Human Perfectibility and the Transformation of the Public Sphere: From Godwin to Digital Communication

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Abstract

This work examines the prospects of moral improvement in human beings through an appraisal of human perfectability and social communication in the political philosophy of William Godwin. It addresses the fundamental question of whether human beings are capable of improving their moral conduct and adopting more benevolent social relations, or whether human nature imposes fixed limits on such transformation. If improvement is possible, what then is the best means to facilitate steady moral progress? Drawing from Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, written in the intellectual climate of French Revolution, this work explores his claim that human beings are capable of indefinite moral perfectability and that open social communication is at the core of the process. Godwin posits that Social progress could be attained when Individuals are intellectually independent. And this is possible through free and rational communication. On the contrary, due to advancement in technology and global communication technology, human beings seem to appear to be self-destructive and this is a challenge to

Godwin's claims of human Perfectability. The central problem of this study is therefore to assess how successful Godwin was in establishing political justice on human perfectibility and social communication. Employing critical and analytic philosophical methods, the study argues that while Godwin's theory is coherent and plausible at the theoretical level, it faces practical limitations, particularly his emphasis on open communication within small groups. Consequently, the study proposes the digital public sphere as a more viable alternative for promoting moral and social improvement in contemporary society.

Keywords: Human Perfectability, Moral Improvement, Open Communication, Public Sphere

Introduction

William Godwin in *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* argues that human beings by nature are capable of indefinite moral improvement, and he maintains that there is a vital connection between communicative practice and prospect for such improvement.[1] He holds that the best way to improve society is by strengthening the intellectual independence of individual through a system of open communication.[2] The fundamental question is this are human beings capable of improving their conduct and adopting more benevolent manner, or are we constituted in such a way that makes this sort of change unthinkable? If improvement is possible, what is the best method of ensuring steady progress? Notwithstanding, in nations with access to means of subsistence, extravagance and luxury often reign as supreme in values over simplicity and generosity. Do these facts show that, as species, we

1. William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice,* ed. Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 109-110.
2. Godwin, *Political Justice,* Book I, esp. discussion of private judgment and intellectual independence, 120-126.

are incapable of improving in a moral sense we believe that the question of human improvement is worthy of sustained philosophical inquiry.

Godwin attempted to answer these questions with a theory about human perfectibility and social communication, with his theoretical framework on political justice which emanated from the French Revolution.[3] Godwin holds that human beings by their nature are capable of indefinite moral improvement through open communication.[4] It is against this backdrop, this work seeks to interrogate his idea of human perfectibility.

The general aim of William Godwin's political justice was to restore the severed link between public life and politics according to him.[5] The only way to achieve this is for the improvement of the rational capacity of man through open social communication.[6] Godwin asserts that human beings are capable of indefinite moral improvement and that communication plays a central role in that process.[7] He argues that the best way to improve society is by strengthening the intellectual independence of individuals through free and rational discussion.[8] Godwin's prescriptions may provide for a highly democratic form of discourse, but is the theory practicable Does it make sense in the light of experience, or does Godwin arrive at his conclusions *apriori*

3. Mark Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 1–12.
4. Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice,* Book IV.
5. Peter Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 92–110.
6. Godwin, *Political Justice,* Book I-II.
7. Godwin, Book IV.
8. Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice,* 85–102.

Godwin's conversational emerged partly from his own experience and understanding of social interaction, which he conceived as a continuing process of debate and reflection through which truth progressively emerges.[9] However, it is reasonable to assert that people can adopt this form of communication on large scale And if so, will it eventually lead to an open society governed by reason along These questions cannot be fully answered from experience and thus represent the type of speculative political reasoning Edmund Burke famously criticized in response to revolutionary rationalism.[10] At the same time, however, Godwin's criterion of good theory does not of necessity constitute a universal standard. This work therefore seeks to determine whether Godwin's ideas on human perfectability and social communication are philosophically and practically plausible.

Basis of Perfectibility

Godwin's main tax in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* is to find the best means of improving society. Godwin asks, "how may the individuals of the human species be made to contribute most substantially to the general improvement and happiness?"[11] According to Godwin, there are two ways of affecting change in society: by reason or by coercion. He argues against the latter, which refers to change enforced by the state through a system of law (positive institution), or to change forced by the people through revolution, and in favour of the former, which relates to his belief in the perfectibility of man, that is, in our ability to continually improve the human understanding and thus,

9. Marshall, *William Godwin,* 118–125.
10. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 87-95, 151-160.
11. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 79.

our general condition.

Godwin argues against change enforced by positive institutions for they "do not content themselves with requiring my assent to certain propositions."[12] Rather, it is "in the very nature of these institutions that there is included a sanction, a motive either of punishment or reward, to induce me to obedience".[13] In other words, "government is nothing but regulated force."[14] And so acting in accordance with government teaches people ultimately to neglect the dictates of their own understanding and to obey commands based on the threat of punishment or the desire for reward.

Godwin argues against change forced by violent revolution for, although it "is engendered by an indignation against tyranny, it is itself ever pregnant with tyranny."[15] He claims that revolution is self-contradictory since it prescribes precisely what it condemns, (i.e), the use of force as opposed to reason, or simply the imposition of will upon one party by another. Godwin believes revolution not only discourages hope for social improvement but inflames the "mutual animosity and variance"[16] already existing between the opposing parties. He argues that there are few conditions as ill-suited to the "cultivation of justice and the

12. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 203.
13. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 203.
14. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 205.
15. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 269.
16. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 272.

diffusion of benevolence"[17] as violent revolution.

Godwin believes that the alternative to coercive change depends on the cultivation of reason. He argues that improving the human understanding offers us the best hope of improving our general condition. Thus, his account relies on the process of human perfectibility. The main idea is that improved reasoning will foster the moral development of individuals by better equipping them with an understanding of what is truly good/desirable. Godwin argues that his conversational theory of social communication is the best vehicle upon which the improvement of reason, and thus morality, depends. The theory asserts, in opposition to communication in mass assemblies, that sincere conversation among small groups of people (open communication) encourages reasoning and independent thought; first, because open communication promotes contemplation, impartial criticism and personal judgment; and second, because sincere conversers can more accurately assess each other's opinions when every man is told "the truth, regardless of the dictates of worldly prudence and custom."[18]

Godwin's belief in the perfectibility of man provides an ideal view of the future. Because we are able to improve, we will eventually create a more just world, a world, according to Godwin, where individuals are motivated by a concern for the general good. His belief in human perfectibility is supported by three theoretical principles: 1. The characters of men originate in their external

17. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 272.
18. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 312.

circumstances. Godwin states: "The actions and dispositions of men are not the offspring of any original bias that they bring into the world in favour of one sentiment or character rather than another, but flow entirely from the operation of circumstances and events acting upon a faculty of receiving sensible impressions."[19] Godwin's aim in saying that our moral character is not formed prior to experience is to establish a key point in support of perfectibility. 2. The actions of men are necessary the doctrine of necessity. Godwin's view of necessity suggests that all events in the universe are part of an endless chain of antecedents and consequents. The universe is a closed system in the sense that every event is determined by an antecedent set of events, and each of those events and so on. Godwin claims that it is impossible that anything break in upon this chain of events. Therefore, all events are determined, for they have occurred in the only way that was possible for them to occur. Godwin draws two essential inferences from the doctrine of necessity in relation to human action.

First, because all events in the universe are necessary, then human action must also be necessary. It is therefore impossible that upon any given instance we could have acted in any other way than we did. Second, because the actions of men are necessary, we have the potential to predict the occurrence of other events in the material universe. Godwin argues that morality, like the material universe, is governed by laws based on 'an observed similarity in the succession of events."[20] 3. The voluntary actions of men originate in their opinions. Godwin's third theoretical principle in support of

19. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 98.
20. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 337.

perfectibility claims that the voluntary actions of men originate in their opinions. He argues that Voluntary action is accompanied with foresight and "the hope or fear of a certain event is its motive."[21] Thus, voluntary action includes a consideration of consequences, which implies that "there is comparison and judgement."[22] In making a judgment, the mind decides that one motive is more desirable than another. Therefore, the judgment leads to action. Next, is Godwin's idea of positive institutions as they relate to social change.

Positive Institutions

His idea on positive institution also emanated from the Late 18th century Europe that has provided a background of events that exemplify connection between ideology and social change. According to Godwin, positive institution is a certain system adopted by the society or government whereby the authority defined the extent an individual utilizes his/her talent/mental ability. He argues against the coercive forms of social change found in both positive institution and in violent revolution. He claims that positive institution damages the mental independence of individuals by modifying their character through the use of external motivation, i.e., the offer of reward or the threat of punishment for their actions. As a result, conduct is no longer based solely on the intrinsic merits of a particular case but is modified in accordance with government sanction. Furthermore, individuals lose the ability to evaluate critically what is genuinely in their best interest, since decisions about their conduct are

21. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 120.
22. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 120.

ultimately made by others.

Godwin asserts that the tendency of the government to "inform the understanding as to what actions are right and what actions are wrong."[23] It is the very nature of government to teach its subjects obedience and compliance with its decrees but not examination of the validity of such decrees. Positive institution is "inimical to the improvement of mind"[24] for it eschews the practice of critical evaluation amongst citizens and applauds blind obedience. It damages moral independence since it "constitutes other men the arbitrators of my actions, and the ultimate disposers of my destiny"[25] what is in the best interest of the public remains a question for the specialized ruling class. According to Godwin, positive institution relies more on coercion or manipulation than on moral reasons for affecting change, and, consequently, damages the mental independence of individuals, and creates an environment that is adverse to the improvement of mind. Also, Godwin is against the idea of resolution as a means of social change.

Revolution

Godwin opposes violent revolution as an effective means of social improvement because it is self-contradictory, involves rapid change, and is unpredictable in outcome. First, revolution is self-contradictory for it is "engendered by an indignation against tyranny, yet is itself even more pregnant with tyranny."[26] It

23. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 3rd (ed.) (London Penguin Books, 1985), 201.
24. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 203.
25. R. A Couture, *Communication and Justice*, Unpublished Paper, 1997, 4.
26. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 269.

opposes force with force itself. Like government-directed change, revolution always "involves one group imposing their controversial moral conclusions on another group of a different opinion."[27] Thus, revolution attempts to force its tenets upon the established order through violence and violence becomes the sole reason why the overthrown are "obliged to change their creed, precisely at the time at which I see reason to alter mine."[28]

Second, revolution is self-contradictory because it creates a communicative atmosphere similar to the one it fights against. For instance, those who speak out with arguments against revolution suffer ill regard in such passionate times. Godwin states that an effort to examine men's thoughts, and penalize their opinions, is of all forms of despotism the most horrible; yet this effort is peculiarly characteristic of a period of revolution. Lastly, even if successful, revolution is self-contradictory because a violent revolution does not alter the resentment that the opposing parties have for each other. The point here is that violence may transform someone's behaviour momentarily but it is not likely to change his or her sentiments. Rather, it may only increase his original conviction. Transforming ideas is better achieved via reason and argument than force. Furthermore, godwin rejects political association as a means of social improvement.[29]

Political Association

As a means of mass communication, political associations attempt to assess and generate public opinion. They draw large numbers of

27. Couture, *Communication and Justice*, 1997, 4
28. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 269.
29. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 267-270.

people to their meetings and appear to be the most useful means for generating a sound public opinion and for diffusing, in the most rapid and effectual manner, political information for the purpose of reform. Yet Godwin rejects political associations. He claims that they tend to replace reason and argument with the "Shibboleth of a party" "harangue and declamation"[30] and "disorder and tumult."[31] Thus, in accordance with the Enlightenment, Godwin places an extreme emphasis on the ability of reason to lead us out from error. The more that people learn to think, argue, and reason for themselves, the more our chance increase for gaining knowledge.[32]

Furthermore, Godwin claims that the nature of political associations discourages individuality, since members experience commonality through sharing the same political views. A second problem attendant on political associations is their tendency toward "harangues and declamation." Godwin contends that just as identifying with the creed of one's party can take the emphasis away from arguments, "harangues and declamation" create a communicative atmosphere based on passion, not reason. Consequently, the "memory of the hearer is crowded with pompous nothings, with images and not arguments." Godwin explains that orators communicate to the crowds in such a way as to avoid detail, rush what is said, and build the hearers' excitement to the point of applause. Communicating in such passionate atmospheres does not permit the hearer to be "sober enough to

30. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 270.
31. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 285.
32. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 124-130.

weigh things with an unshaken hand."[33] Godwin argues that the communication of truth is more likely to occur in a calmer atmosphere where arguments can be fully explored and considered. This is why he promotes open communication.

Open Communication

Here Godwin argues that this communicative ideal increases the intellectual independence of individuals by encouraging contemplation, impartial criticism, and personal judgment, and thus, this affords the best chance of generating a sound public opinion. According to him, the practice of open communication involves sincere and friendly discussion in small groups for the purpose of social criticism, as opposed to the large scale mass meetings of political associations. Open communication according to Godwin is a vehicle of social change, promotes peaceful and gradual change in accordance to the level of public understanding. Open communication avoids the problems associated with the passionate atmosphere of noisy assemblies. In open communication there is no coercion and tumult. He says open communication supports a contemplative practices for calm atmosphere, which allows participant to consider argument in sober action. He also argues that in open communication there is impartiality, for there is no incentive to adopt the Shibboleth of any party.[34]

33. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 286.

34. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 320.

33. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 231.

Sincerity

Godwin's idea on sincerity posits that, we tell every man the truth regardless of the dictates of worldly prudence and customs.[35] He argues that sincerity fosters self-development, for it enables conversers to more accurately assess each other's opinion, and, thus, to strengthen their sentiments. Furthermore, sincerity breeds trust among individuals, which enhance communication and the opportunity for improvement. In order to fully appreciate the benefits of sincere conversation, Godwin criticizes the "cold reserve"[36] that permeates much society's communicative space. He states:

> There is at present in the world a cold reserve that keeps man at a distance from man. There is an art in the practice of which individuals communicate forever, without anyone telling his neighbour what estimate he forms of his attainments and character, how they ought to be employed, and how to be improved. There is a sought of domestic tactics the object of which to elude curiosity, and keep the tenour of conversation, without the disclosure either of our feelings or opinion. The friends of justice will have no object more deeply at heart than the annihilation of this duplicity. The man whose heart overflows with kindness for his species will habituate himself to consider, in each successive occasion of social intercourse, how that occasion may be most beneficially improved.[37]

35. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 231.
36. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 288.
37. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 288.

Godwin's central objection to communication marked by a "cold reserve" is that it keeps up the tenor of conversation, without the disclosure either of our feelings or opinion. The lack of sincerity or "plain dealing" in the society creates uncertainty about how individuals view each other. The insincere communicator thus criticizes others "within the sentiments of a criminal, conscious that what he is saying he would be unwilling to utter before the individual concerned.[38]

The Pros and Cons of Godwin's Project of Human Perfectibility and Open Communication

An attempt would be made under to evaluate **Godwin's** views on political justice. It is based on this some conclusions will be made and subsequently bring this study to a final close. Believing in the perfectibility of the race, that there are no innate principles, and therefore no original propensity to evil, he considered that "our virtues and our vices may be traced to the incidents which make the history of our lives, and if these incidents could be divested of every improper tendency, vice would be extirpated from the world."[39] All control of man by man was more or less intolerable, and the day would come when each man, doing what seems right in his own eyes, would also be doing what is in fact best for the community, because all will be guided by principles of pure reason. Such optimism was combined with a strong empiricism to support Godwin's belief that the evil actions of men are solely reliant on the corrupting influence of social conditions, and that changing these conditions could remove the evil in man.

38. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 288.
39. Godwin, *An enquiry concerning political justice, and its influence on general virtue and happiness*, Vol. 1 (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1793).), 18.

Godwin made several instructive points in his work on political justice. His argument against private property in a way is an attack on corrupt practices and injustice done to poor people. He promotes peaceful and gradual societal change rather than violent revolution which is also commendable. His idea that promotes the development of the individual as the basis for the development of the society is praiseworthy. He also promotes the idea of justice in order to bring about human flourishing. This is also a great contribution from Godwin.

There are several weaknesses in his arguments on political justice. First, notwithstanding the positive side of his idea of human perfectibility as a better way to achieving a good society that will achieve the greatest happiness for the greater number of persons, his idea of conversational theory as a means to achieving human perfectibility is having several weaknesses. Put differently, Godwin believes that the substitute for forceful change in the society depends on the cultivation of reason.[40] Hence, he asserts that improving the human understanding provides man the best hope of improving the general circumstance of the individuals. As a consequence, his account depends on the process of human perfectibility. The key idea is that improved reasoning will promote the moral development of individuals by better furnishing them with an understanding of what is really good/desirable. Godwin contends that his conversational theory of social communication is the best vehicle upon which the improvement of reason, and hence morality, relies. The theory holds that, in opposition to communication in mass assemblies, that sincere

40. Godwin, *An enquiry concerning political justice, and its influence on general virtue and happiness*, Vol. 1 (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1793).), esp. book 1, chapter 1-3.

conversation among small groups of people (open communication) fosters reasoning and independent thought; first, the reason is that open communication encourages contemplation, impartial criticism and personal judgment; and second, because sincere conversers can more precisely evaluate each other's opinions when every man is told "the truth, regardless of the dictates of worldly prudence and custom."[41]

One of the weaknesses of this idea is how he proposed to achieve it. He proposed that individuals will continue to learn from their fellow citizens through candid, sincere and unreserved conversation and correction in order to strengthen their mental independence and private judgement. This provokes a lot of questions like, how possible is the conversational idea in modern and busy world How possible is it in a world of social media, propaganda and fake news Is it possible in a world where people are technologically connected but highly disconnected from each other A world where people do not tolerate advice from other people because they feel it is their life and they can live it the way they want it will not be possible.

The level of education of people is very poor and if individuals want to depend on the advice of other people in order to develop their sense of personal judgemnet and development, it will be like a case of a blind man leading his fellow blind man and both of them will fall into a ditch. This is obvious even in the quality of elected officials we have in Nigeria. They are morally depraved, intellectually bereft and bankrupt to the extent that they cannot make the system which they benefit from work and that has been

41. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and it Influence on Morals and Happiness,* 3rd ed. London: Penguin Books, 1985, 312.

the biggest challenge of Nigerian government. Such quality of human beings on personal level cannot give a life changing advice that is candid, sincere and rational in order to improve the life of other people.

The ideal society as proposed by Godwin is absurdly impracticable and utopian. And this view of his is one of the challenges with Godwin's political justice as well as his idea of human perfectibility. He argues that vices and sufferings humans suffer from are not innate. Invariably too, they are not product of original sin but products of the social conditions of humans in the society and will the elimination of these conditions man will live a life free from all forms of pains and troubles. The idea of ideal society of Godwin will not come to be and if it does it will not last because the perfect nature of the society will bring about astronomical rise in human population which will, at the same time result in such terrible social vices that put humans in pain.

Godwin's conversational theory of social communication among small groups of people open communication which is in opposition to communication in mass assemblies is grossly limiting and ineffective if applied in the modern era as a means for the development and improvement of the human rationality and person as well as the formation of opinions that will influence the government. The population size is huge and it will be impossible to hold such sincere conversation that will have serious impact on the larger society. Also, we live in a multicultural world where people do not easily align with each other; hence it will be nearly impossible for people of different tribes like in Nigeria holding small group conversation for their self-improvement when it is clear that they are not in unity. It is on the basis of this there is need

for an alternative medium for the same purpose which Godwin wanted to achieve using his particular open system of communication. This form of open communication is the digital public sphere. Before delving into that let us look at what public sphere is all about.

The Public Sphere

The public sphere is an arena in social life where people can meet and interact without restraint as well as identify societal challenges, and via that discussion influence political action. A "Public" has to do with people as a whole. This kind of interaction is referred to as public debate and is defined as the expression of ideas on issues that are important to the public, regularly, but not always, with contrasting or different ideas being expressed by participants in the conversation. Public argument takes place more often, not via the mass media, but also at meetings or via social media, academic publications as well as government policy documents.[42] The term was originally created by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas who defined the public sphere as "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state".[43] Communication scholar Gerard A. Hauser defines it as "a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them".[44] The public sphere can be seen as "a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the

42. Indra Overland, *Public Brainpower: Civil Society and Natural Resource Management* (2018-01-01), 1–22.
43. Marshall Soules, "Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere". *Media Studies.ca.*
44. Gerard A. Hauser, "Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricality of Public Opinion", *Communication Monographs,* 65 (3), 1998, 83–107.

medium of talk"[45] and "a realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed".[46]

The ideology of the public sphere theory is that the government's laws and policies should be guided by the public sphere and that the only legitimate governments are those that pay attention to the public sphere."[47] Democratic governance rests on the capacity of and, opportunity for citizens to engage in enlightened debate".[48] Much of the deliberation over the public sphere has to do with what is the fundamental theoretical configuration of the public sphere, how information is debated in the public sphere, and what influence the public sphere has over society.

Digital Public Sphere as an Alternative to Godwin's Open Communication

Digital public sphereDPS is an open social communication mechanism that aids people to rationally inform and educate themselves on both public and private issues for their personal improvement which will at the long run lead to the development of the society. This platform helps people to engage other resource people in molding and forming opinion that will help their personal development and societal growth. The person constitutes the subject of any human association and the development of the individual can lead to the development of the society as a whole.

45. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text,* 25 (26): 1990, 56–80.
46. Benhabib, Seyla, "Models of Public Space", in Calhoun, Craig (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* Cambridge Mass.: MIT press, 1992, 73–98.
47. Hauser, "Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricality of Public Opinion", 83.
48. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* trans. Thomas Burger, 1.

When the people improve in their moral character and mental reasoning, they will be able to make right choices that can have huge impacts on the government of the state in power.

DPS is digital because we live in the age of internet and social media communication and those platforms are open access and anybody from any country can participate or make candid contributions to the discussions being held on such platforms. It is public because it is open to anybody at all. It is a sphere because it involves the gathering of people. The interesting thing about this is that, the level of regulation on such platforms is not paternalistic like the traditional media house and as such people can easily open up and speak candidly and sincerely about their views and emotions without fear of being brutalized by individuals or government. On this note, the DPS is in opposition to Godwin's mechanism of sincere conversation among small groups of people (open communication) which according to him encourages reasoning and independent thought. The fact is that, we live in a larger society than the period of Godwin and as such the small group conversation would no longer be possible and for that reason the global public sphere which takes the form of digital mass assemblies or social media platforms can help in individual improvement and growth of the society. For instance, prior to the Nigerian 2023 general election the social media was pivotal to the sensitization of electorates in Nigeria, most especially the youths. This led to high level participation of youths in the 2023 general election much more than it has ever been in Nigeria. This shows clearly that if adopted as proposed by this work it can help for individual improvement and afterwards, the general improvement of the state. In as much as it has its drawbacks, the advantages surpass the disadvantages.

Impacts of Digital Public Sphere Social Media on Politics and Governance

According to Ohme, internet use has become ever-present in global society and has established opportunities for more and more varied, civic engagement and political participation. Kemp and Pew Research Center posit that the use of the internet and particularly social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp, has grown on a global scale; interestingly, two-thirds of the world's [7.8]8 billion people are now online.[49] For Mano and Ndlela social media use in emerging and developing countries, particularly, has given power to citizens to engage with the outside world, organize, and to engage in social and political activism.[50] Also, Moreno-Almeida avers that social media also allows tools for discreet commentary, like disarming memes, for users to challenge authoritarian rule.[51] Social media has demonstrated to be very effective as an instrument of interaction, communication and organization that has made some authoritarian national leaders to become anxious about it, according to Campbell and Quinn.[52]

Indeed, the social media boom is changing the political landscape of Africa.[53] Africa with a projected population of 1.3 billion

49. Pew Research Center, *Social media use continues to rise in developing countries but plateaus across developed ones* ,June 192018a,
50. W. Mano abd M. N. Ndlela, Introduction: social media, political cultures and elections in Africa, in *Social media and Elections in Africa,* Vol. 2,Cham: Springer, 2020, 1–7.
51. C. Moreno-Almeida, Memes as snapshots of participation: The role of digital amateur activists in authoritarian regimes, *New Media & Society 23*(6), (2021): 1545–1566.
52. John Campbell and Nolan. Quinn, *What's Happening to Democracy in Africa?* Council on Foreign Relations, May 26, 2021, *https://www.cfr.org/article/whats-happening-democracy-africa*
53. Observer Research Foundation, Report 2019, *https://www.orfonline.org*

population, more than 200 million currently use social media, and people in Africa are more probable per-capita to access the internet and social media through mobile device than those in the West.[54] Gradually, Africans make use of mobile and social media to participate in political debates, even in ways which challenge authority.[55]

The use of social media is growing secure and stable in developing countries and this can be seen from the yearly growth in percentage of people who make use of it. For instance, the percentage of people using social media in Ghana is (22%), South Africa (20%), Kenya (15%) is superior to that of the United States of (5%); similarly, the percentage of period spent on social media in Egypt (3.09hrs), Nigeria (3.02hrs), and Ghana (2.56hrs) is superior to that of the United States (2.07hrs).[56] However, it is worth mentioning that much of the research attempts in this area are restricted to Western democracies.[57]

Social media use has been discovered to be adopted more rapidly by younger users first, even though in the West, social media has been demonstrated to be inferior as a news source than attention to

54. T. Ovuorie, *Increased social media use puts African leaders on edge* , deutsche welle, 2022, *https://corporate.dw.com/en/increased-social-media-use-puts-african-leaders-on-edge/a-61303854*
55. Ovuorie, *Increased social media use puts African leaders on edge* .(2022). *https://corporate.dw.com/en/increased-social-media-use-puts-african-leaders-on-edge/a-61303854*
56. Internet World Stats, 2020, *https://www.internetworldstats.com,*
57. M. M. Skoric and Q. Zhu, Social media and offline political participation: Uncovering the paths from digital to physical, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research 28no.*3, (2016): 415–427.

news outlets.[58] Newspaper consumption is declining in Nigeria much as it is in the West, but two issues are making it worse for the weakness of newspapers in Nigeria when compared to broadcast and online sources: price; and the lack of a single leading national paper such as The Guardian in the UK.[59] Interestingly, eight in 10 Nigerians (83%) have smartphones which are, overwhelmingly, the primary way Nigerians access the internet, accounting for more than nine out of 10 (92.4%) website visits.[60] Social media has long served as a source for news and political information.[61]

Since the human person constitutes the subject of any human association; therefore the development of the person is very important. Apart from formal education which helps for the individual development the best informal space that guarantees the intellectual, moral, and general development or improvement of the individual in contemporary time is what this work refers to as the digital public sphere. It can help the individual improvement and subsequently, the development of the society as a whole. When the people improve in their moral character and mental reasoning, they will be able to make right choices that can have huge impacts on the government of the state in power. In the context of this discourse, the digital public sphere will be more

58. A. Shehata and J. Stromback, Learning political news from social media: Network media logic and current affairs news learning in a high-choice media environment, *Communication Research*. Advance online publication (2018).

59. Nigeria Bureau of Statistics,Nigeria, 2021.

60. O. Akinpelu, *60% of Nigerians are still not connected to the internet and only about 10% are active on social media* ,Technext, January 31, 2020, https://technext.ng/2020/01/31/60-of-nigerians-are-still-not-connected-to-the-internetand-only-about-10-are-active-on-social-media/

61. E. Shearer and Mitchell, A. *News use across social media platforms in 2020* , *Analysus & Policy Observatory, Pew Research Center*, January 12, 2021. https://apo.org.au/node/311092

effective to influence the development of the individual person than Godwin's mechanism of sincere conversation among small groups of people (open communication) which according to him encourages reasoning and independent thought.

The fact is that, we live in a larger society than the period of Godwin and as such the small group conversation would no longer be possible and for that reason the digital public sphere which takes the form of digital mass assemblies or social media platforms can help in individual improvement and growth of the society because of its capacity to avail countless number of people and like-minds who are not limited by time, space, religion, and ethnic affiliations the opportunity to air their views on both personal and social issues, cross-fertilize ideas and impact each other's lives positively for their self-improvement. For instance, prior to the Nigerian 2023 general election the social media was pivotal to the sensitization of electorates in Nigeria, most especially the youths. In spite of the fact that Nigeria has one of the world's youngest populations of median age of 18.4 years,[62] unfortunately there has been low voter turnout gradually in each election circle.[63] In a bid to know the reason for youth voter apathy, an election observer averred that young voters complained that they didn't trust Nigeria's electoral system and that they felt their votes did not count.[64] Interviews prior to 2023 general election suggested apathy among young Nigerians, to a degree because the two leading presidential candidates were in their 70s and couldn't

62. World Bank. 2020, *https://www.Worldbank.org*
63. K. Yusuf, Analysis: Trend of Low Voter Turnout Continues in Nigerian Elections, March 5, *Premium Times*, 2023.
64. M. Abang, Voter Apathy Apparent in Nigeria's Local Elections, *Al Jazeera*. March 9, 2019, *https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/3/9/voter-apathy-apparent-in-nigerias-local-elections*

"offer any real hope" for change.[65]

But through high level sensitization on the social media there was sudden surge in youths' interest in politics and that played a significant impact in the voter registration process and subsequently the election proper. In other words, the use of the digital public sphere led to high level participation of youths in the 2023 general election much more than it has ever being in Nigeria even though it did not translate into actual votes on the election day[66] but the positive gain from it was that there was that reawaking of the consciousness of youths to get in involved in politics. This shows clearly that if the digital public sphere is adopted as proposed by this work coupled with the fact that internet penetration in Nigeria is 61.4% - higher than the global average (58.8%), and nearly double the average on the African continent (39.6%), social media use which is at 30.9%,[67] it can help in the improvement of the individual reasoning ability and afterwards, the general improvement of the state. On the contrary, in as much as it has its drawbacks, the advantages surpass the disadvantages.

Summary/Conclusion

Godwin's political justice is "the adoption of any principle of

65. Adigun, The factors determining voter turnouts in presidential elections in Nigeria: Multivariate correlation analysis of the 2019 presidential election, *Open Political Science, 3*, (2020): 11-33.
66. Yusuf, Analysis: Trend of Low Voter Turnout Continues in Nigerian Elections, March 5, *Premium Times*, 2023.
67. Simon Kemp, *More than 5 billion people now use the Internet: Digital 2022* , *We Are Social*. 2022, *https://wearesocial.com/hk/blog/2022/ 04/more-than-5-billion-people-now-use-the-internet/*

morality and truth into the practice of a community,"[68] and the work was hence an investigation into the principles of society, government, and morals. Godwin for many years had been "satisfied that monarchy was a species of government unavoidably corrupt,"[69] and from desiring a government of the simplest construction, he progressively came to consider that "government by its very nature counteracts the improvement of original mind,"[70] indicating anti-statist beliefs that would later be taken as anarchist.

Godwin believes in the perfectibility of the race, that there are no inborn principles, and as a result no original propensity to evil, Godwin considered that our virtues and our vices may be traced to the incidents which make the history of our lives, and if these incidents could be stripped of every inappropriate tendency, vice would be extirpated from the world. All control of man by man was more or less intolerable, and the day would come when each man, doing what seems right in his own eyes, would also be doing what is in fact best for the community, because all will be guided by principles of pure reason. Such optimism was joined with a strong empiricism to support Godwin's belief that the evil actions of men are exclusively dependent on the corrupting influence of social conditions, and that changing these conditions could remove the evil in man.

68. Godwin, *An enquiry concerning political justice, and its influence on general virtue and happiness*, Vol. 1 (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1793).), esp. book 1, chapters 2-3.
69. Godwin, *An enquiry concerning political justice, and its influence on general virtue and happiness*, Vol. 1 (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1793).), esp. Book II, chapter 1-3.
70. Godwin, *An enquiry concerning political justice, and its influence on general virtue and happiness*, Vol. 1 (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1793).), esp. Book II, chapter 3.

In conclusion, this study holds that Godwin's conversational theory of social communication among small groups of people open communication which is in opposition to communication in mass assemblies is grossly limiting and ineffective if applied in the modern era as a means for the development and improvement of the human rationality and person as well as the formation of opinions that will influence the government. The population size is huge and it will be impossible to hold such sincere conversation which has serious impact on the larger society. Also, we live in a multicultural world where people do not easily align with each other easily; hence it will be nearly impossible for people of different tribes like in Nigeria holding small group conversation for their self-improvement when it is clear that they are not in unity. It is on the basis of this there is need for an alternative medium for the same purpose which Godwin wanted to achieve using his particular open system of communication. This form of open communication is the digital public sphere. This form of open communication is the digital public sphere. This work proposes that digital public sphere as an open social communication mechanism that aids people to rationally inform and educate themselves on both public and private issues for their personal improvement which will at the long run lead to the development of the society.

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