

## MORAL EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS (MDGs) FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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This paper is concerned with moral issues. In particular I will be discussing the role moral education should play in the context of the millennium development goals. A conference like this gives us an opportunity to examine the extent to which the goals have been achieved in this country and the educational problems associated with the achievement of the goals. Since the initial eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were set and agreed upon by the members of the United Nations, it is important to remember that what is happening in this country is being closely observed by other nations. The country's image as it is perceived abroad is therefore extremely important. It determines the respect and trust that Nigeria can elicit from other nations. That image as portrayed at the moment by the international print and electronic media is one of moral failure. (I would want to argue that the corruption that has plagued this country for so long is a result of moral failure at various levels.) A search of the internet reveals that the different organizations that rank countries on corruption - Transparency International, Global Integrity, World Bank - all score

Nigeria very low. Although the country no longer ranks among the ten most corrupt in the world, its weak score on the corruption index indicates that it barely escapes being included in the infamous list. Successive governments of this country have tried to launder the perceived image abroad without much success. Although there is evidence that the image has slightly improved because the country is now listed among those that are successful fighting corruption, the earlier impression persists. What should be done about this state of affairs? The argument of this paper is that we must first recognize and accept that all instances of corruption are instances of the failure to make simple moral distinctions and apply them. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this point. I would then argued further that morality can and should be taught from the primary school level. The point will be made forcefully that unless we attempt to do this we would not succeed in properly achieving Millennium Goals 1 and 2. More than that, Nigeria would end up being regarded internationally as a failed state.

**Corruption as Moral Failure**

Let us begin with common examples. Take the case of the policeman who demands for and accepts a certain amount from a taxi driver. The payment then allows the taxi driver to drive passed with excess passengers in his vehicle. There are a few points to make here. First the policeman has failed to realize that he is being paid to do a job which he is not doing. A failure to keep a contractual agreement is basically a failure to keep a promise. You promised to uphold the law at all times when you were engaged as a policeman. You failed to do so. This is clearly a moral failure. Secondly, you are being paid to do your job. You are therefore not expected to enrich yourself in other ways doing the job for which you are paid. When you accept that payment you are engaging in unlawful acquisition of monies you are not entitled to. In other words, you are stealing. Again a moral failure. Thirdly, by allowing the taxi driver to drive passed with excess passengers in his vehicle you are indirectly endangering the lives of others. Your duty is to protect the public, not endanger their lives. Deliberately engaging in a course of action that directly or indirectly puts lives in danger is clearly an immoral act and it properly calls up our normal moral reactive attitudes of resentment or condemnation. These reactions are part of what we are equipped with as human beings, and, as Strawson (1974) argues, they are our natural human moral attributes. When they are lacking in someone, something is wrong and it

would be our place to find out whether the person who exhibits this lack stands in need of special treatment. The policeman knows instinctively that what he is doing is wrong, just as the taxi driver offering the payment. Both have deliberately opted to do the wrong thing. My contention is that both stand in need of proper moral education so that they would instinctively desist from such actions and make the right moral choices.

The observations we have made about this example would also be appropriate in the case of a parent successfully offering a primary school teacher money or gifts so that the teacher would ensure that his child passes the school examination. We can make the further observation in this case that the primary school teacher who accepts the money or gifts fails to realize that part of his duty is to protect the integrity of the school and see to it that the examination remains a true test. He also fails on the count of impartiality. He compromises his position as an impartial judge in a situation that calls for equal treatment and opts for the preferential treatment of a pupil. He thus turns his back on the moral principle of fairness. The parent here who should be guiding his child to do the right thing rather pushes him in the wrong moral direction in the mistaken belief that he is helping him. This case is another example of failure to make simple moral choices that we are by nature equipped to make. I would again argue that the participants in this case also

stand in need of moral education or re-orientation to basic moral values.

Cases of corruption in the political arena that involve the rigging of elections and other undesirable practices can all be seen as examples of failure to make the right moral choices. And when governments have been rigged into power they tend to cling to it by all means, knowing fully that they have no moral right to govern. This why politicians who hold office in third world countries do everything to perpetuate themselves in office. Nigeria, like other developing nations with whom she is often compared, has a fair share of them.

Our insistence that those who aspire to govern us should possess and exhibit high moral credentials is not new. The tradition goes as far back as Plato who in *The Republic* insisted that the rulers or guardians should be persons who have acquired wisdom through a rigorous process of training that stretches over years. Such persons would be morally upright and be above the temptations of office. Indeed he went further to suggest that a State (or country in modern parlance) would know no peace until its rulers become virtuous and acquire knowledge.

We do not nowadays require our politicians or rulers to go through long periods of rigorous training. We only insist that they be virtuous and show that they are capable of rising above

the temptations of high office. But how do they acquire this virtue? Can it be taught to the young so that they grow up to become autonomous moral agents capable of taking sound decisions in situations of moral challenges and conflict? What does it mean to teach morality and how do people acquire moral knowledge? Why is it even necessary to consider such questions?

### **The Importance of Acquiring Moral Knowledge**

The first two of the 8 Millennium Development Goals are stated as follows:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education

Let us briefly discuss them. Let's say we succeed in achieving Goal 1 and a man ceases to be poor and hungry, what does he do then? Does he just eat and sleep? Shakespeare's *Hamlet* asks and answers in terse poetic verse:

*What is a man  
If his chief good and market of his  
time  
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast,  
no more. (Hamlet IV.iv. 34-36)*

We could counter this by saying that a person who is freed from the pains of poverty and hunger now begins to live a normal life and does what everyone else does. But this is not really a satisfactory answer. People do different things in their homes and some things are more worth

doing than others. (See Peters, 1966. P. 78, who constructed a brief Socratic dialogue to illustrate this point). Since we have not taught this person anything other than get rid of his poverty and hunger, the question still remains. What does he do with his time? What kind of life does he live? Spending his time discussing moral philosophy? Have you taught or did you teach him the liner point of moral awareness and discrimination? The point I am trying to make is that the goal of simply eradicating poverty and hunger does not go far enough. A man needs a lot more to make his life worth living. And since the Millennium Goal did not go beyond eradicating his poverty and hunger, he will soon return to his original state. In the end we would have achieved nothing.

Similar criticisms could be made about the second Millennium Goal. As an educationist I would want to examine the quality of the universal primary education offered. Is the curriculum comprehensive enough? Does it reflect the major concerns of each environment? What competences are pupils expected to acquire at the end of primary education? Who is to ensure that these competencies are indeed acquired? What would be the place of moral education in the curriculum? What is the quality of the teachers? Who would be responsible for their training and who would ensure that the training is adequate? These kinds of considerations are extremely important if the goal is to be achieved.

However, the real reason for considering such questions is that the country, Nigeria, can reasonably be considered to be a work in progress. The country at the moment seems to me poised between recognizing and embracing its full potential as a nation, politically, economically and morally or degenerating in all three respects and going down as a failed State. I have said earlier that Nigeria's image intentionally is unflatteringly perceived as that of a county which has failed morally. Its citizenry is wandering about in search of moral sign posts that would direct them to basic principles of morality. The great multiplicity of churches professing every faith imaginable on earth seem to have totally failed to offer any kind of moral guidance. For how else can you explain the fact that almost every aspirant to political public office is aiming for self enrichment and has no idea about what it means to serve the people he or she claims to represent? There are exceptions of course, but these are miserably few. What the populace see mostly are the looters of public funds who spend the rest of their idle seeking ways and means of hiding their loot. If you were an outsider observing the general behavior of these influential worthies, what impression will you have of the country's morals? What moral principles are these people passing on to the young? What moral values are the young expected to learn? Who and what are the young busy imitating?

It is this depressing picture and these questions that make it imperative for educators to find ways of inculcating

basic moral principles, particularly in the young. As I have argued elsewhere, (Bisong, 2005) confronted with this bleak situation. Socrates’ question, “Can virtue be taught?”, becomes relevant. In his attempt to answer this question Ryle (1972: 435) argues as follows:

*The child picks up his mother tongue perfectly adequately not from anyone in particular, and certainly not from any professional linguists, but from everyone in general. In the same way, Protagoras suggests, though we do indeed learn our standards of conduct, we do not have to learn them in any set lessons conducted by any appointed pundits; we learn them from Everyman in the home, in the streets, in the playground and in the market-place.*

Such learning, needless to say, is enhanced by examples set by those the young ones learn from. This throws the challenge of inculcating standards of morality on all of us. Attempts made to pass the buck by teachers, parents, guardians or representatives of the law should therefore be seen as pointless exercises in futility.

Ryle’s comments apply to his society; in ours we would have to devise “set lessons” conducted by appointed pundits, i.e. teachers of morality and moral principles. This would be a deliberate act aimed at bringing about acceptable moral behavior in the young and old. We have to act now. The current

political and economic climate demands it and we must not fail the country.

Let me end with my favourite two lines from Auden’s poetry:  
If you really want to live, you better start at once to try;  
If you don’t, it doesn’t matter, you better start to die.”

But we, the citizens of this great country want to live and prosper and in the process transform the negative image perceived of it outside it.  
Thank you for listening.

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