Foundationalism in Moral Rules and the Problem of Relativism

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we undertake a deep critical analysis of the foundations of moral principles. In it we have established that moral rules guiding human conduct are derivable from either the precepts of some religious belief system, societal norms or from the contemplative dispositions of the individual. The conclusion drawn from this study is that most moral rules can hardly be universal in nature because of the diversity of the foundations upon which such rules are based. Hence, relativism remains a challenge in the attempt to universalize principles of morality.

WHAT IS MORALITY?

The word "morality" comes from the Latin word "mores" which also corresponds to the Greek word "ethos". These words have the same meaning which is just the customs of a people represented as laws or precepts that guide human behaviours. So, morality in modern times has come to mean the theory of what is right or wrong in human conduct (Okere, 52). But another interesting question may arise here, that is, why should we employ the concepts of right and wrong to judge actions? This question attracts diverse answers. For some, the answer is that the principle of determining right and wrong is inherent in the nature of man. That is to say that man is a moral being. Others will argue that a consideration of what is right or wrong in human action is required by man's dignity. And for others still morality is necessary for human beings to get on well together since it defines limits of deciding good from bad behaviour. For example, life would have been perilous if you were not sure of your personal safety should men exert their might as right.

Consequently, morality or codes of what is right or wrong, especially of what is wrong, seems to be imperative for human society, not only for the greater society but also for the individual. However, it can also be argued that not all actions fall within the category of the moral. This argument arises from the problem of the freedom to act as one desires. In this case it has been said that for an action to be moral, it must be voluntary or motivated. According to Okere, motivation in this context of determining the morality of human action requires both knowledge and will. He explained further that motivation presupposes a certain ideology or credo-that is, a certain theory of how things are, especially a theory of purpose and end of human life and the means to attain such an end (52). In the light of the foregoing exposition, it is obvious that the foundations upon which moral principles are based remains diverse. Hence, the problem of relativism in moral principles.

RELIGION AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF MORALS

For the sake of showing how the concept 'Religion' is to be understood in the context of this work, I would prefer the etymological definition of it which Cicero gave namely, 're; egare' meaning to bind or join; hence the view that religion is the link between man and God. It is the sum total of man's relationship with God or the transcendent (Okere, 54). Religion also contains systems of beliefs, systems of mores rituals and laws. But the ones that concern us is the system of belief or creed, and the systems or codes of action. This is because it is the system of beliefs that suggests and determines how men are to act.

From what we have said so far, in determining the place of religion in the foundation of morals, it has been argued that "one solution to the problem of defining good or right is to proclaim that something is right if God wills it right, and wrong it He wills it wrong" (Geisler, 359). In this case, the moral rules, according to Alasdair Machlntyre, are part of a set of divine commandments, obedience to which will be rewarded and disobedience to which will be punished. In this regard, many religious people believe that God himself has made known to mankind, through revelation, what he wants men to consider as morally wrong. Consequently, it is the claim of religious people that the only genuine basis for morality is religion.

The above views have equally led to some questions, first, is something right because God wills it, or does he will it because it is right? The argument that has been advanced here is that if we say that an action is right because God wills it, then it seems to make God arbitrary. In this regards could He change his will and make cruelty, right and kindness wrong? If we take the latter alternative above, then we are saying that God is not ultimately good and this will contradict the Christian conception of Gods goodness. Here it has been pointed out that "Christianity shares with the Aristotelian view the advantage of not taking our actual desire as they affect of our choice of

action as the given" (Intyre, 149). As regards moral rules being the commandment or will of God, there is this other argument which says that "the validity or soundness of a belief is independent of its origin" (Nielsen, 210). This issue here is that when a person is asked where he got his moral beliefs, he is not being asked how he came by them, but (a) on what authority he holds these beliefs, or (b) what good reasons or justification he has for these moral beliefs. The expected answer here is that he does not and cannot hold these beliefs on any authority (the attempt here is perhaps to avoid the fallacy of authority). This is to say that if we do what we do simply because it has been authorized, we cannot be reasoning and acting as a moral agents, for "to respond as a moral agent, one's moral principle must be something which is subscribed to by one's own deliberate commitment, and it must be something for which one is prepared to give reasons (Nielsen, 210).

Now, following the above argument, suppose we say that we ought to do what God wills because God will punish us if we do not obey him. This actually may be a good reason for doing what God commands, but it is hardly a morally good reason for doing what he commands since such considerations of self-interest cannot be an adequate basis for morality. It is on the grounds of this type of argument that it has been further stated that a powerful being – an omnipotent and omniscient being, speaking out of the whirlwind cannot by his mere commands create an obligation. For this reason A. C. Ewing asserts that without a prior conception of God as good or his commands as right, God would have no more claims on our obedience that Hilter or Stalin except that He would have more power than even they had to make things uncomfortable for those who disobey him. And that unless we assume that God is morally perfect, unless we assume the perfect goodness of God, there can be no necessary relation between being commanded or willed by God and being obligatory or good (Ewing, 40). Those who hold this view believe that "good" is a concept which can be understood quite independently of any reference to any deity or God. And as such morality without religion is possible. And that even religion could not exist if people do not have a moral understanding that was, logically speaking, independent of religion. In other words, we could have no understanding of the truth of such statements "God is good" or of the concept of God unless we had an independent understanding of goodness.

From the above argument the conclusion is drawn that we cannot decide whether something is good or whether it ought to be done simply from finding out that God commanded it, that is, willed it. Furthermore, whether "God is good" is a synthetic or analytic statement, the concept of good must be understood as something distinct from the concept of God. That is to say, a man could know how to use "good" properly and still does not know God. And that if that is the case, an understanding of goodness is logically prior to, and is independent of, any understanding or acknowledgement of God" (Nielsen, 210).

The implication of the above view is that there are also secular moralities that are independent of religion, and that the meaning of moral

terms could be understood independent of the knowledge of God (Nielsen, 211). Hence, we now turn to other sources of the foundations of morality.

SOCIETY AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY

In some cases the standard of morality is determined by the group or community that one belongs. This is why ethics is identified with the ethnic group or society. And for this reason "moral commands are considered community demands. This, of course, implies a cultural relativity of morality" (Geisler, 354). This means that diverse cultures and diverse societies could posit their own moral or ethical principles. In this situation, the community is the ultimate arbiter of what is right.

The above view on the foundations of morality has been criticized, first it is based on what David Hume calls the "is-ought" fallacy (Geisler, 354). The argument here is that just because something is the practice in a particular society or community does not mean it ought to be. For example, in the past, some African societies saw the killing of twins as a right action but this does not mean that the act ought to be so. Or take the case of some African societies where the concept of adultery is made vacuous by the special practice whereby a friend could allow his best friend to sleep with his wife as a highest act of hospitality in the said societies. In this case it is that particular community that is the determinant of what is right. Here is where cultural relativism or morals becomes problematic.

Another problem with the above view on the foundations of morality is that if each society or community is right, then there is no way to solve conflicts between communities. In other words, whatever each community believes is right, even if it may be evil or injurious to other societies, for them it is right. Here one can say that if such an ethical principle is to govern human actions then there is no justification to condemn industrialized nations, for instance, when they dump toxic waste in the environments of less developed nations.

However, let us look at the concept of the society being the foundation for morals from another point of view. This is the point of view which says that "the state (the state here refers to the governing institutions of the society) itself represents the very embodiment of morality" (Lloyd, 56). In this case the state makes laws that determine or affect morality of human actions. A popular example in moral philosophy is that of Socrates. Socrates recognizes a moral duty to obey the law of the state. In this example the question which will arise is what does one do in cases where morality is in conflict with the provisions of what is called the positive, or man made laws of the state? In the attempt to answer this question, Socrates position is very relevant. Socrates believes that even in such conflicts the overriding moral duty might be to obey the law until persuasion is effective to bring about legislative changes (Lloyd, 56).

But how about situations in which the moral duty is that of rejection of the law of society? This has to do with situations in which the society or the state makes laws that are inimical to the welfare of the citizens. In response to situations such as this, it has been opined that even though there is a moral duty to obey the law, whether its specific content is or is not in accordance with morality in the case of an acute and fundamental conflict of principle between the two, morality both requires and justifies disobedience.

INDIVIDUALS AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF MORLITY

In determining the principle of judging the rightness or wrongness of Human actions, the dictum propounded by the Greek Philosopher Protagoras has also been applied namely, "man is the measure of all things". If this assertion is judged from an individual point of view, then the concept of right in ethics is measured by an individual will. Therefore the right is what is the right to me. And what is right for one may be wrong for another. (Geisler, 354). The problem with this approach or moral standard is that it will lead to chaos. For example, if everyone decides to behave in the way that pleases him, then there will be no unity in the society, and there can be nothing like law because everyone will be a law unto himself.

However, the notion of personal autonomy of the individual in ethics demands that an autonomous agent's reasoning should control his behaviour. In line with the concept of individual autonomy, Robin Barrow has explained that to talk of somebody being master of his faith implies that he directs or controls his behaviour rather than simply that he blows aimlessly in which ever direction the wind blows. In other words if a man is to be described as master of his fate, then we should expect him to organize and govern his behaviour in such a way that his actions could be seen to be the product of his judgment, his reflection, calculation and decision-taking (132). The function of reasoning in balancing one's behaviour is also expounded in Aristotle ethics as we shall see later. And it has also been argued, for instance, that morality in African thought sometimes involves conscious reflection on one's actions. (Hospers, 590)

It is equally important to note that the concept of personal autonomy in ethics has led to a new view known as the self-realizationist view of ethics. A more recent rendition of it is the ethical philosophy of the contemporary philosopher and novelist Ayn Rand. According to this view the good is that which is proper, that is, appropriate or conducive to the life of man as a rational being (Hospers, 593). In this case, it is advocated by proponents of this view that ethics should begin with an analysis of the concept of value. Ayn Rand, for instance, maintains that values arise from and are necessitated by the distinctive nature of living organisms. The argument proceeds thus; a value is that which one acts to gain some desired end. In other words, a value is the object of an action. It is that which can be secured only by an action.

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Thus, values presuppose the existence of an entity to things are valued, an entity capable of acting to achieve values, an entity capable of initiating goal-directed behaviour. Thus it is the existence, nature and needs of living organisms that make the existence of values possible and necessary. It is the requirement of a living organisms survival that must set the standard of its values.

Arising from the foregoing it is then opined that "man's life as man,…..is the standard of value for a code of ethics. But each individual man, his own life is its purpose (Ezedike, 199-206). This conclusion follows logically from the self-realizationist perspective of ethics which entails that the good-for-man is that which is required for his survival as a rational being.

CONCLUSION

Our exposition in this paper has shown that principles of morality have diverse foundations either as the commands of the supreme being namely, God as posited by some religions, or on the mores of a given society. We have also come to note that the individual contemplative rations also determines what moral principles he accepts as precepts to guide his or her actions. In effect moral principles have diverse foundations. What then are the implications of this diversity in the foundations of morality? The obvious response to this question is moral relativism. And moral relativism as we know is the view that there are no objective values in the world. Hence, right and wrong are to be decided entirely by reference to local customs or on the philosophy of life that governs a person's life. On this account, what is accepted within one society is just and morally right for its members even if it conflicts with other peoples deepest held views. In other words, moral relativism survives on the assumption that there is no vantage point from which competing moral approaches can be judged. But this paper advocates that in spite of the diversity of the foundations of morality or moral values, there is yet a reasonable latitude of universally accepted rational determination of the moral principle of judging morality of human conduct. Hence, this paper upholds human rationality as the arbiter of what learn it to right conduct, and what constitutes wrong action in spite of the given religious or societal or ideological ethos that an individual allies with.

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