Environmental Influences and its Import on Moral Life

[1]Dr. Idoreyin, [2]F. Esikot

[1, 2] Faculty of Arts, Department Of Philosophy, University Of Uyo, Nigeria.

Abstract: *Morality is inundated with sets of principles of right conducts that are deemed praise worthy and commendable as a condition-since-qua-non for a peaceful, happy and harmonious social co-existence. However, since morality is society/nature related, certain environmental factors may constitute precedence from which actions are judged as right or wrong. This paper seeks to argue that, owning to the laws of nature of the universe and man's place in it, it will be difficult to extricate man's moral life from environmental influences, and hence morality to some extent can be predicated on environmental concerns.*

I.   Introduction

The subject of morality still elicits a lot of concerns despite the sophistication we find in the world today. Technological advancement has not been able to erode the all embracing importance of morality. The line between ethics and morality however, is very thin and people often get confused even though the difference between the two is quite significant and comprehensive. Morals are said to be personal characteristics while Ethics pertains to social system where morals are put in practice. In other words, Ethics define the socially accepted behaviour by the members of groups that they belong to, and may be defined differently by different groups such as national ethics, social ethics, business ethics, organizational ethics and family ethics. Under scoring this point Lucidly, Udoidem (1992) avers that:

Where the study of the principle is normative, ethics is used interchangeably, with morality. Thus normative ethics has to do with the study and prescription of rules and regulations regarding the rightness and wrongness of human action. This approach to ethics determines what is to be done and what is not to be done if the human person is to live a moral life (70).

There are three questions that, if asked sincerely and explored carefully will carry one a long way toward understanding ethical problems and deciding what moral action to take in the very dilemmas in which we find ourselves caught. The three questions are:
(i)   Who actually makes an ethical decision?
(ii) What criteria should I use in making a relevant and meaningful ethical decision?
(iii) To whom (or what) do my moral obligations apply? These questions clearly stress the point that moral issues are real and objective even though there are some thinkers who will argue for moral subjectivism. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant tells us that two things fill him with wonder, namely; "the starry sky above and the moral law within" (Cited in: Omoregbe 1990:5).

If morality tends to find expression in a social context (this is where actions become visibly good or bad) then it follows that, cultural forces, family traditions and religious training, parental understandings and actions regarding childrearing, discipline and socialization all deeply influence humans' appreciation of right and wrong. Furthermore, the moral law can be viewed as the law traditionally known as the natural law which enjoins man to do well and refrain from evil. Consequently, since the universe is not static, it follows that what goes around comes around and as such, Newton's third law of motion which states that for every action, there is always opposite and equal reaction is very apt. This claim can be situated in human conduct especially as it is influenced by environmental factors. We shall clearly show in this work that not only is morality an objective issue, but it is something "living", active and in motion whose direction can be influenced leading to certain desirable or undesirable course of action. Let us begin our discourse by x-raying the concept of morality further.

II.   On The Concerns Of Morality

The subject of morality presupposes man's free will to make voluntary choices, such that he can be held accountable for his actions. The discipline that is concern with morality is ethics. Ethics according to Wallace (1970) is: The philosophical study of voluntary human action, with the purpose of determining what types of activity is good, right, and to be done, or bad, wrong and not be done, so that man may live well (149).

Morality originates in everyday life through reflection on certain situations. Popkin and Stroll (1969) gives us a graphical illustration of such ethical reflection in the following lines: Suppose a man believe that he should not take a human life, and suppose he believes that he has an obligation to defend his country against foreign enemies. What should he do when his country is at war? If he refuses to fight for his country, then he

reneges on his belief that he has an obligation to do so. On the other hand, if he does fight for it, in the course of doing so he may take human life. What should he do in the circumstances? (2).

The kind of dilemma in the above quotation is common features in ethical or moral considerations. However, what is aimed at in ethics is a reflective, well-considered, and reasonable set of conclusions concerning the kinds of voluntary activities that may be judge good or suitable (or evil and unsuitable) for human agent in the context of men's life as a whole, including his relations to other beings whom his actions influence in some significant way. This is why Ross (1972) opines that: A moral agent finds himself in a moral situation when he is called upon to make a decision and to act in some way, and where some regulative principle has application in determining what he ought to do (278).

Morality therefore concerns both behaviour and character. And the issue it raises bothers more on questions such as what should I do (or not do); how should I act? ; What kind of person should I be and so on? Moral issues arise most fundamentally when the choices people face will affect the well-being of others by either increasing or decreasing it, causing harm or benefit (Barcalow, 1994:4).

Although moral issues arise most often when a person faces choices that will affect the well-being of others, many people maintain that moral issues also arise in cases where only the agent's well-being is affected. Christian (2009) avers that "we also have an obligation as man to cultivate the moral life so that we will be able to act morally when we are faced with moral choices" (376).

There are two basic forms of ethics that all other ethical theories participates in. these are the authoritarian ethics or internalism, and the autonomous ethics or externalism. In this perspective, morality is not merely what one does; it is rather the inevitable expression of what one is. It is a sincere goodwill and never an empty conformity to prevailing customs.

The moral life then is for man to live in conformity to best practices preventing harm to him or others. This is possible because man is a moral being because he is free and rational. To be free and rational is to be subject to the moral law (Uduigwomen 2006:7). Freedom implies responsibility and responsibility in turn implies purposive activity. We assume, when ascribing praise or blame to a person, that other alternatives were available for him to choose from. We do not praise or blame a person for doing something if we believe that, under the circumstances in which he found himself, he could not have done otherwise or it was the only thing he could have done. This truth has profound implications on the moral agent especially as it has to do with external influence. This we shall examine shortly, but let us look at what constitutes the environment.

III. The Environment And Its Influence On Morality

By the term "environment" Hornby opines that "it is the physical conditions that somebody or something exists in; it also means the natural world in which people, animals and plants live" (2000:389). These two meanings given here is very appropriate for our discussion, even though the first will be our pre-occupation in this work. Nonetheless, the second meaning also has ample evidence to prove that the natural habitats and its conditions can affect moral decisions and behaviours.

There are three main components of our moral sense; they are perception, emotion and reason that mostly contribute to the production of moral attitudes and behaviour. For instance, when confronted by a scene, or after being exposed to an idea, the first faculty to be engaged is perception. Almost immediately after the scene is perceived, the emotions are engaged depending on the meaning and significance in the scene such as guilt and disgust. Afterward, conscious reflection is engaged along with it the application of rational principles and moral beliefs leading to a moral judgment.

The transition of the non-moral child to the moral adult in conjunction with the widening sphere of influences and demands made upon him points to the conclusion that environment, along with intelligence, is the precipitate which solidifies the code of moral behaviour. Moral codes are often instituted to control behaviour, therefore, the way in which one behaves should indicate the degree of moral development which he has attained. Hence social approval or disapproval is the motivation for all learned behaviour. Uduigwomen (2006) concur with this position when he states thus:

Since ethics is enshrined in our traditional beliefs and values, it therefore demands a true standard of practice, a true standard of policy implementation, and the prevalence of the rule of law. It requires that we do the right things at the right time in the interest of all (199).

One's environment consists of two stages which we must pass through. The child lives in primary groups: family, play-group, school, and church. The adult lives in secondary groups: society, community, nation, and world. The personal nature of the primary group permits a great deal of allowances for non conformity; but as the adolescent moves into the secondary group, he is confronted with many demands and restriction. A person's morals are said to be influenced by the behaviours he observes in others and by the feedback recieved when certain behaviours or actions are carried out. Close associates like family members, friends and authority figures wield the most influence in terms of feedback.

Based on the observations made, individuals develop a set of internal standards that dictate how they should behave within different situations. These standards are based on moral beliefs acquired from observing how others behave and the consequences that followed their actions. Stressing this point, Jacquelyn Jeanty in an On-line article titled: "Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Thought and Action" makes the point that: Social cognitive theory views the interplay between people, behaviour and environment as a continuous process. Even after self-regulatory controls are in place, individuals still respond to environmental influences (2012).

To say that the environment has serious influence on moral behaviour of man is to state the obvious. Bull (1973) upheld that: The child only becomes characteristically human in human society; it alone develops his personal and moral potential into actuality. In the moral sphere, therefore, there are two essential factors - the child himself and his environment. Both heredity and environment, both nature and nurture, are intricately involved (105).

The term "socio-economic" is another useful piece of shorthand to describe "environment"; for it indicates the breath of the background, involving as it does both social and economic factors. A child for example, who was brought up in a depraved environment, may come to accept dishonesty as a natural part of his way of life, whereas a child from a morally sound background may well have a strong sense of honesty. Each social grouping has its own values, its own code and this in turn influences the child. William Kay (1975) echoed this point thus: Obviously the physical conditions of the home have a direct effect on moral conduct. It is extremely difficult to be reasonable and loving when home is chaotic; and exceptionally hard not to steal from a supermarket when one's home is bereft of toys and comfort (28).

The school is another social institution that has enormous influence on the moral development of the child. In fact it has been held as an assumption that the best way to change pupil behaviour is to change the schools of which they are members. Culture of course is vastly important in shaping personality. Vivid examples of fascinating, cultural differences in conduct are not difficulty to find. If this is true of cultures and subcultures it would seem necessarily to imply that it is also true of such sub-systems as schools. Here, too, we are what other people let us be to a great extent (Kay 1975:198).

Socialization not only induces us to conform to the conventions of society but it also leads us to enact the roles prescribed by social expectations. Furthermore, this tendency is endorsed by the fact that such social "sensitizing" results in group decisions being accepted by individuals even when they are contrary to the individual norms, beliefs and practices; and such considerations as these lead inevitably to the view that every society has an innate value system which it imposes on individual members.

IV.   An Evaluation

So far in our discussion, we have tried to show the nexus between man's moral life and environmental influence. What is of interest about this connection is the fact that man is an integral part of the environment he finds himself whether it is the natural environment or his socio-economic environment; he is not an alien who lives in isolation. His existence is tied to the happenings in his environment; therefore he participates either overtly or covertly in it. The implication of this truth is that morality can be influenced by internal or external factors. These internal factors have close similarity to Newton's first and third law of motion by inference. It reads thus: First law: Everybody continues in its state of rest, or of uniform motion in a straight line, unless it is compelled to change that state by forced impressed upon it.
Third Law: To every action, there is always opposite and equal reaction. (Holton & Roller 1958:61-62).

The laws summarize the influence that the environment wields on the child as regards his moral development. It is also connected with habit, learning and response to stimulus so to speak and the antecedent consequence of what has been observed.

Another dimension at looking at the issue is on the area of society shaping one's moral life and painting a picture that seems to portray a people either in a good or bad light. For instance, some countries are known for certain vices or virtues. Some are re-known for drugs pedaling and others are known for corruption and so on. This conclusion is as a result of the cumulative effect of societal influence on her citizens. Morality then, whether it is argued from the point of view of formalism, that is, (ethical decisions as universal laws that apply to all people) or the relativist which sees ethical codes as (relative to different society) or contextualist which sees ethical decisions as (subsumed within the context of each ethical problem). One truth that stands out is that, moral issues are real notwithstanding the theories we use in attempting at solving or explaining them. Since this is so, then it follows that, for man to live the moral life satisfactorily, he must know and appreciate rightly that society has the propensity to shape his perspective about moral decision and reality as a whole.

V.   Conclusion And Recommendations

This work has been an attempt to present arguments from a philosophical perspective on the interconnectedness of morality and the environment in terms of 'influence'. The purpose is to show the rallying point of the core issues, while at the same time buttressing the salient points of the discourse. The writer is of the

view that, if the truth of the environment influencing moral life is embraced, the knowledge will serve as a veritable tool for policy makers, the judicial system, the law enforcement agent and the society at large. It will also re-kindle the awareness in us about our actions today serving as precedence for tomorrow's generation because as the saying goes, what goes around comes around and to every action, there is always opposite and equal reaction.

References

[1]   Barcalow, E. (1994). *Moral Philosophy: Theory and Issues.* Belmont: Wadsworth Publishers.
[2]   Bull, N. J. (1969). *Moral Education* .London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
[3]   Christian, J. C. (2009). *Philosophy: An Introduction to the Art Wondering*.Belmont: Wadsworth Publishers.
[4]   Holton, G. & Roller, D. H. D. (1958). *Foundations of Modern Physical Science*. London: Addison-Wesley
[5]   Hornby, A. S. (2000). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[6]   Jacquelya, J. (2012). "Social Cognitive Theory of Moral Thought and Action. In: http://www.ehow.com/social-throey-moral-through-action.html.. Retrieved on the 24/10/2012.
[7]   Kay, W. (1975). *Moral Education*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
[8]   Omoregbe, J . (1990). *Knowing Philosophy*. Lagos: Joja Educational Publishers.
[9]   Popkin, R. H. & Stroll A. (1969). *Philosophy Made Simple*. London: W. H. Allen & Co.
[10]   Ross, S. D. (1972). *Moral Decision: An Introduction to Ethics.* San Francisco: Freeman, Cooper & Co.
[11]   Udoidem, S. I. (1992). *Understanding Philosophy*. Lagos: Africa-Heritage Research & Publishers.
[12]   Uduigwomen, A. F. (2006). *Introducing Ethics Trends, Problems and Perspectives.* Calabar: Jochrisam.
[13]   Wallace, W. A. (1977). *The Elements of Philosophy.* Washington: St Paul's.