

Altruism: An Ethical Principle in Nigerian Politics

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Abstract

Ethics is a branch of philosophy which deals with the morality of human actions. Its absorption and practice in human society and more importantly, by the political leaders tend to promote peace and social order which is paramount to the development of any political society. It is therefore imperative that the political society must be guided by ethical norms. This paper thus examines the relevance of ethics in the political administration of human society. With particular reference to Nigeria, the paper opposes ethical egoism, which currently characterizes the political practice and governance of the country. It identifies and critically assesses 'altruism', an ethical principle that seeks to promote public interest, as the underlining ethical principle upon which the Nigeria nation was created. The paper argues that the manifestation of ethical egoism, an ethical principle that promotes personal or private interest in contemporary Nigerian society has made the political arena to remain volatile, generating insecurity and social disorder. Thus, for Nigeria to be saved from this situation, the political elites and the citizens in general must be committed to the absorption and practice of altruism.

Keywords: ethics, politics, Nigerian nation, altruism and order

Introduction

An analysis of the events in the political arena in the contemporary Nigerian society causes one to ask questions that border on ethical standards. The society seems to be characterized by selfishness, injustice, falsehood, ethnicity, oppression and intolerance. All these have contributed to the current state of insecurity, social disorder and political instability of the country. It is a fact that most Nigerians live in abject poverty and are unable to feed themselves while the political leadership increases in affluence. A critical reflection on this situation raises some mind-boggling posers that border on whether the country is living on any ethical principle. Also, the volatile and chaotic nature of the country's political arena, is contrary to the peaceful and orderly nation that underlined the hope and aspirations of her founding-fathers. The challenge undertaken in this paper is to examine the place of ethics in the political administration of Nigeria. Thus, the paper critically reflects on *altruism* as an ethical principle that a society can be structured upon. Altruism is the ethical principle which maintains that the welfare of others

must be considered first before one acts or refrains from acting. It implies that the moral goal of every human being should be the well-being or good of others. It is identified as the ethical principle underlining the creation of Nigerian nation at independence. So, the pursuit of private interest by the contemporary political elites is a deviation from this ethical principle. This has created a crisis of interest among Nigerians, and has led to economic and social woes, resulting from lack of growth and underdevelopment of the country. Thus, for Nigeria to be saved from further economic, social and political disintegration, ethical egoism, which describes the attitude of the contemporary political elites and the Nigerians in general must be jettisoned. In its place, altruism as an ethical principle must be imbibed and practiced by all.

What is Ethics?

Ethics is one of the traditional branches of philosophy that concerns itself with rightness or wrongness of human conduct. It has been defined in various ways and each definition reflects the individual scholars' perception of the term. Ethics is sometimes referred to as moral philosophy. It applies to any system of moral values. Ethics can be seen as the scientific study of the norms of human behaviour. As a branch of philosophy, it seeks to examine, interpret and in a way, prescribe for man the right course of behaviour which helps in securing good life - happiness for man. It directs our attention not only to human morality but to values in general (Sober, 1991:386). Almost all human beings have some idea of what is 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong' and we can at one time or the other identify or judge some behaviours as 'good' or 'right', and some others as 'bad' or 'wrong'. Thus, the concepts of 'right', 'good', 'bad' or 'wrong' behaviour are the subject-matters of ethics. According to Joseph Omoregbe (1993:3), ethics is "the systematic study of the fundamental principles of the moral law" or "it is the normative science of human conduct". It seeks to guide us as rational beings on how we ought to behave to others in particular and the society in general, and to think more clearly about the principles of our actions in so far they are related to ethical matters. As human beings, we are aware that some actions are morally acceptable and praise-worthy, while some others are morally reprehensible and must be avoided. Some of such bad actions are dishonesty, stealing, embezzlement of public funds, lying, murder, etc. Those who support or indulge in morally reprehensible actions are regarded as social deviants, and are punished by the laws of the society for engaging themselves in such morally sanctionable actions.

On the other hand, there are some other actions which are acceptable

to the society. These morally prudential actions are honesty, truthfulness, fidelity, justice, sincerity, etc. Those who indulge in them are regarded as respectable and good members of the society. It is imperative to note that the concern of ethics goes beyond how human beings ought to behave, it also concerns itself with the critical examination of reasons why some actions are considered morally- right, good, praise-worthy and acceptable; and why some other actions are considered wrong, bad, condemnable and unacceptable. In other words, its major concerns include the nature of ultimate values and the standards by which human actions can be adjudged right or wrong.

The question of right and wrong, good and bad human behaviours cannot be overemphasized. Human beings are created in such a way that not all kinds of actions befit their nature and can lead to happiness and self-fulfillment. On the one hand, some kinds of action befit human nature, promote their well-being and lead to their happiness and self-fulfillment. For human beings to attain peace of mind, happiness and self-fulfillment, their behaviours must conform to norms of morality. In the same vein, an idyllic society is characterised by morally prudential citizens. Such society is characterised by peace, unity, social order, progress and development. But, this is not the case with a society consisting of citizens with morally reprehensible actions. The immoral life will impinge on the various sectors of the society, especially when the political arena is dominated by such individuals. Joseph Omoregbe (1993:127) was of this persuasion, when he writes: "Remove morality, honesty and public accountability, and what are governments but gangs of thieves and treasury looters."

Suffice to say that the historical functions of politics are the provision of a system of order through the administration of a given society. It functions as an instrument of peace. Etymologically, the word 'politics' is coined from the Greek word, *polis*, which means city-state. When writing on human associations, according to P. Procter (1978:841), Aristotle states that the most sovereign and inclusive association is the *polis*, as it is called, whose essence is the establishment of government, law-making, enforcement and eliciting obedience from the members of society." Human being, to Aristotle is by nature, a political animal. This implies that politics comes naturally to all human being. It is, therefore, not surprising seeing human beings exhibiting this nature daily in all that they do.

Various attempts have been made to define the term politics; however, all the definitions given did not command universal acceptance. Aside, the various definitions have generated difficulties. The difficulties result from the fact that all the attempted definitions have only revealed the different views and understanding of the individual scholars. However, the idea of

politics can be viewed from both wider or general and narrower senses. As a general concept, it is the practice, the art or the science of directing and administering states or other political units (Onigbinde, 2009:180). However, this definition is highly contestable. There are considerable disagreements as to which aspects of the social life that are to be considered 'political'. Some have argued that the essential characteristics of political life can be found in any relationship among human beings. Common to this group are the feminists (McLean, 1996:396). In a narrower sense, it is often assumed that politics only occurs at the level of government and the state, and in another sense, it must involve party competition (Onigbinde, 2009:180). Though, the phenomenon of politics could be understood in any of the two senses, but it is in the second sense that the contemporary Nigerian society tends to understand and practice politics. Party politics and party formation are more encouraged in this sense. Thus, political parties are formed for the purpose of (i) contesting for the available space on the national polity (ii) administering the social values so as to enhance the desired set goals in the society (Adegboyega, 2015:15).

From the above description, and for the purpose of this paper, I shall define politics as, the activities of government to rule the people and the activities of the people to try to influence their government. This includes the laws and policies of government with all the machinery for implementing them and enforcing them, the law-making arm of government, the interpretation and application of the laws, and the method of getting into power. Reflecting on this definition, the idea and practice of politics is a common phenomenon to every human society, and it is sometimes difficult to make a clear-cut difference between politics and governance in some societies. Also, politics could be seen as an instrument to promote peace and social order. To enhance this, ethics plays a fundamental role. Since the general principles that could best guide us in life are those of the best ethical system, the realization of a good human society hinges on the moderation of politics by ethics. It is in line with this that the Nigerian society is being critically examined.

An analysis of the development of politics in Nigeria shows that Nigeria as a political society is being guided by a certain ethical principle. This principle describes the kind of society Nigeria should be. The ethical principle can be logically deduced from the wordings of both the national anthem and the national pledge adopted for the nation at inception. Before judging whether the country thrives well or not, it is imperative to critically examine the basic ethical principle that runs through the yearnings of the country's patriarchs to sustain Nigeria.

Quite apparently, every human society ought to exist on ethical

principles that underscore the society's political ideology. It must be recalled that political societies become a necessity since every human being requires the existence of others in the society to survive. A human being is a social animal who cannot but relate with other members of the society. The differences that exist and, the desires and goals that are pursued by individual members of the society put a demand on the society to operate with ethical norms. These ethical norms are to regulate the activities of members of the society, to avert possible clash of interests that can degenerate into chaos, social disorder and instability. The existing agent that ensures compliance to these norms is made possible through politics. The formation of the Nigerian society, therefore, is expected to be based on certain ethical principle that should guide and direct the activities of the citizens towards the realization of the country's goals.

The need to identify the ethical principle underlining the objectives of the Nigerian state is necessitated by the need to urgently address the problem of moral decadence currently ravaging the country. According to George Ayittey (1992:16), "to remedy a problem, it should first be exposed. Then one must carefully diagnose its causes, prescribe a solution and monitor the efficacy of the prescription." However, Ayittey's view should not be misconstrued to mean that problems must be always solved in philosophy, rather, the aim of philosophy is to critically analyse problems with a view to justifying or examining the rational ground upon which the proposed solutions are based. The attempt here is, therefore, to satisfy the first three parts of Ayittey's assertion, that is, expose, diagnose and suggest possible solutions to the Nigerian problems.

Ethics and Politics

It is important to state here that the relationship between ethics and politics is *sine qua non*. Ethics remains the pivot of politics. It is the concept that underlies the development of the idea of politics and the establishment of a political society. The normative value of ethics is to regulate the activities of politics in order that peace, social order, common good, progress, stability and development may be achieved. At this juncture, into the ethical principle of altruism I shall have recourse.

Altruism as an Ethical Principle in Nigerian Politics

Given the relationship between ethics and politics, it can, on the one hand, be argued that the progenitors of the Nigerian state were conscious of the role of ethics in nation-building. Thus, they began the campaign with what should be the obligations of the individuals towards the newly constituted country. The application of ethics in the administration of a society serves as an inner

mechanism for the realization of the goals of the state. However, the activities of political elites in Nigeria since the creation of Nigeria raise questions of ethical importance.

Also, it can be asserted that the forefathers' goal of creating Nigerian political society hinged around promoting peace, unity, brotherliness, stability, and so on, among her various constituents. Perhaps the reason for the adoption of the principle of 'Federal Character' in Nigeria's socio-political system, was to enhance justice, fairness and equity among the various constituents and citizens. This position can be corroborated by John Rawls' principle and interpretation of how a state can ensure social order (Rawls, 1972:199-200). To Rawls, justice is a fundamental ethical virtue in the governance of any society. It enhances the pursuit of common good. His conception of justice gives adequate consideration to every member and tribe of the society. The principle of justice, Rawls argues, determines how the benefits and burden of the society are to be distributed among individuals in a fair manner. Thus, for Rawls, justice is equal to fairness (Ibid). On this note, Rawls' idea emphasizes the relevance of justice to human society and the proper ordering of resources in such a way that peace, unity and social order may be attained.

Beginning with great enthusiasm, and the recognition of the fact that diverse tribes and different ethnic groups were being brought together to form a nation, the country's founders saw the need to develop and enhance the spirit of brotherliness in order to ensure the survival of the *polis*. However, the achievement of the lofty idea lies in the observation of certain ethical concepts or virtues that underlie the idea of growth and national development, more so that the members are unequal in their abilities, and are from different backgrounds. This factor requires adequate consideration in order to prevent any form of favouritism that those who are stronger in the country might indulge in against the weak. This is because there is the natural tendency in human beings to think of himself first before others, as argued by the psychological egoists. Every human being, interest or ethnic group, always seeks personal or individual interest in whatever they do (Omoregbe, 1993:79). The manifestation of psychological egoism in a state is capable of exposing the state to chaos and disintegration. To prevent this, an appeal is made to all Nigerian to use their rationality to tame the natural instincts that make them up so as separate good actions from bad ones in their daily activities, and to always perform the good ones.

Some of the ethical concepts or virtues identified in the national anthem and pledge, which the citizens are expected to promote are: truth, justice, peace, freedom, love, faith, honesty, faithfulness and loyalty. The observation

of all these are in honour of the country in general and not the individual tribes or ethnic groups. The concern of every citizen as expected must be the concern of all and not a few. The interest of every citizen in Nigeria is paramount and must be given adequate consideration. In other words, public interest must be supreme and be given priority over that of individuals, tribes or ethnic groups, irrespective of the status or geographical location. Thus, the Nigerian nation was created with a view to maintaining unity in diversity. To this end, no form of dictatorship, oppression or suppression is to be encouraged; rather equality, oneness and regards for every constituent part must be the order of the day in the newly constituted country. From this understanding, the ethical principle that can stand as the underlying moral principle that can sustain the Nigerian state is 'altruism', which is an ethical principle that is not averse to the welfare and happiness of others before one's own. It is the standard of morality which is consistent with whatever others need for their well-being. It is the opposite of 'egoism', which implies making oneself the centre-point of all things or one's actions. Egoism is the "concentration on oneself or one's interest as a principle of action, without regard for other people" (Onigbinde, 2009:135).

Altruism as an ethical principle is a sharp contrast to ethical egoism, which considers personal interest to be paramount to other people's interest. According to Joseph Omoregbe (1993:125), whenever human beings display egoism, they are simply displaying the animalistic tendencies in them. Human beings consists of two elements namely animal and rational element. The better one of these two elements is the rational element. The display of animalistic element by human beings needs to be checked, as it is capable of causing social disharmony in a state. It can only be controlled through proper moral vigilance. The pursuit of private interest therefore is a display of the animalistic tendency by man. This is considered to be immoral.

On the other hand, man become altruistic when the rational element is allowed to dictate his actions, because he demonstrates or show his regard for others. This is preferred to the egoistic principle for the fact that human beings are by nature, social being. No individual person(s) is self-sufficient, and human survival requires living with other people in the society. Thus, to achieve their goal in the society, it is only imperative that members of the society give adequate consideration to the interest of everyone and not the interest of a few. If they embrace egoistic principle, the society will be characterised by the pursuit of personal or individual interest and this might degenerate into social unrest or chaos, for the fact that there may be members of the society who may share similar interest. This is capable of returning

the society to its *status quo ante*, that is, the suggested state of nature in John Locke and Thomas Hobbes' political philosophies.

Evaluating the Nigerian state at creation therefore, altruism is seen as expedient value that must be pursued by every citizen. Having egocentrism as the individual's nature will amount to excessive pre-occupation with individual private interest at the expense of the interest of other Nigerians. Self-gratification, pride, injustice, conceit and callous disregard for the common good or the interest of other people will be the order of the day in the state. Thus, the demand for virtues like; honesty, truth, justice, equality, and so on, is a manifestation of the need to promote public interest through the demonstration of an altruistic principle. Vices such as embezzlement, or corruption, greed, injustice, cheating, and many others point towards the manifestation of private interest and shows the absence of the pursuit of common good. These exerts negative influence on the mechanism that would ensure that there is moral order that can enhance growth, peace, unity and development in the society. This moral order, I assume, is what should serve as the defining characteristics of all Nigerian citizens as well as all those who live in the country, in order to promote the idea of public morality. By public morality I mean a set of normative rules guiding the interaction of human beings in the society. The idea of public morality is hinged on a philosophical concept of highest and common good. It also implies people adopting a public mode of conduct that promotes the common good.

Consequent upon the above analysis, it is pertinent to note that since independence, the desire for the Nigerian society to make progress and fulfill the purpose for which she exists, hinges on the need for every individual member to adopt and exhibit certain moral disposition. Thus, the moral maturity of the individual citizens must be *sine-qua-non*, to Nigeria's development. This argument for the practice of ethics or virtues, can be buttressed by Albert Schweitzer's (1961:76) assertion that, "The prosperity of a society depends on the moral disposition of its members." Albert's point of emphasis is that the moral disposition of citizens in a society determines the society's experience of order, peace, unity, growth and development. This paper has succeeded in identifying this fact, hence, it is expressing the optimistic view and desire that, optimum consideration of public morality by the Nigerian citizens and the absence of oppression will make peace and prosperity to abound in the polity.

The point I am driving at from the above discussion is that, it will be a great illusion to talk of development in any society that lacks ethical standard or where moral laxity persists. Citizens in such a state will lack social responsibility. There will be no cause for any form of obligation, either

on the part of the leaders or on the part of the citizens. This argument is corroborated by Henri Bergson's consideration of the term 'closed morality'. Omoregbe J.I (1993:249) citing Bergson, asserts that, "Closed morality is the morality of obligation, that is, the morality dominated by the sense of obligations". The sense of obligation that the individual feels comes from the pressure put on him by the society that he considers to be the source of the closed morality. The society, in the attempts to maintain itself in existence and preserve its unity and identity, imposes certain rules on its members. It also exerts pressure on its members to observe these rules. It is this pressure that gives individual a sense of obligation. Thus, like Rawls, Locke, Hobbes, Plato, Aristotle and some other political philosophers, Nigeria patriachs also considered morality as a veritable instrument in the creation of a nation, and in determining the science of its administration.

Altruistic Ethics in Nigerian Politics: Further Reflection

A critical examination of the political space in Nigeria shows that the role of ethics in the administration of the country has been undermined, hence, the prevalence of vices in the country. Politics in the country is seen as a do-or-die affair, and the political elites engage themselves in the pursuit of selfish interest. A very minute proportion of the citizens lives in affluence with the majority living in abject poverty. There has been no consideration of the majority, favouritism is the order of the day. Injustice, falsehood, ethnicity and oppression, disrespect to the rule of law are perfect descriptions of the Nigerian state. Brotherliness, peace, unity, freedom, love, honesty and faithfulness that were virtues presupposed in the adopted National Anthem and Pledge were ignored. The idea of service to the people, which is considered as the basis of altruistic principle in ethics is jettisoned.

The support given to altruism in this paper should not be taken to mean that it is free of criticism and remains the best of all ethical principles. For instance, it has been argued against altruism that it is not the case that it is a natural instinct in human, that in actual fact, it could be false; that people are naturally egoistic in nature. That is, people have inborn motives causing them to serve their own well-being and take advantage of others when possible. The argument is to the effect that it is human to always tend towards being self-centred, hurting other people, treating others unfairly, cheating them and be unjust to them.

However, it needs to be pointed out that it is not obviously true that human beings are geared by nature towards harming others whenever the chance arises. Though, we may all have the capacity for destructive actions, yet, this does not mean that we are tending towards it always. The idea is

not in any way self-evident, especially without the assumption about the basically hostile innate drives of human being. Therefore, the above criticism of altruism notwithstanding, it is the conviction of this paper that it is still the preferred moral principle over egoism. Besides, by imbibing its principle, people would themselves benefit from treating others fairly, speaking truly, respecting each other's needs and wants. Fundamentally, the support this paper is canvassing for altruism is borne out of the belief that unless people take their prime moral responsibility to be 'doing good for others' seriously, they would end up conducting themselves ruthlessly and cruelly towards their fellow human beings. Altruism takes as "given the evil of selfish pursuits, considering these as leading to conflict among human beings unless restrained by morality" (Onigbinde, 2009:139).

Conclusion

The idea of seeking the well-being of others first before our own, which is supposed to inform the attitude of the political elites in particular and the citizenry in general, which is missing in our body politics is our albatross. The neglect of altruism, and the practice of egoism has made the Nigerian political elites to be close to hitting the ship of the state against rock. The consequence of this is the breakdown of public morality, which accounts for lack of economic, social, political and technological growth and development of the country.

As things currently stand, public immorality stares the country in the face as the political elites and the citizens have been infested by the virus of vices that result from the egocentrism. It has ever since become difficult to attain social order when political and moral obligations that ought to come through strict adherence to ethical norms cannot be achieved. Thus, national greatness has not been achieved because corruption, injustice, oppression, absence of freedom, lack of human rights and unequal treatment of the citizens characterize the society. The ethical interrogation of the social, economic and political situation of Nigeria shows there is a complete defeat of the ethical norms that ought to serve as the guiding principle. The summary of this outcome is that the Nigerian society is sick of the virus of public immorality and this has prevented the country from attaining meaningful development despite the long years of her independence. Thus, to save the nation from this precarious situation and place her on the path of growth and development, the political elites in particular and the citizenry in general must jettison all traits of egoism and imbibe altruism.

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