

RELEVANCE OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF MORAL PLURALISM TO ETHNO-RELIGIOUS RELATIONSHIPS IN THE NIGERIAN PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

Rev Fr Louis L. Ngare
American University of Nigeria

ABSTRACT

When a social group is ideologically homogeneous, it is usually easier to reach consensus on what is ethically appropriate and what is not. However, in an ideologically heterogeneous society such as modern pluralistic societies this is not likely to happen because people do not share the minimal ideological basis needed for true consensus. The inescapable issue is this: when a society's ideological homogeneity is changed into one of diversity, the unanimous acceptance of key values, which had ultimately built the concept of right or wrong, is destroyed. This study describes some features of the pluralistic society as the essential cultural matrix of Moral Pluralism. It also discusses the philosophy of Moral Pluralism and shows how it is superior and more relevant to today's problems than any of its counterfeit forms. The study considers the relevance of this philosophy of Moral Pluralism to the Nigerian pluralistic. Recommendations include a proposal for a morality of human integration for the country.

Keywords: Ehtno-religious, Pluralism, Pluralistic Society

Basic Features of a Pluralistic Society

Modern societies are generally pluralistic in that they are ethnically, geographically, culturally and religiously diversified'. What is characteristic of modern societies is an increase in the use and impact of rational procedures of investigation and solution of problems affecting all levels of interaction and a growing complexity of the network of relationships among citizens (Talissee: 2011). Furthermore, a pluralistic society could be *negatively* or *positively* described. Positively, a pluralistic society is described as the harmonious and enriching coexistence within a society of peoples of different and at times of incompatible views, interests and aspirations. In this sense, these groups come together to promote a greater dimension of the quality of life for all. In the negative sense however, these differences do not bring about total and peaceful coexistence as some groups may be openly antagonistic.

Greek philosophers under the influence of thinkers like Anaximander and especially of Heraclitus believed that reality comprised opposites whose unity manifested in all things. For Heraclitus, the formula for understanding reality was the perpetual strife of opposites. All change manifests itself in an interaction of opposite forces. More recently, the belief in a fundamental opposition in all things has its most significant influence through Marx and Engels. For them, without a tension between opposites, things would be unchanging. The *overcoming* and *being overcome* of opposing forces explain all natural and human history. As a philosophical principle therefore, the unity and the struggle of opposites are definitely in our perspective on human nature and conflict. Perception here is considered as the outcome of struggle between opposing forces- the powers of reality bearing upon us and our world (Brody: 1999). Life then is a struggle of opposites towards self-realization. Harmony is a balance between such opposites. For society, the

struggle is the balancing of powers among people- the manifest determination of their interests, capabilities and wills; the harmony is the structure of expectations. Conflict transforms itself into harmony and harmony into conflict; war into peace and peace into war. Both are aspects of the same process (Filis: 2016).

True we cannot conceive a large collection of individuals differentiated by interest and roles who can totally avoid coercion. Outside our small circle of friends and relatives, we find in the larger society an increasing differentiation of interests and values. For example, disagreements regarding the proper allocation of rights are inevitable in a society evidently diversified and pluralized. There must be an encounter among individuals of different groups; an interaction that affects the ways of thinking, the attitudes to be adopted, and the actions to be taken regarding each as members of a common political society.

Conflict then we can say is a part of a social process by which people and groups adjust their different and changing interests, capabilities and wills. It is both a manifestation of a breakdown in social expectations and a means by which new expectations can be formed. Through conflict, social order is established and adjusted. It is a balancing of powers among interests, capabilities and wills. It is a mutual adjusting of what people want, can get, and are willing to pursue. And so we can say that conflict behavior, whether hostile actions, violence or war, is a manifestation of this process. In discussing the challenges of normative diversity and decolonization in critical theory and ethics, Allen (2016) posits that in the realm of critical theory and ethics, the challenge lies in decolonizing normative foundations, acknowledging the richness of normative diversity. Progress, in this context, requires a deep engagement with diverse perspectives, paving the way for a more inclusive and just intellectual landscape.

Towards a Distinctive Morality for the Pluralistic Society

There is a three-fold distinction which anthropologists have found quite useful in the and very relevant to the study of a pluralistic society. First, in every pluralistic society, there are *universal* norms which are binding on all members of the society. Second, there are *alternative* norms which allow options in complying with them and third, there are *specialty* norms which are restricted to and are distinctive of a group within the larger society. In every of these instances, the concept of freedom plays an important role. In a study, Philip Pettit (2001) explores the concept of freedom and agency in a pluralistic society, considering the ethical implications of diverse perspectives on freedom. For him, in a pluralistic society, freedom is not a solitary act but a shared endeavor. It is in recognizing the agency and autonomy of each individual, even amidst diverse perspectives, that we foster a more inclusive and ethically grounded concept of freedom."

The reason morality has become an issue in the pluralistic society is that, if social and political equilibrium are to be sustained, a careful proportion between those norms must be worked out. When for instance the specialty norms of a group are imposed on others as universal particularly when such norms either enhance the aims of that group or when the norms in question are unduly penalizing on others who do not subscribe to the views of that group, then they can cause great and unnecessary anguish and disharmony. What is called for in every effort for the establishment of a genuinely pluralistic society is a formula of social equilibrium because as it were, 'reality is neither an interminable solo, nor a chaos of mutually irrelevant duets, like that which assails the

ears of the man waiting for a friend in the corridor of a music school, but a vast chorale, in this broken world, alas, always inefficiently and discordantly rendered. Here, the tenets of the proverbial Golden Rule aptly come to mind. And according to Spinner-Halev (1998) while commenting on Amitai Etzioni's work (1998), in a diverse democratic society, the 'new golden rule' calls upon us to treat others as we would wish to be treated, fostering a sense of community and upholding moral values as the cornerstone of a just and inclusive society. This formula must strike a proportion between alternative norms and universal norms on the one hand, and specialty norms on the other. Mason for instance opines that 'when we emphasize the former too much we move towards totalitarianism, while a drift to the latter leads to anarchy. The formula here proposed is that of *Moral Pluralism*.

Moral Pluralism as a Distinct Morality for the Pluralistic Society

As a working definition for this work, morality can be regarded as the emergence within the human person of a distinct way of looking at life, relating to people, interpreting issues and directing and evaluating actions. Now, since the human person is born to be as a human being who realizes his or her natural potential within a frame of *understandings* and *expectations* which one discovers and which determine one as a human being, a philosophy of moral pluralism must do justice and must also be based on the acceptance of each individual as a human being in one's own right. In this sense, one's otherness must not only be respected, but it must be affirmed and its dignity recognized and allowed to be freely expressed within due limits. Haidt (2012) argues that that the moral psychology of individuals has so much to do with how moral differences can lead to divisions in society. In our diverse society, moral differences can be both a source of strength and division. Understanding the moral psychology of individuals is essential for bridging divides and fostering a more harmonious coexistence among good people with differing beliefs.

It is generally agreed by moral philosophers, Jean Paul Satre & Gabriel Marcel that every man, woman or child of this world, regardless of racial origin (regardless of even of whether they are moral or immoral), is proper of worthy living conditions, and should be treated with respect as befits the essential dignity of man. Such acceptance is neither a *capitulation of indifference nor a canonization of error*. On the contrary, this is a recognition of some of the deeper truths concerning humankind, namely, that both individually and collectively, we can only discover the truth about ourselves and the good life if we are allowed to make mistakes in its pursuit, and within limits pursue it as we perceive it. In the tapestry of justice, the threads of diverse perspectives and voices must be interwoven (Frazer: 2008). True justice emerges not from a single vantage point, but from the collective wisdom of a society that values and incorporates the richness of its differences (Sen: 2009, Michael 2009). In order that each one of us may reach the truth according to our measure and desire, let us recognize each other's right to make mistake in its pursuit. We need not only a philosophy of commonality- that is of the universals of mankind- but also a philosophy of difference. No one civilization has the right to impose itself on others by force. We need to know why we must accept and respect the dignity of those that are not like us. Nussbaum (2007), while examining the challenges of pluralism, ethics, and religious violence in modern societies argues that in the face of religious and cultural diversity, the path to a peaceful and just society requires a commitment to understanding and respecting the dignity of every individual, regardless of their background or beliefs. True progress lies in our ability to navigate the clash of ideas with empathy

and ethical engagement. Here, there is a demand for respect for the individual's viewpoint and a call for tolerance and moderation in our understanding of the complex social structure of our society. Such an understanding not only forbids extremism in choice of actions and policies, but as of necessity demands a need for consultation and wider participation. The recognition of different beliefs and moral standards is not an endorsement of the differences themselves, but rather recognition of the supremacy of conscience when it is the *servant of truth* (Francén, 2010).

So far we have argued that given the fact that contemporary society is conditioned by industrialization, democratization, pluralization, and in many cases, globalization, there is the need for a kind of morality that can inspire, motivate and guide citizens so that they may learn to work together in jointly constructing the kind of society that all can jointly judge to be worthwhile- a morality that enhances their own self-esteem, self-worth and self-realization. This morality we insist, finds expression in the philosophy of Moral Pluralism (Gill & Nichols: 2018). Next we need to ask: how distinct is this moral principle from others that had earlier been proposed which, as the case may be, could stand as rivals or counterfeit forms of this new morality? In order to attempt an answer to this poser, a brief identification of the possible counterfeit forms of the philosophy of moral pluralism would make a good start.

Moral Pluralism and its Counterfeit Forms

Let us quickly mention here that Moral Pluralism is a recent arrival to moral philosophy. However, we can already identify some of its rival forms which are not necessarily later arrivals in the field of moral philosophy (Gill: 2014). The main forms we shall consider here are Moral Dogmatism, Moral Relativism and Moral Liberalism.

Moral dogmatism

Generally, dogmatism consists in an excessive emphasis on prescriptions without rooting such prescriptions sufficiently in lived experience. By implication, moral dogmatism is the claim to lay down principles of right and wrong without providing adequate grounds for such principles (Hooker, 1996). This counterfeit form of moral pluralism is often found among religious fanatics and ideological zealots. If religion unduly imposes itself in the public affairs, it frequently ends up *universalizing the specialties* of one group. This may benefit the group in question but at the same time penalize those who do not subscribe to that belief system. Ironically, adherents of belief systems do not explicitly refer to their scriptures to vindicate their position. What they normally do is to put forward an argument that is at best precariously within scriptures and put forward as if it were a dictate of reason itself.

There is however, a certain truth in the dogmatist point of view. Both the moral pluralist and the moral dogmatist accept that there are moral truths. But unlike the moral dogmatist, the moral pluralist acknowledges that there are different sources and approaches to such truths. The error of the dogmatist is not in *what* he believes but rather in the *way* he believes. Concluding on the position of the moral dogmatist and at the risk of sounding rather theological, we wish to state that it is not our claim that religion has no place in public affairs, rather we insist that one must recognize the distinctive role of reason as God's measure on earth. And when as adherents of

different belief systems people reach *ultimately irreconcilable* positions, it is this same reason which will guide them provided it is nurtured by truth.

Moral relativism

In philosophy moral relativism is the position that moral or ethical propositions do not reflect objective or universal moral truths, but instead make claims relative to social, cultural, historical or personal circumstances. Moral relativists hold that no universal standard exists by which to assess an ethical proposition's truth. Relativistic positions often see moral values as applicable only within certain cultural boundaries (Bohman: 2015) or in the context of individual preferences (individualist ethical subjectivism). In this vein, moral relativism is the claim that since moral values are, like feelings, matters of taste, that all such moral views are of equal value. It would seem as if the moral relativist also has an element of truth. Moral relativism draws attention to the fact that our perception of morality in general and of what we ought to do in particular circumstances are limited in character. They are steeped in the culture of their origins (Moore: 2019). The moral relativist has grasped this side of the truth. But by making his own understanding the limit of what is meant by morality, he ends up closing the door on any discussion.

We have so far seen that relativism is the philosophical belief that all views are equally valid. However, if you test this position under general rules of logic, especially the principle of non-contradiction which states that '*a thing cannot be and not be at the same time*', you soon discover that relativism is illogical and self-defeating. If relativism is true and all points of view are true, then the assertion that relativism is false is also true. Is this contradictory? Yes. Is truth contradictory? No. According to the relativist position, "I can have my own version of truth. Therefore, a truth for me is that relativism is false. Based on the relativistic rules, I have just established that relativism is false. Of course, the relativist will say "no" to my logic, but then what is true for me is not really true, and, again, I have proven the philosophy of relativism false" (Klein: 1974).

Moral liberalism

Liberalism in general is any conviction that places freedom above all others on the scale of human values. The distinctive view of the moral liberalist is that all points of view are legitimate because each person is free. However, we know that freedom could be used in two different ways. In the first place, it could be used in a *self-centered* way, when one short sells his human nature by making the wrong choices in matters that demand the use of freedom which should lead to an authentic self-realization. On the other hand, our freedom could be used in a *self-realizing* way, where proper development, growth and maturity take place (Galston: Moral Pluralism 2009). This happens anytime we make the proper choices, and it demands such actions be done with the right motive.

However, freedom is not and cannot be an ultimate standard of either individual or collective morality; this is because freedom itself is bound to the truth. And if freedom departs from the truth, it degenerates to a license to do as one wishes to. What happens here is that social policy is determined by the preferences of the people alone. Once a society adopts this view of morality, it inevitably drifts towards a posture of *moral neutralism* whereby in an effort not to

appear as endorsing the specialty norms of any particular group, it ends promoting the least common denominator among the values of all groups (Pavel: 2007). This in effect leads to a chaotic situation. If freedom and human rights consciousness have made life easier, they have also made it more dangerous. We have threats now even on our freedom. Here then is the paradox: our freedom threatens our freedom.

Relevance of the Philosophy Moral Pluralism to the Nigerian Pluralistic Society

Nigeria as a geographical concept is still a nation state in the making. It is still in the process of fully understanding what sort of task forces outside its control have initiated for it. In a sense, it has been launched since its independence on a voyage of self-discovery. It has the task of appropriating for itself the challenges its ethnic and religious composition has imposed on it. People, who in most cases had lived side by side without reciprocal communication and in virtual isolation suddenly found themselves as one country, thanks to colonial interest, burdened with a system of government without a precedent in their indigenous traditions (Galston: Political Pluralism 2009). They have now to operate a government they do not understand, and to communicate with one another, they have to employ the use of foreign languages. What really lies at the bottom of our dilemma is the absence of a viable political arrangement. The political history of this nation is partly one of disillusionment. Our task then is to bring about a new political culture; a culture which like a veritable fountain head, would bring forth a stable, strong and dynamic society.

In doing this, we need not only a philosophy of commonality- that is of the universals of mankind- but also a philosophy of difference. No one civilization has the right to impose itself on others by force. We need to know why we must accept and respect the dignity of those not likes us. Here, there is a demand for respect for the individual's viewpoint and a call for tolerance and moderation in our understanding of the complex social structure of our society. Such an understanding not only forbids extremism in choice of actions and policies, but as of necessity demands a need for consultation and wider participation.

As a democratic nation searching for an acceptable political philosophy, Nigeria cannot shy from the fact of being culturally and religiously diversified. But when for instance at the religious level we think we are fulfilling the will of God by waging war against the 'infidel', or forcing our specific beliefs, customs and practices on others, so that all Nigeria shares the same religion- our religion, such an idea would rather amount to total infringement on the fundamental human rights of others. In discussing the importance of deliberative democracy in pluralistic societies and how diverse viewpoints can be integrated into ethical decision-making, Gutmann and Thompson (2004) opine that "In a pluralistic society, the strength of democracy lies in our ability to engage in open and respectful dialogue, where diverse voices can be heard and considered. Deliberative democracy is not just a process; it's a commitment to forging ethical decisions through inclusive conversation.

From the foregoing, there is no gain saying that until the religions in Nigeria not merely tolerate but find positive value in the diversity of our country, we shall have wars and their

repercussions will continue to rise. Cashing in on the demands of the philosophy of moral pluralism, our submission in this work is that instead of wasting time fighting battles that in the final analysis do not belong to God, religions in this country should try and unite at a higher level in upholding truths of humanity rather than buried in religious fundamentalism. Such truths will include the affirmation of the eminent dignity of humanity. And since all human beings, whether Muslim or Christian or worshippers in the Tradition Religions share in that dignity, they have the right to be respected and loved. This also, will apply to the phenomenon of ethnic diversity in Nigeria.

Summary of findings

1. Economic inequality and limited access to resources can breed resentment and social divisions, emphasizing the need for policies that promote equal distribution of wealth and opportunities.
2. Many communities lack understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures, traditions, and beliefs, underscoring the importance of cultural awareness programs and diversity training.
3. Marginalised groups often face barriers to participation in decision-making processes and representation in public sectors, highlighting the need for inclusive policies and practices.
4. There are instances of racism, xenophobia, and discrimination in Nigeria which can compromise the safety and well-being of minority groups, emphasizing the need for anti-discrimination policies and awareness campaigns.
5. There is the need for education in promoting social cohesion, intercultural understanding, and empathy, as well as the importance of community engagement and participation in decision-making processes.
6. Institutions, including schools and government agencies, play a critical role in promoting diversity, inclusion, and social cohesion, highlighting the need for reforms and training programs.

Conclusion

In the intricate tapestry of pluralistic societies, particularly exemplified by Nigeria, the philosophy of Moral Pluralism emerges as a promising framework for addressing the ethical complexities inherent in diversity. As this essay has expounded, Moral Pluralism accentuates the importance of recognizing individual dignity, respecting diverse perspectives, and striking a balance between universal norms and specialty norms within a pluralistic society. It underscores the need for harmonious coexistence, tolerance, and the mutual appreciation of differences, fostering a more just and inclusive social fabric.

Recommendations

These pragmatic recommendations are proposed to guide the Nigerian government in its efforts to create a more inclusive and harmonious society. By actively embracing Moral Pluralism and implementing these initiatives, Nigeria can navigate its diverse landscape with greater unity, respect, and ethical commitment, leading to a brighter future for all its citizens. The Nigerian government is therefore encouraged to:

- i. Revise and enhance the national educational curriculum to include subjects that promote diversity awareness, tolerance, and ethical values. This can be done by introducing mandatory courses on intercultural understanding and religious diversity in schools and universities.
- ii. Establish and support interfaith and interethnic dialogue platforms at both the national and local levels, bringing together religious and community leaders to promote mutual respect and understanding.
- iii. Develop legislation that safeguards religious and ethnic diversity, ensuring the protection of minority rights and preventing discrimination. The National Assembly should enact bills which promote policies that actively encourage diversity in public and private sector employment, education, and governance.
- iv. Provide diversity training programs for public officials, educators, and law enforcement personnel to equip them with the tools and knowledge necessary for handling diverse communities sensitively.
- v. Launch nationwide public awareness campaigns emphasizing the importance of embracing diversity and respecting individual dignity. The Utilization of media, community events, and social platforms to disseminate messages of unity and tolerance is a sure way of achieving this.
- vi. Strengthen and promote community-based conflict resolution mechanisms that encourage peaceful dialogue and reconciliation. This can be achieved by training of mediators and facilitators to manage disputes arising from cultural and religious differences.
- vii. Collaborate with international organizations and governments experienced in managing pluralistic societies to gain insights and expertise in fostering tolerance and coexistence.

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