

ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR NIGERIAN SCHOOLS IN THE 2000's

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Abstract

The paper tackled the complex issues of ethics, observing that achieving consensus on ethical values and codes for any society is a daunting task. This is owing to the diversity of cultures, religions, politics, individual needs, etc that make up the whole called society. However, there are always some ethical frames that seen relatively popular for a given society and these can be used as a guide to draw some ethical codes for the society and her social institutions. Consequently, the paper reviewed the dormant theories and concerns of the field of ethics. It further analyzed selected vital ethical documents found in Nigeria and outside. These revealed the dominant concerns in the present world's quest for ethical conduct. From these, the paper extracted and discussed the basic ethical values and codes, which may guide schools in Nigeria. These include the sacredness of life, dignity of the human person, placement of public good above self-interest, professionalism, specialization, and commitment to the profession.

Others are supremacy of the employment contract, discipline, individual liberties and freedoms, promotion of intellectualism and societal progress, rationality, positive human relations, and above all, patriotism.

Introduction

One of the fundamental tasks of sociologists, philosophers, political scientists, legal luminaries and other intellectuals of all times is to explain the means of achieving a sustainable social order in society. In the classical times, this onerous task gave rise to a great array of social thought. To name a few, this ranged from Ibn Khaldun's AL UMRAM (New Science or Sociology), Aguste Comte's Positivism, Karl Marx's Theory of the State, Herber Spencer's "Deevlopment Hypothesis", Emile Durkheim's "Collective Conscience", Max Weber's Theory of Social Action, to Plato's Sophism, Arisotle's Doctrine of Immanent Universals, St. Augustne's Theology, Thomas Hobbe's Social Contract and Psychological Egoism, John Locke's Primitive Utilitarianism, Benedict Spinoza's Rationalism, David Hume's Principles of Morals, and Immanuel Kant's Moderate Rationalism (Bottomore, 1971; Robertson, 1977; Sherman and Wood, 1989; Akehurst, 1990, Nnoli, 1986; Birch, 1989; Eisentadt, 1969; Otite and Oginwo, 1994). Yet today, contemporary intellectuals still battle with the same challenge, and the views and positions have gone beyond an easy count.

A key element of social order, and which constitutes the focus of this paper is ethics. Perhaps, of other issues involved in social order, ethics remain the most problematic to define and theorize about. Thus, the great philosopher. Wolff (1983:169) is justified when he stated that "probably no branch of philosophy has generated such persistent and vigorous disagreements as ethics".

However, inspite of the complex nature of ethics, society, for it to cohere and survive, must have an ethical benchmark or baseline to enable it to regulate behaviour. For schools, which constitute a microcosm of society and infact are involved in both the maintenance and change of rules of conduct in society, there ought to be some definite ethical framework to guide their performance of this sensitive task.

It is against this background that this paper reviews the major concerns of the field of ethics and discusses basic ethical orientations advocated within and outside Nigeria. Out of these advocacies, the paper develops some ethical groundwork that may guide the schools.

Ethics: A Definition

According to the Encyclopedia American (1995:610), the term ethics or ethic is derived from the Greek words Ethikos (moral) and ethos (character). It is, therefore, a branch of philosophy that deals with general theories of conduct or with evaluation of moral action. Similarly, The New Standard

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Encyclopedia (Vol. E-218) sees ethics as the “science of moral values and duties; the study of ideal human character and of human conduct and the consequences of it”. Bull (1983:3) on his part describes morality as a term derived from a Latin plural word *mores*, which means “manners” and “morals”. He states that morality as such is interpreted to mean a “generally accepted code of conduct in society, or in a subgroup of society”.

In essence, actions and issues termed ethical are ones capable of possessing moral activities. These attributes could be “good” or “bad” going by moral standards of society. Often, the good ones are termed ethical or moral, where as the bad ones are regarded as immoral or unethical. Actions and issues that do not have moral properties are said to be amoral (Unimna, 1994:86-97).

Overall, ethical framework in this paper refers to broad ethical guidelines that may regulate the conduct of those concerned. In this case, the attention is on the schools, that is, the formal educational institutions. As such, specific references are made to the conduct of the operators of these institutions in their capacities as teachers or administrators, students and employers.

The Dominant Concerns of Ethics

From time immemorial, humanity has realized the need to facilitate social harmony of her members to facilitate social harmony and control. Therefore, ethics can rightly be said to be as old as society.

As a field of study, however, its two major concerns are normative ethics (or moral philosophy) and metaethics (analytical or critical ethics). The former determines the rules of conduct and the bases used to classify an action as good or bad, right or wrong, etc. The latter critically analyses ethical concepts, their functions and means of supporting ethical judgements.

This paper, however, focuses on normative ethics. The *Encyclopedia Americana* (1995) notes that this branch of ethics has developed two principal concerns - the theory of values and the theory of obligation. The theory of values deals with the nature of good, answering a question like “what things, persons, motives, states and affairs, and character traits are good and bad”; whereas the theory of obligation handles conduct and answers questions like “what actions are right and wrong”? or “how ought a man to live”? (p. 610).

Under the theory of value are two sets of ideas, namely, the monistic and pluralist. The monistic views believe that only one thing, say happiness; pleasure, duty, or perfectionism is intrinsically good. For instance, hedonism is a monistic theory, which opines that the highest good (*summum bonum*) is pleasure. However, there exist different hedonistic schools of thought having varying definitions, properties and measurements of pleasure, which make their contributions less valuable. The pluralist views believe that more things than one can be intrinsically good. These include power, pleasure, honour, happiness, wealth, justice, knowledge, honesty, charity, duty, and perfectionism.

For the theory of obligation, there are equally two sets of ideas, namely, the teleological and deontological. The former states that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends absolutely on its consequences. The latter argues that the moral status of an action depends, not on consequences, but on the intentions, motives, contract, rules and regulations, and the like. (Russell, 1987; Akinpelu, 1987).

The two most popular teleological views of obligation are egoism and utilitarianism. The egoists believe that an action is right or wrong based on how it affects the doer. In other words, the doer has the right to act at all times in his best interest. Wolff (1983:117) states that “the best known contemporary defender of selfishness as right, justified indeed even virtuous, is the widely read novelist Ayn Read”. According to him, Read, in her best selling works, the *Fountain Head and Atlas Shrugged*, expounds a philosophy of “objectivism” according to which “absolute, uncompromising self-interest is the highest moral principle”. On the other hand, the popular variant of utilitarianism believe that only actions that lead to the greatest good of the greatest number of people can be morally right.

Suffice it to state that in normative ethics generally, the crux of the matter - the most fundamental problem of concern - is vividly presented in the arguments of the egoists and utilitarians. Wolff (p. 118) puts the matter this way: “One of the oldest and most frequently debated issues in ethics is the opposition between selfishness and self-sacrifice, or “egoism” and “utilitarianism”. In other words, most practical

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issues on ethics in society, including Nigeria, may be simply reduced to a question of choosing between two extremes, that is, self-interest and public interest.

Well, for most if not all societies, public interest is expected to be supreme at all times. Then a dilemma results: man is inherently driven towards self-aggrandizement but society wants him to change direction towards self-denial. Wolff equally captures this dilemma when he opined that:

Most "official" or establishment moralists simply assume that selfishness is bad and that sacrificing oneself for others is the highest form of virtue. Yet all of us, I suspect, have a secret feeling that the martyr is a bit peculiar, and that may be it isn't all that terrible to put yourself first now and then. (p. 18).

This dilemma may explain the reason why in Nigeria, for instance, inspite of the enormous religious revivals, ethical re-orientation of the successive governments, burgeoning penal institutions including capital punishment, social controls, etc, the magnitude of vices in form of corruption, ethnicism, violent crimes, drug abuse, cultism, prostitution, examination malpractice, etc still stand unabated. Therefore, an ethical framework for any citizen, institution, school, or even nation at large can be seen primarily as a challenge towards the, promotion of public good over selfish interest. The ideas reviewed in the next section eloquently demonstrate this fact.

National and Educational Ethical Frames

The body of what constitutes Nigeria's national or educational ethics is not in a single document. In fact, very much like the constitution of Britain, which is said to be "unwritten", they are scattered in several documents and with a substantial part existing in form of social conventions. Therefore, this paper cannot lay claim to an exhaustive presentation of such ethics. However, in order to give a meaningful sketch of the ethics, some documented opinions of the government, institutions and eminent personalities in Nigeria and elsewhere are reviewed.

The Second National Development Plan (National Policy on Education, NPE 1981:7) is one of the key documents that set the global frame for Nigerian aspirations. It states that the nation shall pursue the following objectives: (I) a free and democratic society (ii) a just and egalitarian society, (iii) a united, strong and self-reliant nation, (iv) a great and dynamic economy, and (v) a land of bright and full opportunities. The implications of these objectives are that any conduct that negates the achievement of these dreams is in itself unethical. In other words, actions should be ones that at all times foster freedom and democracy, fundamental human rights, justice, equality before the law, unity of the country, patriotism, and overall national development.

The NPE (1981) itself used these objectives as bases for constructing suitable educational philosophy, goals and objectives, which at the level of the schools provide the framework for all educational activities and conduct. The Policy (p. 7) in effect adopts the following values:

- (i) respect for the worth and dignity of individuals,
- (ii) faith in man's ability to make rational decisions,
- (iii) moral and spiritual values in inter-personal and human relations,
- (iv) shared responsibility for the *common good of society* (emphasis mine),
- (v) promotion of the emotional, physical and psychological health of all children.

Values such as are presented above summarily abhor acts that could degrade the human person, create social discord, rob individuals of their fundamental liberties and freedoms, underestimate human potentials, or thwart their intellectual, physical and socio-emotional development. Further, it expressly bans acts that run contrary to the common good of society.

The Nigerian 1999 constitution currently enforce, in Chapter II Section 23 (p. 13), outlines the national ethics to be "Discipline, Integrity, Dignity of Labour, Social Justice, Religious Tolerance, Self- Reliance and Patriotism". Section 24, in addition, stipulates the duties or obligations of citizens to include the following:

- (a) abide by the constitution, respect its ideals and institutions, the National flag, Anthem, Pledge, and legitimate authorities,

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- (b) Help to enhance the power, prestige and good name of Nigeria, defend Nigeria and render such national service as may be required,
- (c) Respect the dignity of other citizens and the rights and legitimate interests of others and live in unity and harmony and in the spirit of common brotherhood,
- (d) Make positive and useful contribution to the advancement, progress and well-being of the community where he resides,
- (e) render assistance to appropriate and lawful agencies in the maintenance of law and order, and
- (f) declare his income honestly to appropriate and lawful agencies and pay his tax promptly.

These constitutional provisions are indeed in unity with the earlier stated national objectives and educational values. The provisions are equally comparable to those of any civilized or advanced country in the world. Thus, they can be compared to the list of civic responsibilities in the Western World produced by Bottery (1990:138). These include:

- (i) a pride in one's society and its institutions, which result in a desire to uphold the laws and norms of that society;
- (ii) a belief that one has a duty to help in the upholding of these laws and norms ;
- (iii) an understanding that people must work together if they are to exist in a society worth living in;
- (iv) a suggestion that if society has an increased crime rate, greater violence, etc,

then all of its members are to blame for this state of affairs, as they are all contributors to this society. Based on these provisions, Bottery (p. 144) articulated what he describes as four factors that form the groundwork for civic responsibility in schools: (I) the promotion of rationality (ii) the heightening of the child's empathy; (iii) the fostering of the child's self-esteem, and (iv) the furthering of cooperation. He asserts that these four factors 'form, not surprisingly, the ground work for the promotion of a truly moral attitude to others in school, for school , is essentially a preparation for participation in society. The relationship between civic responsibility, morality, school and society is essentially reciprocal.'

Overall, ethical principles concentrate on three constituents, namely the self, others, and the relationship between self and others (Bull, 1983:18). Further, emphasis is placed on both conforming to prevailing morality as well as pursuit of an individual ideal within the limits of law.

Perhaps, an ethical issue, which the incumbent Federal Government from its first day in office, swore to fight to a logical conclusion is corruption, Earlier, the Transparency International Perception Index 1995 - 1997 has voted Nigeria as the most corrupt in the World (Kolade, 1999:5). To this end, the Corrupt Practices and Other related Offences Act of 2000 has since been signed into law. Against the background that corruption, seems to be Nigeria's number one problem, that has so much retarded national development, the Act stipulates stiff penalties for corrupt conducts previously seen to be "business as usual". Sections 8 to 26 clearly define the acts that constitute corruption and their respective penalties. Section 8(1) in part reads:

Any person who corruptly (a) asks for, receive or obtains any property or benefit of any kind for himself or for any other person, or (b) agrees or attempts to receive or obtain any property or benefit of any kind for himself or for any other person., is guilty of an offence of official corruption and is liable to imprisonment for seven (7) years.

Similarly, the British High Commissioner to Nigeria, His Excellency Graham Burton (1999: 22) notes that the United Nations General Assembly as part of a resolution on Action against Corruption adopted in 1996 an International Code of Conduct for Public officials and a Declaration on International Commercial Transactions. All these instruments abhor corruption and fraudulent practice in public and international life.

Lastly, the section may be closed by looking at some Ethical Codes of selected professions and organizations in Nigeria and elsewhere. The 80-page Code of Conduct of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (1998) basically states that each member "owes certain duties to the public at large, including those who retain or employ him, to the profession itself and to all other members of (the)

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profession, even though such duties may at times be at variance with his own personal interest". The Code of Conduct for members of the Nigerian Institute of Management (Asuquo, 1995:6) in part reads: That the professional managers will put services above self and ever seek to find and employ more efficient and more economical ways of getting things done.

That the professional manager will accept the most scrupulous and transparently honest and ethical process of thought for all decisions in his daily work and be himself free of any fraudulent and or corrupt practices and within his scope of authority treat all persons as being equal, and refuse to give special favours or privileges to any one.

The Integrity Organization in Nigeria lists the following as basic components of integrity (Kolade, 1999:9):

- (i) honesty - freedom from deceit, self delusion and offence;
- (ii) Purity - freedom from adulteration or corruption; freedom from duplicity of speech or action (insincerity);
- (iii) Uprightness - being morally right and being set the "right-side-up"; following the right precept and doctrines (ethics), of protocol and etiquette;
- (iv) Completeness - being fulfilled, highly skilled and polished, a matter of training and discipline
- (v) Wholeness - being healthy in mind, body, spirit, morals, tastes, attitudes, etc;
- (vi) A craving for ideas (not just standards) which come from within;
- (vii) Acting on any matter in total submission to God's perspective, the viewpoint of Him who is more knowledgeable, more objective, and yet more caring.

For the Institute of Global Ethics (Adenubi, 1999:24), what it terms as its eight sets of core values are:

- (i) Love-caring, compassion;
- (ii) Truth,
- (iii) Freedom
- (iv) Fairness - Justice, equity;
- (v) Unity, A sense of community or wholeness;
- (vi) Tolerance, respect for diversity;
- (vi) responsibility, Accountability;
- and (viii) Respect for life

One can go on and on citing these kinds of codes. Nonetheless, the common denominator is already noted earlier, and that is the fact that they advocate the supremacy of public good or interest over selfish motives.

Core Values and Codes of Conduct for Schools

In the light of the facts presented in this paper, schools may summarily be guided by the following values and codes of conduct.

1. ***Sacredness of Life*** - Life should be seen as a gift from God. Humanity has not as yet shown any capacity to create one. Therefore, under no circumstances should capital punishment be endorsed. Jungle justice is condemnable in all its ramifications, especially when it is capable of claiming life. This equally implies that violent demonstrations on campus should be outlawed and checked both by legal means and by creating a conducive environment for peace to thrive.
2. ***Dignity of the Human Person*** - The human person should at all times be accorded dignity commensurate with his exalted civilization and status in the schemes of creation. Even offenders and prisoners have a right to be treated with due respect. This explains the need for schools to clearly stipulate what may be termed the "Minimum Treatment of Offenders". This idea equally suggests that barbaric treatment of the child in the name of corporal punishment should be considered retrogressive and abrogated where they exist.
3. ***The Public Above Self*** - If every one can have his interest above society, only anarchy and social disintegration are sure to emerge. Consequently, in all acts, the standard should be that wherever a conflict arises between personal and public interests, public interest should supercede.
4. ***Professionalism*** - Both teachers and school administrators should strive to attain the highest level of theoretical and practical training available in their chosen fields.
5. ***Specialization*** - Teachers and administrators should perform tasks only in those areas they have been certified to be most competent.

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6. *Professional Commitment* - Members of the school should be committed to service to humanity through education. This implies sticking to the system to salvage it rather than taking the easy way out when conditions deteriorate.
7. *Supremacy of Employment contract* - All stakeholders should treat, with utmost honour, all relevant elements of the employment contract. This implies that in the first place such contracts must be made following due processes that ensure justice, equity, fair play and adequate reward for the toils of all those involved.
8. *Discipline* - All stakeholders must be subordinated to the common will expressed in form of laws, rules, and regulations. In fact, the school is most associated with the term discipline. Thus, Peters (in Wilson, 1990:33) writes that “discipline etymologically speaking is rooted in a learning situation, it conveys the notion of submission to rules or some kind order...” In other words, programmes in the schools are traditionally known as disciplines to underscore the fact that naturally, learning is only possible where individuals internalize successfully the appropriate knowledge, skills and values and subject themselves to just rules and regulations.
9. *Individual Liberties and Freedoms* - Individuals should have it as a fundamental human right to pursue the “good life” as deemed fit by them as long as the laws of the school or constitution of the Federation are not violated. Such freedoms have been enumerated in several global, continental and national documents. They include the freedom of thought, religion, conscience, movement, peaceful assembly, association, expression, and the press, as well as right to social security, participation in the life of an artistic and aesthetic community, dignity of the human person, personal liberty, fair hearing, private and family life, freedom from discrimination, to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in the nation, and so forth. The documents containing these rights include the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights of December 10, 1948, the African Charter on Human and People’s Right and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria .
10. *Intellectualism and Societal Progress* - All stakeholders in the school should be committed absolutely to the promotion of the highest intellectual quest and societal development.
11. *Rationality* - What the NPE (1981, p. 7) termed “faith in man’s ability to make rational decisions” should be a key ideology of the school. This idea abhors resort to superstition, spiritism, racial or ethnic prejudice, rule of thumb, and the like in decision-making.
12. *Human Relations* - The school should strive to promote team spirit and cooperativeness. In a country like Nigeria hooliganism, etc, the need to use the school as a bride to unity, equity, tolerance and peace cannot be over-emphasized. The bottom line should be for the school to theoretically and practically demonstrate that in diversity, there is unity, that all individuals are born equal and have equal rights; and, that the advanced countries in the world are moving towards globalization, mergers and continental unification and not rationalization and disintegration.
13. *Patriotism* - Above all, all stakeholders in the system should remain ideal citizens of the federation, upholding the cardinal virtues of the policy - integrity, honesty, transparency, democracy, etc. Perhaps, like President J. F. Kennedy of the United States of America charged his countrymen stakeholders in the schools should ask of what to do for the country and not what the country should do for them.

Conclusion

The issue of ethical values and codes in society is a complex and problematic one to tackle. This is due to the diversity of the culture, religion, policies, intellects, individuals needs, etc that make up the whole called society. It is therefore not easy at any time to produce a set of values and codes that are exhaustive or free from controversies. However, in the midst of such confusion, there are still certain standards that stand out as being, relatively, widely acceptable. This paper has not only reviewed such outstanding standards but also recommended a set of them for the Nigerian schools.

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