

NEO-ARISTOTELIAN ANALYSIS OF VIRTUE-BASED ETHICS AND THE PROBLEM OF CORRUPTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: Virtue-based ethical theory has been revived by scholars as a challenge to the dominant ethical theories of utilitarianism and Kantianism. Both Plato and Aristotle made contributions to the emergence of this theory but Aristotle is generally regarded as developing the ethical theory which proposed that the virtue of the moral agent should determine the morality of human conduct. Neo-Aristotelian conception of virtue ethics does not fundamentally differ from the major theses of Aristotle's analysis of virtue. This is the case with the views of some of the contemporary supporters of virtue ethics such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre. There are many problems associated with both Aristotle's and neo-Aristotelian's concept of virtue-based ethics. One of the problems is that virtue, on its own, is an insufficient tool for addressing moral problems such as the problem of corruption. The objective of this paper is to analyze virtue-based ethics and its link with the problem of corruption in Nigeria. Based on the analysis of the tenets of virtue-based ethics and the concept of corruption in Nigeria, this paper proposed that the character of the moral agent is merely one of the factors which could determine whether an action is moral or not. The paper concluded that virtue-based ethical theory cannot solve the problem of corruption in Nigeria and that the enactment of proper legislation and strengthening of social and political institutions are necessary in tackling the problem of corruption in Nigeria.

Keywords: Virtue-based ethics, corruption, utility, duty, Kantianism, Neo-Aristotelian virtue-based ethics.

I. Introduction

The origin of the theory of virtue ethics is associated with Aristotle. Many scholars agree that Aristotle's major work on ethics is his book *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle followed Socrates and Plato in arguing that a good action consists in the promotion of virtue. However, Aristotle differed from Socrates and Plato in an important aspect. For Aristotle, the good life is achievable through everyday activities. Thus, the good life is not something that is far-removed from experience or the mundane. In other words, unlike Plato, the good life is attainable without having to go beyond the world of phenomena.

Aristotle stated that a good moral action consists in an activity of the soul in accord with virtue. He also argued that every good action, aims at an end. Based on this view, Uduigwomen (2006:23) states that "Aristotle's ethical theory can be described as teleological because he believes that every human action has a distinctive end to achieve or a function to fulfill". It is not surprising that Aristotle situated ethics within the realm of politics. Even though many aspects of Aristotle's ethics are rooted in Plato, his views tend to resonate with many scholars in the contemporary period with respect to the fact that his views are relevant in the analysis of practical ethical issues. According to Bertrand Russell, Aristotle's ethics "are not like Plato's, impregnated with mystical religion nor do they countenance such unorthodox theories as are to be found in the *Republic* concerning property and the family" (1979:185).

The focus of this paper is on neo-Aristotelian analysis of virtue theory as a tool for addressing the problem of corruption generally and with specific reference to the problem of corruption in Nigerian politics. The relevance of virtue ethical theory can be situated within the context of the limitations of the dominant ethical theories in dealing with important ethical problems. It has been argued in this paper that although virtue ethical theory offers an important new perspective by its analysis of the character of moral agents, it is not without its own limitations.

II. Aristotle's Ethics

Aristotle agreed with Plato that there are two parts of the soul which are the rational and irrational and that there are also two types of virtue – intellectual and moral virtues. The two virtues are linked to the two parts of the soul. For Aristotle, mental activity, which is the highest form of virtue, is only for a privileged few. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued that there is an end to every activity which human beings pursue and that this end is some good. Thus, it is part of human nature to pursue this good which he called happiness. According to him, “happiness, then, is found to be something perfect and self-sufficient, being the end to which our actions are directed” (1907b). In other words, for Aristotle (1098a), “the good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue or if there are more kinds of virtue than one, in accordance with the best and perfect kind”.

The implication from these views is that happiness is based on the cultivation of virtue. In this sense, the cultivation of virtue is a means of attaining happiness which is the ultimate good since it is perfect and does not need anything else. There are, according to Aristotle, intellectual and moral virtues but unlike the former which may be likened to knowledge derived from science, the latter consists of the cardinal virtues which the Greeks recognized as fundamental which include justice, temperance, courage, wisdom, friendship, etc. It should be emphasized that Aristotle believed that virtue is acquired through habit or constant practice even though it is an internal disposition. Furthermore, Aristotle (1129b) argued that justice is the most complete virtue in the fullest sense because “it is the active exercise of complete virtue, and it is complete because its possessor can exercise it in relation to another person and not only for himself”.

Aristotle's conception of justice is related to Plato's conception of human soul as being divisible into parts and also of the society being composed of different classes of people whose functions correspond to the kind of natural disposition they possess. Justice, in this sense, entails individuals carrying out functions which are in accordance with their natural dispositions for the good of the society. These views have rightly been shown to have obnoxious consequences. For example, since contemplation ranks higher than manual labour it follows that only a privileged educated few can attain the highest level of virtue. Thus, it is not unjust to regard people of lower classes as mere property. After all, justice only applies to people of the same class and social harmony is paramount over individual rights. This explains why Aristotle's ethics condoned slavery as this was typical of ancient Greek moral standards and it raises the question of the objective nature of virtue or, its derivative, justice.

The notion of golden mean is another important component of Aristotle's ethics and notion of moral virtue. He believed that since happiness is linked to virtue, it is necessary to strike a balance between different actions. For example, the mean between self-indulgence and being puritanical is temperance while the mean between rashness and cowardice is courage. Lawhead (2006:50) points out that Aristotle recognized that the mean may not be the same for everyone in all circumstances but applauds Aristotle for his recognition that universal and objective principles are always the same but prescribe different actions for different people and in their different circumstances.” This tendency may explain why virtue ethical theory is somehow associated with relativism.

However, in order to determine the mean in a given situation, it is necessary to rely on practical wisdom and this involves prudence and experience. This means that an individual acquires moral virtue through repetition of the corresponding acts. Furthermore, Aristotle argued that the pleasure and pain which are associated with moral acts should serve as test for character. The bottom line is that virtue is not an emotion or a faculty but is acquired through training and habits. It follows that we should cultivate the habit of choosing the mean in every moral situation. Thus, the intermediate virtue between two `extremes is recommended as the virtuous action. It is however, open to question whether every moral situation has an intermediate position. In spite of this misgiving, an interesting fallout of Aristotle's view is that both virtue and vice are voluntary since they have been formed through repeated habits.

The implication is that an individual bears responsibility for all moral choices. It means that every moral agent is a product of habits and repeated actions. The notions of choice and responsibility have become important aspects of moral conducts and decisions and also of legal theory and practice. This means that it is difficult to ignore the influence of Aristotle's virtue moral theory in different spheres of the society. It is true that his notion of virtue contains or raises moral questions but the emphasis was to base ethics on experience. The extent to which this venture has been successful is open to debate but in the contemporary period, the revival of virtue ethical theory

has led to some notifications.

III. Virtue Ethical Theory

In the ancient period, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle treated the significance of virtue in moral conducts and decisions. In different ways, they pointed out that the character of the moral agent should be taken into consideration in determining the morality of an action. As Greg Pence pointed out these three philosophers focused on the traits of character in moral conduct. According to Pence:

For example, Plato's *Republic* described the virtues encountered by democracy, oligarchy, tyranny and meritocracy. Second, they analysed specific virtues such as the "cardinal" (major) ones of courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice... Third, they ranked types of character into five types, ranging from the great-souled men to the moral monster (in Singer, 1993:252).

Pence argued that virtue ethics is a challenge to both utilitarianism and Kantianism. For him, there are important criticisms against utilitarianism which promotes the pleasure of the majority and neglects the interests of the minority. Moreover, there is also a problem with Kantian ethics which claims that we should promote the happiness of others at our own expense. It seems, to Pence, that the character of the moral agent is neglected. The concern of supporters of virtue ethical theory is that the character of the moral agent should be emphasized and not just the moral duty or consequences or utility of an action.

In line with this argument, Peter Singer highlighted the difference between virtue theory and deontological and consequentialist theories. According to Singer (1993: xiii) the difference can be expressed or follows:

Perhaps "what ought I to do?" is the wrong question to ask. We might ask instead: "what kind of person should I be?" Virtue theory focuses on this latter question, and on the virtues that make up good character".

In addition to this distinction between virtue ethics and other ethical theories, there are major themes which occur in different varieties of virtue ethics. Lawhead (2006:495-498) highlighted five major themes which are as follows:

1. Virtues are necessary conditions for human flourishing and well-being.
2. Moral rules are inadequate unless they are grounded in a virtue-based ethics.
3. Judgments about character are more fundamental than judgments about the rightness or wrongness of conduct.
4. Virtue ethics is more comprehensive because it deals with the whole person and not simply the person insofar as he or she performs an action.
5. The key to morality is found in the character of role models.

It is true that supporters of virtue ethics may not support these themes in the same degree but they are important components of virtue ethics, some of them going back to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. As T. M. Furman and M. Avila (1999: 413) stated, "virtue ethics is a character-based ethics which holds that moral actions are right and good in so far as they flow from virtuous characters; bad or wrong actions are the results of vices or vicious characters". This shows why Aristotle contributed immensely to the history of virtue ethics because he "used human nature to determine the good life (Mautner, 2000:43).

In the contemporary period, two scholars have contributed significantly in the revival of virtue ethical theory. These are Elizabeth G.E.M. Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre. In Anscombe's view, expressed in some of her works, historical notions of morality are no longer applicable or even intelligible even though these notions have continued to survive in the analysis of moral actions. These views were expressed in some of her works which include *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1958), *Intention* (1957), *Essays in Human Life, Action and Ethics* (2005). She argued that it was necessary to drop off the moral terms which were carryovers of earlier times for new ones which would be more relevant in the analysis of ethical issues.

Anscombe argued that the old moral clichés like “morally wrong”, “obligation” “ought”, “duty”, etc, needed to be replaced with more relevant terms which would reflect an analysis of human nature with respect to the character of the moral agent not based on legal and religious terminologies. In Anscombe’s view, “concepts of obligation and duty – moral obligation and moral duty, that is to say – and of what is morally right and wrong, and of the moral sense of ‘ought’ ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible” (1958:2). Anscombe further asserts that “there is a huge gap, at present unbillable, as far as we are concerned, which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human flourishing”. (1958:41).

From Anscombe’s views, it can be stated that she expanded the scope of virtue-based ethics beyond that of Aristotle but still agreed with Aristotle that human nature should form the foundation for evaluating the morality of an action. Her views, therefore, represent an attack on the old dominant ethical theories of deontology and consequentialism. However, she recognized the difficulty of replacing the old terminologies which formed part of ethical discourse right from the ancient period.

Alasdair MacIntyre’s contribution to virtue-based ethics is as interesting as that of Anscombe. While he borrowed the concept of good based on a set of virtues as postulated by Aristotle, he tended to be concerned with the role of the moral agent in a tradition or story. MacIntyre was of the view that “to act virtuously, is not as Kant was later to think, to act against inclination; it is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues” (1981:175). Moreover, MacIntyre agreed with Aristotle’s view that “a virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods” (1981:191).

Although MacIntyre did not develop a better ethical theory than Aristotle, he has contributed to its contemporary resurgence with focus on the nature or character of the moral agent and not on the obligation or consequence of an action. In other words, MacIntyre argues that virtue ethical theory provides an answer to the conception of meaningful life. This view is in consonance with Pence’s analysis of MacIntyre’s position. There are recent works which deal with virtue ethics. They include David McPherson’s book *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective* (1002), Paul Woodruff’s book *Living Toward Virtue: Practical Ethics in the Spirit of Socrates* (2023); and Nancy F. Snow’s *Contemporary Virtue Ethics* (2020).

The importance of these works and other recent ones is that virtue ethical theory is now considered a legitimate ethical theory worthy of serious consideration in the analysis of moral actions. It is no longer sufficient to argue on what we ought to do or the principles or consequences of moral actions. Virtue ethics demands that the character of the moral agent must count when a moral action or decision is being assessed. This demand, I think, is not unwarranted without losing sight of the challenges of virtue ethical theory itself.

IV. Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

The notion of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethical theory deals with contemporary views of scholars on the subject. Some of the scholars who fall within this scope include Elizabeth Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre, Philippa Foot, Rosaline Hursthouse, and Julia Annas. Although these scholars have attempted to offer new narratives on the subject their views are primarily derived from Aristotle’s view that the morality of an action must be based on virtue or the character of the moral agent. Thus, the views of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethical theorists can be summarized as follows:

The good person is not the one who performs good actions but good actions are defined as those that a person with a good moral character would do (Lawhead, 2006:412).

Lawhead’s view is true both of Aristotle and recent virtue ethical theories. As Pence correctly pointed out, virtue ethical theory has undergone changes or modifications from its use in the ancient period. David Papineau states that contemporary virtue theory is different from ancient virtue theory by its tendency to relate virtue to its social and temporary setting. According to Papineau (2004: 154).

Both Plato and Aristotle offered a universalistic account of human good... The version of virtue theory now favoured by a number of writers reverses these underlying assumptions, seeking to locate morality in a tradition... The topics that modern virtue theories explore include: how far are individuals responsible for their own character? Is there just one main virtue or several irreducible ones? And how are such notions as friendship, integrity, forgiveness, loyalty, shame, and remorse to be understood?

The difference that Papineau highlights does not detract from the fundamental assumption of virtue-based ethics that the morality of an action should be based on an analysis of human nature in order to determine the role the character of the moral agent plays in a moral action. It is true that Aristotelian notion of virtue had traces of universalistic account of human good but he also founded ethics on experience and also subordinated ethics to politics. Thus, to an extent Aristotle's virtue-based ethics contains some traits of relativism because of social differences which are related to training and education. This explains why Pence (in Singer, 1993:256), stated that virtue ethics "studies how different kinds of societies encourage different virtues and vices". This raises the question, for Pence, of whether character is fixed. This question arises because if character is fixed, it is difficult to change or modify it to promote virtuous behavior.

This issue has not been satisfactorily settled for it is connected to the controversy or debate about the status of nature and nurture. Scholars have tended to defend one or the other and they have gone ahead to construct educational theories based on their positions. The implication is that although it is useful to analyze the role that character plays there might be no guarantee that it might not be tainted based on wrong training or indoctrination; or based on cultural notions of virtue and vice.

V. Virtue Ethics and the Moral Problem of Corruption in Nigeria

Chinua Achebe (1983:1) stated categorically that "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership". Since Achebe made this declaration in 1983, it is difficult to say with a straight face that the situation has changed for the better in Nigeria in terms of the quality of leadership with respect to the problem of corruption which is manifested in the form of public-centered corruption. There are arguments that corruption is rampant in Nigeria because of several reasons going back to Nigeria's colonial history and also the fact that at independence from Britain in 1960 the new nation-state comprised different sub-national groups at different level of educational, political, cultural and economic sophistication and development. Indeed, the different political actors viewed their counterparts from different regions with a high level of mutual suspicion. This mutual distrust which has led to a civil war and several coups has not dissipated.

I have argued somewhere else (Anyim, 2021:1) "that there is a link between negative ethnic consciousness and public-centred corruption in Nigeria". Transparency International has consistently listed Nigeria as a very corrupt country. Indeed, its definition of corruption "as the misuse of power for private benefit is apt as it applies to Nigeria. Although there are different classifications of corruption by scholars, the focus in this section is to highlight the fact that public-centred corruption which is perpetrated by political leaders is at the core.

Several factors are responsible for this scenario but this section of the paper focuses on analysis of corruption from the perspective of virtue-based ethics. Since many scholars have identified poor leadership as fueling corruption in Nigeria the question that arises is whether an analysis of the character of political leaders will help to throw light on the issue in order to minimize it. Looking back at Aristotle's and neo-Aristotelian's notion of virtue, it can be stated that the deficit in the cultivation of necessary virtues such as integrity, honesty, transparency and justice has exacerbated the level of corruption in Nigeria. If we follow the classical Aristotelian analysis of human nature, it could be argued that leaders are supposed to possess virtuous dispositions which they had acquired through habits and repeated moral activities.

Since Aristotle subsumed ethics under politics, it is difficult to imagine how Nigerian political leaders can overcome the temptation to be corrupt bearing in mind that their perception of corruption is coloured by sub-national consciousness and prejudice. In other words, although corruption, as defined by Transparency International, involves the misuse of power for private benefit some political leaders interpret this to mean that it

is not corruption if the misuse of power is not for their personal gain but for the benefit of their sub-national group, tribe, region or state of origin. Indeed, a former Nigerian President, who claimed not to have engaged in misuse of power for private benefit was accused of giving political, judicial, and economic leverage to his region and also turned a blind eye to allegation of massive corruption perpetrated by political leaders from his region, tribe and religion.

The implication is that the character of this former Nigerian President was shaped by the kind of virtues that his cultural and religious background he was brought up. Thus, the virtues of justice, honesty, truth, integrity, etc, apply differently in the sense of sub-national interests being more important than those of the nation-state or country. This is a carry-over from the colonial and post-colonial era which left behind some negative legacies. As Timothy Sisk (in Sodaro, 2001:813) pointed out “colonialism’s legacies are thus pervasive throughout Africa some fifty years after the system of domination began to crumble”. These legacies cut across every facet of the Nigerian society. This is the Nigerian experience where the distinction between virtue and vice is determined by sub-national or ethnic loyalties and prejudices.

There have been efforts to mitigate or eliminate corruption in Nigeria through the establishment of anti-corruption agencies and National Orientation and Attitudinal Agencies at the national and state levels. Some progress is being made but a high level of corruption persists because the benefits are humongous and punitive measures are weak and do not serve as deterrence.

VI. Evaluation

Aristotle attempted to give ethics an empirical foundation by his view that moral virtue consists in habit and repetitive moral acts. This is the reason that some scholars have pointed out that Aristotle and Plato proposed a universalistic account of human good. However, Aristotle also admitted that particular circumstances could determine whether an action was morally right or wrong. This admission of some form of relativism weakens some of the element of virtue-based ethics whether in its classical form or the neo-Aristotelian variants. In a sense, it shows that virtue and vice may be interpreted subjectively. This is not necessarily a bad thing and it shows that character is shaped by both empirical and subjective experiences.

The concept of justice, which Aristotle proposed as the cardinal virtue is difficult to swallow because it promotes actions and practices which, in the contemporary period, would be regarded as immoral actions. For example, the Greek society of Aristotle’s time validated slavery as it saw justice as a virtue in terms of equals. This validation was based on the view that individuals are born with different natural dispositions which determine the kind of vocation they are suited to perform. This elitist theory is pernicious and, if it is allowed, could lead to leaders not being accountable to the populace. In Nigeria, for example, one political leader whose tribe and religion had benefited from political patronage opined that the major tribes in Nigeria had been naturally ordained to perform different roles for the harmony of the country: the core North should have political power, the South-West should be culturally disposed to function in diplomacy and the South-East should be restricted to commerce.

This level of cultural or ethnic chauvinism exists and is a fallout of both Plato’s and Aristotle’s ethics. It does not conduce to building of good moral character but promotes unjust domination of one group by another. This naturally leads to ethnic tension and promotes corruption as component regions struggle to provide political and economic benefits to their particular ethnic or social groups. In spite of these misgivings regarding virtue-based ethics, Russell had argued that there is an internal consistency in Aristotle’s ethics. In his view, every ethical theory, including Aristotle’s, needs to respond to the following three questions:

- (1) Is it internally self-consistent?
- (2) Is it consistent with the remainder of the author’s views?
- (3) Does it give answers to ethical problems that are consonant to our own ethical feelings? If the answer to either the first or second questions is in the negative, the philosopher in question has been guilty of some intellectual error. But if the answer to the third question is in the negative, we have no right to say that he is mistaken: we have only the right to say that we do not like him (1979:195).

Following from Russell's view that there is an internal consistency in Aristotle's ethics, my view, therefore, is that I reject some of the consequences of his ethics. It is unacceptable to accept that some individuals are born with natural dispositions which automatically give them the right to rule over others. Moreover, although social harmony is important, it should not be the basis for denying offers of their natural rights. If Aristotle claims that moral virtue is a product of habits and repetitive actions, it should follow that the society should provide opportunities for all citizens to "flourish". The notion of flourishing is not entirely in the neo-Aristotelian sense but in the sense of consciously formulating rules which allow equal opportunities to all member of the society irrespective of their social backgrounds. Injustice occurs if the reverse is the case.

With respect to the problem of corruption, virtue-based ethics has a limited chance of solving the problem. It is true that the character of political leaders needs to be thoroughly assessed but the country has weak institutions. Corruption buys influence politically, economically, and socially. The moral virtues of the political leaders is shaped by a sense of entitlement to natural resources and spoils of office. For this reason, it is not enough to be concerned with the character of individuals in power. As Aristotle also recognized, the circumstances of societies may be different and, thus, require unique measures which go beyond the assessment of character.

VII. Conclusion

Virtue-based ethics has become a legitimate ethical theory. This means that it is helping to enrich ethics by its demand that human nature should be taken into consideration in the analysis of moral actions and decisions. Aristotle's notion of virtue-based ethics appeals to commonsense and has some form of internal consistency. Although he attempted to present a universal account of morality, he also recognized that the application of his ethical theory might be influenced by social circumstances. It should be pointed out there are many difficulties with both Aristotle's and neo-Aristotelian concept of virtue – based ethics.

Neo-Aristotelian ethics theory has tried to overcome some of these difficulties by offering different narratives which are modifications of Aristotle's original views. However, these modifications are still based on Aristotle's major views which include that: moral virtue determines the morality of an action; character is a product of habit and repetitive action; there are cardinal virtues of which justice is fundamental; moral decision should be based on experience, etc. In contemporary ethical language, we could say that virtue-based ethics rejects the notions of utility and duty as the foundations for judging the morality of human conduct. One of the challenges of virtue-based ethics is that its application may be relative to different cultural settings as the notions of virtue and vice may be viewed differently.

In this paper, I have pointed out that the demand of virtue-based ethics that character is an important factor in determining the morality of human conduct is laudable. However, it is not very relevant in some societies and in addressing some social problems such as that of corruption. The paper used corruption as an example where virtue-based ethics will not be adequate in solving moral problems. This is because the character of many Nigeria political leaders is shaped not just by habits and repeated moral acts but also by sub-national cultural interests. Thus, although there is no harm in assessing the character of leaders; what is required is the enactment of legislation which ensures that impunity will be punished severely. This approach may have a desirable impact in Nigeria and even help to build better character among citizens. The implication, therefore, is that in addressing moral problems such as corruption the moral notions of duty and utility may still be relevant depending on the society and the circumstances.

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