

Ethics on Trial: Threats and Foundations

Vincent Edache IDOKO & Daniel Chimdinma OPONE

Abstract

The moral compass that guides us into actions or inactions depending on what is judged as right or wrong in its different shades is what is termed ethics. Indeed, without any standard of living, there will be no living at all. However, despite the incontrovertible realization and inevitable need for such a discipline and sensibility among the comity of rational beings, certain idiosyncrasies that abound such as those fostered by positivism, relativism, religious nihilism, evolutionary theory and determinism suggest that ethics is impossible and these perspectives constitute threats capable of weakening the fabrics and viability of the moral environment. With such ideas sipping into and contaminating the moral environment, words like freedom, rights, equality or justice are considered as sham, hypocritical mere opinions and utopic ideals that no one should be obligated to follow with the consequent paralyzing effect on the society. This paper employs the expository and analytic methodologies in order to understand firstly, those indicting worldviews that are unsympathetic to ethics, and to unearth the latent inconsistencies in such reasoning. Findings reveal that while the arguments of anti-ethical theorists who are cynical about moral values contain some elements of conviction, they are not sufficient to cast aspersion on the obligation to moral values in the society. In the final analysis, the paper advocates the justification, relevance and indispensability of ethics without which there will be nothing but chaos and disorder in the society.

Keywords: ethics, reason, threats, foundation, relativism, objectivity

Introduction

Right from the foundations of human existence, the question of ethics as a fundamental constituent of personal progress, human fulfillment and relational factor has always been implied either implicitly or explicitly. We rarely have debates about the reality of the physical environment or the scientific environment or the climatic environment because of the empirical import of these realities subject to sensible verifications. However, more often than not, many contest the realities of human dimensions that are not readily discernible by the senses even when it is glaring that this is the case because the subject-matters of these dimensions are not ontologically readily accessible to the senses. The subject-matter of ethics happens to be among those human realities that have been heavily contested. The fracas about ethics comes in different shades viz. the denial of its practicability in the face of differing values, that it is unnecessary or undesirable, the denial of its relevance, perceiving it

as a discipline which has elements that are relevant in one epoch and outdated in another, and the list goes on.

Albeit, introspection into the fabric of our existence and human relations reveals the existence of apodictic ethical realities like “preferences”, “choice values”, “pros and cons” and the likes. We prefer some things over other things or some routes of reasoning or actions over another, we tell others what to do and what not to do with sanctions for breaking rules, we present certain actions as desirable, better, or right as against others that are considered wrong or undesirable depending on the circumstances. To cap it all, we often do this with a sense of selling these preferences through rational dialogue so that others too can buy the ideas from us and take a cue from us. Little wonder then in our contemporary and academic clime, we find nomenclatures like business ethics, ethics of law, bioethics, environmental ethics, military ethics, religious ethics, ethics of research, etc. sipping through and finding their way in our organizations, seminars, institutions and round-table discussions.

It is obvious that the subject-matter of ethics is not the exclusive reserve of those who have been professionally trained as ethicists; it is the concern of everyone literate or otherwise. Observed from an interdisciplinary point of view, the reality behind the curtain of the novelist, the poet, the playwright, the musician, and the likes often have ethical underpinnings. Despite the fact that the moral environment is a reality that stares us glaringly in the face, what then would make some persons to challenge the desirability of morality. Simon Blackburn (2003:6) attempted to proffer a hypothesis to this conundrum when he averred that:

We do not like being told what to do. We want to enjoy our lives, and we want to enjoy them with a good conscience. People who disturb that equilibrium are uncomfortable, so moralists are often uninvited guests at the feast, and we have a multitude of defenses against them.

Thus, this paper attempts to evaluate the claims that ethics is impracticable, unnecessary or undesirable. Ultimately, the paper establishes that these claims are not sufficient to avow that ethics is impracticable, unnecessary or undesirable. It thus defends the indispensability of ethics in the human society by grounding the foundation of ethics in rationality which is found in human nature. To achieve this aim, the paper begins with a brief conceptual clarification of ethics. It then evaluates those threats promoted by positivism, relativism, religious nihilism, evolutionary theory and determinism that suggest the impossibility of ethics, with the goal to revealing that while these arguments contain some elements of conviction, they are too superficial to dis-

lodge ethics. It then evinces the inevitability of ethics as fundamental to the sustenance of human society and concludes that ethics and morality are mutually inclusive.

The Nature of Ethics

Etymologically, the term “ethics” comes from Greek word “ethos”, which means the “customs, habits and mores of people.” Hence, ethics deals with the study and justification of moral beliefs. It is a branch of philosophy which examines what is right and what is wrong (Tzafestas, 2016). Ethics has been defined in many ways by different philosophers throughout the ages. For Aristotle, ethical behaviours were practices that lead to the end goal of “eudomonia” which entails a high level of happiness or well-being. Kant conceives of ethical behaviour as acting in accordance with one’s duty and in harmony with certain categorical imperatives universally binding on all men (Uduig-women, 2006). According to Charles A. Ellwood, ethics is the science which deals with the rightness or wrongness of human conduct, the nature of morality and of moral obligation, the validity of moral ideals and the norms by which conduct is to be judged (2003).

Ethics as a discipline is concerned with what is morally good and bad, right and wrong. The term is also applied to any system or theory of moral values or principles. Its subject consists of the fundamental issues of practical decision-making, and its major concerns include the nature of ultimate value and the standards by which human actions can be judged right or wrong (James, 2003).

Threats to Ethics

The discourse here grapples with those claims that constitute a threat to the thriving of the moral environment.

The Sledgehammer of the Logical Positivists

In the early 19th century, a group of philosophers whose main goal was to develop an adequate theory of language with the aim of rebuilding philosophy on a sound logical and scientific foundation were noted to have proposed the “verifiability principle” which states that “a factual statement is meaningful if it can be verified in experience” (Lawhead, 2002:507). Unfortunately, ethics happens to be among the class of disciplines that cannot make factually verifiable statements. Thus, while Moritz Schlick would aver that ethical statements are merely factual statements about how the word “good” is used, Rudolf Carnap and A. J. Ayer were more constructive in their criticism through their ethical theory known as “emotivism”. In their opinion, since ethical statements do not contain factual claims that have cognitive meaning capa-

ble of being verified, they only at best represent verbal ways of expressing certain attitudes of approval or disapproval. On this, William Lawhead avers:

Thus when someone says, "You acted wrongly in stealing the money," this does not make a factual claim about stealing because no sense data corresponds to the quality of "moral wrongness". Instead, when a person morally condemns an act of stealing, what they are actually doing is (1) stating a fact plus (2) expressing an emotion or attitude towards it... in this case, the statement "it is your moral duty to tell the truth" means nothing more than "I recommend you tell the truth" (Lawhead, 2002:508-509).

Regrettably, the logical positivists came under the same weight of the sledge hammer they used to derogate ethics and metaphysics because the verification principle in itself cannot be verified in experience (Stumpf and Fieser, 2003). The implication then is that if the logical positivists hold tenaciously to the position that the verification principle is absolutely true, then it becomes a contradiction in terms since the principle itself cannot be verified by experience. On the other hand, to give up the principle altogether in the face of this conundrum would be tantamount to giving up their earlier claims about the meaninglessness of ethical or metaphysical statements. Thus, the only way they can hold on to their principle and avoid self-contradiction would be that they have to be milder in their position in order to allow for certain meaningful statements (such as ethical statements), that by their very nature cannot be factually verified by experience.

Death of God

It is common place to find people who think that ethics and religion are mutually inclusive. The implication is for people to start toasting to the death of ethics as soon as the concept of God gradually fizzles out in the contemporary empirical world. Blackburn hints of such a mindset from Dostoevsky: "If God is dead, everything is permitted" (Blackburn, 2003:10). As a rider to that, he further poses the question: "without a lawgiver, how can there be a law?" The question then that begs for an answer is whether religion is the offspring of morality or vice versa. This echoes the Euthyphro dilemma in which Socrates asked Euthyphro on the question of piety whether "it is loved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is loved by the gods" (Plato, 2002:12). The phrase, "God is dead" is often popularly associated with Friedrich Nietzsche and this observation was made by him when he observed the secularization of the society as against the erstwhile "slave morality" of the Christians (Magnus and Kathleen, 1996). When observations about the morality of certain realities spring forth, answers often have the coating of an ap-

peal to the divine authority of God. However, in so doing they step back from religion in order to assess the moral worth of these realities.

Besides, religious motivations may even corrupt ethics because if our religiously based actions are only inspired by the reward-punishment drill, then we do not do things because we believe they are good to be done in themselves but because of self-interest. As Socrates would later have cause to note, "I mean to say that the holy has been acknowledged by us to be loved of God because it is holy, not to be holy because it is loved" (Plato, 2002:13). Still on the matter, Luke opines that, "perhaps religion's relationship to morality is not as a source even though some have argued that religion is a projection of our own moral values, dressed up in epic myths and the garb of transcendental authority" (2009).

So, it seems the death of God needs not mean the death of morality. If actually "God is dead", as some persons claim, then it means just what it says, "God is dead" and not morality as well.

Relativism

Perhaps one of the worst nightmares of the moral philosophers is the claim of relativists who feel that ethics should not bother itself dishing out specific codes of conduct since it has been observed that norms are culture-bound, and every culture has varied ways of approaching issues. When stepped down to the individual level, it becomes subjectivism as each and every individual perceives the world differently. So, the plight of relativism is, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." But what if the Romans do some very foul things? (Luke, 2009). A classic narrative of this problem is evinced in Book III of Herodotus's *Histories*:

If one were to order all mankind to choose the best set of rules in the world, each group would, after due consideration, choose its own customs; each group regards its own as being by far the best. So, it is unlikely that anyone except a madman would laugh at such things. There is plenty of other evidence to support the idea that this opinion of one's own customs is universal, but here is one instance. During Darius's reign, he invited some Greeks who were present to a conference, and asked them how much money it would take for them to be prepared to eat the corpses of their fathers; they replied that they would not do that for any amount of money. Next, Darius summoned some members of the Indian tribe known as Callataie, who eat their parents, and asked them in the presence of the Greeks, with an interpreter present so that they could understand what was being said, how much money it would take for them to be willing to cremate their fathers' corpses; they cried out in horror and told him not to say such appalling things. So these practices have become enshrined as customs just as they are,

and I think Pindar was right to have said in his poem that custom is king of all (1998).

Notwithstanding, a closer look upon the subject-matter will reveal that these laws are in a sense transcultural. Granted that dress codes differ from place to place but in every place there is at least a “dress code”. The ways of burying the dead as we cross from one culture to another vary but in every culture, there is a sense of “funeral rites” about burying the dead and so on. Allan Leslie attempts a response to the relativists when he argued that “for a reason for an action to be moral, that reason must appeal to interests beyond that of the agent and the agent’s preferred social group. It is in this sense of ‘impartiality’, I argued that morality is objective” (Leslie, 2016:2).

Also, if we buy into the thought of relativism, then Mr. A would be justified in killing Mr. B, who stole his car if that is Mr. A’s idea of seeking out justice for the crime committed. Thus, when one considers the unimaginable chaos that would bedevil mankind if there was no objective sense of morality and each person was allowed to live according to his/her whims, then one would realize the undesirability of the relativist worldview. This is because in the bid for self-preservation, only the strongest, fittest and most brutal would survive.

Evolutionary Theory

The evolutionary theory is often proposed in a bid to undermine ethics. Critics in this regard opine that a mix of evolutionary theory, biology and neuroscience provide sensible ground to believe that we have been “programmed” to act in certain ways and so what we term as ethical actions need unmasking to reveal what they truly are (Blackburn, 2003).

In the *Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin made survival of the fittest the natural course for human social relations and behaviour (Himmelfarb, 2014). Similarly, Edward O. Wilson claims that biology is the foundation of social behaviour (2000). In his book, *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins noted that genes are responsible for the formation of our bodies and minds. In so doing, he claims to reveal the subtlety of the selfish gene which controls survival, self-preservation, competition, exploitation, deceit, etc. Dawkins thus argued that altruism is a façade. He gave an example of bees committing suicide to protect the hive and birds endangering their lives to caution the flock against an advancing hawk all by instinct (2006).

Similarly, he suggests that altruism, care and love in the case of a mother towards its child or children for instance is nothing more than an adaptation in alliance with the self-preservation instinct and not really a state of af-

fairs to be applauded as virtuous because evolution has configured in her genes, a natural predilection to be affective towards her offspring. Hence, she is not doing any more than just following the “programme” within her.

If this proposition is true, what then can be said about women who abandon their children, kill their babies in cruel ways that are better not imagined, trade their children in sex market... are they also following a programme or are they following a choice? Apparently, the varied ways people would respond to the same situation of “programmed” behaviour as proposed by these critics reveal that there is more to “gene programming” as the answer- there is choice owing from our rational capacity to weigh alternatives before, during and after an action.

Determinism and Futility

The claim here is that ethics is futile owing to the fact that certain traits and characteristics are ingrained in our genes. Determinism has its roots in Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason which states that “everything can in principle, be explained... everything that is, has sufficient reason for being and being as it is, and not otherwise” (in Hoefer, 2016). Laplace (1951) corroborates this position when he opined that to the deterministic intellect, nothing would be uncertain and the future as well as the past would be present to its eyes. Karl Popper simplifies the notion of determinism with a single term- “predictability” of events (1982). The implication of this position then is that we cannot help but act in certain ways following some causal factors and in this case, the behavioral traits encoded in our genes. For example, this suggests that it is futile to prohibit the growing of hair, or the growing of finger nails or hunger/thirst or the desire for sex because we have been programmed in our gene to manifest these traits and hence, the hopelessness of the moral enterprise in a bid to alter fixed nature. Does this hypothesis really nullify the ethical relevance? Blackburn Simon's response is that:

The answer is no, because whatever our genetic make-up programs us to do, it leaves room for what we can call ‘input-responsiveness’. It leaves room for us to vary our behavior in response to what we hear or feel or touch or see (otherwise there would be little point in having these senses in the first place). It leaves room for us to vary our desires in accordance with what we learn (discovering that the glass contains sulphuric acid, I lose the desire to drink it that I had when I thought it contained gin). It leaves room for us to be influenced by information gathered from others. Finally, it leaves room for us to be affected by the attitudes of others. In other words, it makes us responsive to the moral climate (2003:39-40).

Similarly, if the claim of the determinists were true, it will undermine the notion of free-will and moral responsibility as observed by Bertrand Russell that, "It has been urged by advocates of free-will that its denial involves the denial of merit and demerit, and that, with the denial of these, ethics collapses" (1966:24). Consequently, there will be no need for the society to sanction stealing, killing, rape, etc. because anyone can also very well argue these socially "undesirable" traits were programmed in his/her genes. This will certainly breed chaos.

The Indispensability of Ethics

The pertinent question now is whether we can dispense with ethics on the basis of the aforementioned threats. Certainly not! This is because the formation of moral consciousness is a dictate of reason and morality was among the fundamental pillars at the onset of the human society. To deny the relevance of ethics is to deny a fundamental manifestation of our rationality necessary for the sustenance of the human society. This implies that without ethics, human society would be impossible.

How then does reason serve as the foundation for ethics? In the light of philosophy, reason entails the faculty or process of drawing logical inferences. The term "reason" is also used in several other, narrower senses. Reason is in opposition to sensation, perception, feeling, desire, as the faculty by which fundamental truths are intuitively apprehended (Robert, 2004). The German philosopher Immanuel Kant, holds that reason is the power of synthesizing into unity, by means of comprehensive principles, the concepts that are provided by the intellect. That reason which gives *a priori* principles Kant calls "pure reason," as distinguished from the "practical reason," which is concerned with the performance of actions (Kant, 1998).

It is deducible from the understanding of what "reason" entails that all worthwhile human endeavours spring from the correct application of our rational faculty, and ethics is one of such. This position has been variously defended by many philosophers in the past.

To start with, while social contract theories from philosophers like Plato, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Rawls are often argued to justify the emergence of civil-society, politics and the state, it also gives an insight into the origin of morality since politics cannot be divorced from morality (Okorie, 2006). More so, ideas like equality, justice, fairness, law, rights, etc. that are reflective in the social contract are also imbedded in ethics since they are all geared towards maintaining order in the society through the distinction of what is right and wrong; permissible or impermissible.

Sheldon Wein (1987) discusses that one of the fundamental principles of the social contract theory and hence ethics is that it ought to be addressed to rational beings, since only rational beings have the capacity to distinguish right from wrong or being either just or unjust. Taking a particular example, Thomas Hobbes held that the state of nature was characterized as solitary, nasty, brutish and short, a war of all against all and the survival of the fittest. All men were considered equal in the sense that each man was capable of harming his neighbour in a bid for self-preservation. Driven by the fear of untold harm and a cruel death, reason dictated to men to come to a consensus and submit their individual rights to an absolute sovereign who would then ensure social cooperation and the sustenance of the lives of the community. This marked the birth of the civil society and the need for a collective ethics (Hobbes, 1994). It is then true that life would go back to the Hobbesian state of nature that is nasty, brutish and short if there were no standards of living.

McCloskey observes that asking the question “why should I be moral?” is redundant because the moral impulse can be intuitively and objectively discerned: “Good... is the name of a consequential property, a property which we apprehend by intuitive, rational insight. Statements about which things are good are thus explained as being factual, information-imparting statements” (1968:151). He further notes the uniqueness of moral reasons:

Moral reasons are reasons which claim authority to override all other reasons for acting. They are reasons of the greatest importance, and they enjoin action in a categorical way, and independently of my wants, likes, social and legal sanctions, etc. (McCloskey, 1968:132).

From a religious perspective and obviously influenced by scholars such as Aristotle and Dionysius, Aquinas argued that God is perfectly rational and since man is made in the image and likeness of God, man is endowed with rationality, making man capable of opting for good and avoiding evil (Summers, 2009). John Mackie observes from Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, that the moral disposition is found almost universally in all men and derivable from the human nature (1980). This is no different from the position of Kant that the moral principle exists within human society.

Evolutionary psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt aver that humans have a reflexive response to varying situations which can be either negative or positive depending on their moral intuitions. Other psychologists such as Barragan and Dweck opine that morality was inscribed from the inception of cultural values when humans decided to give up their primordial individual life for a better life in a collective sense (Sanchez, 2017).

Though man is endowed with the capability of making moral deci-

sions, being “capable” does not mean man will always indulge his rational impulses. Thus, in order to relativize this intuition in man into concrete principles that would serve as a template to discern right from wrong and guide human actions, several theories have emerged viz. virtue ethics, deontological ethics, utilitarian ethics, emotivism and the likes. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into these ethical theories as doing so would be superfluous. Despite the fact that these different theories approach the subjects of right and wrong from different perspectives, they make one thing obvious; they represent man’s concerted efforts and aspirations in harnessing the impulses of his rational faculties in discerning good from bad or right from wrong in concrete terms.

If there is anything this should make clear, it is the fact that even though ethics has its own peculiar challenges, these challenges do not make morality in any way redundant. As a matter of fact, morality is indispensable to the human society. Without ethics, human society will be in disarray, will ultimately collapse.

Conclusion

The temporal world and all it contains including humans have limitations. These limitations are often the cause of doubt, skepticism and relativism, especially when the subject-matter is not readily accessible to the senses. This makes one wonder whether this is why the platitude, “seeing is believing” has become commonplace. Ethics happens to be among the class of disciplines whose subject-matter is not readily accessible to the senses and so has been subject to various criticisms. After reviewing various worldviews that suggest that ethics is redundant and that its foundations of rationality are shaky, it is glaring that ethics is a necessary component of reality, an indispensable tool towards peaceful living, a compass for a plausible standard of living which lies at the very heart of the ultimate human desire for happiness, fulfillment and survival without which the world will be chaotic, a theatre of war of all against all, where only the strongest will survive.

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