

Imperativeness of Ethics in Christianity: Perspectives and Praxis

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Abstract. The issue of rightness or wrongness and good or bad is a very crucial matter that society contends within contemporary times. Most religions today including Christianity that promote the making of ethical decisions do not at the same time address a variety of ethical problems which their adherents face. Using several ethical underlying principles, this theoretical paper argued that ethics is imperative to Christianity. It concluded that ethics in Christianity is rooted in the love for God and humanity as a whole.

Keywords: Imperativeness, Ethic, Christianity, Perspectives, Praxis.

1. Introduction

In most cases, ethics is mixed up with a variety of ways in which decisions are made. While most religions support their adherents to make healthy ethical decisions, they have failed to address the ethical crisis faced by them. The advent of Christianity occasioned a new trend in ethics because it introduced a religious perception of good into Western reasoning. Rooted in a Christian view, is the perception that an individual is holistically dependent on God and cannot attain goodness by means of the will or reason but only with the assistance of the grace emanating from God (Holloway & Holloway, 2013). The 'kpim' (core) of any Christian ethical belief is premised on "the golden rule" contained in (Matthew 7:12) that says, "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them"; also in the injunctions to love one's neighbour as oneself in Leviticus 19:18; and to love one's enemies also in Matthew 5:44. Worthy of note is that Jesus believed that the fundamental significance of the Jewish law is predicated on the commandment that says, "You shall love the Lord

your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with your entire mind; and your neighbour as yourself" (Luke 10:27). Thus, early Christianity emphasized as virtues asceticism, martyrdom, faith, mercy, forgiveness, and non-erotic love, few of which had been considered important by the philosophers of classical Greece and Rome (Bulafia, 2002).

Seen from the above context, the rightness and wrongness of decisions or actions cut across every segment of human life. In this sense, ethics affects every stage of life including the proper ways to act by individuals, groups and governments; and having ethically rooted human society. The aim of this research is to synthesize ethics and ethical choices in Christianity. The research recognizes that in individuals' Christian context, ethical decisions concerning what is "right" or "wrong" are a difficult task. This implies that in taking ethical decisions sensitivity and intelligence are required because of the underlying moral situations. While the paper believes that ethics requires practice, it argues that strong frameworks for ethical decision-making are a *sin-qua-non*.

2. Ethics and Ethical Approaches

Etymologically, the term, "Ethics" is from the Greek "*ethika*" or "*ethikos*", also "*ethos*", which means "character" or "custom"; and in Latin, it is called "*mores*" or "customs" (Goldsenth, 2009). Technically speaking, from the Greek and Latin contexts, ethics is the principles or standards of human conduct; and by extension, it studies such principles also called moral philosophy. Ethics, as a branch of philosophy, is rated as science

which creates standards due to its relation to standardizing of human behaviours (Goldseith, 2009). However, this research is concerned with ethics mainly in the sense of standards of human conduct and its scope is limited to the Christian religion.

Ethics uses ethical theories (principles) as instruments to measure ethical decisions or judgments (Emeka & Ekpenyong, 2011). Theories underlying ethical decisions are grouped into three with each of them having a variety of approaches that may also cut across one another.

2.1 Consequentialist theories

These theories are solely rooted in ethical outcomes resulting from specific actions. To accomplish their aims, consequentialist theories employ the utilitarian, egoistic and the common good approaches. Utilitarianism which is traced to Epicurus argues that the life which creates less pains and frustrations is the best, while Bentham employed a criteria that is similar to that of individual's acts, and developed a pattern whereby acts may be explained as right or wrong premised on the measure of the results they intended to create (Ramsey, 2009). David Mill, on the other hand, streamlined this pattern by creating a format for the good and a non-impartial notion of happiness which is in variance with the materialistic idea of pleasure (Miller, 2007). One of the commonest approaches employed in ethical decision making is utilitarianism, particularly the choices that have consequences as end results and that have a connection with a larger group of individuals.

Utilitarian ethics instructs people to always appraise the rightness and wrongness of their intended actions before they under take them (Peschke, 1998). One of the variations of utilitarianism is ethical egoism (self-interest). Some influential proponents of this approach include Thrasymachus, Thomas Hobbes and Ayn Rand who posited that respect for one own self and other people are core indicators of ethical egoism (Peschke, 1998). Their views are in variance to that of Plato, Aristotle and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "Common approach" which promote the perspective that human action should contribute to ethical communal life where the best society should be guided by the collective will of the people which would in turn produce what is best for the people holistically.

2.2 Non-Consequentialism

These theories employ the duty-based, rights, fairness (or justice), and divine command approaches. Deontological ethics as it is also called is linked to Immanuel Kant, even though it has significant proponents of non-consequentialism in the past who are serious religious thinking people such as St. Augustine of Hippo that dealt on the relevance of the individual's will and the choice to make decisions that are ethical. Immanuel Kant asserted that doing what is good is not about the consequences of our actions but about having the proper intention in performing the action (Insole, 2013). What Kant refers to as ethical act or behaviour is the one rooted in duty, this means, such action is carried out based on a person's duty to carry out the act. Hence, the choice to obey a moral law that is universally accepted amounts to ethical behaviour.

The strength of the rights approach is rooted in the Kantian deontological ethics, having a long historical connection with stoicism in Ancient Greece and Rome, and with John Locke's work (Insole, 2016; Alexander & Moore, 2020). The approach states that protecting people's ethical rights, especially those who are directly affected by such acts amounts to acting ethically, and implying that every human being is entitled to the dignity of humanity. The divine command approach is predicated on God's will – that is, any action commanded by the Supreme Being is right and that ethical standards are the creation of God's will. This is because, God could change what is now considered ethical, and he is not bound by any standard of rightness or wrongness short of logical contradiction. Proponents of this approach include: William of Ockham, Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, and Søren Kierkegaard.

2.3 Agent-centered theories

They deal with the ethical balance of the individual persons or groups (Ranganathan, 2018). These theories employ the virtue and feminists approaches which argue that actions that are ethical ought to be consistent with good human virtues. For instance, Aristotle postulated an ethical value devoid of individualism but devoted to the totality of human life at all times. Thus, one with a good character would be the one that has attained certain virtues. Additionally, the approach from a feminist context in recent times has emphasized the relevance of the inclusion of women and vulnerable groups in society in ethical discourse.

3. Christian Ethics and Virtues

Christian ethics is a branch of Christian theology that defines virtuous behaviour and wrong behaviour from a Christian perspective. In other words, Christian ethics is an organized theological study called moral theology (Gustafson, 2007). Christian ethics ask questions regarding how the rich ought to act in regards to the poor, how women should be treated, and the morality of war. Historically, much of Christian ethics is derived from biblical scripture and Christians have always considered the Bible profitable to teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness (Wogaman, 2011; Roger, 2017). The New Testament generally asserts that all morality flows from the Great Commandment, to love God and one's neighbour as oneself (Hultgren, 2017). In this, Jesus was reaffirming teaching of Deuteronomy 6: 4-9 and Leviticus 19: 18. Christ made himself an example of love John 13: 12 seen in the New Testament (Emil, 2002). Christian ethicists tackle ethical issues from a variety of ethical frameworks and contexts.

In addition, Christian virtues are commonly divided into four cardinal virtues and three theological virtues. The four cardinal virtues are prudence, justice, restraint, and courage. They are called cardinal virtues due to their importance in living a virtue-centered life (Ferreira, 2014). The three theological virtues are faith, hope, and love (Yoshino, 2020). The approach of virtue ethics became more relevant in recent times, because of the works of Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas (Long, 2010). Christian Ethics has been criticized because on the ground that the Bible contains both right and wrong teachings which are morally inconsistent.

Like conventional ethics, Christian ethics is governed by some ethical principles or theories. This includes the: Divine command, Just war, Moral Relativism, and Natural Law Theories. The divine command theory holds that all actions commanded or willed by God are morally right (Kain, 2005). This theory is often criticized by Plato's argument known as Euthyphro dilemma which begins by posing a question whether morally good acts are willed by God because they are ethically good (Grudem, 2018). The Just war theory tackles the question as to under what circumstances it is legitimate to go to war. The theory developed by Thomas and his followers identifies various specific conditions to be met if a war is to be justified. This includes: Just cause; being declared by a constituted authority; right intention; and proportionality.

Moral relativism is opposed to objective ethical truths, and that moral facts only hold relative to a given individual or society. In this ethical theory, what is morally good for one person or culture might be morally bad for another, and vice versa, hence, there is no moral absolutism (Singer, 2011). Thus, moral relativism suggests that ethical truths are subjective rather than objective. The natural law theory has existed in many forms. In its classical form, it is simply the opposite of conventionalist moral skepticism. In its Thomist form, it characterizes morality as a function of the rational human nature that God has given, stressing God's purposes in creation as defining humankind purpose as humans, and how they ought to lead their lives.

4. Bible-Based Ethical Teachings

The Old Testament (OT) morality is housed in the Decalogue and in the Mosaic Law. Two tables of the Decalogue can be identified as the principal moral text and spirituality foundation of Israel's life. The first three commandments (Exodus. 31:18; 34:1-29) deals with human's relation to God, while the fourth to the tenth commandments (Exodus 20 & Deuteronomy 5) are in the second table, deals with human's relation to human beings. This law is recorded in the document of the covenant between God and his people, Israel whose obligation is to keep to the covenant as the condition for the fulfillment of Yahweh's promises, which he on his part had given to them in the mutual bond of the covenant (Grudem, 2018; Card, 2005). The covenant between God and Israel is based on a free initiative from God's part when he destined Abraham to be the father of many nations (Genesis. 2:1-3; cf. Isaiah. 51:4) (Holloway & Holloway, 2013). The covenant at Sinai is the most dynamic event in Israel's history.

The Decalogue has been characterized as an "apodictic law" because it explains the obligations in absolute, in operative form, and in brief negative sentences, e.g. "you shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery" etc. It curtails some basic principles of the mutual moral law, which are of lasting reliability for ethics. On the other hand, the code of the covenant has been described as a "casuistic law" because it has much more the nature of the positive legislation of civil and penal code, which formulates concrete obligations in social life and determine penalties for offences against the rights of others. With respect to inter-personal acts social ethics, OT morality or ethics is guided and motivated by a strong sense of community (Stang, 2015). The tribes of Israel feel bound together by their common racial, origin, initially, culture and

above all, by the religion bound of the covenant which Yahweh has entered into with them. The communal sense positively referred to a basic knowledge of social obligation and great regard for the weal and woes of the community (Roger, 2017). This communal sense also reveals an act of common solidarity.

Christianity is presented by the New Testament (NT) as the “new covenant” (Mark 14:24; 1 Corininthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrew 8:6-13; 9:15; 12:24; 14:20). What this implies is that the new covenant is a confirmation and revival of the covenant theme of the OT. In this sense, the new covenant is the initiative to the bond of unity and communion between God and human that comes alone from him. As the old covenant rested upon the act of God in delivering Israel from the Egyptians, so the new covenant rest upon the action of God in redeeming humankind through Jesus’ death and resurrection (Pinckaers, 1995). And as the old covenant laid upon Israel consequential obligation which was defined in the Decalogue and more explicitly on the whole law of Moses, so the new covenant lap consequential obligations upon the Christian church, which are in the view of Matthew, defined in the sermon on the mount (5:1-2) (Ridlehoover, 2020). Christian ethics also has its source in the Gospels.

Prominent among them are that of Mark and Luke. At the beginning of the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus’ preaching is summarized in the word: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel” (1:15). The proclamation of the kingdom is to be followed by a response on the part of human; “Repent and believe in the gospel”. What this implies on those to whom the call to repentance is made, is to turn from their former wrongdoings. The attitude of mind that should often militate against repentance is self-righteousness and presumption as illustrated in the parable of the Pharisees and Publicans in Luke 18:10 -14. Christ formulated the great commandment of love of God and neighbour which remain the outstanding characteristics of Christian morality (Hultgren, 2017). Summarily, Christ’s message of salvation includes the call to complete submission to the will of the father by loving God and fellow humans.

Ethical teachings of the early Church form another important source of Christian ethics. The *Kerygma* (the proclamation or announcement) is the presentation of the historical facts of the NT, which form the basis of Christianity and of the fundamental convictions of its faith (Pinckaers, 1995). The

Christian preacher thinks of himself as an announcer or proclaimer of very important news (the good news). The Christian *kerygma* is a brief account of the life and work of Jesus, his conflicts, sufferings, and death and his resurrection from the dead. The aim of the preacher is to convince hearers that a new era in the relationship between God and humanity has begun and those who respond to this appeal to begin a new life with God become members of the church’s community.

The members are then to be instructed in the ethical principles and obligations of the Christians life, the moral instruction so given is covered by the Greek term, “*Didache*” (teaching) (Hill, 2013). So it was first, the *Kerygma*, and followed by the teaching (*Didache*). The epistles to the Romans, Galatians, Colossian and Ephesians and some other epistles present Christianity as an ethical religion to a certain set of religious convictions about God, human and the world. Christians, being reconciled with God through Christ, are new creatures, members of Christ’s body and children of God. This new life in Christ is the root and foundation of Christian ethics.

5. Ethical Praxis in Christianity

Human activities amongst other things, behaviours or actions are objectively condemned as ethically wrong. Actions such as stealing, killing, cheating, rape, bribing, adultery, amongst others are objectively acknowledged as morally wrong actions in society (Isiramen & Akhilomen, 1998). Some other actions or attitudes are also accepted as morally right and good in society. This includes such as actions like hospitality, kindness, forgiveness, honesty, fidelity, sincerity, etc. On the other hand, there are some human attitudes or actions that cannot be universally appraised as ethically wrong or right. For instance, abortion, euthanasia, smoking, masturbation, celibacy, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, alcoholism, assisted reproduction, cloning, transexualism, genderism and their likes. What principles of ethics or morality can be used to decide the rightness or wrongness of all the human actions mentioned above? This is where ethics comes into play. To answer this question, the praxis of Christian ethics is imperative.

One of the major shaping forces in Christian ethics was the competition with Manichaeism, a rival religion of Persian origin which held that good and evil or light and darkness were opposite forces struggling for mastery. Manichaeism had an enormous following in the third and fourth centuries (Wogaman, 2011). St. Augustine regarded as the

founder of Christian theology was originally a Manichaeist but abandoned Manichaeism after being influenced by Platonic thought. After his conversion to Christianity in 387, he sought to integrate the Platonic view with the Christian concept of goodness as an attribute of God and sin as Adam's fall, from the guilt of which one is redeemed by God's mercy. The Manichaeist belief in evil persisted, however, as may be noticed in Augustine's conviction of the sinfulness of human nature (Card, 2005). The Christian theologian St. Thomas Aquinas succeeded in reconciling Aristotelianism with the church's authority by acknowledging the truth of sense experience but holding it to be complementary to the truth of faith.

The great intellectual authority of Aristotle was thus made to serve the authority of the church, and the Aristotelian logic was used to support the Augustinian concepts of original sin and redemption through divine grace (*Summa Theologica* cited in Peschke, 1998). These attitudes and views may have influenced contemporary Christian morality or ethical decisions on certain ethical issues such as abortion, alcoholism, divorce, sexual morality, celibacy, homosexuality, wealth and poverty, etc.

Christian positions on abortion have a complex history as there is no explicit prohibition of abortion in either the OT or NT books. Other writers say that early Christianity held different positions at different times about abortion; others say that, in spite of the silence of the NT on the issue, they condemned abortion at any point of the pregnancy as a grave sin. The *Didache* (teaching), in all ramifications, disapproved of abortion of any kind (Peschke, 1998). The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) for instance, teaches the total respect for human life from conception to death. It is opposed to any procedures having the intention to harm an embryo or fetus for whatever reasons (Onimhawa, 2001). RCC has always declared its unchanging decision or position against abortion (Peschke, 1998; Singer, 2011; Ramsey, 2000). Since the twentieth century,

Protestant views on abortion have varied considerably, with some taking positions in the anti-abortion and abortion-rights camps (Beach, 1988). Conservative Protestants tend to be anti-abortion whereas mainline Protestants lean towards an abortion-rights stance (Peschke, 1998; Grudem, 2018). For instance, African-American Protestants are much more strongly anti-abortion than white Protestants (Peschke, 1998). Although the scripture is silent on abortion, some parts of it inform Christian

ethical positions on this issue (see Genesis 4:1; Job 31:15; Isaiah 44:24, 49:1, 5; and Jeremiah 1:5, etc.).

Another prevalent contemporary ethical issue is alcoholism. Current positions on alcoholism in Christianity are grouped into moderationism, abstentionism, and prohibitionism. Abstentionism and prohibitionism are most times grouped together since they share common notions. However, those in the camp of prohibitionism do not drink alcohol because a divine law says so, while Abstentionists, do so in the name of prudence, calling it "the wisest" decision to take in all circumstances. Some Christians, including Pentecostals, Baptists and Methodists believe that a person should abstain from alcoholism. Fifty-two percent of Evangelical leaders across the globe believe alcoholism is not compatible with a right Christian attitude hence they do not support drinking alcohol.

There are a number of Christian ethical positions on poverty and wealth acquisition. One view says that wealth and materialism are evil that ought to be avoided and combated (Weber, 2009; Ramelli, 2012). Some Christians argue that a proper understanding of Christian teachings on wealth and poverty needs to take a larger view where the accumulation of wealth is not the focal point of one's life rather a resource to foster the good life (Ramelli, 2012). Miller (2007) produced a three-part model that gives three common attitudes found among Protestants concerning wealth.

According to Miller, Protestants in varied manners have considered wealth as: (1) standing at variant to Christian belief (2) a stumbling block to faith and (3) a result of faith. Cobb (cited in Miller, 2007) invoked the teaching of Jesus that says a human cannot serve God and Mammon (wealth). Jesus did not condemn wealth rather he condemned its wrong acquisition, motive, and usage. In this sense, wealth gotten through dubious means or not used for the communal good of society is condemnable. Thus, Christian ethic creates the awareness of its adherents that honesty, truthfulness and other Christ-like attitudes are better than ill-gotten wealth especially, these days of yahoo-yahoo business boom around the globe.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have been able to highlight some important perspectives in ethics as it relates to Christianity including highlighting some ethical theories and approaches which underline ethical judgments. For instance, I used the framework of consequentialism to focus on the future effects of the

possible courses of action, considering people who are directly or indirectly affected. An individual using this framework ought to produce the best action. On the other hand, it is not always possible to predict the consequences of an action, so some actions that are expected to produce good consequences might actually end up harming people. In the duty framework, I focused on the duties and obligations that humans have in a given situation, and consider what ethical obligations they have and what things they should not do.

Using the virtue framework, it is obviously useful in situations that ask what sort of person a Christian or one should be. Also, using Christian ethical standards, the paper examined the issues of abortion, alcoholism and wealth acquisition, and arrived at the conclusion that such human actions are inimical to Christian teachings and ethical standards. The motive of Christian ethics, therefore, is the love for God and the love for humanity as a whole. This is the reason for the imperativeness of ethics in Christianity.

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