

Ethical and Moral Implications of Corruption

CORRUPTION D'IMPLICATIONS ETHIQUES ET MORALES

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Abstract

This paper argues in defence of the thesis that there is an urgent need for an indebt and thorough going ethical re-orientation and education, Particularly, in Nigeria. Apart from reinstating the place of moral education in the educational curriculum, there is also the need to carry out mass enlightenment campaigns through the print and electronic media, through plays, the entertainment industries, government sponsored television shows, fliers, articles on papers, newspapers and books. Ethical standards should be insisted upon in every sector and aspect of the people's lives; and those making efforts should be singled out and rewarded, especially those who have the public responsibility entrusted to them. The first people that come to mind are policy makers and implementers – those in Government-since their actions and inactions, in this regard, have a lot of influence on the crusade against corruption. What this means, our paper argues, is that Nigeria's much desired economic recovery and national development cannot be achieved unless Nigerians eschew corruption from their individual and national lives and embrace the virtues of honesty, patriotism and altruism.

Key words: Corruption; Deontologism; Teleologism; Contractarianism

Résumé

Cet article soutient en défense de la thèse selon laquelle il y a un besoin urgent d'une va s'endetter et approfondie éthiques ré-orientation et d'éducation. En particulier, au Nigeria. En dehors de rétablir la place de l'éducation

morale dans les programmes scolaires, il ya aussi la nécessité de mener des campagnes de sensibilisation de masse à travers les médias imprimés et électroniques, par des jeux, les industries du divertissement, la télévision montre que le gouvernement a parrainé, des tracts, des articles sur les papiers, journaux et des livres. Normes éthiques devraient être insisté dans chaque secteur et les aspects de la vie des gens, et ces efforts doivent être fait distingué et récompensé, en particulier ceux qui ont la responsabilité publique qui leur sont confiées. Les premières personnes qui viennent à l'esprit sont les décideurs et les exécutants - ceux dans le gouvernement depuis leur actions et inactions, à cet égard, ont beaucoup d'influence sur la croisade contre la corruption. Qu'est-ce que cela signifie, notre journal soutient, c'est que la récupération du Nigeria tant désiré et le développement économiques nationales ne peut être atteint que si les Nigériens évitent la corruption de leur vie individuelle et nationale et d'embrasser les vertus de l'honnêteté, le patriotisme et l'altruisme.

Mots clés: Corruption; Deontologism; Téléologisme; Contractualisme

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INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a global problem and no country of the world is totally free of its menacing grip. However, it is the level of its prevalence, on the one hand, and the honest, committed readiness of the people in eradicating it, on the other hand, that differentiates one country from another in the scale of corruption perception index. Here

in Nigeria, corruption has been entrenched in our national ethos, politics, civil society, public and private sectors of business and commerce. Our educational system, moral preferences and the whole economic machinery of our society stink and ooze with the stench of corruption. Every level of our Nigerian society has been deeply permeated by a pervasive and debilitating culture of corruption. Nigeria has been rated as one of the most corrupt nations in the world.

This prevalence of corruption betrays a latent decay in our ethical values and orientation. It shows our futile attempt to build a political society without a foundational reference to the religious-ethical principles of justice, transparency, altruism, accountability and a service-oriented notion of leadership. It shows a leadership praxis that promotes the selfish interests of a selected few at the expense of the common good which have generally been acclaimed by philosophers as the essence of the formation of political society (Uduigwomen 2006).

The effects of this pervasive corruption stare mockingly at our faces. We see them in the bad state of our roads, hospitals, school system, poor infrastructures, increasing crime wave, looting of the government treasury etc. Sad enough, there has not been an accompanying readiness and committed effort on our part to stamp out corruption or bring it to a manageable degree. Our many anti-corruption slogans, initiatives and institutions are sterile and empty of integrity; they are also selective and hypocritical.

This paper attempts to analyse the implications of corruption from the ethical and moral perspectives, with a view to articulating an ethical road map for an effective reduction or complete eradication of corruption from our societies.

1. CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

The word 'ethics' is derived from the Greek word 'ethos' which means "custom". It shares an equivalent meaning with yet another word "mores", which means "customs" or "habits". Sometimes the two words are used interchangeably to mean "customs, habits and acceptable ways of behaviour of an individual or a community" (Uduigwomen 2006:1). Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the rightness or wrongness of human action. It is for this reason that Ozumba (2004) holds that ethics deals with judgments as to the rightness or wrongness, virtuousness or viciousness, desirability or undesirability, approval or disapproval of our actions. As part of philosophy, it provides the undercurrent of rationality and logic in the admissibility of moral codes, mores and behavioural patterns. Ethics has also been called moral philosophy, since it deals with moral problems and moral judgments, and concerns itself with the morality of human action. Uduigwomen (2006:236) has identified the major concern of ethics to be "the

regulation of the behaviour and conduct of man as it affects the overall wellbeing of the state or society in which he lives".

On the one hand, it is possible to talk of a very close affinity between ethics and morality. On the other hand, some subtle distinction between these two concepts can also be inferred. We all act in a moral way, that is, every human act has a moral value and can be adjudged to be either morally good or morally bad. Sometimes we do not explicitly reflect on what makes our actions good or bad or what undergirds our moral judgments. Ethics as a moral science, or as a branch of Philosophy, comes in then to provide us with the principles and fundamental reasons or yardsticks for our moral judgments. Omoregbe (2006:5) sums this up when he says that

Ethics presupposes that we already have a sense of morality and it is the systematic study of the fundamental principles underlying our morality. Hence, morality is the basis of ethics, the later is an explicit reflection on, and the systematic study of the former.

In other words, while morality tells us that an action is either good or bad, ethics gives us the principles and the reasons why an action is good or bad. It is from this point of view that we say that ethics and morality are fundamentally related. This, no doubt is a very broad understanding of ethics as a branch of philosophy. However, it must be stated immediately that in trying to state these ethical principles underlying the morality of an action, many ethical systems and theories have been propounded by many philosophers. Among these systems, mention could be made of Deontologism, Teleologism and Contractarianism. Apart from these ethical systems, and found imbedded in them are a plethora of ethical theories. Uduigwomen, in his book *Introducing Ethics: Trends, Problems and Perspectives*, gives an excellent treatment of these theories and has classified them under the Classical Ethical Theories and Contemporary Ethical Theories. It is interesting to note that among these various Ethical Theories, some, argue for the possibility of moral argument – that is, for the universality of the moral principle or of morality. Others argue against the existence of such universal moral principle, alluding only to subjective moral principles. In the former group, mention can be made of philosophers like Plato, St. Thomas Aquinas and Kant. Among the later group are philosophers like, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Nietzsche and many empiricists and positivist philosophers (Ochulor 2008). Though we generally acknowledge the relationship between ethics and morality, emphasis is also placed on the distinction between these two concepts. Ethics can be used in a narrow sense to mean the code of conduct, the guiding principle of behaviour peculiar to a people, an organization, or a professional body. This is what is referred to when one talks of the ethics of the Legal and Medical Professions, or the work ethics guiding a people in an office or company. From this point of view, ethics

is particularistic in nature. Morality, on the other hand, has a universal applicability by virtue of the fact that for an act to be moral, it must be based on a universally acceptable standard. The term ethics does not necessarily always carry this note of universality, in the sense that it may only refer to an individual's view point as when we say Christian Ethics, Bergsonian Ethics, Humean Ethics and Aristotelian Ethics etc. or when we refer to the code of conduct of a particular profession or establishment. From this narrow point of view, therefore, while morality talks of a universal standard by which our actions could be adjudged good or bad, ethics refers to an individual's point of view about the goodness or badness of an action which may not generally have a universal applicability.

In ethics and morality, we often hear of such words like moral, immoral and amoral just as we hear of words like ethical action, good, bad, moral agent, choice, value, human action, acts of man etc. It may also be worthwhile to establish some subtle distinction between some of these commonly used words, like moral, amoral and immoral. The term moral can be used in two ways. This equivocation gives it the following contrasts: *moral vs amoral* and *moral vs immoral*. In the first usage, *moral* means when a being or an action is liable or subject to a moral law or responsibility. For this to take place, the being in question, in our context man, must be rational and free, that is to say that the action must be done with deliberation (knowledge) and free will (volition). An act has a moral value when it can be adjudged good or bad, because of the presence of some ultimate conditions like rationality and freedom. An action or being is *amoral* when there is no rationality and freedom in the being or about the action. When we say for instance that a man is a moral agent, we mean that man, in so far as he is rational and free is morally responsible for his action, in accordance with an existing moral law. Animals are amoral beings, likewise infants. An action is moral if it is done freely and advertently or with deliberation. An action is amoral if it is done inadvertently, that is, without deliberation and under coercion, e.g. the act done instinctively, unconsciously or under compulsion.

The other pair *moral vs immoral* have to do with the rightness or wrongness of an action respectively. An act is moral if it is good, praiseworthy and in line with universally acceptable moral standards. A moral person likewise is one who has the habit of doing good acts. On the other hand, a person is said to be immoral if his/her actions contravene acceptable moral codes. From this perspective, we can classify corruption or acts of corruption as immoral acts and a corrupt person as an immoral person (Uduigwomen 2006).

Ethics and morality are the life wires of every society. This is because society is composed of moral agents who make choices everyday and engage in daily social interactions, influenced by their individual desires, tendencies and preferences. Without a generally

acceptable, just and solid principle of morality, the human society would soon degenerate into the Hobbesian state of nature where man becomes wolf unto his fellow men, thereby making life to be nasty, brutish and short. Apart from this, every facet of the human life comes under the purview and searchlight of morality because every human action (done freely and with deliberation) not only has moral value but also affects positively or negatively the life of the individual himself, those around him, the society at large, and his ultimate destiny or end. Whether these actions are on the political, religious, socio-economic, interpersonal or cultural levels of man's life in the society, they all have a moral value and can be termed either good or bad, just or unjust, cruel or kind. Ethics aims at elucidating the grounds for the morality of our actions and the scope of ethics practically covers every action of human life, so long as these actions are morally responsible actions. We can, therefore, talk of Biomedical Ethics, Environmental Ethics, Legal Ethics, Political Ethics etc. The ethics of these areas of human endeavour provide the scientific study of the principles and bases of the morality of the actions and decisions we make in these areas of human life, as well as the norms that serve as guiding principles, laws and standards to regulate decisions in these areas.

Ethical principles are based on the metaphysical presuppositions of man as a being imbued with rationality and freedom; a being with an ontological propensity to goodness, moral self actualization and perfection; a being with an inherent teleological orientation towards God; a moral agent imbued with an inner moral principle – an in-built conscience open to divine and human positive laws; a social being who fulfills himself only within the context of unceasing dynamics of social interaction with other beings. Now, because ethics touches all these metaphysical issues about man, the foundational importance of ethics for man's complete and authentic self-fulfillment cannot be over-emphasized. It is because corruption hits at these foundational issues that corruption is ontologically inimical to the life of man and his society and his ultimate purpose in life. This necessarily brings us to our core question, the question of corruption. Etymologically, the word corruption comes from the Latin word "corrumpo" which literally means to decompose, or to disintegrate, to lose value, to become putrid and useless. In other words, corruption simply means to lose purity or integrity. This broad understanding covers both objects and things – animate and inanimate. However, when applied to human actions, or to a free moral agent, the word corruption assumes an added meaning. The Advanced Oxford Dictionary defines corruption as 'an act of dishonesty or an illegal behaviour aimed at using public office for one's private gain' (Hornby 2000:261). Maurice Coker (2006:91) shares this view when he states that corruption is the

Misuse of power for private benefit or advantage. This power

may, but need not reside in the public domain. Besides money, the benefit can take the form of promotion, special treatment, commendation, or the favours of women or men.... In ordinary parlance, corruption simply means asking, giving or taking a fee, gift or favours as a condition for performance of one's legal or assigned responsibility.

This definition brings out the fundamental link between bribery and corruption. These two are twin concepts always associated with each other.

2. IMPLICATIONS OF CORRUPTION

Corruption as a human act, has moral and ethical implications and so can be analyzed from the ethical and moral perspectives. We can achieve such analysis against the background of the three dominant ethical systems – Deontologism, Teleologism/Utilitarianism or Consequentialism and Contractarianism.

2.1 Deontologism and Corruption

Deontologism as an ethical system holds that some acts are naturally obligatory and binding on us. The natural and universal obligatory dimension of such acts give them their moral status. An act is moral if there is a universal sense of duty or obligation attached to it. To do it makes one morally good and to refrain from it is morally bad, e.g. the act of sharing one's bread with the hungry. This is on the positive side. On the negative side, some acts naturally carry with them negative obligation like the acts of adultery, cheating, lying, giving or taking bribe, embezzlement of public funds etc. We have the natural obligation not to do them. To do them makes one morally bad and to refrain from them makes one morally good. In relation to this ethical system one, therefore, sees that corruption is a morally bad action or an immoral act. It goes contrary to right reason that one should appropriate what is meant for the public to assuage one's private interest or that one should use his position as a public servant for self aggrandizement or for private gain, at the detriment of the common good. Right reason cannot also tolerate this type of action because it goes contrary to the natural law enshrined in the universal human moral sensibility. Going by the Kantian moral philosophy on which this ethical system is built, corruption is seen as an immoral or morally bad action because it goes against the supreme moral principle and the natural sense of duty that goes with it. Corruption cannot be used as categorical imperative or a supreme moral principle which can be universally applied or acceptable. The reason for this is because corruption contravenes the three maxims that should guide all human actions that have moral value. These maxims according to Kant, as enumerated by Ochulor (2008:307), are: "Act only on the maxim through which you can, at the same time, will that it should become universal law". This is the formula of universal law. It is obvious that nobody would want corruption to

be adopted and practiced as a general principle of action. While we may like to defraud others, nobody would want to be defrauded or cheated. The second categorical imperative requires all to: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end". This is Kant's formula of the end in itself. Corruption implies the usurpation and subsequent use of the sweat or the rights of others for one's selfish ends. It implies a total neglect and repudiation of the dignity, sensibility and socio-economic rights of others. In carrying out any corrupt act, what the corrupt person is saying is that, others can go to blazes for all he cares. The third categorical imperative states that "a moral agent is subject only to laws which are made by himself and yet are universal". This is Kant's third formula, the formula of autonomy.

It must be stated immediately that the autonomy in question here means the freedom of the will which the individual enjoys, a free will molded, directed and informed by reason. When thus informed and guided by reason, the will in turn feels obliged towards the particular action and sees it as duty, a moral imperative. Thus Ochulor (2008:306) further remarks

In observing that man serves as a judge of moral law and of course the sole agent of moral laws, Kant postulates that man is endowed with practical reason and freewill, which also makes him to choose actions that are directed by his reason for the sake of duty or obligation. Kant believes also that man has conscience which enables him to act in terms of duty.

As morally responsible agents, we know that corruption is bad, and deep within us, in the sanctuary of our consciences, we know what we are doing is wrong. We are free to choose to be corrupt and to choose to be honest. In freely choosing corruption, we freely go against our consciences, yet without wishing that such acts of transgression be universalized. It is here then that we see that corruption is evil and morally unacceptable.

2.2 Teleologism/Utilitarianism or Consequentialism and Corruption

The teleological system predicates the goodness or badness of an act on the effect or consequence of that action or the utility value of the particular action. Another name for it is Utilitarianism or Consequentialism. It holds that an agent performs a morally right action if such an action will maximize good and minimize evil, in terms of the number of people who benefit from that particular action or the degree of pleasure the particular action causes on people. In other words, if an action gives happiness to the greatest number of people affected by it, it becomes morally right (Uduigwomen 2006). Even here too it is easy to see how corruption goes against the principle of morality. Corruption, as we can see, has bad effects on the society, jeopardizes the common good and ultimately inflicts pain on a very large number of people,

if not the whole nation. In this regard, it is also pertinent to note that corruption, no matter the temporary benefit it brings to the individual and those around him, can neither constitute nor contribute to man's summum bonum. There has never been a time that man was completely satisfied or happy because of his wealth. The very rich also have other desires which keep them anxious. They are not even satisfied with the amount of money they have. Given the opportunity, they will still embezzle more. As a matter of fact, because corruption is a morally depraved and condemnable act, it can even jeopardize man's attainment of his summum bonum, that is, his highest good.

2.3 Contractarianism and Corruption

The third ethical system, the contractarianism or justice system, predicates moral responsibility on acts that are based on rational choice, done with empathy, without any dint of partiality and motivated by a sense of justice and fairness towards the other person. Our actions are good as long as they respect the right of others and maintain the cohesiveness of the social contract on which society is based. If we go by the simplest understanding of justice as giving someone his due, then we will easily see that since corruption deprives people of their due, their due in terms of the good roads and other amenities the money corruptly embezzled would have provided for them, then corruption is morally wrong. Corruption does not, in any way, promote social cohesion or the social contract that binds people together, but rather threatens it. Corruption does not allow one to be fair in one's dealings with others (going by the Rawlsian definition of justice as fairness). On all these counts, therefore, corruption is morally bad. It is, therefore, the prerogative of ethics or moral philosophy to establish normative principles that not only make corrupt practices morally bad but also command people to desist from them.

Man, the individual man, is the origin of every moral action whether good or bad. Corruption begins first in the individual's heart, first as thoughts and then these thoughts are translated into concrete actions. When these acts are repeated over time, they become habits, these habits in turn become character and almost one's second nature. One can become involved in acts of corruption through a variety of ways: personally carrying out corrupt acts, associating oneself with corrupt people through whom one can be influenced negatively, or participation in the use or enjoyment of the booties of corruption. At this personal level, one can protect himself from corruption by the formation of good conscience, a conscience that warns you ahead of time, and condemns or praises the individual depending on whether his actions are good or bad. Apart from this, there is need to convince one's self that corruption is a morally bad act. Without this personal conviction, it will be difficult to get the individual to steer clear of corruption. For the individual to protect himself

from corruption he or she must also respect the laws of the land, be satisfied with one's means of livelihood, while looking for honest ways to improve on one's lot. Maintaining a high standard of morality and refusing to compromise these standards, no matter the pressure around one, would certainly contribute to the individual's attempt to protect one's self from being corrupted. Avoiding the company and advice of those who are corrupt is of utmost importance.

CONCLUSION

Traditional African Society was rich with many values which can be integrated into our plan for nation building; values which when inculcated can help curb corruption. The values of truth and honesty were highly extolled in our tradition and are symbolized among the Igbos in the sacred staff of Ofor-na-Ogu. These were anchored on a firm religious foundation, with the gods as witnesses ready to punish anyone who was dishonest in his dealings with others. The virtues of respect for public property, respect for the laws of the land were also common place. Thieves were publicly disgraced so as to deter others, and a life of virtue was rewarded with chieftaincy title and qualified one not only to join the Council of Elders during one's life time but to be named among the ancestors and protectors of the community at death. There were instances where corrupt kings and chiefs were deposed and sometimes banished from the land. There was, therefore, a reward system that served to promote hard work, honesty and transparency in the affairs of men, particularly the kings, the elders and those in authority.

As a way out of corruption, therefore, this paper has put forward principles that draw impetus from ethics and morality, from our traditional African cultural values, from modern socio-economic and political practices, that have been of comparative relevance in developed and other developing nations. Subsequently the paper challenges all, particularly Nigerians, to be individually and collectively involved in the fight against corruption.

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