest happiness of the greatest number of persons. It states that an action is morally right if it brings about the greatest happiness to the greatest number of persons. Put simply, the “basic premise of utilitarianism was that human beings as a rule sought happiness, that pleasure alone was good, and that the only right action was that which produced the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”<sup>v</sup> This basically means that “the conduct which, under any given circumstances, is objectively right is that which

will produce the greatest amount of happiness on the whole; that is, taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct."<sup>vi</sup>

Another theory that is closely related to the above stated is ethical hedonism. This is another consequentialist or teleological theory. Hedonism states that an action is morally right if it gives pleasure in the end. Hence, the end result of an action is most important in determining the rightness or wrongness of an action. According to the hedonists, "only pleasure is intrinsically good and only pain is intrinsically bad; all other good things are good only because they increase pleasure (or decrease pain)."<sup>vii</sup>

Moving away from the consequentialists theories, we have the intuitionists who emphasize motive as the object of moral judgment. To them motive is superior to consequences. Under the nonconsequentialist theories is what is often called Duty Ethics which was formulated by the German Philosopher, Immanuel Kant. This theory states that we must perform our duty for duty's sake and not because of its utility or the pleasure it generates. Beyond acting based on one's sense of duty, such an action must be capable of being made a universal law or categorical imperative. The categorical imperative basically states thus: "act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."<sup>viii</sup> This essentially means that anytime an individual wants to make a moral decision he must first ask if the rule authorizing his action can be made a universal rule for all mankind. Thus, universalism becomes the essence of Kant's categorical imperative.

Further, the Divine Command Theory is another Deontological Theory of Ethics. This theory states that "an action is wrong if and only if it is forbidden by God and an action is right if and only if it is either permitted or required by God. Therefore, "whatever God permits is morally acceptable, and whatever God requires is morally obligatory."<sup>ix</sup> Thus, God is the determinant of morality.

### **The Meaning of Politics**

The meaning and nature of politics have changed over time since it was first used in the ancient Greek period where it was related to ensuring good life within a political structure to its present meaning of politics as an exercise of power. The word 'politics' is derived etymologically from the Greek word 'polis' which means city-state. Ancient Greek scholars and philosophers used the word 'politics' to refer to the activities of citizens as members and operators of the state. Hence, politics has to do with the state.

Politics can be defined and theorized in at least two senses. First, in a narrow sense, politics has to do with government and its activities. Secondly, in a broad view, politics has to do with power. According to Chris Ejizu, "politics simply

refers to the act of governance, a dynamic process that entails the mobilization of human and other resources, managing, directing and enforcing the affairs of public policy and decisions toward the regulation of social order.”<sup>x</sup> Fundamentally, politics is about governance and as such, it involves the articulation and pursuit of certain goals. Based on the aforementioned, scholars have distinguished between two levels of operations of politics, namely; the external and the internal. The “external level concerns the structuring or the administrative organization, while the internal refers to the undergirding ideology which informs policy. At the latter level, the question of the responsibility of power is posed: power is to be used for whom? To achieve what goals?”<sup>xi</sup>

As it can be seen above, politics is related to the state, management and allocation of human and material resources, as well as conflict resolutions. According to David Easton, politics is concerned with “the authoritative allocation of values”<sup>xii</sup> for a society. Three terms clearly stand out in the above definition – ‘values’, ‘allocation’, and ‘authoritative.’ Clarifying the usage of the three terms, Gauba asserts that “by ‘values’ he means the ‘things considered valuable, whether they be spiritual or material.’ By ‘allocation’ he means distribution of these things to various individuals or groups; this is accomplished through policy which consists of a ‘web of decisions.’ Decisions denotes a ‘selection among alternatives’; policy implies arriving at a decision as well as its implementation: ‘a policy is authoritative when the people to whom it is intended to apply or who are affected by it consider that they must or ought to obey it.’<sup>xiii</sup> The introduction of authoritativeness simply shows that politics is a complex phenomenon that involves conflict resolution, decision making about public goals, interests, allocation of values and governance in general. As a complex phenomenon, there are different perspectives to it, ranging from the liberal view, the Marxist view to the communitarian view. Time and scope of this research would not permit us to delve into these different views about politics.

### **Political Realism And Moralism**

The nexus between ethics and politics is complex and knotty. There are two dominant views about politics, and they are, the moralists view and the realists view. The moralists view dates back to the ancient Greek period and is based on ethical and normative foundations. This paradigm is usually associated with the works of Plato and Aristotle, who were among the first philosophers to raise philosophical and normative enquiry of ‘what ought to be’ or ‘should be’ as against ‘what is’. The moralists view also known as the traditional approach was dominated by normativity. For this group, there can be no delink between ethics and politics. They associate ethics with politics. In fact, in Aristotle’s

view, politics is a social ethic since it deals with human beings in group activity. Dwelling on this, Ross opines that "Aristotle's ethics, no doubt, are social, and his politics are ethical; he does not forget in the *Ethics* (title of his book) that the individual is essentially a member of a society, nor in the *Politics* (book title) that the good life of the state exists only in the lives of its citizens."<sup>xiv</sup> Plato and Aristotle in their study of society and politics were mainly concerned about the good life and how to attain it. For them, the good life is only possible if there is a synergy between politics and morality. That is, political power must have a strong and firm moral foundation. Hence, basically, the moralists are of the view that there should be no politics without ethics. That is, ethical values and norms are imperative in politics if the society must make progress.

On the other hand, the realists hold a different view about politics. Unlike the moralists who are interested in normative questions, the realists are after facts and empirical descriptions. Hence, they raise 'is' questions. The focus of this group is human behavior and not values, norms or ethical issues. For the realists, politics is a practical endeavor that is incompatible with ethics and its principles. Realism is often associated with the works of Niccolò Machiavelli. Realism argues that politics and policy makers have their own system of values (promoting, protection and further enhancement of natural interests) that cannot be equated with the common moral values.<sup>xv</sup> Hence, morality and ethics are independent of each other. In fact, for Machiavelli, private morality should not encroach into public affairs. This is because the principles that govern the morality and public affairs are contradictories. The realists' perspective about politics is based on their pessimistic understanding of human nature. The guiding philosophy of the realists' view about politics is the aphorism "the end justifies the means." Political realism is not interested in ethical correctness.

From our exposition so far, it is clear that the pendulum swings between two extremes: ethics as a frame of reference for politics and politics devoid of ethics. This dichotomy creates a lacuna that would be addressed in the next session.

### **Should There Be a Place For Ethics In Politics?**

Right from the nineteenth century onwards, the study and discourses about politics have shifted from traditional normative to contemporary realism based on empiricism devoid of ethical norms and values. In spite of this obvious shift, politics as an activity has continued to be subjected to ethical questions. The scrutiny of politics in this contemporary period can be attributed in part to the complex nature it has assumed and to the numerous challenges facing the human society. Against this background, we ask, should there be place for ethics-politics? What is the implication of ethics-politics in the Nigerian society?

To begin, it is important to state from the onset that the two parallel positions of reducing politics to ethics, and delinking ethics from politics are extreme stands. Our position in this work does not belong to any of the positions. As earlier pointed out in a previous section of this work, ethics is the science of morality. That is the study of what is good, bad, right, or wrong. Ethics and morality has to do with “a set of rules for guiding human behavior and a set of reasons or grounds of moral obligations.”<sup>xvi</sup> Politics on the other hand has to do with authoritative allocation of resources and management of conflicts. So, fundamentally, both ethics and politics have the same “host”, the human being /the society. As an activity, politics is not played in space neither is it played by immaterial objects, but within a human society and by human beings. Morality too, as a set of rules for guiding behaviours is directed to human beings and human society.

On the question whether there should be ethics in politics, our answer is, yes. Politics cannot be completely detached from ethics. In fact, a proper understanding of the nature of politics will show that ethical considerations are always part of political actions and decisions, no matter how minimal. The point is, politics as a discipline and activity is not limited to distribution of political power, allocation of resources and management of conflicts within society, it also takes into consideration the justification(s) for such distributions and allocations. According to Grcic, “Political power unlike other forms of power is supreme, because it enjoys legitimacy of citizens at the same time it embodies values, norms and beliefs, ethics of the society at a given time.”<sup>xvii</sup> So, in essence, ethics is needed to moderate and evaluate political power, decisions and actions.

Furthermore, the ultimate purpose of politics, being the progress of human society, points us to the imperative nature of ethics. This is correct because even though politics has to do with the quest for power, it all gears towards the common good and the progress of the society. To achieve this aim, decisions must be made by politicians and public office holders and this is where ethics comes to play. Dwelling on the normative aspect of politics, “Otto van Bismarck asserts that “Politics are not a science based on logic; they are the capacity of always choosing at each instant, in constantly changing situations, the least harmful, the most useful.”<sup>xviii</sup> So, morality is needed as a guide in politics especially in decision making, policy formulations and implementation. Even in the pragmatism of politics, ethical norms must be considered in the interest of the common good. Similarly, Bobbio and Bertelsen argue in support of morality in politics. In their words, “political ethics are the ethics of those who conduct political activity, but political activity, in the notion of those who breach the subject on the grounds of professional ethics, is not power as such,

but the power to reach an end that is the common good, collective or general interest. It is not government, but good government....good government seeks common good, bad government seeks personal good.”<sup>xix</sup>The point is, politics without ethics most often ends in injustice, violence and selfish decisions. The consequence of unethical politics is catastrophic. Even in politics, as in ethics, there are paths to minimal/least injustice, harm and resistance. Hence, ethics is needed to ameliorate the harshness and arrogance of politics. Our point here does not discard the place of constitutional rules and regulations in a society. Even in drafting rules that should guide a state, ethical norms and values are considered. This clearly shows that ethics, rules and politics are not independent rather, they complement each other. The empirical understanding of politics as an activity detached from the realm of ethics is flawed. This is because, “the subject matter or the contents of politics like power, authority, legitimacy, social integration etc, all are highly subjective in nature and grounded in ethical principles.”<sup>xx</sup>

In addition to the foregoing, the detachment of politics from ethics is one of the reasons for the extreme destructions and conflicts in the world today. In international politics between countries and national politics within a defined territory, the stories are the same. Ethics must be used as an instrument to uphold the moral fabric of the society and a check on power. In that case, “seeking power for power to transform a means, which as much be judged by the face of the end, into an end in itself. Even for those who see an instrumental action in the political action, it is not an instrument for simply any end it pleases the politician to attain. But once the distinction is established between a good end and a bad end,...it becomes unavoidable to distinguish between good and bad political action, otherwise aid, to subject it to moral judgment.”<sup>xxi</sup>

The nature of politics and the place of ethics must be well understood in order to avoid extreme expectations. Nigeria is a good example of a state where all the dynamics of politics and ethics seem to be playing out. To understand the Nigerian situation, there is need to grasp the historical background of the situation. The Nigerian situation typifies happenings in many African states. As a country, Nigeria was colonized by the Europeans for decades. But while the Europeans were here, Nigerian nationalist leaders fought for the independence of the country from colonial rule. This quest for independence raised the hope and expectations of many Nigerians for a better country. In 1960, Nigeria gained her independence and it was expected that with the going of the Europeans, the country would be piloted to the promise land by indigenous nationalist leaders. This was not the case as it turned out to be the exact opposite. It turned out to be that the nationalist leaders who fought for the independence of their country from foreign dominion were not utterly



altruistic in their pursuit instead, they wanted to drive the foreigners away so they can become the new lords. Diversion of public resources and funds to private pockets became the order of the day. Pursuit of the common good took the back stage. These tendencies have continued to be experienced and expressed till date. The point to note is that majority of Nigerians thought that the “good” individual character and attributes of their leaders would metamorphose into good governance when they are elected. Just recently, in 2015, Muhammadu Buhari was elected as the president of Nigeria largely because of the perception that he is a good, honest and disciplined man; a man that dislikes corruption and its likes. This type of thinking was well captured when Thera argued that “when the ruler of a country is just and good, the ministers become just and good... the people become just and good.”<sup>xxii</sup> This type of reasoning is misleading because it gives the impression that once a leader or politician is morally upright, then, he will necessarily perform in office. The Nigerian political situation, again, shows that the aforementioned theory is not correct. In fact, the administration of Buhari is riddled with corruption issues, nepotism and under performance. At this point, it is important to state that there is a distinction between morality of a person and morality of action. Morality of a person has to do with his personal morality and the way he lives his life. Personal morality can be deceptive and misleading. Morality of action has to do with ethical cum normative consideration and evaluation of actions. For the majority of Nigerians who voted for Buhari in 2015, they thought and believed that his personal morality was enough guarantee that he would perform and eliminate corruption when he gets elected. But the anti-corruption crusade failed because a fight against corruption that limits itself to individual honesty and moral virtue, is doomed to fail. Without such institutional mechanisms as an independent judiciary, set fines and punishments, whistleblower protection, and fair competition among businesses, it may prove mere lip service, concealing a disastrous reality and opening the door to even worse and more systematic corruption than before. In essence, our point is that in politics, attention must shift from morality of a person to morality of action. Are we pushing for a divorce of ethics from politics? No. The thesis of this research favours institutional ethics or ethics of institutions as against individual ethics. For this work, we are more interested in political institutions like constitution, political parties, electoral bodies and different levels of government and their agencies. The institutionalization of ethics will help to curtail the “end justifies the means” kind of politics. It will also indirectly shape and moderate politicians. The politics of the “end justifies the means” implies that the ultimate aim of politics is power and any means can be used to attain it. Well, it is true that politics is about power, but power is not all that is in

politics. Even at that, power is not gotten for its own sake; it is gotten as an instrumental towards a higher purpose. That purpose is the common good and progress of the society. Once this is established and politicians become conscious of it, then morality becomes a significant aspect of their politics. This is so because moral issues arise when our actions affect others. Politics and its associate activities affect human beings and as such cannot be divorced from ethics. To distance ethics from politics would mean the draining out of the very essence of politics and the consequence would be destructive.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper argued that politics and ethics are not incompatible with one another. Ethics is needed in politics to moderate and evaluate political actions, policies and decisions. The relationship between ethics and politics is communicative, interactive and complementary. Ethics supplies the norms and values that should be used in taking political decisions and politicians in turn make use of those norms, while doing the business of politics. Stretched further, political decisions and actions introduce new areas for ethical analysis. In essence, for politics to meet its ideal purpose, ethics is needed. The type of ethics that this paper prioritizes is ethics of institutions because it will guarantee the establishment of a system that works for the common good and ensure that a just politics is enthroned in the society.

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