



## Ethics, medical ethics and bioethics: Towards conceptual analysis

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### Abstract

God created man as a free moral agent. This does not preclude that fact, that human action must be judged and he is accountable. In view of this, God handed over amoral or ethical code to regulate the actions of man in all his endeavors and even as he interacts among themselves. Unfortunately, this “golden ethical blue-prints” seem to have been fawn by man. This paper seeks ethics as the very foundation of a good and rewarding human relation. The paper observed that all professions ranging from the street’s to offices, educational institutions, politics, hospitals and even market places need ethical reawakening in order to rebuild and solidify the human sanctity. Though arguments on the subject matter of ethics abound, but however, its significance cannot be denied. The paper maintained that a knowledge and understanding of ethics is key to our claims of rationality and morality. Application to all other field of study and profession like law, medicine, engineering and so on should be seen as attempt at revamping our society through our actions along the lines of virtue and integrity though this paper restricted itself to the field of medicine.

**Keywords:** ethics, medical ethics, bioethics

### 1. Introduction

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. According to biblical account, God created everything to include man, and He saw that His creation was good (Genesis. 1:25). From this account marks the distinction between what is good and what is bad. God enjoins man to embrace good and avoid evil (bad). It suggests that the idea of bad and are God’s initiates meaning knowledge of good choose and evil to eschew (avoid) ethics as a guide to regulate human actions in the biosphere and beyond originated from God Himself. It follows deductively that ethics is even older than man because he had the code of conduct spelt out succinctly for him to follow. This code of conduct was ultimately meant to give man a moral direction on earth that will at the end eventually lead him to heaven. It could be rightly inferred that God’s code of conduct (ethics). He gave a unilateral application without restriction. By this it means man is whatever field of operation or discipline be it a teacher, engineer, medical doctor, driver even to a farmer is by God’s code of conduct (ethics) is commanded to do good only and avoid evil (bad) always, so we principally see ethics, medical ethics or bioethics excellently applied all to do man good only and at the end of his sojourn on earth, spend eternity with God in heaven. The anchor point of ethics in specific and general terms is to drive man towards leading a praiseworthy life in his dealings with other creations especially his fellowman.

### 2. Ethics

Meaning a univocal and straightforward definition of ethics is difficult so much from the fact that there may be no universally acceptable definition. Definition of ethics may vary as they are many ethicists (Morris, 1956:9) <sup>[1]</sup>. However,

ethics derived its meaning from the Greek word ‘ethos’ which is attune with ‘moral’ both connoting customs, habits and acceptable ways of behaviour of an individual or a community of individuals (Soulez, 2009:60) <sup>[2]</sup>. He adds by defining ethics as an inquiry into how men ought to act in general, as a means to a given end but as an end, but as an end in itself (60). To shields, ethics is a conscious and purposeful behaviour concerned with the obligations and rules that relate to it (2004:9) <sup>[2]</sup>. Ozumba, sees ethics as a philosophical thinking about morality (2001:4) <sup>[3]</sup>. This definitions “cap” ethics as a discipline concerned about moral thinking or attitude to issues of life (the morality of human actions and conduct). To William Lillie, ethics is seen as: the normative science of the conduct of human beings living in societies. A science which judges this conduct to be right or wrong to be good or bad or in some similar way (1964:1-2) <sup>[4]</sup>.

Ethics as a normative discipline, deals with standards or principles of right or wrong behaviour. And a science in that it deals with principle that governs endeavour and tries to systematize the study of human conduct. It is also concern with the theory of man’s moral evaluation, ethics has also been defined as a systematic investigation into the norms of human behaviour. It is also seen as a certain code of conduct or a set of principles by which men live. Many thinkers see ethics as the fundamental principle of moral law or guide (El-John, 2005:15) <sup>[5]</sup>.

Ethics unlike other branches of philosophy, concern itself with problems or questions of everyday life. To include question such as: is abortion right? Should I cheat during examinations? Is stealing right? Should I always tell the truth even when it is obvious that telling the truth will affect me negatively? Or in the face of danger? What is the good life for

man? Is there a standard of right by which all human actions can be judged? What does goodness or badness of human conduct mean? Does right conduct imply checking our natural desires, or enhance their fulfillment? What is duty? What is obligation? How should men conduct themselves? What general ideas should they pursue? etc.

### 3. Ethics: Purpose

It is established that ethics concerns human conduct, it therefore has a vital role in human life such as

- a. Human beings have no automatic guidelines to regulate their lives. Humans are free and can make genuine choice between alternatives unlike lesser animals. We therefore need ethics to guide us on how we should live our lives (Uduigwomen, 2003:3) <sup>[6]</sup>.
- b. Ethics helps us to discover the general principle to guide human conduct. Accordingly, it sees the purpose of ethics in its “helping us to think better about moral questions by exposing the logical structure of language in which these thoughts are expressed pointedly, ethics helps us to answer certain questions that apply to all normal human beings.
- c. Ethics helps us to better conform our conduct to the norms of morality or to influence our conduct for good (Omeregbe, 1996:10) <sup>[7]</sup>.
- d. To the analytic school of philosophy, the purposes of ethics is to clarify and analyze moral terms that feature in ethical statements and discoveries. For example meaning of terms such as “good”, “bad”, “right”, “wrong”, “ought”, “obligation”, “responsibility”, “duty” etc.

### 4. Classification of Ethical Inquiry

Ethics is generally grouped into three classes such as: Empirical or descriptive ethics, Normative ethics and Meta-ethics.

#### Empirical or Descriptive Ethics

This as a branch of ethics, study the moral codes of different cultures and societies. This branch of ethics seeks to find out similarities and differences in the ethical codes of different cultures in a view to establishing whether such ethical views are universally held or not. This ethics helps to reveal the different expressions of, and opinion about morality (Uduigwomen, 2003:4) <sup>[8]</sup>.

#### Normative Ethics

This ethics concern itself with norms of conduct. That about principles by which actions are adjudged either as good or bad; right or wrong. It asks why are some actions are judged good or bad? Importantly, this branch of ethics tries to bring order and consistency into our beliefs and also relate them possibly to some universal principle or principles from which they supposedly derive their validity as rules for the guidance of our behaviour. According to Halverson, normative ethics attempt to set up ethical beliefs as a coherent system deducible from one or more general principles (1967:278) <sup>[9]</sup>.

#### Meta-Ethics

This branch concern itself with the search for meaning of certain key terms found in ethical statements as for example

concepts such as ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’ band etc. Meta-ethics does not propound any moral principles or goals for action, except possibly by implication. This branch of ethics is wholly of philosophical analysis and provides the sort of justification for our normative positions (Frankena, 1963:30) <sup>[10]</sup>.

### 5. Ethical Systems

There are basically two types of ethical system. Teleologism and Deontologism purposed to bring order and consistency to our thinking about the moral sphere. Let’s understand them as we treat them in turn below.

#### Teleologism

This is a forward looking theory or consequentialism. Here action is judged good or bad depending on whether or not they tend to promote or hinder what is intrinsically good. Good actions are praiseworthy while bad actions are blameworthy. Teleologism is derived from the Greek word, teleos meaning “end” or “purpose” or “goal”. This ethics can be seen as a moral theory concerned with the end-result of actions (John, 2005:49 – 50) <sup>[11]</sup>.

#### Deontologism

Deontology comes from the Greek word, deon or deont, meaning “obligation” or “necessity”. Deontologist holds that some actions are wrong in themselves and not wrong merely because of the results of the action. This is the other divide of moral philosophers who do not subscribe to seeing moral sphere only from the teleological sense or plane. They argued that some acts are by their nature, obligatory in themselves irrespective of any tendency in producing intrinsic good result for example telling the truth and keeping promises etc are seen in the light of deontologism (Booth, 2008:530) <sup>[12]</sup>.

### 6. Some Fundamental Ethical Terms

Understanding ethics necessarily demands making clear some distinctions between ‘moral’, immoral and amoral.

#### Moral

This term is used to appraise human behaviour positively. An act could be said moral if, it is good noble, praiseworthy, generous or right, while the actor said to be benevolent, virtuous, humane or kind. One is said to be moral because he or she is free and rational. Moral conduct is that which is voluntary and affects the basic direction of our living. Morality implies freedom responsibility and purposeful activity.

According to (Goodwin, 2015: 38) <sup>[13]</sup>, a person is praised or blamed on account that there were alternatives to his actions he/she would for him to choose from. In the absence of alternatives, then his action would have been the only thing or way to act. Morality encloses theories, rules, arguments, men, outlooks, reasons, intensions, feelings, utterances etc.

#### Immoral

This is the opposite of moral. It controls action viewed as morally wrong, bad, evil or morally blameworthy. Criminals, cheats, corrupt politicians and public office holders, bestial, inhumane attitude and so on are classified under this ethical

term (immoral).

### **Amoral**

This term is either moral and immoral operators under this good are not praiseworthy, nor blameworthy. That is they are not morally responsible animals and human infants are governed by instincts rather than reason or morals.

### **7. Concern of Ethics**

For the purpose of this paper, it becomes very imperative to give a nutshell the priorities of ethics even if it is just to state or passing.

- a. Ethics is keen about the worth of living. Attempts are made to answer question such as, is life worth living. Optimism and pessimism are the associated theories here.
- b. It is concerned with *summum bonum bonum* (the highest good) or the transcendental ends. Formulated ethical doctrines here include happiness for the greatest number. Perfectionism: Perfection of self, or self-fulfillment or realization is taken as the highest good.
- c. Ethics is concern with laying bare the criteria for human conduct. Here Kantian maxim of acting only if we be willing to endorse our actions to become a universal moral laws.
- d. Ethics is interested in motivating human conduct towards the good end.

Here, we have doctrines such as egoism; concentration of actions that satisfies personal interest while altruism is directed to a life the places premium in the interest of others first and self-last (Schreiner, 2001:17) <sup>[14]</sup>.

### **8. Medical Ethics**

This is the latest dimensions of philosophy. Ethics and the practice of medicine. It is perhaps informed by this connection that brought about the introduction of medical ethics as a course of study. Moral laxity among physicians and many other health workers in our health institutions, hospitals and clinics today has not only been observed in alarming proportion but also disturbing and disheartening. Handling, treatment and cure of patient being the primary aim of the medical professionals have been grossly compromised and disdainfully ignored. The relegation of this salient and all important aim of handling patient with cure that brought about medical ethics with a view to inculcating in medical practitioners and health workers, the virtues of altruism, dedication, honesty, devotion and single-minded to duty, purity of life and also reprobation of evil things.

Medical ethics championed the course of bringing health workers under the supreme moral law and a predominating thoughtfulness for the overall interest and welfare of the patient. The practice of medicine is as old as man himself, it dates from the period of ordinary herbs, rituals and sacrifices to date with Chinese acupuncture and Hippocratic medical practices. In all history of medical practices medicine was and is still directed towards the restoration of health to the sick. To achieve this all-important aim, the practice must be guided by set of dos and don't. Failure of which will reduce this noble practice to individual whim and caprices. Agreed application of herbs of some sorts, medications no matter how simple or complex with whichever potency or efficacy, no matter the proficiency of the health worker with the attendant delicate, articulate act of cutting open the bowels, transplantation of

heart he or she must be regulated by set rules and regulations as to assist him or guide him in the determination of what the physicians must do, what quality to use for, who had how many in view of scarce medical resources.

Taking of codes for physicians and allied medical workers, the Geneva Declaration, constituting of the World Health Organization. Helenski Declaration, Luremberg code and lots more readily come to mind. Unlike many other professions deal with subjects or issues that benefit mankind. Medical profession deals with mankind directly for instance, administration of drugs, surgery, family planning, human experimentation, in-vitro fertilization artificial insemination, abortion allocation of scarce medical resources deal with man directly. Therefore, the urgent need to put blueprints or sets of rules in attempts to deploy them in allowing reason in the practice of medicine is what we popularly referred to as medical ethics.

Uduigwomen defines medical ethics aptly as the attempt to critical discuss medical issues or problems in the light of some ethical theories or principles. (2003:21) <sup>[15]</sup>.

### 9. Bioethics

With advancement in science and technology many disciplines have been affected both positively and negatively. Bioethics as it is called is the philosophical study of the ethical controversies or problems caused by technological advances in biology and medicine. Bioethics is the branch of ethics that investigates problems specifically arising from medical and biological practices, these include problems of nature and distribution of treatment; the sphere of authority of the patient, the physician, and others; the scope and limits of confidentiality; the limits of acceptable intervention and experimentation... and the propriety of genetic research and its applications. Bioethics is also seen as the philosophical study of the ethical controversies brought about by technological advances in biology and medicine. It concern itself with relationships among life sciences such as biotechnology, medicine, politics, law and so on. Bioethicist directs their attention to ensure the sustenance of value and sanctity of the human life, and not jeopardized by the advances in biomedical technology. Of paramount importance is the interface between ethics and modern medical technology as it affects the control of human life (Dzurgba, 2005) <sup>[16]</sup>.

Bioethics derives its meaning in 1970 from a Van Rensselaer Potter, a professor of Oncology at the University of Wisconsin who coined it to describe different concepts though the debate as to its definition and meaning is still on. But suffice it to say, that given Van Rensselaer great work perspectives in Biology and Medicine for her argued that:

We are in great need of a land ethic, an environmental ethics, an international ethics, and so on... Mankind is urgently in need of new wisdom that will provide the knowledge of how to use knowledge for man survival and for improvement in the quality of life. This concept of wisdom as a guide for action, the knowledge of how to use knowledge for social good might be called the "Science of survival", surely the prerequisite to improvement in the quality of life ... A science of survival must be more than science alone, and I therefore propose the term "bioethics" in order to emphasize the two most important

ingredients in achieving the new wisdom that is so desperately needed: knowledge and human values.... Man's survival may depend on ethics based on biological knowledge and hence, bioethics (cited in Glenn, 2003:50) <sup>[17]</sup>.

The introduction of bioethics became necessary because it occurred even at that time that if care not taken, and even in our time now, science and technology with its attendant biotechnology will develop without considering human values. Bioethics and bioethicists became a body and discipline established to streamline biotechnological development. One recount the United States Congress led by Senator Edward Kennedy in 1974 that gave rise to Belmont Report to streamline the challenging issues in medical technology given the principles of beneficence, justice and autonomy as a secular bioethical guidelines. Though this principles are not without debates from many groups to include Christian fundamentalists and Christian scientists, who charged Belmont Reports principles of disregarding the significant role of community and family in taking decisions on certain matters as it affect a family member(s) (Miller, 2013:15) <sup>[18]</sup>.

However, despite dissenting debates on bioethics. Bioethics attained international recognition by 2000 and have become an interdisciplinary studies with participants and perspectives from disciplines as philosophy, biology, medicine, theology, law etc. with over 100 organizations and institutions established and dedicated world-side to bioethics and with United States taking the lead.

It follows from the foregoing principles: Beneficence, justice and autonomy, that physician must be strictly guided by the fact that the human subject undergoing whatever course of treatment is equal and has his/her inalienable rights to be protected, enjoining that arbitrary treatment or undue negligence either in treatment or use of any equipment on the patient must be reached after careful and excellent contemplation and agreement that it is for the good and interest of the patient in wholesome furthermore of life.

### 10. Conclusions

From our pains taken analysis of ethics, medical ethics and bioethics we realize that the trip concepts have an overlapping significance. They all same human interest, Infact it suffices to say that the much acclaimed rationality and morality bequeathed man can only be discerned and made visible if and only if we (man) appreciate and entrench a praiseworthy lifestyle with conscious attendance of blameworthy lifestyle of actions curb the excesses of ambivalence of human interest. Prone down egoistic pursuits in preference of altruism. Otherwise our core values will keep fast eroding and our actions typify man inhumanity to man with the consequence of heading of self-annihilation.

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