

THE CONCEPTS AND RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICS AND MORALITY

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Introduction

The question of how politics relate with morality is crucial that it has evolved into a debate in intellectual and political discourses, among others. As a matter of fact, the debate has assumed a status that is critical in building a just society. Consequently, two opposing groups have emerged. On one hand are those who maintain that morality is an integral part of any political culture and is therefore, inseparable from politics. They equally argue that any conscious effort to separate morality from politics will amount to removing the very essence of politics and will also increase its vulnerability to all shades of practices.

On the other hand, it is argued that morality should be separated from politics because according to this position, it is possible to carry out the art of politics without making recourse to the idea of morality in that, morality, if joined with politics, could at best, obstruct political interests. The position of Nicccolo Machiavelli is crucial here. In his book titled *The Prince*, observing the political situation of his time, Machiavelli maintained that it is best that politics stands on its own without recourse to morality. A prince (ruler) needs not subject himself to moral codes but could do anything to succeed in politics. This position is typical even of the contemporary Nigerian political society and it is in view of this that this study seeks to understand how morality relates with politics and the possible outcome if both are divorced.

The Concept of Politics

The term politics is derived from the Greek word *polis* meaning political community. It is the art and science of government (Clarke 659). Politics could therefore be understood as the affairs of the *polis*- political community. According to Leftwich, the modern form of this definition is therefore, what concerns the state (43). Today, the meaning of the term politics remains ambiguous. It means differently to different people (Asirvantham and Misra 20). That is why it is pardonable even when one describes politics as a dirty process. Sometimes, it is understood to mean an activity

of a certain type directed towards the achievement of common goals shared by a class, state or community. Seeing the rumble and tumble that go on in democracies, some persons have associated politics with the functioning of democratic forces and institutions have found it disgusting and distasteful as earlier noted. To the Portuguese dictator, Antonio Salazar, politics represents:

All those noisy and incoherent promises, the impossible demands, the hotchpotch of unfounded ideas and impractical plans, opportunism that cares neither for truth nor justice, the inglorious chase after unmerited fame, the unleashing distortion of facts and all that feverish and sterile fuss” (qtd in Asirvantham and Misra 20).

Politics thus understood, may be defined as the art of governing mankind through deceit. This was the view of politics proclaimed by Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, General Franco in Spain and many other mini-dictators in Asia, Africa and Latin America (20). This perverted view of politics today is upheld by a large number of people even in democratic governments and Bernard Crick Observes about this:

Many people of course even in regimes which are clearly political, think that they are interested in politics, and even act as if they are not; but they are probably few compared to the many who think that politics is muddled, contradictory, self-defeatingly recurrent, unprogressive, unpatriotic, inefficient, mere compromise, or even a sham or conspiracy by which political parties seek to preserve some particular and peculiar social systems against the challenge of the inevitable future (17).

According to Bernard, the anti-political are very right to think that politics is an achievement far more limited in time and place than politically minded men, or men who practice this odd thing- politics, normally presume (17).

In Philosophy, politics as systematic area of study began with Plato and in his book titled the *Republic*. As a branch of study, Aristotle conceived politics as belonging with ethics, that is, he saw politics and ethics as subjects that should be treated together through practical reasoning. He argued that there was no intellectual necessity to treat both subjects differently, since both politics and ethics are out to bring about common good. Aristotle recognized the distinctive quality of politics as one of the basic human activities. He criticized Plato's scheme of ideal state on the ground that Plato in his *Republic* made the mistake of trying to reduce everything in the *Polis* to a unity which actually implied the abolition of “politics” (Asirvantham and Misra 21). Against this, Aristotle argued in his *Politics*:

There is a point at which a *polis*, by advancing in unity, will cease to be a *polis*. There is another point, short of that, at which it may still remain a *polis*, but will nonetheless come near to losing its essence, and will thus be a worse *polis*. It is as if you were to turn harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat. The truth is that the *polis* is an aggregate of many members” (21).

According to Aristotle, politics arises in organized communities, which permit the simultaneous existence of different groups, which represent conflicting traditions and divergent interests within the same state. “ For Aristotle as well as for many modern liberal thinkers, politics represents at least a degree of tolerance of controversies and some understanding of the principle that government is best conducted, amid the open propagation of mutually antagonistic interests (21)”. Politics therefore can be defined as the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and the survival of the whole community (21).

Clarke stated that politics could be regarded as a collective decision made within groups in other words, politics is often associated with human behavior within governmental set-up (659). Politics can also be seen as the process and method of making decisions for groups hence the art of governance. Although it is generally applied to government, politics is usually observed in all human group interaction, like in corporate, academic and religious settings (661). For Machiavelli, politics is primarily concerned with preserving and furthering the interest of the state. He tried to situate political activity in an autonomous realm, free from the constraints and limitations of moral judgments (Roth 571). Here, Machiavelli attempts to demonstrate the incompatibility between the demands of traditional morality and power politics. However, this study sees politics as an activity that is concerned with the collective decision of how the state should be organized, taking cognizance of morality with the aim of bringing about common happiness. This explains that the happiness man seeks for can only be achieved if the concept of politics and morality are treated together. If we accept the fact that by nature man is a political animal, then we should also consider the fact that politics is for man and not man for politics. Politics should be about promotion of human values in order to bring the much desired happiness that man have always sought for which is achievable through politics founded on those basic human values, notably the idea of morality.

Approaches to Politics

According to David Apter, there are six different views of politics or systems of political analysis. These include political philosophy, institutionalism, behaviouralism, pluralism, structuralism and developmentalism.

Political Philosophy: It is based on the application of reason to the study of human affairs. This view dominated the classical tradition of political thought and was the main trend in the study of politics for a long time. The emphasis of political philosophy was on moral principles and purposes. Plato and Aristotle are the founders of the philosophical approach to politics. As the Greeks used the precepts of philosophy to solve the problem of justice and good government under the laws, political philosophy became a guide to political action as well (Asirvantham and Misra 22). To David Apter, political philosophy tends to be concerned with the establishment of moral purposes, the ethical basis of the political community, and a logic which establishes their priority or validity. The results comprise the field of normative political theory and the evolution of the normal basis of the state (12).

Institutionalism: Institutionalism assumes certain ethical priorities as given and attempts to realize them in the mechanisms of the government. Its emphasis is on legal and historical analysis, descriptive and comparative methods and interest group theory. The specific fields covered by the institutionalists are national, comparative and international politics among others. This view of politics suggests that political institutions realize philosophical ideals in governmental practices. For example, the representative assemblies and independent and politically neutral courts are the institutional pre-requisites of democracy (12).

Behaviouralism: It is a political analysis which takes the individual as a political actor. Behaviouralism shifts the emphasis from political institutions to the study of how people behave in the political field and what motivates their political behavior. It deals with their opinions, their political choices, their attitudes towards the established rules, their tendencies towards violent actions, their tolerance of the views of the rival groups, and the nature and extent of citizens' participation in electoral and other political activities (13).

Pluralism: Incorporating the institutionalists' emphasis on democracy and representative institutions and building upon the empirical research of the behaviouralists, the pluralists deal with modes of competitive interaction among groups and cooperative interaction among groups and the connections between different forms of organizational behavior. It examines the influence of group activities on the functioning of the pluralist democracy in a modern industrial society based on advanced capitalism. The primary emphasis is on the study of democratic participation, empirical methods, coalition theory, electoral systems, political parties, legislative behavior, decentralization of functions and democratic elitism in civil and national government (9).

Structuralism: It is a variant of both institutionalism and behaviouralism and therefore, it concentrates on the relationship between the individual and the community. Structuralism is concerned with the “hidden agenda” behind political phenomena. Hence, its pre-occupation is with class analysis, exchange theory, and functionalist and dialectical methods of determining the boundaries of political system (9).

Developmentalism: Just as institutionalism represents the empirical application of political philosophy to the organized practice of politics, so developmentalism, a new applied and inter-disciplinary approach to the study of politics, attempts to examine the processes of cultural modernization and economic development and change and their impact on structures and policies of various governments. Thus, developmentalism is concerned with the theories of transition from one type of political system to another, causes and effects of innovation, political regimes of the developing countries, nationalism of the new nations, decolonization and neo-colonization. All analytical systems can be linked to the concept of developmentalism (10).

The Concept of Morality

Morality is a derivative of the Latin term *moralis* which means manner, character, and proper behavior. It is the differentiation of intentions, decisions and actions between those that are distinguished as proper and those that are improper (102). Morality can be a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct from a particular philosophy, religion or culture, or it can be derived from a standard that a person believes should be specifically synonymous with “goodness” or “rightness”.

Omeregbe adds that morality is concerned with personality held ethical beliefs, theories of obligations and the social elements that reinforce it. This also refers to a system of principles and judgments shared by cultural, religious and philosophical communities with common belief of what constitutes right and wrong (18). Immorality is the active opposition to morality while amorality is variously defined as an unawareness of indifference towards, or disbelief in any set of moral standards or principles. Moreover, the term morality is often used interchangeably with ethics to imply the study of the principles established by morality; how right or wrong human actions are.

A Historical Overview of the Concept Morality

A systematic western approach to the concept of morality began in the fourth and fifth century Greece. When the Athenians began to trade by ship, their horizons expanded and the exposure to new customs and traditions led them to question their own moral traditions. Many thought that if a different moral code worked somewhere else, then what made their own better? Exposure to different cultures

also prompted early philosophers to question the difference between nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*) and what it meant to be “just” in each of these cases. Questions about morality and how to best lead the ethical life led to more questions such as “what constitutes the good life?”, and “what do we mean when we talk about the good life?”(Rogers 17).

In response to their questions some philosophers posited that the good life was a matter of *eudaimonia*, which is commonly translated as happiness. Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Hellenistic Stoic and Epicurean schools all held eudaimonistic accounts of ethics. The schools differed in how *eudaimonia* was best achieved. For instance, Socrates believes that no one knowingly commits wrong. To commit wrong prevents achieving *eudaimonia*, thus, no one would knowingly do so. In this view, Socrates' ethics can be seen as the seeking of knowledge in order to live correctly and to live the happiest live (17). Still others who had been strongly influenced by the influx of new ideas, thought that the good life was something different, philosophies like that of the Sophists and later the skeptics considered justice to be a matter of convention, or following the laws, while the Stoics believed justice arose from the rational organization of nature.

The first people to theorize on the relativism of ethics were the Sophists who were traveling teachers. They would lecture on a range of subjects for a fee. Because the Greeks were very concerned with political life and power, Sophists primarily taught rhetoric and boasted they could teach anyone how to make a weaker argument stronger in order to convince people to vote in their favour. Sophists like Thrasymachus from Plato's *Republic*, thought the good life was achieved through power in political life and considered justice to be the advantage of the stronger. Thrasymachus and other Sophists like Glaucon thought justice should only be taken into account when convention demanded it, but when it did not; man had no reason to act in a way that was unnatural. For them, man is naturally an egoist and pursues his own self-interest even to the detriment of others (17). However, for the demand of this study, the position of Aristotle is very relevant. Aristotle's main work on ethics is *Nicomachean Ethics*. The first line of the book reads: “every craft aims at some good”. To understand this statement, it is necessary to know that Aristotle thinks in a teleological way, which means everything has a purpose. In spite of the differences in these philosophies, one common thread running through them was the importance of reason; though morality as we know does not necessarily come with reason.

Theories of Morality

These are theories that seek to understand what good life is for man and how man should act that such acts might be termed moral. These theories will be treated thus:

Aristotelianism: Aristotle argues that human life aims at happiness and has two reasons for saying this. The first is because happiness is unconditionally complete, which means that happiness is always the best choice and that we choose happiness for itself and not for another goal towards which happiness lead. The second reason that Aristotle identifies happiness as the goal of human life is because it is “self-sufficient” that is, happiness is the only thing needed to make the best life and nothing else is needed. Aristotle thus sought to discover the basis of moral actions in the structure of the human nature (Anyam 19).

Stoicism: Stoicism developed about 300BC during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. In Greece, the principal Stoic philosophers were Zeno of Cilium, Cleanthes and Chrysippus of Soli. In Rome, Stoicism proved to be the most popular of the Greek philosophies and Cicero was among the famous Romans who came under its influence. Its principal figures during the Roman period were the Greek philosophers; Epictetus and the Roman emperor and philosophers; Marcus Aurelius (Anyam 24). According to the Stoics, nature is orderly and rational and only a life led in harmony with nature can be good. The Stoic philosophers however agreed also that because life is influenced by material circumstances, one should try being as independent of such circumstances as possible. The practice of certain cardinal virtues such as practical wisdom, courage, discretion and justice enables one to achieve independence in the spirit of the Stoic motto, “endure and renounce”. Hence the Stoics taught and practiced the philosophy of indifference. They advised that men should learn to be indifferent to external influences. The main effect of Stoicism was to place the responsibility for becoming a good or bad man directly upon the individual himself, rather than upon society (Popkin and Stroll 25).

Intuitionism: In ordinary language, to intuit something is to understand it directly without having to rely or fall back to the reasoning process such as deduction or induction. Intuitionism proposes that man has the natural capacity on, that is, that man has the capacity for the immediate perception of a mode of action as being right or wrong without recourse to reasoning (Anyam 30). The theory therefore, holds that in man, there exists a special faculty separate and entirely independent from reason which intuitively distinguishes right from wrong just as in the same way the sense of taste distinguishes bitter from sweet and the sense of sight distinguishes blue from red. It is argued that this instinct is a natural instinct for an emotional appeal from that which is good and away from that which is evil. In sum, whatever acts that agree with and are pleasing to this sense (moral sense) are good and those actions which disagree with and are displeasing to this sense (moral sense) are wrong, bad or evil (31).

Utilitarianism: There are two major proponents of this theory. They are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Utilitarianism holds that the morality of an act consists essentially in its utility as a means for attainment of the happiness of man,

happiness in most cases being considered as temporal. In fact, if you wish to know whether an action is good or bad morally, find out whether it is useful or not. If it is useful, it is good, if it is harmful, it is bad (Eboh 45).utilitarianism is therefore, equated to consequentialism because the theory seems to emphasize on the consequences of actions. Within this school of thought, the consequences of an act determine its moral value; if it is beneficial to many, then it is good, but if it causes harm to the larger number, then it is bad (Anyam 36).

Categorical Imperative: the categorical imperative asks us to act in a way that our actions could be sampled as a universal law. In order words, is asks us to behave in a rational way that would be rational for anyone. If it is right for me to defend myself when attacked, then it is right for everyone to defend themselves in self-defense. Robert Johnson describes the categorical imperative as a method to find out if an action is permissible using four steps:

First formulate a maxim that enshrines your reason for acting as you propose. Second, recast that maxim as a universal law of nature governing all rational agents, and so as holding that all must, by natural law, act as you yourself propose to act in these circumstances. Third, consider whether your maxim is even conceivable in a world governed by this law of nature. If it is then, fourth, ask yourself whether you would, or could, rationally will to act on your maxim in such a world. If you could, then your action is morally permissible (5).

In order to know if an action is morally acceptable based on the categorical imperative, we must ask, “is the action rationally appropriate for everyone else in the same situation”? If the answer is yes, then the action is morally right and acceptable.

The Relationship between Politics and Morality

As earlier stated, the relationship between politics and morality is such a contestable one so much that it has assumed into an unending debate. To this end, two groups are considered. Some argue that morality is the anchor of politics while others denounce vehemently that politics has no relationship with morality. Whatever position one might decide to take, the fact remains that there seems to be a possible correlation between politics and morality. Both politics and morality helps to regulate and direct human behavior. As a regulator, morality is concerned with interpersonal relationship and interaction between persons and groups, whereas politics regulates relations between groups, different socio-political organizations and the state, with the control of state power as the focus (Garret 159-76).

For Aristotle, the hallmark of human actions including politics is the pursuit of moral virtue, which in turn will guarantee common happiness for the individual and the society at large. Clearly, the relationship between these two concepts is a flexible one, and it is this flexibility that will find the difference between private and public

morality in social life. The point is that the individual is a moral agent with private and public life. The connection between morality and politics is situated in the individual. When the individual moves from private life to public life, the necessary relationship between morality and politics is spotlighted. The enterprise of politics has no meaning without defining the place of individuals in it. It is the actions of these individuals that determine the scope and justification for politics. The moral status of individuals to a large extent justifies the relevance of political activities to man.

According to St. Augustine concerning the role of justice in governance, “remove justice and what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale” (Omeregbe 127). The implication of this statement is that justice is an essential element of government and its absence will amount to having no government. This can be put in another way that if the concept of morality is removed from politics, what will be left will be gangs of deceivers, fraudsters, looters and the likes. In this regard, it is dangerous to divorce morality from politics so that morality becomes the beacon of politics. To this effect, one won't be wrong to say that without the union of morality with politics, life in the political society would be in the words of Thomas Hobbes, “brutish, nasty, and short”. Human nature will cause man to act against another; though such actions might be claimed to be for self-preservation or defense. Morality is therefore, a watch dog over politics so that politics becomes useful to man and not the reverse.

On the other hand, it is argued that morality and politics have no relationship. It is possible to carry out the art of politics without making recourse to the idea of morality. Here, the notion of 'morality is an unnecessary burden that should be eased off the shoulders of politicians since politics is about choice and consequences which have greater weight on our public life than our private life (Coudy 374). That is why Ramsay puts it that “politics is projected as an autonomous entity that should be free from the constraints and dictates of moral judgments”(103). The position of Niccolo Machiavelli is crucial here. He sees politics as essentially a game of power acquisition and retention. To him, the end justifies the means; that is why he maintained that one should simply ignore morality and use moral or immoral means, provided that one succeeds in the end (Omeregbe 128). A prince (ruler) does not need to be a morally upright man, he does not need to be honest or humane; but he must pretend to be all these and make use of this pretense to achieve his aim. Once the result of an action is good, all the means employed to bring it about are justified (129). However, this would only worsen political situations and life would be tough. Consider that what you may will to be a universal law turns to be harmful to you; would that be sensible? Without morality, politics could only be an entity of people without recourse to the good of human life and dignity. It is just as impossible to separate morality from politics as it is to separate law from politics.

Politics and Morality: The Nigerian Experience

It has been seriously argued that morality and politics are inseparable in that, when they are divorced, the political situation becomes as terrible as the state of nature

expounded by Thomas Hobbes. It may therefore, not be completely surprising to state that politics in Nigeria has been distanced from morality. The illustration of Niccolo Machiavelli on politics and morality has Nigeria as its playground. Machiavelli emphasizes that the two must be separated because politics is all about acquiring power and retaining such, no matter the cost and if joined, morality will hinder politics from achieving its goals.

Politics in Nigeria since independence has generally followed the Machiavellian line of separating politics from morality (Omoregbe 130). We are made to believe that politics and morality do not go together; that once an individual joins politics, morality is to be abandoned hence the popular statement “politics is a dirty game”. This is typical of Nigerian politicians who believe that the best way to be successful in politics is to use immoral means such as those fraudulent ways of winning election, looting public funds, antagonizing opponents among others. Moral virtues such honesty accountability, justice, fairness equality, selflessness are seriously lacking in the political culture of Nigeria and because these seeds of morality are ejected from politics in Nigeria, what we have left are bunch of treasury looters, and selfish politicians with no apology to conscience.

It is important to establish that if politicians weigh the looting of billions of naira (meant for common good of Nigerians) on the scale of utility (utilitarianism), the categorical imperative, the challenges of insecurity, poor infrastructure, lack of access to education by less privileged citizens and poor health care system would be curtailed. Although, a few Nigerian politicians understand that morality is certainly inseparable from politics and the ultimate goal of politics is not just the acquisition of power (by any means possible) but the tendering of service to the people. It is therefore, erroneous to think that the end justifies the means; that one can justifiably use an immoral means to bring about a good end is morally unacceptable. A good end does not justify an immoral means used in bringing it about. Politics in Nigeria therefore, must be united with morality so that politics becomes more useful to all.

Evaluation

A thorough examination of the concepts and relationship between morality and politics presents us with what we can best describe as a mutually enriching and supporting relationship. Although the argument that morality needs to be divorced from politics is completely paralytic; in that politics would no longer be for the happiness or good of man as it would obviously be turned into a field of immorality and it is undeniable that once morality is lacking, respect for human life and dignity would cease. Of what use would politics be to man at this point if it does not satisfy or reflect the aspirations of man such as providing peace and happiness? With particular reference to morality, politics will serve man better. Although knowledge of what is evil might not necessarily prevent one from carrying out the act such intends. To this effect, if a leader proclaims change of attitude towards patriotism among the citizenry, they should practicalize such. People must be prescriptive in acting so that if a judge sentences a government official to jail for stealing

government money, he too must therefore, not in any way, mess with public funds or property. This way, practical politics would be more beneficial and when politics becomes beneficial to all, the democratic principles of equity, rule of law, accountability, fairness, service to humanity among others, would be realized.

Conclusion

The study has established that separating morality from politics renders it blind like a blind man with no staff for direction. The case of Nigeria was examined and it is obvious the resultant effect of dissociating morality from politics is catastrophic and harmful to governance and by extension, to the people governed. In fact, a political society is doomed once this happens. We cannot argue further that morality is the foundation of a peaceful and harmonious society. Without it, justice is far and when it gets to this level, life becomes “brutish, nasty and short” as clearly by Thomas Hobbes. Politicians must therefore, understand that, like Aristotle put it: “every craft has a purpose” and the purpose of politics is for the good of man and therefore, must be reserved for peace and happiness of man in the sociopolitical order.

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