

IS MORALITY AN ILLUSION?

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ABSTRACT

For well over two millennia, philosophers and theologians assumed that morality presupposed compliance to a set of ideals used for the regulation of human conduct, in consideration for other individuals with whom a moral agent shared his or her social space. Accordingly, ethical inquiry was pursued with the primary aim of discovering these ideals. Beginning from the second half of the 19th century, however, Charles Darwin (1871) redefined morality as an innate trait evolved by biological organisms in their struggle for existence in otherwise hostile primordial environments. Subsequent moral theory, fed by the naturalistic temper of post-modernism, and its new conception of freedom, developed an individualist ethics, whereby morality is to be left at the discretion of the individual. The assumption is that each individual can only automatically elicit the appropriate behaviour as the need arises, owing to their biological moral constitution endowed by natural selection. This has, to a very large extent, made Western ethical theorists to focus, rather narrowly, on the biological explanation of the evolutionary mechanisms of moral behaviour, viewing human morality as a biological illusion prompted by genes. This paper addresses this issue through the re-examination of the meaning of morality, as well as that of ethics. It explored and delineated some basic indices that it considered essential for proper characterisation of human morality. It argued that, under any judicious reckoning, morality, being a phenomenon that fundamentally arises and goes on in the concrete daily concerns of humans, is a factor that gives human existence and interaction its meaning. As such, morality, adequately conceptualized and understood within its social context and framework, is not an illusion. This connection is to be taken into cognizance for ethical inquiry to remain a worthwhile exertion.

KEYWORDS: Ethics; evolutionary biology; human; illusion; moral reasoning.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary evolutionary ethicists, whether as inner-chamber biologists, or as sideline philosophers and sociologists, have been unanimous in their view of human morality and moral sentiment as an illusion brought on by the genetic history of human evolution. Darwin himself has been consistent in all his writings with this suggestion (Allhoff, 2003:86). In this estimation, morality is simply an inducement produced by the genes to make humans cooperate. As such, morality has no referent beyond the biological constitution, or make-up, of living organisms, including humans. The belief that it has such a referent is simply an illusion designed by the forces of evolution to make humans cooperate

with one another for corporate survival (Ruse, 2006).

Evolutionary depiction of the origin and development of human moral sentiments precludes the notion of moral authority, placing the (moral) imperative entirely at the discretion of the individual, while paying only negligible attention to the social dimension of morality. This paper advocates a reformulation of the concepts of morality and ethics in such a way as to account for this essential human and social element of morality. It persuades that moral discourse needs to address the question of how human societies may be smoothly run. But evolutionary ethics is, to a large extent, individualistically oriented; it is an attempt to deconstruct the idea of moral *authority*. In practice, however, no known human

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society has ever thrived on the principle that its citizens, being moral beings, should individually determine for themselves the basis of social action. Rather, social organisations are built on rules, not on the assumption that individuals—as a matter of biological necessity—will always do what is right.

The crux and logic of the evolutionary position

Starting from the Preface of his book, *The Myth of Morality* (2003:ix), Richard Joyce unequivocally makes the point that moral discourse is “fundamentally flawed.” For him, moral beliefs and judgments are myths, and can, at best, be treated as “fictions” if one is to be free from the “error” inherent in them. He writes:

Roughly, when one reflects carefully on what it would take for an action to instantiate a property like *being morally forbidden*, one sees that too much is being asked of the world – there is simply nothing that is forbidden in the specifically moral sense of the word. The thought that morality is a fiction in this way is hardly an original thought, enjoying a long history... (*ibid.*; original emphasis).

Natural selection is, as Joyce sees things, fully responsible for deceiving humans in this way. Having evolved in such a way as to categorise certain aspects of their world using moral concepts, humans are, thus, led by natural selection to commit this fundamental, systematic mistake, “invest[ing] the world with values that it does not contain, demands which it does not make” (*ibid.*:135).

In the same vein, Michael Ruse (1986:102) argues that “morality has no philosophically objective foundation. It is just an illusion, fobbed off on us to promote biological ‘altruism’.” Ruse compares human moral belief to the consolation some parents drew from having recourse to spiritualism in the period immediately after the First World War. In those days, parents of deceased soldiers would consult Ouija spiritualism, which, in their erroneous belief, enabled them to communicate with their deceased son, who purportedly told them that all was well with him in the land of the dead. In the same way, moral feelings are found in the subjective nature of human psychology, having exactly the same status as the terror, or the fear, which we some-

times feel at the unknown aspects of human experience. According to Ruse:

In a sense, therefore, the evolutionist’s case is that ethics is a collective illusion of the human race, fashioned and maintained by natural selection in order to promote individual reproduction (*ibid.*).

However, the objectification of morality is part and parcel of human moral evolution; it is part of the trick employed by natural selection to achieve its blind ‘goals’. After all, unless morality is believed to be binding, it would never have any effect on humans; and society would break down. “It is precisely because we think that morality is more than mere subjective desires, that we are led to obey it” (*ibid.*:103).

In conformity to this last point of Ruse, Richard Dawkins (2007:253) refers to human moral belief and behavioural tendencies as “misfirings, Darwinian mistakes: blessed, precious mistakes.” Using the allegory of the ‘selfish gene’, Dawkins (1976/2006:ix) proposes that in behaving morally, humans are actually propagating their genetic materials into the distant future. More precisely, human moral sentiments, even when outwardly expressed towards kin and close relatives, is, biologically speaking, an effort to enhance the fitness of one’s family members. Thus, the individual may die; but her offspring and other family members surviving her are, so to say, carriers of the same genetic materials in her, and so, would naturally carry these genes on to the next generations. Humans, as such, are merely ‘vehicles’ in which the genes replicate and preserve themselves onward. According to Dawkins (2007:251), moral evolution took four different routes: genetic kinship; reciprocation: the repayment of favours given, and the giving of favours in ‘anticipation’ of payback; the benefit of acquiring a reputation for generosity and kindness; and the benefit of “conspicuous generosity as a way of buying unfakeably authentic advertising.”

In their seminal paper, Michael Ruse and Wilson (1986/2006:560) also argued that human morality is simply an illusion produced by genes. For them, “human beings ... are deceived by their genes into thinking that there is a disinterested objective morality binding upon them, which all should obey.” Humans are subject to certain ‘epigenetic rules’ that predispose them to adopt certain behaviours and reject others, giving the illusion of objective morality. Morality “depends upon the value people place upon them-

selves, as opposed to their imagined rulers in the realms of the supernatural and the eternal" (*ibid.*:567).

But what is the logic in all this? People whose moral claims, beliefs, principles and actions are based on divine revelation, or some other transcendental element, naturally appeal to such as the source of the authority of their moral persuasions, or convictions. Since the deity has commanded certain courses of action and prohibited others, morality may be hinged on the fact that belief in the deity automatically implies obedience and compliance to what it commands. Similarly, philosophers who view morality as having emanated from human social conventions and culture tend to appeal to these things as sources of moral authority, which would then be binding on all rational individuals in the society, whether universally or locally, who are expected to recognise the need not only of protecting the common good, but even more fundamentally, of maintaining, order, harmony and civility. These options, however, are closed to the evolutionary theorists, whose self-given mandate has, so far, been to render a purely biological account of the nature and origin of human moral sentiments (Curry, 2005:11f.). For them, morality derives from the inherent biological nature of living organisms. This is because, as Ruse and Wilson (2006:566) put it, "No abstract moral principles exist outside the particular nature of individual species. ... Morality is rooted in contingent human nature, through and through." This, and similar considerations, thus, make it superfluous to talk about some universal, external moral principles which are binding, or authoritative, on humankind. This idea of the nature of morality advocated by the evolutionary theorists is reminiscent of the doctrine favoured by the late philosopher, J.L. Mackie (1977). It is regarded by moral theorists as a variant of moral scepticism under the label of "error theory" (see Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006:10).

The meanings of morality and ethics

All through the history of thought, morality and ethics have been of deep interest to humans. In scholarly and pedestrian discussions alike, these issues have received widespread and vigorous attention in the form of debates. The reason is that morality and ethics deal not just with how people live their lives and how they actually behave, but also with what they ought to do, or ought not to do (Rachels, 1995:1). As with most matters of scholarly interest, however, the

innumerable attempts to define morality or describe its meaning has proved inconclusive. This made some scholars to submit that all the foregoing attempts to proffer a precise meaning of morality have been an exercise in futility (Whiteley, 1970). Christine Battersby (1978:214), for example, argues that the concept of morality, both in terms of *definition* and in terms of "examples of morality," is replete with all kinds of difficulties, and, therefore, renders untenable philosophical evaluations and justifications of moral beliefs and practices. For Battersby:

[I]t would seem to be over-optimistic of philosophers to expect to provide a generally accepted list of necessary and sufficient conditions which have to be satisfied in order to class a rule, an action, or a society as 'moral'. It would seem useful to spell out some of the more commonly accepted paradigms of morality—particularly those used by anthropologists in 'reporting' on other cultures. But to hope to adjudicate between these conflicting paradigms, and say that one is correct and another incorrect, would seem a hopeless task (*ibid.*).

Albeit, we do not subscribe to the suggestion that it is not possible to give an acceptable characterisation of morality. That, precisely, is our set objective in the present discussion. We take it for granted that morality is a phenomenon found in the reality of human social existence, and used by humans to foster meaningfulness and harmony in their corporate and social existence. To this end, our aim in this paper is a modest one: To undertake a conceptual analysis of ethics and morality. An exploration of the indices that define morality will certainly provide the basis for a better characterisation and visualisation of this phenomenon. To know what morality demands, it is necessary to understand what it is in essence. As such, the purpose of our bird's eye view approach in this section is to achieve some basic understanding of morality. This we consider to be a *sine qua non* for deciphering what morality requires of us, which, in the words of James Rachels (*ibid.*:13), is "to do what there are the best reasons for doing—while giving equal weight to the interests of each individual" in society. We believe that appreciating this basic factor is indispensable not only in human social existence, but also for a meaningful ethical theorising.

According to the 20th century analytic philosopher, Kai Nielsen (1967:117):

[T]here is no uncontroversial Archimedean point from which ethics can be characterised, for the nature and proper office of ethics is itself a hotly disputed philosophical problem.

Today, nearly half a century after Nielsen penned these words, the search for such an "Archimedean point" remains, to say the least, a daunting task for the moral philosopher. The familiar grounds on which this age-old issue had been discussed have come under vigorous attack in the works of frontline evolutionary biologists (Wilson, 1975; Dawkins, 1976/2006; Tancredi, 2005), and other crops of naturalists (Ruse, 1986; Dennett, 1995; Ruse and Wilson, 2006). As such, one cannot but wonder about the right place to start and, in fact, how to proceed. This sense of loss is even more forcefully felt considering the fact that the very essence or necessity of morality is now being seriously challenged (see Joyce, 2003:135; Dawkins, 2007:253). The naturalistic temper of contemporary inquiry has, to this extent, taken metaphysical considerations out of moral discourse. As Robert Burns (2007:15) rhetorically avers:

The potential unavailability of metaphysical foundations raises a question of how one who wishes to give an account of morality in our age should proceed. Must he first accept the end of the metaphysical era, the unavailability of the old foundations, and then start over, providing a new understanding of morals and politics either by refounding morality in the contemporary selection of terms or abandoning foundations altogether? ... Alternatively, is metaphysics ... indispensable to morality? Rather than give up on the discarded language of metaphysics, must the would-be moralist struggle to recover it?

This state of affairs seems to be, at least, partly responsible for the persuasion that morality is relative (Levy, 2002:3). But this apparent confusion may be resolved by distinguishing between what a person thinks is moral and what morality actually is. This is because a description of someone's moral beliefs, or a contrast of one person's moral beliefs with another's, is not an answer to the question of what morality essentially is, even though different beliefs may be given

as examples. It would be, instead, an answer to the question, "What do you (or some other persons) think is moral?"

Be that as it may, one possible way to approach the question of morality is, perhaps, by concentrating, as Emmett Barcalow (1994:2) has done, on the essential question: "What makes a thing a moral issue?" An important feature of morality is that it serves as a guide to action. It is a practical phenomenon in which decisions are made. Because of this, moral decisions concern those human actions involving responsibility and choice. It is when people have possible alternatives to their actions that we can judge those actions as either (morally) good or bad (Searle, 1984:772; Cline, 2012:par. 12). Moral issues concern both behaviour and character, especially where other people are involved (Barcalow, *ibid.*:2f.). But it may be asked: Is every form of choice and decision-making necessarily of a moral nature?

Let us imagine, for example, that a man needs to decide which of two different shirts to buy. He could decide to buy either of them, or even both of them, so long as he can afford them. Apart from some casual remarks which may be made about colour preferences, his choices, strictly speaking, do not affect anyone's well-being in any (morally) significant way. Again, imagine that one has to choose which of three cities to relocate to. Whatever choice one makes would be based purely on personal considerations and not necessarily on someone else's moral approval or disapproval. In the same vein, decisions about whether to drink tea or coffee, whether to go to the movie or attend a concert, whether to watch television or simply listen to the radio, etc., ordinarily raise no moral issues (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, decisions about whether to deal on drugs for pecuniary gains, cause or start a fight in a bar or street, drive while intoxicated, appropriate another person's property without his/her consent, etc., do indeed raise moral issues. A boy's decision to rape a girl or beat her up, to cheat in an examination, to mislead others by a well crafted falsehood, etc., all definitely raise moral problems. In what way, then, can one distinguish between moral and nonmoral issues? What gives a moral character to an issue?

Whether a person buys a blue or red shirt, relocates to Lagos or Abuja, drinks tea or coffee, and goes to the cinema or watches the TV, does not affect any other person's well-being in itself. Ordinarily, none of these alternatives

constitutes a threat or harm to any other person's or group of persons' well-being, unless a different circumstance, of a different nature, is built into the consideration. For instance, the blue or red shirt may be preferred because it is a mark of involvement with the occult, or some other group whose activities threaten social peace and security; or, perhaps, one is relocating to another city to abdicate his or her family responsibilities. Apart from these considerations, none of the choices necessarily benefits nor harms other persons. Therefore, they cannot be said to raise any moral concerns in themselves. On the other hand, a boy's decision to rape or beat up a girl, instead of protecting her, to sell drugs, or fake a company's products to make money, and his preference for a lie instead of the truth, are all states of affairs that would affect someone's well-being. Therefore, they are moral issues (*ibid.*). We may conclude, then, that in so far as anyone's well-being is enhanced or diminished in an issue or a state of affairs, that issue or a state of affairs automatically translates into a moral one. As such, moral issues arise ultimately, or most fundamentally, when the choices people face will definitely or, at least, likely affect the well-being of anyone, whether in the person of the moral agent or that of others, by decreasing or increasing it (Barcalow, *ibid.*: 3).

Some philosophers have applied this argument to lower animals (See Regan and Singer, 1976).

Another way to approach the morality question is by drawing a tacit conceptual distinction between *morality* and *ethics*, terms which have often been employed synonymously. However, there is a clear-cut distinction between them. This distinction is very important to us because a philosopher has to be precise in his or her use of words, and cannot be content with only their ordinary use. This is due to the nature of the philosophical enterprise itself, in which making ideas stand out as clearly as possible is of paramount importance. Language and concepts are the philosopher's primary tool, as the laboratory is that of the natural scientist, for instance (Alston, 1967:386).

Properly defined morality, refers to the standards of conduct normally required of members of a group or a society, while ethics refers to the formal or systematic study of the nature of morality (Rachels, *ibid.*). For this reason, philosophical ethics is also often referred to as "moral philosophy," i.e., a philosophical investigation or

exploration of moral issues and ideas in general, and human morality in particular. But morality is antecedent to ethics in that it denotes those concrete activities of which ethics is the science. For if moral problems did not arise from how people actually live in society, their expectations and failures, the ethicist would probably have no subject matter of much interest to work on. Thus, morality seems somewhat confined in the realm of practice, while ethics is largely theoretical. To this end, when moral philosophers say that someone is morally good, they usually mean to say that the individual's actions are commendable or praiseworthy (Johnson, 1989:2).

On the other hand, philosophers do not ordinarily say that a person is an ethically good person; rather, they say that a person is a good ethicist, meaning primarily that the person's theories about morality are well articulated and, so, are worthy of serious consideration (*ibid.*). Thus, the interest of the ethicist is basically theoretical: he is trying to understand the basic principles of a given subject matter of morality. But the interest of the moralist is purely practical, in that he tries to help people become better human beings by caring about them. From this point of view, both the biblical Jesus and the Buddha may be taken as typical examples of good moralists.

In other words, while ethics is more or less a generic term for various ways of understanding and examining the moral life; while, in its most familiar sense, morality refers to norms about right and wrong human conduct and values which, because they are socially shared, have become stable constructs and, therefore, conventions (Beauchamp and Childress, 2001:1ff.). Hence, the tendency of traditional moral philosophers to analyse the morality of human conduct against the backdrop of some ideal moral standard. This idea of the ideal standard governing our free actions is sometimes considered to essentially relate to the human race. Although there are widely divergent theories of morality and ethics, there seems to be agreement among humans in some fundamental areas of public morality.

Some basic defining indices of human morality

Despite Edmund Gettier's (1963:121-123) renowned attack on the notion of *knowledge* as "justified true belief," epistemologists have continued to incorporate the concept of *belief* into epistemological discourse (see Alston, 1998). This is apparently because Gettier's challenge

primarily succeeded in showing that an adequate characterisation of “knowledge” requires some other factor(s) beyond belief, truth and justifiability. In other words, these three criteria are, in fact, insufficient in themselves for rightful establishment of knowledge claims. Thus, although they are not sufficient conditions, they are, at least necessary ones. As such, Gettier’s work need not be taken as having logically ruled out the roles of belief, truth and justification in the proper understanding of knowledge, but as pointing out the need for some further or additional condition(s). Contemporary epistemologists rightly realised the oddity, under normal circumstances, of the following statements:

- (1) I *know* that the Earth is spherical in shape, although I *do not believe* it;
- (2) James *is aware* that Washington is the capital of the United States, but *thinks it is untrue*; and
- (3) Clare *knows* that the elephant is the largest mammal, even when *there is no supportive evidence* for that.

In (1) above, the sentence seems nonsensical because of the absurdity of *knowing* the truth of something and yet *not believing* it. This is the same problem with (2), which also depicts the absurdity of someone *being aware* of some fact, and yet *thinking* it is untrue at the same time. But (3) is even more absurd in another epistemologically interesting way: the unintelligibility of knowing something one has no iota of evidence for. It is in this way that the three conditions of belief, truth and justifiedness remain the necessary, but not sufficient, conditions of knowledge. To this extent, then, it seems evident that these three conditions are, in a way, still important in any proper characterisation of knowledge in epistemological discourse, though they are inadequate in themselves. But being inadequate is something altogether distinct from being absolutely irrelevant or unnecessary.

This is, to a very considerable extent, exactly what has happened with regard to the defining characteristics of morality. Although these characteristics have each been deemed inadequate by moral philosophers, one may still make a case for their importance in facilitating the intelligibility of the concept of morality in ethical discourse. Some of these features have been identified as follows: universalisability (Levy, *ibid.*:120), prescriptivity (Woolcock, 1999:280), overriding importance (Wallace and Walker, 1970:8ff.), the ability to command or influence

behaviour (Frankena, *ibid.*) and the categorical attribute, etc.

a. Universalisability

Moral rules and principles are said to be universalisable in that if a moral principle is rationally applied to any person or group at all, then it becomes a universal imperative which can be applied to everyone else in the world who is exactly in the same circumstance or similarly situated. Take, for instance, the moral judgment, “Killing is wrong”; unless there are differing circumstances, like self-defense, war or other controversial circumstances, like euthanasia, and abortion (when the mother’s life or health is at risk), or such other hypothetical circumstances in which more innocent lives are at stake (Hauser *et al.*, 2007:6), it seems to be widely agreed that there is no justification for killing. Thus, if such a moral judgment is accepted at all, it would be true for all people. Hence, accepting that killing is wrong, in a way, commits me to accepting that it is wrong also for me, or anyone else, to kill.

The basic idea that moral principles apply to everyone in the sense that everyone has a duty in that direction was, of course, championed by Kant in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* (1785/1953:70), where he gave the famous **universal law** formulation, the first of the two categorical imperative theses, as: “Act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” But this was further developed by R.M. Hare (1952, 1963), whose reformulation is called Universal Prescriptivism and, according to Wallace and Walker (1970:8), runs as follows:

[I]f I maintain that morally I ought to do X, then I am committed to maintaining that morally anyone else ought to do X unless there are relevant differences between the other person and myself and/or between his situation and mine.

Thus, according to the universalisability thesis, for a moral principle to be meaningful, it must apply equally to everyone and be taken rather seriously by all those involved in the same social group and particular situation. Otherwise, it will not work. In other words, it should not just apply to only a few members of a given group who are exactly circumstanced as everyone else within that group; otherwise, such a group would hardly thrive.

To get a clearer understanding of this idea, imagine a group in which there is a tacit understanding that members must not steal as a matter of moral principle; imagine further that some members of the group do observe this moral rule, while others steal with impunity. Now, Kant would think—as would Hare, and rightly so—that it would be, *ab initio*, wrong for us to ascribe to that group, as a whole, the property of having a moral principle of not stealing, because the commitment is not even there in the first place. Although it is true that some members of the group have gone on to observe the moral code of desisting from stealing, they do so as individuals and from personal conviction, and not because of a social sanction or group requirement. Therefore, for morality or moral principles to be said to exist at all in any social group, there can be no *undue* exceptions in its range of applicability, as long as all are equally circumstanced. They must apply with equal force to all and sundry, without discrimination, so that even if people infringe on them, there must be some sort of social control that will, in all earnestness, serve to rectify the anomaly. For Hare, therefore, applying moral judgments in this way to only a few within a group, under the same circumstances, culminates in a logical contradiction. Hare (1991:456) goes further to explain this idea:

One cannot with logical consistency, where *a* and *b* are two individuals, say that *a* ought, in a certain situation specified in universal terms without reference to individuals, to act in a certain way, also specified in universal terms, but that *b* ought not to act in a similarly specified situation. This is because in any 'ought' statement there is implicitly a principle which says that the statement applies to all precisely similar situations. This means that if I say, 'That is what ought to be done; but there could be a situation exactly like this one in its non-moral properties, but in which the corresponding person, who was exactly like the person who ought to do it in this situation, ought not to do it' I contradict myself. This would become even clearer if I specified my reasons for saying why it ought to be done: 'It ought to be done because it was a promise,' and there were no conflicting duties.

Imagine giving a general rule which is actually applied to only a few and not to others

when, in fact, all are exactly in the same circumstance. This conclusion, it will be realised, seems logically necessary because in the Kantian account, morality is an obligation, rather than a choice. It is a duty; and the idea of 'duty' involves that of commitment. In ordinary life situations, if people have a duty to perform, they simply perform it, because the concept of duty also involves a sense of dedication and, to some considerable extent, of loyalty.

However, the criterion of universalisability has been deemed inadequate for defining the terms 'moral' and 'morality'. According to Wallace and Walker, the thesis of universalisability is only a necessary condition, not a sufficient one, due to the simple fact that there are several other principles which can be universalised, and yet have nothing to do with morality (Wallace and Walker, *ibid.*:9). For example, it is a universal principle to sit down first on an iron, or wooden, chair before stretching out and relaxing back, otherwise a person runs the risk of hitting her head, or wounding herself in some other unforeseeable way.

Further, MacIntyre (1970:30) also argues, against Hare's thesis, that there are some cases in which moral imperatives do not necessarily commit us to the universalisation of moral principles. For example, it does not make sense to assert that a moral hero—a person who does more than duty or morality demands—did what he, or anyone else, ought to have done. Also, a person facing the moral dilemma of either taking care of his immediate family or going off to join forces to fight the enemy, during a war time, can freely choose any of these options without necessarily having to legislate for anyone else in a similar position. According to MacIntyre, the problem with Hare's thesis is that it concentrated only on the 'ought' sentences. For instance, in uttering a moral sentence, a person may say, "Don't do that," instead of "You ought not to do that." In fact the latter can still be used sometimes merely as an indication of the importance attached to the imperative, not necessarily as an indication of a universal moral commitment. These and similar considerations, therefore, led MacIntyre to conclude with the following assertion:

To assert that universalisability is of the essence of moral valuation is not to tell us what 'morality' means or how moral words are used. It is to prescribe a meaning for 'morality' and other moral words and implicitly it is to prescribe a morality (*ibid.*:37).

In spite of all these criticisms, the universalisability criterion still has a lot to be said in its favour. Even though there are some cases in which moral injunctions need not be universalised, there are clearly other cases in which morality makes sense only if its principles are universalised, as in honesty and the willful murder of the innocent. Besides, it seems untenable to say that a person who asserts, "Murder is wrong," or "One ought to keep one's promises except when it is impossible to do so," cannot legitimately universalise them.

b. Prescriptivity

Much of what is said in the preceding sub-section also applies to the feature of Prescriptivity. According to Wallace and Walker, to say that moral rules and principles are prescriptive in nature is to say that they are essentially action-guiding. It is to say that they influence human action in a particular direction. But in what does this claim consist? Hare is, again, very resourceful on this point. The action-guiding force of moral principles is believed to derive from the fact that they entail imperatives:

... [M]y acceptance of the principle 'One ought to do X' commits me to accepting the imperative 'Let me do X'; and my acceptance of the imperative commits me in turn to doing X in the appropriate circumstances (Wallace and Walker, *ibid.*:9).

As Peter Woolcock (1999:280) further elucidates, the "prescriptivity" requirement is hinged on the fact that:

... we call a belief "moral" only if the person who holds it is committed to acting in accord with it. For example, if someone claims to believe that incest is wrong, then the prescriptivity requirement says that we call that belief "moral" only if the person sincerely intends not to practice incest.

But this criterion is criticised on similar grounds, as the universalisability criterion above, that there are many other sorts of action-guiding rules and principles which are not primarily moral in nature, e.g., 'One ought not to swim immediately after a meal.' Secondly, how can we account for the problem of the weakness of will, based on this prescriptivist thesis? For, it is conceivable—in fact highly possible—that a person can hold a particular moral principle, sincerely

cherishing it as an ideal, and still fail to live up to it when the appropriate occasion arises (Wallace and Walker, *ibid.*:10). However, the strength of the prescriptive criterion again lies in the understanding, which must not be overlooked, that morality primarily has meaning in so far as its injunctions are meant to be obeyed or followed, or at least acknowledged. A moral principle or rule which is neither acknowledged nor esteemed by those whose actions it is supposed to guide can only be anything but moral. In fact, it hardly exists, except, perhaps, superficially.

c. Overriding importance

As was hinted above, the overriding importance of moral principles and rules is registered by the fact that they tend to take precedence over other sorts of considerations. For example, the moral injunction, "Do not commit murder," is considered to be weightier than the comparatively non-moral injunction, "Do not swim immediately after a meal." Thus, what is meant here is that when people are confronted with a choice between following a moral rule and following a non-moral one, they often tend to give precedence to the former, just as people who follow moral rules believe that they ought to act in accordance with the moral rules when they conflict with other kinds of rules (*ibid.*:11).

This criterion is given because it is assumed that moral principles and rules possess a status which other kinds of rules and principles do not have. They demand a deeper sense of urgency in us which overrides other non-moral situations. This is because failure to take them seriously inevitably and directly affects the well-being of someone, while the inability to meet non-moral obligations may not have disastrous consequences on anyone.

d. Ability to influence behaviour

Moral rules and principles can, in fact, influence behaviour. They do not merely command or elicit behaviour; nor do they only cause or prevent overt action, as do non-moral commands and requests. Rather, they influence behaviour in a more or less desired direction, with the aim of improving human relationships. The philosophical speculations and the theological injunctions that had been the mainstay of moral thinking, as well as the recent findings in the sciences about the phenomenon of morality at-

test to this, albeit from somewhat different perspectives. The moral philosopher and the moral theologian view morality as a phenomenon that is necessary for uplifting the human standard, while moral biologists variously argue that the human person is already biologically imbued with the requisite moral propensities Tancredi, *ibid.*:6f.). All that is needed is for it to be harnessed for a more reasonable and meaningful living, as humans are already predisposed by their genes to spontaneously exhibit the necessary moral characteristic, depending on need.

e. The categorical attribute

According to Woolcock (1999:280), the requirement that a claim be a categorical claim if it is to count as a moral claim means that a claim is not a moral claim unless those who make it believe that a person should act in accordance with it, regardless of his or her own desires or beliefs about the matter. In other words, such a claim is taken to be “binding” on all rational persons, irrespective of what they are inclined to believe or think. This, in turn, is because once a truly moral judgment or claim is given, it places a responsibility on us, to either act or refrain from doing so, as the immediate demands of that moral circumstance may require:

A claim that incest is wrong will count as a moral claim only if those who make the claim believe that it is wrong even if the perpetrator wants to commit it or believes that it is morally right to commit it. On this understanding of morality, a belief about what people ought to do is not a moral belief if the “ought” it contains is only hypothetical... Essential [therefore] to the meaning of the moral “ought,” ... is that it commands us categorically, regardless of what we happen to want or believe (*ibid.*).

Woolcock’s submissions here directly correspond to Joyce’s (2006:56f.) idea of *practical clout* of moral judgments, according to which to judge an action as moral or virtuous is, at bottom, “to draw attention to a deliberative consideration that cannot be legitimately ignored or evaded.” This deliberative consideration cannot be ignored because it applies to every right thinking individual in the society. For example, the moral or ethical rule proscribing the breaking of promises, even the simple etiquette enjoining that one should not

speak with her mouth full, categorically applies to all who are concerned in that given moral situation or circumstance, irrespective of what their feelings or inclinations happen to be, unless a person who keeps these rules would be vicious in doing so. Thus highlighting this categorically binding element of morality, Joyce goes on:

When we say that it is morally wrong to break promises, we include people who don’t care about suffering the consequences of such actions, we include people who broke promises and went to their graves unpunished (discounting for the moment the possibility of post-mortem punishment), we include people who might somehow stand a good chance of avoiding the usual penalties, and we include people who don’t give a fig for morality (*ibid.*:58).

This categorical attribute of morality is also directly discernible from the insights of Kant, in the form of his “categorical imperatives”. Kant viewed moral principles and rules as a mandate, or maxims. In other words, they are automatic, authoritative and binding. They are a duty or an obligation in which humans simply have no choice, except, perhaps, to act immorally; and these moral obligations must be seen and appropriately responded to by every rational being. This, as Kant argued, is because the right way to approach morality is to act from a sense of duty, which the individual has personally recognised as so from rational reflection.

Moral reasoning

Is moral reasoning also an illusion? Reasoning about morality, like other forms of reasoning, involves some degree of mental activity. Some moral issues do not appear to humans as problems at all, because they have been biologically and socially conditioned to apply certain straightforward rules in resolving them (Joyce, 2006:3). For example, most people consider it morally wrong, even intrinsically evil, to kill the innocent. This is, in fact, considered a rule of thumb in several societies, as anyone who thinks or believes otherwise is seen as a socio-path. In some other cases, however, moral problems are not amenable to such straightforward solutions, but may require careful, rigorous probing in order to understand all the facts of the issue. For instance, the debate on abortion is not just about the termination of unwanted pregnancy; it also involves the underlying issues of women’s right to

their bodies, privacy, as well as self-determination (Little, 2005). These things which are, by default, readily enjoyed and taken for granted by the male folk, are factors that must be taken into consideration in order to truly appreciate the full weight of the debate and reach a well informed decision on the issue.

Similarly, there is considerable disagreement among ethicists, and other stakeholders, concerning such issues as same-sex union, pornography, euthanasia, sex outside of marriage, human cloning (Watson, 1971:50ff.; Rifkin, 2005:32f.), and the on-going human stem cell research (Nickel, 2008). These issues are very complicated in nature; as such, it would be naïve to think that they could be easily resolved by the application of certain straightforward rules. Rather, the inquirer would need to have a deep understanding of the real issues, as well as the particular circumstance(s) of the moral agent(s) involved, in order to arrive at an intelligent moral decision. In fact, that people face moral problems and/or disagreements at all is evidence that moral discourse sometimes involves a decision procedure by which resolutions may be reached on the appropriate moral pathway. However, whatever our disagreements are about, and however intense they may appear to be, we need to get on, not only with the business of living, but also doing so together, and meaningfully.

This consideration suggests some parallel with research work. A researcher does not merely rely on his intuition to attain knowledge; rather, there is need for some underground investigation that will yield the necessary information about the subject matter. This is why a lot of time is spent in the library, in studying other sources of information, so as to produce a well-researched work. In the same way, some aspects of human morality are hard to resolve without recourse to reasoning, and in fact, disputation. The solution to such moral situations is not always self-evident, but often requires some rigorous and patient search, because in morality, judgment and choice are often antecedent to overt action. As John Dewey (1957:163f.) noted:

The practical meaning of the [moral] situation—that is to say the action needed to satisfy it—is not self-evident. It has to be searched for. There are conflicting desires and alternative apparent goods. What is needed is to find the right course of action, the right good.

In spite of these considerations, some writers have tended to deny the connection between moral behaviour and reason, leaving one wondering how to make sense of the term, 'moral reasoning' (Hauser *et al.*, 2007). In his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740/2003:325), David Hume, apparently relying on the assumption that all thinking—including reasoning—is passive, argued that:

An active principle can never be founded on an inactive principle; and if reason be inactive, it must remain so in all its shapes and appearances, whether it exerts itself in natural or moral subjects.

Based on this empiricist assumption, Hume then reached the following conclusion:

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone ... can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason (*ibid.*:326).

One would hardly agree with Hume's insinuations here, unless one realises that they are the postulations of a man who must maintain an empiricist stance, even when there is some evidence to the contrary. It seems rather difficult to sustain the contention that morality, even when it clearly includes the attempt to reason about it, is a passive phenomenon, in the Aristotelian sense (*Physics*, Bk II:1-4), in which casual thinking (the free flow of thought) may sometimes be taken to be a passive experience or phenomenon. But how does one go about arguing for the contrary position?

It may, perhaps, not require a great deal of effort to understand how other forms of thinking or mental processes, such as imagining, regretting, remembering or reminiscing, reverie, depression, etc., can be regarded as passive, or as things which happen to the mind, as the mind easily or effortlessly lapses into them (Tancredi, *ibid.*:158). However, as Copi and Cohen (1994:3) have aptly pointed out, every mental reasoning process is a species of thinking; but not all thinking is reasoning. For instance, one can remember or imagine all the numbers between 1 and

10, without engaging in any kind of reflection on them, such as their mathematical implications, or their connections to one another (e.g., $3 \times 3 = 9$). On the other hand, reasoning is, in a special sense, just as mathematical calculation, a form of activity, albeit a mental one. It is something the mind does, because it is a special species of thinking in which problems are solved (*ibid.*).

This being the case, then, moral reasoning cannot be different, but equally involves the solving of problems. To a very considerable extent, human decisions about morality in this active sense often involves conscious and deliberative reasoning, in which people carefully consider the choices open to them. Thus, Hume's thesis that "moral distinctions ... are not the offspring of reason," (*ibid.*:326) which is based on his defective assumption that "Reason is wholly inactive, and can never be the source of so active a principle as conscience, or a sense of morals," (*ibid.*) poses the problem of how to distinguish between spontaneous moral actions, on the one hand, and those that require some deliberative thought and consultations. Hume's "moral distinctions," it would seem, are also more a product of reasoning—active reasoning, at that—than that of any other factor Hume would readily grant. This seems so obvious that despite the high esteem in which Hume has been held even in contemporary philosophy, not many of his sympathizers seriously defend this position. Thus, in his paper titled "The Concept of Morality," William Frankena (1970:151) sums up this critical point about morality by characterising it as follows:

... [M]orality is and should be conceived as something 'practical' in Aristotle's sense, i.e., as an activity, enterprise, institution, or system ... whose aim is not just to know, explain, or understand, but to guide and influence action, to regulate what people do or try to become or at least what oneself does or tries to be.

Morality is, thus, the quality of being in accord with the standards of right or good conduct or a system of ideas that fall into those same categories.

CONCLUSION

Morality as human and social issue:

Not only do individuals affect society in various ways by what they think and do; they, too, are affected by the factors that are prevalent in society. In other words, society fundamentally

affects or influences the experiences we have and the choices we make. This phenomenon creates a system of interdependency between a society and the individuals within it. Because this social life tends to mandate people to live within the same territory and share many patterns of behaviour, values, beliefs, and attitudes, social problems are bound to arise. Some of these social problems are caused by human factors, such as crime, terrorism, prostitution, ethnic and racial inequality, environmental degradation and pollution, etc., while others are natural, for example, earthquake, typhoon, flooding, avalanche, and tsunami. Ultimately, a social problem is, by definition, a troublesome condition (or at least is perceived as such by society) which causes suffering and hardship to society, and so hinders societal progress and development in some way. As explained by John Macionis (2008:2), "A social problem is a condition that undermines the well-being of some or all members of a society and is usually a matter of public controversy."

According to Macionis, "social problems" would also include things like joblessness, poverty, drug abuse, racial or ethnic inequality, and bribery and corruption in high places. The nature of these inevitable ills of human society is that they are troublesome to society: they "undermine well-being" and hurt people "either by causing them immediate harm or, perhaps, by limiting their choices" (*ibid.*:2f.) in their quest for a more meaningful life. Poverty and joblessness, for instance, not only deprive people of nutritious food and safe housing, but also take away their sense of dignity and purpose, leaving them passive and powerless. These social problems, when they are caused, sometimes affect various segments of society differently, making some better off at the expense of others. For instance, an economy that pays low wages to its working class—which is usually in the majority—would simultaneously tend to enrich its elites—who are usually in the minority—in whose hands political power and means of production reside.

Thus, a further consequence of this human social living is the inevitability of moral evaluation, which is naturally a part of how human interactions happen. Because we are deeply embedded in a web of human relationships that constitute our life together, the moral reasoning and judgment is part of what is required. In fact, to withdraw from moral judgment is, to a considerable extent, to cease interacting with others. Moral responsibilities are equally pervasive in human society, in that humans are vulnerable,

needy, and interdependent beings, caring for and cared for by others. Moral sentiments relate to things that we have reason to value, moving and stirring humans into action. In part, therefore, the phenomenon of normativity refers to how ordinary individuals, deeply enmeshed in day-to-day living, readily deliberate about appropriate actions (Sanghera *et al.*, 2008:6).

Now, assuming the evolutionary arguments to be true, the cogent question is, why would anyone continue to adhere to morality after learning that it is a mere genetic illusion? To all intents and purposes, it seems one would act morally only as long as he or she remains ignorant of the claim that morality is an illusion (Talbert, 2002). As we have argued antecedently (see Odozor and Metuonu, 2011), to say that something is an illusion is, at bottom, to say that it has no basis, whatsoever. It consists in saying that something is only a mental construct, a mirage—the exact charge which evolutionary theorists have continually brought against traditional moral theory. However, if morality were an illusion and had no basis, it automatically implies that no basis whatsoever can be plausibly assigned to it, which leaves one with no choice but to also reach the conclusion that not even a biological basis would work for human morality. Of course, one would have to make this concession at the expense of traditional moral philosophy, and, in fact, every other aspect of moral theory (*ibid.*).

Morality is, at bottom, a human issue involving the ability to reflect on the past and future consequences of actions, or conduct. Other animals certainly exhibit altruistic behavioural tendencies which enable them to cope with survival. But human morality is thoroughly imbued with the ideas of intentions and preconceived choice. This is why a given human action can be pre-judged and assessed in isolation from its actual perpetration. But animal behaviour fails to be meaningfully accorded such verdict even if it comes across as definitively self-seeking. As the primatologist Frans de Waal (1996:1ff.) has amply argued, any such attempt to judge animal behaviour on the part of humans would amount to an undue and irrelevant anthropocentrism. For Leslie Stephen (1893), natural selection simply has nothing moral or immoral about it, as it is merely how nature operates; and there is nothing anyone can do about it, no matter how (morally) repugnant its actions may appear to humans. Even then, it does not make sense to apply anthropomorphic attributes to the inferior animal spe-

cies that do not even begin to understand such attributes.

From the foregoing discussion, therefore, it seems evident that morality *primarily* comes into play in how human beings relate to, or with, one another in society (Barcalow, 1994:2). It is because the idea of the best way to deal with others does not always readily come to us that morality has been such an issue among humans; since human beings are sometimes prone to making the wrong decisions in this matter. Even if this fact were denied, one would still have to reckon with the nature of humans as social beings. Humans are, by nature, beings that normally live in societies, on which their very existence largely depends. But they do not live in isolation within these societies. Rather, this fact of living in society has other direct implications, such as the inevitability of interrelationships or interactions between people.

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