Ethics and Moral Education

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Abstract

This paper discusses the idea of ethics in relation to the possibility and attainment of moral education. It is informed by the belief that adequate attention to ethical thinking is essential in attaining moral satisfaction and developing the society. The study emphasises the importance of critical moral self- examination and good moral education. It identifies and examines three essential types of ethics in relation to moral self-examination and moral education. It equally examines who a moral agent is and how well the pursuit of self-interest should be understood. Through conceptual clarification, analysis and reflection on certain theoretical views in philosophy, such as the views of Buddha, Socrates, Aristotle and the Yoruba concept of *ìwòntúnwònsì*, it argues for the expediency of moderation in achieving moral education. It also shows that deficiencies in human conduct limit any human that is not morally educated from leading a morally satisfying life.

Introduction

This paper addresses the question of what ethics is in relation to moral education. It distinguishes between ethics and morality and adopts the two concepts synonymously so as to achieve its objective. To clarify the issues involved in the description, definition and concerns of ethics, it defines three

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important aspects of ethics before narrowing down to the question of who a moral agent is, in relation to the pursuit of ethics, and the considerations of the necessity of a proper understanding of the pursuit of self-interest and the examined life as it concerns moral education. The paper employs conceptual clarification and conceptual analysis, accompanied with philosophical theories and perspectives, and shows the arguments in favour of moderation as an important way to attain moral education, or pay attention to ethical considerations, in leading a morally satisfying life and in achieving societal development.

Ethics and Morality
Understanding what ethics is can be examined from two angles. The first is the non-academic, daily or common usage of the word 'ethics' and the other is the academic and rigorous usage or study of the word. In the former sense, the human everyday usage or broad sense of the term, the things considered ethical are the same things regarded as moral. Morality is the standard or principle of judging human conduct as either right or wrong; good or bad. It is also the system of rules or principles for regulating human conduct. In dealing with morality under this first consideration, people are not necessarily reflective. They just assign meanings to what they consider moral. As such, expressions like "Adultery is bad!" and "Liars are not good people" are not what people seriously consider in a non-academic or non-rigorous sense, but what they merely assign meaning to and form their daily prejudices about. Going by these, people using ethics to merely express their sentiments do not really make distinctions between ethics and morality because they see the two words as synonyms.

In the latter sense, ethics is seen as the study of morality. Thus, as a field of rational inquiry, ethics deeply studies morality (Solomon and Greene, 1999:2-3). Humans have learnt to pass value judgments, like "Stealing is bad!", "Adultery is wrong!", long before they ever studied ethics. However, being a field of enquiry, ethics subjects the assumptions and principles of morality to rigorous examination. In this respect, the usage of the term 'ethics' is narrowed down to academic or rigorous and careful study as issues that are considered moral are interrogated. The suppositions and claims of people and society relating to beliefs, traditions, standards, customs

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and orientations guiding human conduct are then critically examined. This is the sense in which Socrates affirmed that the "unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato, 1997: 33). Following from this, succinctly put, we examine and evaluate moral principles, moral values and moral orientations in relation to our every minute conduct, social relations and various arrangements of our societies, without leaving any stone unturned. In this respect, according to Velasquez (2011:14),

> The specific issues discussed in ethics vary widely and include questions such as these: Are abortion, suicide, and euthanasia ever morally right? Is capitalism or communism a better form of life? Should the law permit or prohibit adultery, pornography, capital punishment, or homosexuality? Again, some examples may make these inquiries a bit clearer. Consider the statement of Mahatma Gandhi, the great twentieth-century Indian statesman who successfully practised nonviolent political resistance against the British rulers of India. Gandhi devoted his life to breaking down racial and religious forms of discrimination. He campaigned for equality of respect for all human beings. In doing this, he advocated and practised ahimsa, or nonviolence. In Gandhi's view, we should harm no living thing. Nevertheless, we should resist evil.

As a field of inquiry, ethics may be divided into three aspects: normative ethics, meta-ethics and descriptive ethics. These three divisions address the abstruse nature of the subject. The first relates to human conduct. This is the sense in which human actions are considered moral or immoral. Normative ethics, thus, deals with the issues involving moral goodness or badness as regards human moral agents, which focus primarily on two questions: "What is the good life for men?" and "How ought men to act/ live?" (Barcalow, 1994: 3). These questions distinguish ethics from other sciences and fields of learning such as psychology and sociology, which are socio-scientific and descriptive in nature. Disciplines other than ethics describe human behaviour rather than prescribe how men ought to conduct themselves. Normative ethics asks questions about what manner of persons

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we ought to be and the type of life we ought to live (Barcalow, 1994:3). Normative ethics is divided into two: teleological and deontological ethical theories. Teleological theories are consequentialist theories. They base the rightness or wrongness of human actions on the end results of such actions. They include theories such as egoism and utilitarianism. Deontological theories base the rightness or wrongness of human actions on rules and as such are non-consequentialist theories.

Metaethics has to do with how we analyse the nature, scope, properties and sources of moral values and concepts. It initially addressed questions of how to understand the rightness or wrongness of human actions but later expanded to incorporate the analytic approach, which questions certain assumptions of ethics and the concepts used in ethics. Thus, resulting are metaethical theories such as non-cognitivism, intuitionism, and so on. Metaethics divides into two: Naturalism and anti-naturalism. Naturalism is a metaethical theory that sees moral goodness as properties of things while anti-naturalism is the opposite of naturalism. The anti-naturalists deny that moral goodness is an observable property of things. G. E. Moore, one of the major proponents of anti-naturalism, holds that to say that goodness is a property of things is to have committed "the naturalistic fallacy" (Moore, 1973:324). To commit "the naturalistic fallacy" is to be mistaken in two areas, which G.J. Warnock (1982:62), in an analysis of Moore, described as: "First, that of offering a definition of non-natural quality which is indefinable, and, second, that of offering a definition of a non-natural quality in terms of natural qualities."

While the two aspects of ethics above are prescriptive in nature, the third is descriptive. By being prescriptive, normative ethics and meta-ethics recommend ways by which humans ought to live and how issues involved in ethics ought to be viewed. We can here look at descriptive ethics in two ways. One is that descriptive ethics relates to how we adopt moral terms in describing or in relation to agents that are not human beings. For instance, to say that a table is good or that a bed is bad is to talk about non-human things or agents in moral terms, as either good or bad. Invariably, what this amounts to is the description of the way the objects appear. Thus, the difference here is that we are not referring to their conduct but properties and usefulness. The second way of viewing descriptive ethics relates to

the activities of the social scientists (Boss, 2008: 106). These social scientists, especially the psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists, study morality descriptively by their assessments of moral claims of societies and peoples by looking at certain facts in relation to societal beliefs and human behaviours (Velasquez, 2011:433). Thus, clearly stated, they are interested in the people's behaviours and what they believe. This is where the prescriptive pursuit of ethics differs. For instance, where the social scientists tell us what people do, ethics tells us what people ought to do. Relating this to an example of the belief and behaviour of the Calabar people in pre-independence Nigeria, the social scientists were always interested in and descriptively informed us of the killing of twins in Calabar before Mary Sclessor stopped it, but the ethicist was interested in the morality of the killing of twins and queried why moral dignity and sanctity of human life were ignored when innocent twins were destroyed. Besides the above parts of ethics, there are infrastructural or applied areas of ethics. As we proceed from here, we will regard both ethics and morality as synonyms to avert definitional conflicts.

Ethics, Moral Agents and Self-Interest

What ethics examines are the moral conducts of moral agents. Moral agents are humans that are capable of taking responsibilities for the consequences of their actions. It is at this point that consideration of what is morally good or bad comes in. According to Eegunlusi (2023:31),

> The issue of moral agency is pivotal to ethical discussions. Only the human persons are presently regarded as moral agents in ethics. By being called moral agents, philosophers mean that the conducts of persons can be adjudged to be right or wrong while they too are capable of moral judgements. In this sense, there are philosophical debates making distinctions between human beings and persons. By reference to human beings, some thinkers consider humans as non-persons who are neither rational nor reflective. Specifically, Locke affirmed that someone is considered a person who is "a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places." In this wise,

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> being rational and reflective are considered necessary properties of personhood. By this, they distinguish persons from non-persons. Animals and inanimate objects are, thus, not considered as persons while certain categories of individuals that cannot exercise their rational and reflective abilities, due to mental impairment, are equally regarded as non-persons. Locke also said that a person is, "a forensic term appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs to intelligent agents capable of a law, and happiness and misery.

From the above quote, non-human agents are excluded from being regarded as moral agents because they are not considered rational and reflective. However, ongoing debates on moral agency are being broadened to include considerations of non-human agents like animals and objects of artificial intelligence. Despite this, we still limit our consideration to humans in this paper.

Moral Agency, Self-Interest and Moral Obligation

The question of how to live a morally satisfying or good life has been at the heart of ethical debates. As moral agents, humans are expected to make decisions based on the pursuit of their self-interests. It is not wrong to pursue self-interest, which is the ultimate desire or interest one has concerning what one considers as beneficial to self without being harmful to others. According to Velasquez (2011:48), "the most basic question in philosophy is this: What kind of a being am I? Your answer to this question about human nature— what a human being is— will profoundly affect how you see yourself, how you see others, and how you live." The consideration of who we are will affect the way we relate with others in the world and what we consider to be our responsibility to others.

Until individuals can critically reflect on life's issues and accept the well-thought out outcomes of their reasoning, it is doubtful if they can live well or act in morally satisfying ways. Boss (2008:12) makes a distinction between two types of moral agents: the autonomous and the heteronomous. According to her,

rather than relying on public opinion or what others say, it is up to each of us, as philosophers, to critically examine and analyse our reasons for holding particular views. In this way, the study of philosophy encourages us to become more autonomous. The word autonomous comes from the Greek words auto ("self") and nomos ("law"). In other words, an autonomous moral agent is an independent, self-governing thinker. A heteronomous moral agent, in contrast, is a person who uncritically accepts answers and laws imposed by others. The prefix hetero means "other." Because philosophy encourages people to be independent thinkers and to question the deeply held beliefs of their society, most people, as Socrates discovered, resist philosophy.

Consideration of self-interest has made the ethical views like utilitarianism, ethical egoism and Kantianism prominent (Bennett. 2015: 53-92). For instance, the ethical egoists think that it is morally right to pursue self-interest whether or not others' interests are taken care of. In other words, the moral egoists perform actions promoting their long term interests, not minding the interest of others so far theirs are guaranteed (Frankena, 1963:14). They, thus, neither have any duty of morality to other people nor are their actions based on altruistic considerations. The utilitarians think that only actions that are in the best interest of the majority are moral (Bentham, 2017:6-10). These actions are thought to be morally altruistic. The Kantians think that individuals must not act unless acting on a maxim that what they will can become a universal law (Kant, 1997:31). In this respect, individual actions must be properly weighed so that every action performed should be viewed from the standpoint of becoming moral actions that others can copy or which can be regarded as universal or copied as the proper rule of human conduct. In most cases, people pursue their interests and that of their communities without thinking deeply. Going by the description of Boss (2008:12), these individuals may not be categorised as autonomous moral agents because they have not acted objectively, but relatively, in their moral views. Only actions that are not selfish will depict moral obligation to others. In other words, such actions satisfy the requirement of pursuing

what we consider right, in accordance with good reasoning or in line with principles of good moral conduct.

In dealing with issues regarding actions that are morally right as far as self-interest is concerned, Oke (2008:79) asked if self-interest is actually the basis of morality. In distinguishing between selfish and self-interested actions, he debated that to pursue one's self-interest in a selfish way is to debase oneself or present ones' character as flawed or immoral. To him, to act selfishly is to act pervasively as far as self-interest is concerned. He affirmed: "In the only important sense, vicious tendencies are generated when an agent, through ignorance or confusion mistakes selfish interest for self-interest and consequently only seeks self-gratification rather than self-actualisation. It is therefore necessary to see the distinction between selfishness and self-interest." If we follow this, Oke is simply saying that acting in self-interest is performing an action that is moral and takes care of one's interest without hurting others' interests, while acting selfishly is to perform actions that protect one's interest but harm others' interests. Thus, we can only think that we are morally obligated to others when we pursue interests in ways that favour them while not necessarily injurious to our interests.

The Examined Life and Moral Education

As quoted earlier, Socrates is of the view that the "unexamined life is not worth living". The consideration of having an examined life is to assess one's morality and determine if one is leading a life that is morally worthy. Crimes, brigandage, and all forms of pervasive lifestyles show the necessity for an examined life. Shedding light on these vices, Singer (2002:108) holds that,

> For much of the past century it has been widely believed that people commit crimes of violence because they are poor, ignorant, oppressed, abused, or exploited; or if none of these adjectives apply to them at the time they commit these crimes, then one or more of them must have applied to them at a formative period of their individual psyche, such as their childhood. This was supposed to be true not only of people who commit individual crimes but also of those who take

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> part in crimes on a larger scale. It follows from this view that trying to prevent crimes by more effective policing is treating the symptoms and not the causes. To get at the roots of the problem we must end injustice and exploitation, improve and reform education so that it teaches the importance of respecting our fellow human beings, irrespective of race, religion, or politics, prevent the corruption of the democratic process by the arms manufacturers and others who profit from war or genocide, and ensure that no child is brought up in poverty or by abusive parents.

Singer's harping on educational reforms and improvement is essential. However, the kind of education that should not be neglected is moral education, which will assist every individual to lead a morally satisfying life. There are many ways or approaches of leading a morally satisfying life that philosophers have suggested. An important one of these is giving room for moderation in all things. Thinkers think that this will help proper self-examination and imbibing of moral education. Moral education assists individuals to pursue their interests well and cater for others' interests. It also integrates peoples and societies. The concept of moral education is visible in works by several authors like Socrates, Aristotle, Buddha and explicit in the Yoruba idea of *ìwòntúnwònsì*. These all deal with the formation of human character in ways that will ensure the good development of humans as well as the development of societies. According to Buddha, one should choose the way of moderation or the middle way between the two extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence. He taught this by teaching his followers the practice of the eightfold paths that can help them overcome the evil desires that bring pain and misery: right intention, right speech, right endeavour, right conduct, right understanding, right contemplation, right concentration and right occupation. Through these paths, he expects every man to overcome negative desires that can lead to misery and pain.

As Socrates discussed, people in human society should get morally educated in order to form characters that can be regarded as morally good

and virtuous. Thus, as they get trained through moral education, they are knowledgeable about what is morally good and are able to act in morally good ways. Since one cannot undermine the roles people's self-interest play in their pursuits, people who are morally educated will know how to choose between acts that are morally good and morally evil. To Socrates, wise decisions are made by those who have reached the highest height or pinnacle of their educational training. These then become the ones governing others in society. He called these the philosopher-kings. According to him, three classes of individuals in society go through moral education: the soldiers, the artisans and the rulers. The soldiers possess the moral virtue of courage, the artisans that of temperance, and the philosopher-kings that of wisdom. All three classes work towards ensuring justice and harmony in society. Thus, by the formation of character through moral education, they are able to develop the society.

Under Aristotle's doctrine of the mean and habituation, he debates that humans can learn to imbibe moral virtues. According to Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, there are extremes in human conduct, but the morally virtuous person seeks the middle ground to maintain balance between the extremes. The Aristotelian doctrine of the mean instructs that humans should learn to make choices between the two extremes. The first is an excess while the second is a deficiency. As an example, being courageous is the mean (or middle ground) between the two extremes of being a coward and being rash, while being generous is the mean between frugality and being wasteful (Aristotle, 2004:28-32). In his consideration of the theory of habituation, Aristotle believes that humans were never born with ethical virtues, which is why they must learn or master them by continuously practising them since they can learn them by habit. Thus, good habits or sound moral virtues are formed by constant practice. This helps us to understand and choose the mean between the two extremes of human conduct and avoid the vices of the extremes so as not to inflict pains that can deny us the chances of being happy with ourselves (Power *et. al.* 2008).

Similar to the above, the Yoruba concept of *ìwòntúnwònsì*, literally meaning 'weighing things to maintain a balance between the right and the left' or 'a little to the right and a little to the left,' points to moderation

between extremes of human conduct (Olanipekun, 2017: 223).[1] By this, one is not expected to choose actions that are not carefully thought out or put up with a conduct regarded as overbearing, excessive, ruinous or capable of casting one in bad light. Thus, under the communalistic structure of Yoruba societies, children are morally educated from home and by the society to attain a balance in moral conduct. Obviously, moral education from childhood involves the processes of socialisation: the primary and secondary forms of socialisation. The first involves home training while the second involves school or community/societal training (Ogunola. 2018:40-44; Ayodele, 1982: 267-276).[2] Through primary and secondary processes of socialisation and intentional moral education involving parents, siblings, extended family members and others within the society, children grow to form moral virtues and values required to lead a morally satisfying life in Yorubaland. An essential part of this is not just that the individual is responsible to himself and leads the moral life that satisfies him, he also leads the moral life that satisfies the entire society. This makes them proud of him, his parents or family, and he becomes a person for the society to recommend to other members as an individual to emulate (Omobowale *et. al.*, 2019:24).

Going by the above, moral education provides the opportunity to assess situations well and live the good life by forming good moral conduct. By this, individuals imbibe the moral virtues and values that complementarily help them to become morally good persons that can develop a good society. Barrow (2007:166) posits that "a morally educated person understands the nature of morality and is committed to the standards and norms implicit in moral inquiry (such as consistency and truth), in the same way that the educated historian and scientist understand their subjects and are committed to the norms of their disciplines." Essentially, how to help individuals develop moral values and moral virtues is the main business of moral education. Through getting morally educated, individuals will develop moral virtues such as self-respect, respect for others, kindness, covenant keeping, truth telling, and moral values such as reciprocity, transparency, altruistic actions, integrity, justice and fairness, and empathy.

As Eegunlusi (2023:36-37) concluded, every society needs a comprehensive moral education where individuals are "tutored on the

essentiality and mastery of good conduct. This education, which should be genuine, should be through intensive campaigns involving the print, information and electronic media and physical enlightenment and training in schools, markets, etc. It is common knowledge that people often act corruptly and contrary to the laws of their nations when they are untrained, uneducated and uninformed about what their societies consider moral. Although it may be acknowledged that having knowledge of a wrong act may not translate to an individual doing the right thing, yet, knowledge of wrong acts aids living a moral life (Oladipo, 2018:22-23). Indeed it is moral education that can eliminate corrupt practices and uplift the standard of a country in the comity of nations. People act corruptly when allowed to operate by their standards of morality against the common good of their societies.

Conclusion

This chapter looked at ethical considerations as they relate to the attainment of moral education; and posits that moderation is essential in attaining moral education, it explored the views of Buddha, Socrates, Aristotle and considered the Yoruba concept of *ìwòntúnwònsì*. Humans cannot be successful in moral pursuits or lead morally satisfying lives if they do not give ultimate attention to the pursuit of self-interest in manners that depict that they have overcome human flaws or deficiencies. This is why they must be morally educated to be able to identify the enviable moral characters that can assist them to understand human conduct and avoid vices while embracing virtuous traits. Besides, moral education will help them to develop and imbibe the moral virtues and moral values necessary to live well in society by a good pursuit of self-interest through a well examined life based on good and morally edifying moral education.

Notes
1.   With respect to this idea, Olanipekun attributed the saying that "*iwontun wonsi lo ye omoluabi* (moderacy should be practised by a respectable person) to O.B. Lawuyi.
2.   "The Yoruba: Family, Socialisation and Child Development." From https://archive.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu13se/uu13se0d.htm

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