

Popper's Negative Utilitarianism and the Ethics of African Humanism

Ignatius Ifeanyichukwu Ogbodo¹, Obiora Anichebe^{2*}, George Ohabuenyi Abah³

Abstract

This paper deals on Karl Popper's Negative Utilitarianism and the Ethics of African Humanism. It examines Popper's concept of Negative Utilitarianism with a view to using Popper's Negative Utilitarianism as a tool for the analysis of an Ethics of African Humanism. Popper's Negative Utilitarianism asserts that the principal business of politics is to reduce suffering rather than to increase happiness. The function of Ethics of African humanism, in this regard, is to drive social and political reform that should work for the elimination of concrete evils. The objective is to elucidate Popper's negative utilitarian with a view to directing Ethics of African Humanism to proffer values proper to Africa which can drive governance to focus not on establishing happiness through massive utopian planning, rather to aim at the elimination of immediate concrete miseries of the African people by means of piecemeal tinkering. This paper adopts hermeneutical, expository and textual analysis methods. This paper shows that adopting the method of elimination of false theories will help ethics of African Humanism to cast light on governance to concentrate on gradual elimination of social situation that increase suffering of the greatest number, rather than concentrate on Policies that increase the happiness or serve the interest of only a section of a nation.

Keywords: *Negative Utilitarianism, Ethics of African Humanism, Pain, Suffering and Happiness.*

I. Introduction

Popper emphasizes negative utilitarianism - a doctrine of reduction of pain and suffering. Popper's Negative Utilitarianism asserts that the principal business of politics is to reduce suffering rather than to increase happiness. There seems to be a symmetry between Popper's concern and the concern of African humanism. Response to human misery happens to be the most urgent problem in Africa. Popper's Negative Utilitarianism provides intellectual basis for ethics of African humanism. This will be demonstrated in this paper but before then, there is need for clarification of concepts.

How do we understand Africa humanism? African Humanism is a philosophical concept that accords preeminent importance to human beings. As an ethical system, it lays emphasis on human needs, dignity, concerns and rationality. Its philosophical relevance is appreciated when contrasted to ideas that hang approach

¹Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

²Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

³Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

to human concerns on the authority of the supernatural (Edeh 2015, 205). Ede views African Humanism as that ethical understanding which is enjoyed by Africans in their way of life as evident in all works of African thinkers (Edeh 2015, 205). According to Molefe, Gyekye defines humanism as the doctrine that views human needs, interests and dignity as the foundation of Ethics. Wiredu on his part, views the human person as the basis of all value including ethical value (Molefe, 2015, 60). These are proponents of secular interpretation. One can read utilitarian meaning into these views; that the central point of humanism is utility for humanity itself, and that is why the authors find the secular interpretation fascinating. It is worthy of note that though, the nineteenth century associated the idea of African Humanism with anti-clericalism, as a response to the 18th century renaissance, twentieth century African humanism tended towards human rights, reproductive rights, gender equality and social justice, and was demonstrated as embedded in African culture and traditions (Edeh 2015, 206).

According Motsamai Molefe (2015, 59) there is a debate about whether African ethics is best interpreted as religious or secular, and that this debate is dominated by proponents of secular interpretation. According to him, a secular interpretation of the foundations of African morality is described in terms of humanism. This interpretation favours humanism as the best approach of African ethics, and that this position is accompanied by a direct rejection of ethical supernaturalism which is a view that morality is grounded on some spiritual being. For the purpose of this paper the secular interpretation serves authors' interest best.

Some proponents of African secular humanism like Anta Diop (1923-1986), Leopold Sedar Senghor (1906-2001) and Aime Cesaire (1913), have approached the understanding of African humanism in wildly different ways with much emphasis on the ontological nature of the African. Senghor, for instance, focused on the creative potential of black consciousness, and argued that African value system was humanistic because the African is emotional and that it has the same values as the rational European humanism. This paper proposes a different approach – the approach of negative utilitarianism. This approach will be discussed in relation to Karl Popper's negative utilitarianism. But before that, it might be necessary to look at the development of Utilitarianism.

As already indicated, Popper proposed a doctrine of negative utilitarianism - a doctrine of reduction of pain and suffering. Democritus had earlier considered that happiness was the end of conducts, and that pleasures and pain determined happiness, and that happiness dwelt neither in herds nor in gold, but in the soul. For Democritus, the good and the true are the same for all men but the pleasant is different for different people. Frederick Copleston commenting on this observed that, for Democritus, just as sense knowledge is not true knowledge, so the pleasures of senses are not true pleasures. Democritus believes that the "best thing for a man is to pass his life so as to have as much joy and as little trouble as may be" (Copleston 1946, 125).

Epicurus had also made pleasure the beginning and the end of living happily, and as a good that is connate with man, and in reference to which every choice and every avoidance are made (Copleston 1946, 406-407). Frederick Copleston give two notions of what Epicurus meant by pleasure as the end of life: first, Epicurus did not mean the pleasure of the moment or individual sensations but the pleasure which endures throughout a lifetime; secondly, that pleasure consists in the absence of pain than in positive satisfaction (Copleston 1946, 407). By and large, all discussions on utilitarianism at this era, especially among the Stoics, focus mainly on virtue ethics (Whiting, Konstantakos, Carrasco, & Carmona 2018, 3).

Jeremy Bentham, in his *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, opines that nature has placed mankind under the government of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. And these masters determine man's actions. For Bentham, "the standard of right and wrong and the chain of causes and effects are fasted to their thrones" (Bentham 1789, I, I). By the principle of utility Bentham meant "that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question" (Bentham 1789, I, II), or property in any object, that tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness, and prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered – the happiness of the community or the happiness of that individual (Bentham 1789, I, III).

John Stuart Mill had also observed that those who knew anything about utilitarianism were aware that writers from Epicurus to Bentham, whoever adopted a theory of utility meant by it not "something to be contrasted with pleasure but pleasure itself together with freedom from pain" (Mill 1863, 9). On this ground, Mill proposed a definition of utilitarianism for which the term is best known. He refers to utilitarianisms or the Greatest Happiness Principle as the creed of the foundation of morals. It holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, and wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. And by happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; and by unhappiness or pain, and the privation of pleasure (Mill 1863, 10). Mill's definition of utilitarianism is predicated on theory of life on which theory of morality is grounded – that pleasure, and freedom from pain, constitute the only things desirable as ends. Mill argues that "all desirable things are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in them, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain" (Mill 1863, 10). Thus Popper's notion of negative utilitarianism seems to have been covered by the clause about reduction of pain in Mill's definition. However, Popper seems to have something different in mind. Popper was proposing a principle that will be constant with his critical rationalism (Popper 1945, 241-242).

Bentham and Mill are classified as the Classical Utilitarians, especially because of their preoccupation with legal and social reform (Driver, J. 2014,<jdriver@wustl.edu>), just as Popper's concern in the *Open Society and its Enemies* is a rational response to political instability in his home country, Austria (Popper 1959, 242). The same reform drives the authors' idea of Ethics of African Humanism. The basic motif behind the development of Classical Utilitarianism was the desire to see useless, corrupt laws and social practices changed. Achieving this goal, off-course, demands a normative ethical theory employed as a critical tool – a tool that will outline in clear terms what makes an action or a policy morally good, or morally *right*. The conviction that some laws policies of Government are bad are arrived at by an analysis of why they are bad. For Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (Driver 2014,<jdriver@wustl.edu>) as for Popper (Popped 1945, 141), what made them bad was their tendency to lead to unhappiness and misery. If a law or an action does not serve a useful purpose, then it is not of any good. The Ethic of African Humanism analyses existential condition of the African in this direction.

Popper's negative utilitarianism

According to Karl Popper, there is no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure. The utilitarian and Kant were wrong at least in their formulations because human suffering makes direct moral appeal for help, while there is no corresponding appeal to increase the happiness of one who in

already doing well. His criticism against utilitarianism is that pain cannot be outweighed by pleasure “and especially not another man's pain by another man's pleasure.” Instead of the greatest happiness for the greatest number it is more modest to advocate for the least amount of suffering for everyone. He also argues that unavoidable suffering should be distributed as equally as possible. (Popper 1945, 141).

Popper claims that there is an analogy between reduction of suffering and his principle of falsification outlined in his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* where he argued for elimination of false theories from theories tentatively proffered instead of attainment of already established truth as the task of scientific method (Cf. Popper 1959, 17). In the field of Ethics, it is better to formulate ethical demands negatively – that is to demand the elimination of suffering instead of promotion of happiness. (Popper K. R. 1945, 241-242). This off-course is part of his peace meal engineering.

Popper observed that some Marxists assert that there would be far less suffering involved in a violent social revolution than in the chronic evils inherent in what they called capitalism (Popper, 1945, 321-322). Popper also mentions Hegel, who always faithful to his historicism, bases his anti-utilitarian attitude on his interpretation of history. He accuses Hegel of claiming that the history of the world is no threat to happiness and that periods of happiness are blank pages in it because they are periods of harmony (Popper 1945, 71). With regard to hedonism and utilitarianism, Popper believes that it is necessary to replace their principles which is maximizing pleasure, with one which is perhaps more in keeping with the original views of Democritus and Epicurus, and much more urgent – minimising pain. Mill in support of Popper, had earlier argued that for a theory of life as that of Hedonism to suppose that life has no higher end than pleasure or no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit is mean and grovelling as a doctrine worthy only of swine (Mill 1863, 10). Popper believes that an attempt to maximise the pleasure or the happiness of the people, though not impossible, will always lead to totalitarianism. Moreover, attempts of most governments to respond to the antagonism between proletariat and entrepreneurs, as the Marxist would recommend, always lead to decisions that increases the suffering of the consumers (Popper 1945, 321-322). Popper suggested that with this understanding, the followers of Democritus and Epicurus would not quarrel with the suggested reformation of the pleasure principle to negative utilitarianism (Popper 1945, 289).

Popper's Negative Utilitarianism and the Ethics of African Humanism

Popper described a social and political situation that led Karl Marx to discountenance capitalism, which by extension describes the consequence of downplaying the Ethics of Humanism:

Exploitation of women and children led to incredible suffering.... William Wood, 9 years old, was 7 years and 10 months when he began to work. He came to work every day in the week at 6 a.m., and left off about 9 p.m. Fifteen hours of labour for a child 7 years old!... Other children were forced to start work at 4 a.m., or to work throughout the night until 6 a.m., and it was not unusual for children of only six years to be forced to a daily toil of 15 hours. 'Mary Anne Walkley had worked without pause 26 hours, together with sixty other girls, thirty of them in one room. A doctor, Mr. Keys, called in too late, testified before the Coroner's jury that Mary Anne Walkley had died from long hours of work in an overcrowded workroom.... Such were the conditions of the working class even in 1863, when Marx was writing *Capital*; his burning protest against these crimes, which were then tolerated, and sometimes even defended, not only by professional economists but even by churchmen, will secure him for ever a place among the liberators of mankind. (Popper 1945, 114).

This kind of picture is constant with Africa where the streets are filled with women and children hocking, young girl are subjected to ten hours of work without proportional income. Insecurity of lives and property as a result of insurgency and wars hit top news headlines daily. Popper, in his idea of negative Unitarian principle, conceives this kind of situation as the kind of situation that utopian social planning sort to respond to but fell into the error of utopianism (Cf. Popped K. R. 1962, 158- 59). By utopia social engineering is meant, as opposed to piecemeal social engineering, remodelling the society in accordance with a definite plan or blueprints. Utopian social engineering flows from determining ultimate political goal even before taking any practical action. Applying his principle of elimination of false theories, Popper sort to propose a kind of social engineering that could respond to humanitarian condition through elimination of social conditions that lead to suffering. This is located in a concept he termed 'piecemeal social engineering' (Cf. Popped 1962, 238). It has to be a kind of social reform that focuses on changing social situations through piecemeal tinkering with the aim of eliminating utopiansocial engineering and its lofty and abstract goals of perfect justice, true equality, and happiness of a higher kind, and adopting piecemeal social engineering that addresses concrete social and human problems such as poverty, violence, wars, unemployment, environmental degradation, income inequality, terrorism and social insecurity (Cf. Popped 1962, 161).

The function of Ethics of African humanism, in this regard, is to drive social and political reform that should work for the elimination of concrete evils that perpetuate suffering in Africa, and not focus on unrealizable abstract dreams of a perfect society. Ethics of African Humanism ought to proffer utilitarian values connate to the African people to drive governance to focus not on establishing happiness through massive utopian long term planning, rather to aim at the elimination of immediate concrete miseries of the African people. For instance, elimination of poverty by making sure that everybody has a minimum income, combating epidemics and diseases by building hospitals and training of qualified medical personnel, fighting to eliminate illiteracy, providing functional security agencies to protect the people and providing basic human need.

Adopting the principle of negative utilitarianism, African humanism has the function of eliminating the conditions of suffering widows and orphans in Africa by proposing ethical principles that relate to African leaders to protect lives and properties of widows and orphans in Africa. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF 2000), before HIV and AIDS became widespread approximately two percent of children in developing countries were orphans. The present statistics indicate that the toll has reached fifteen to seventeen percent. Due to the fact that "this epidemic continues to grow and that HIV and AIDS affect people in their most productive years the number of orphans in African is expected to increase as the number of healthy adults able to care for them decreases making dependency ratio even higher and further burdening extended families" (Subbarao, Mattimore, &Plangemann 2001, 3). There is also the need of preventing and tackling the impact of HIV and AIDS. African humanism ought to deal with the specific function of providing sensitization programs to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS. (Cf. Kessy, Kweka, Makaramba & Miriam 2008, iii). In a documentary compiled by William Brown, we notice that we cannot eradicate world poverty if we ignore countries affected by conflict or bad governance instability, violence and insecurity (2013, 31). This sort of problem still plague lives of millions of men, women and children in Africa. Many parts of Africa are affected by conflicts. Nigeria for example is affected by insurgency and tribal clashes as evident in Kaduna, Benue and Enugu. The intelligently coordinated deadly terrorist attacks in churches and public places in many African countries have claimed very many lives and increased suffering. An instance is the Easter Sunday 2019

bombings of three churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, there is no problem as big and imminent as climate change in Africa. The earth is getting warmer and this problem affects Africa the most. Roger Blackmore observed that “eleven of the twelve years between 1995 and 2006 were the warmest observed since instrumental records began in 1850 and every year brings new evidence of changes to climate and weather, and their environmental impacts” (Blackmore 2013, 179) on lives of the people. It is pretty obvious that Africa is facing the crisis of food insecurity. According to Mark J. Smith (2013, 116), the food riots in Mozambique can be repeated anywhere in the coming years. With the rising political instability in African countries especially Nigeria, it is most likely that the current inflation rates will give rise to a situation of gross food insecurity. What about refugee crises in Africa. The toll of refugee crises has risen especially in Nigeria between 2013 and 2018, and the condition of internally displaced persons is also horrible.

Popper wrote that it is his thesis “that human misery is the most urgent problem of a rational public policy” (Popper 1962, 361). The issues raised in the preceding paragraph evoke suffering and pain, and they make direct moral appeal for help. The problem with governance in most countries in Africa is that they preoccupy themselves with policies that do not make moral appeal for help like Grazing Bill (A Bill for an Act to Provide for the Establishment, Preservation and Control of National Grazing Reserves and Stock Routes and the Creation of National Grazing Reserve Commission and for Purposes Connected Therewith, Sponsored by Senator Zainab Kure), bills on non-governmental organization (employing Popper’s term, a bill that has the potency of dragging the nation back into closed society and totalitarianism), and closure of the boarder (which if not properly managed could cause inflation and economic instability). There is no corresponding appeal to increase the happiness of farmers who are already doing well in their animal husbandry, or to turn the African nations into socialist nations by concentrating planning on the Federal Governments or having a central account for an entire country as in the case of Nigerian, while neglecting all important issues of human suffering such as kidnapping, terrorism, food insecurity, climate change and disease. Issues of these sort that increase pain and suffering cannot be outweighed by issue about Grazing Bill, NGO Bill (which if passed into law will make the citizens dependent on the Federal Government for permission to use lands and run private organizations thereby increasing the suffering of the citizens) and closure of the boarder (Which as Adam smith would opine does not increase the wealth of a nation but only increases stock by concentrating the wealth of any nation within its borders). It is not ethical to trade one person’s happiness with another’s “and especially not another man's pain by another man's pleasure” (Popped 1945, 141), or another group’s pain with another group’s pleasure. Popper’s negative utilitarianism advocates that instead of the greatest happiness for the greatest number in a nation, it is more modest to advocate for the least amount of suffering for everyone in that country. Ethics of African Humanism should guide African leaders to adopt policies that would make it possible to distribute unavoidable suffering as equally as possible. (Cf. Popped 1945, 141). Properly understood, the task of Ethics of African Humanism is the elimination of false policies of government that lead to attainment of utopian dreams (Cf. Popper 1945, 285.).

Roger Chao expressed a pessimistic opinion of some critics of negative utilitarianism. Positive utilitarians are of the view that the best way to minimise suffering is to destroy the whole world with no life spared; in this way suffering could be minimised. This criticism has been proffered to discredit negative utilitarianism. (Chao 2012, 57). But the authors of this paper consider this sort of criticism as an exercise in futility.

II. Conclusion

Popper proposes negative utilitarianism as a doctrine that lays emphasis on reduction of pain and suffering. This view informed the authors' approach to Ethics of African Humanism. Popper's Negative Utilitarianism asserts that the principal business of politics is to reduce suffering rather than to increase happiness. Hence, the symmetry between Popper's concern and the concern of Ethics of African Humanism. Ethics of African Humanism is concerned about humanitarian condition of the human person. This paper examined Popper's concept of Negative Utilitarianism and assessed whether Popper's Negative Utilitarianism provided ground for Ethics of African Humanism. It proposed that the function of Ethics of African humanism is to drive social and political reform that should work for the elimination of concrete evils like humanitarian crisis of internally displaced persons, insecurity, disease and epidemics, and food crisis, that perpetuate suffering in Africa, and not focus on unrealizable abstract dreams of utopian ideas such as gracing bills, NGO bill and central planning (as seen in central account policy of Government). Ethics of African Humanism ought to proffer negative utilitarian values proper to the African people to drive governance to focus not on establishing happiness through massive utopian long term planning, rather than to aim at the elimination of immediate concrete miseries of the African people by means of piecemeal tinkering. Response to human misery of this sort is the concern of Ethics of Africa Humanism. This paper argues that Popper's Negative Utilitarianism provides intellectual basis for ethics of African Humanism. Adopting the method of elimination of false theories will help ethics of African Humanism to cast light on government to concentrate governance on gradual elimination of social situation that increase suffering rather than concentrate on policies that increase the happiness or serve the interest of only a section of the society.

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