

## R. M. HARE'S PRESCRIPTIVISM AND THE QUESTION OF GOOD GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*This paper carefully examined R.M. Hare's prescriptivism and the question of good governance in Nigeria. A critical look at democratic governance in Nigeria shows a deficient system engulfed by lack of accountability, transparency, among others, by leaders, and this has continued to eat deep into the fabrics of democratic practice and governance in Nigeria; thus, raising concerns on the question of good governance in the Nigerian polity. The paper adopted the qualitative research design. Data were sourced from books, periodicals and the internet. The expository, analytic and evaluative methods of research were used. The expository method was used to expose ethical prescriptivism and, particularly, the prescriptivism of R.M. Hare. The analytic method examined, in detail, Hare's notion of prescriptivism. The evaluative method was also employed in giving reasoned value judgment on Hare's prescriptivism in juxtaposition to good governance in Nigeria. Significantly, the paper understood that good governance champions a common cause for the common good of the people so that they are economically, socially, psychologically, intellectually and otherwise stable. But a system devoid of this results in abuse of power, educational and infrastructural decay, poor welfare and health care provision and many more. The paper thus submitted that in Hare's description, value judgment or moral statements are basically prescriptive in the sense that such moral judgments or statements contain in them the direction for one's action. In view of this, the paper recommended that when a leader comes to power on the whims of brilliant and promising manifestoes, such a leader is duty-bound to fulfill such promises. The paper concluded that for good governance to thrive in Nigeria, the action of leaders must be a consequence of, or proceed from, their moral statements or judgments.*

**Keywords:** Good Governance, Hare, Prescriptivism.

## Introduction

The question of good governance in Nigeria remains one that has attracted attention from the intellectual clime and the society at large. How governance in Nigeria can be adjudged remains questionable to this day. The Nigerian-state practices the democratic system of government and so it is safe, at least in theory, to say that governance in Nigeria is sown in the principles of democracy, but the exactness of the practice of this democratic governance remains almost a mirage and it in this line of thought that R. M Hare's prescriptivism seeks to address such aberration. Hare, in his ethical prescriptivism, notes that moral terms are evaluative and descriptive. The moral terms, in their evaluative function (which concerns this paper), are used to commend. Thus, if one says something is good, such is indirectly commending it to another, and if it is said to be bad, it is to be refrained from. We, thus, argue that Hare attempts to put moral statements equal to moral actions so that only actions that replicate moral statements are truly moral. This paper draws from this thesis and attempts to juxtapose it with the question of good governance in Nigeria.

## Understanding the Concepts of Governance and Prescriptivism

Etymologically, the word 'governance' is from Latin verb *gubernare* or, more originally, from the Greek work *Kubernain*, which means to "steer". Therefore, governance refers to the manner of steering or governing, or of directing and controlling a group of people or a state. Governance is essentially related to politics, in that politics is often defined as the art of governance. Just as politics talks about governments, institution, power, order and ideals of justice, governance also deals with the public sector, power structures, equity, and ideal of public administration. Nevertheless, they are distinct from each other in the sense that politics is broader than governance. Yet, governance could be seen as the exercise of power or authority by political leaders for the well-being of their country's citizens or subjects.<sup>1</sup> Governance, therefore, is the complex process whereby, some sectors of society wield power, and enact and promulgate public policies which directly affect human and institutional interactions, and economic and social development. The power exercised by participating sectors of the society is always for common good, as it is essential for demanding respect and cooperation from the citizens and the state. As such, a great deal about governance is the proper and effective utilization of resources.

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Jhon, "What is Governance?" In *Law, Politics and Philosophy*. 20 October 2019, <https://tarmayaosbe.wordpress.com>

This way, the paper sees governance as the fulfillment of the mandate of politics, in that politics has to do with due distribution of power and resources for the common good of the citizenry. In view of this, governance becomes classified as “good” only when it is indicative of or characterized by the rule of law, when it is participatory, transparent, effective and efficient, among others, so that governance serves the best purpose for which it is described.

On the other hand, prescriptivism (otherwise called universal prescriptivism) is the meta-ethical view which claims that rather than expressing propositions, ethical sentences function similarly to imperatives which are universalizable. That is, “whoever makes a moral judgment is committed to the same judgment in any situation where the same relevant facts obtain.”<sup>2</sup> This makes prescriptivism a universalist form of non-cognitivism. Prescriptivism stands in opposition to other forms of non-cognitive (such as emotivism and quasi-realism) as well as to all forms of cognitivism (including both moral realism and ethical subjectivism). Prescriptivism was introduced by Hare in his 1952 book, *The Language of Morals*, and it has been compared to emotivism and to the categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant.

Hare originally proposed “prescriptivism as a kind of amendment to emotivism”.<sup>3</sup> Hare had noticed emotivists become irrationalists to imperatives and made a mistake about imperatives which are still too common, namely to think that they get their meaning from their casual properties. This may be termed the “verbal shore” theory of the meaning of imperative. It involves a failure to distinguish between what Austin calls “perlocutionary acts (what one is doing by saying things) and illocutionary acts (what one is doing in saying them)”.<sup>4</sup> If one thought that imperatives owed their meaning to their causal properties, one might easily become an irrationalist about imperatives and thus about moral judgments, if these were prescriptive. But if this mistake is avoided, “the thesis that moral judgments are a kind of prescriptions (perhaps not identical with the simple imperative and certainly more complex in their logic) is consistent with their being reasoning – rules that govern moral thinking”.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, prescriptivists have looked at a combination of the rules that govern ordinary simple imperatives and a further set of rules that govern “ought” and other deontic modal words like “must” in its moral sense, which stand to imperatives in much the same relation as model indicative to non-modal ones.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup>Warnock G, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 30

<sup>3</sup>Hare R. M., *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: OUP, 1952).

<sup>4</sup>Augustine J. L. *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: OUP, 1962), 61

<sup>5</sup>Seanor, Totion, *Hare and Critics* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 29

<sup>6</sup>Hare R. M. *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: OUP, 1981), 23

most discussed kind of prescriptivism, known as universal prescriptivism, finds difference in what has been called the universalibility of “ought” – sentences and other normative or evaluative sentences. One cannot, with logical consistency where *A* and *B* are two individuals, say that *A* ought, in a certain situation specified in universal terms without reference to individuals, to act in a certain way, also specified in universal terms, but that *B* ought not to act in a similarly specified way in a similarly specified situation. This is because, in any “ought” statement, there is, implicitly, a principle which says that the statement applies to all precisely similar situations. This means that if we were to say “that is what ought to be done; but there could be a situation exactly like this one in its non-moral properties, but in which the corresponding person, who was exactly like the person who ought to do it in this situation, ought not to do it”.<sup>7</sup>

Three warnings are necessary here to avoid confusions which have been too common. First, the “situation” is to be taken as including the characteristics of the people in it, including their desires and motivations. If, therefore, the speaker says that *A* ought not to do the same thing to *D* because the decisions of *C* and *D* are quite different, he is not offending against universalisability, because the different desires make the situations different.<sup>8</sup> Bernard Shaw said, “Do not do unto others as you would they should do unto you”<sup>9</sup>. Their tastes may not be the same; but this is not an objection to universalisability. If I ought to tickle one child’s toes because it loves it, it does not follow that I ought to tickle another child’s toes, however similar, if the child hates it.

However, universality must not be confused with generality.<sup>10</sup> The principle involved in an “ought” statement may be a highly specific, complex and detailed one, perhaps too complex for formulation in words. It does not have to be very general and simple. Complaints against universalizability, that it makes us the slaves of very simple general rules, therefore, miss their target. To use an example which gave trouble to Kant; moral principles do not have to be as general as “never tell lies except when it is necessary in order to save an innocent life, and except when and except when .....<sup>11</sup>

There can be universal relations as well as qualities (many-place as well as one-place predicates). The statement that everyone ought to look after his/her mother in her old age is, therefore, a universal statement, and the statement that *A*

<sup>7</sup>Hare R. M., *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: OUP, 1981), 10

<sup>8</sup>Singer Peter, *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 102

<sup>9</sup>Shaw Bernard, *Maxims for Revolutionists: Appendix to Man and Superman* (London: Constable, 1903), 227

<sup>10</sup>Hare R. M. *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: OUP, 1952), 1

<sup>11</sup>Kant Immanuel. *The Moral Law*, Trans. Paton, J. H. London: Hutchinson, 1948)109

ought to look after his/her mother (but has no such duty to look after other people's mothers), is universalisable. The same can be said about the statement that, I ought to keep my promises but not other people's. It is, therefore, no objection to the thesis of universalisability that there can be duties that one owes just to one person, provided that that person can be specified in universal qualitative or relational terms. It is no objection, even, that one can have the relation in question only to one person.

The point above can be related to a famous, though much misused, example given by Jean-Paul Satre. During the Nazi occupation of France, a student came to seek Satre's advice. The student's dilemma was whether to join the free French forces to fight against the evil of Nazism, or stay with his widowed mother, who depended on him. Satre uses the case to suggest that universal principles are useless in such situations, since each case is unique. Satre himself seems to confuse universality with objectivity; though they are obviously different concepts.<sup>12</sup>

But apart from that, his student did not have to find for himself any very simple, general principle. Perhaps, he was the only person who had ever been in that particular complex situation. But he ought to have been able to form for himself a principle (a highly specific one) which he could accept for situations just like his). Perhaps other such situations would never occur. But one can conceive of hypothetical situations as he wishes; and he would be committed, on pain of self-contradiction, to admit that if they occurred, the same thing should be done in them. That "our moral judgments have to extend to identical situations,"<sup>13</sup> hypothetical as well as actual, is an important tool in moral argument.

Universal prescriptivists hold, then, that "ought" judgments are prescriptive, like plain imperatives, but differ from them in being universalisable. A speech act is prescriptive if to subscribe to it is to be committed on pain of being accused of insincerity to doing the action specified in the speech act. "Prescriptivism thus falls within the class of ethical theories known as internalists; those who hold that to accept some moral judgment is to be motivated in a certain way."<sup>14</sup>

### **R. M. Hare's Prescriptivism**

The British philosopher, "R. M. Hare, in his two books, *The Language of Morals*, and *Freedom and Reason* developed the meta-ethical theory known as

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<sup>12</sup>Singer Peter, *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 113

<sup>13</sup>Hare R. M. *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: OUP, 1981), 112

<sup>14</sup>Singer Peter, *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 113

prescriptivism.”<sup>15</sup> According to him, value judgment or moral statements are primarily prescriptive; that is, that such statements contain an element of meaning which serves to prescribe or direct action<sup>16</sup>. In other words, moral statements are intended to guide conduct or human actions. The basic understanding is that when we commend or condemn something, it is always a way of guiding or directing our choices. According to Hare, moral judgments influence the kind of action that we perform and the kind of conduct we approve of. The meaning of this is that, once a person accepts any moral judgment, he or she must stand by it; one cannot accept a moral statement and go against that same moral statement.

R. M. Hare maintains that moral statements have direct relation to our conduct, for to make a moral statement is to commit one to what one says. If I say, for example, that honesty is good, I hereby imply that I should be honest and I commit myself to being honest. If, on the other hand, I say that embezzling public fund is bad, I imply that I should not embezzle fund and I commit myself to refraining from such an act. “Moral judgments always have a bearing on our conduct”<sup>17</sup>, in that we cannot in the fullest sense accept them without conforming to them. If we make a moral statement, but we are not prepared to commit ourselves to what we are saying, then, Hare says we are not sincere. Moral judgments involve self-commitment. To condemn an action as morally evil is to commit oneself to avoiding it.

According to this theory, ethical terms like “good” and “bad” are prescriptive. This means that they are used to prescribe a cause of action. To say that something is good is, according to this theory, indirectly to tell a person to choose it. And to say that something is bad is, indirectly, to tell a person to refrain from it, that is, not to do it. Moral statements therefore, entail imperatives, but they differ from simple imperatives. The main difference between moral statements and imperatives, for Hare, is that whereas, “moral statements are universal, imperatives are not”<sup>18</sup>. This means that the imperative entailed in a moral statement is universal, that is, addressed to all mankind. For example, if I say, “abortion is evil”, I have made a moral statement; whereas if I say, “do not perform abortion”, I have issued an imperative. The moral statement, “abortion is evil”, entails the imperative that nobody in the whole world should perform abortion. Thus, it is universal; it can be said then that a moral statement is a universal imperative, but “do not perform

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<sup>15</sup>Omoregbe Joseph, *A Systematic and Historical Study* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 1993), 20

<sup>16</sup>Anyam Damian, *Issues in Moral Philosophy 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed*, (Makurdi: Gwatex Publishers, 2018), 33

<sup>17</sup>Hare R. M *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: OUP, 1981), 143

<sup>18</sup>Omoregbe Joseph *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 1993), 3

abortion” is not universal.<sup>19</sup> It is a simple imperative addressed to a person or group of people.

Moral terms, Hare says, are evaluative and descriptive. In their evaluative function, they are used to commend. Thus, if I say that something is good, I am indirectly commending it to you. And if I say that something is bad, I am indirectly asking you not to choose it. Evaluative terms are, therefore, used to guide choices. This way, therefore, Hare advocates that human actions can only be accepted as moral if they precede exact moral statement.

### **The Context of Governance in Nigeria**

Historically, democratic governance in Nigeria dates back to 1922, when Sir Hugh Clifford introduced the first elective principle through the 1922 constitution (the Clifford’s Constitution). Following this development, Nigerians were for the first time elected into the legislative council: three representatives from Lagos and one from Calabar. As a follow up to this, the first political party (NNDP), led by Herbert Macaulay, was formed. Since then, “Nigeria has shown preference to democracy to all other systems in spite of opposing forces such as religion, ethnicity, communal clashes and military interventions in politics”.<sup>20</sup> To put the record straight, Nigeria gained independence in 1960 and by 1963, Nigeria had become a republic. Between the periods of 1960 and 2019, Nigeria has had four Republican Governments: 1963-1966, 1979-1983, 1989-1993 and 1999 – date. The earlier Republics were basically obstructed by military interventions. However, Nigeria has remained resolute, showing more preference for democratic governance.

Significantly, when Nigeria attained political independence from Britain, there was a great expectation among citizens in respect of the prospects of socio-economic development and the possibility of the flowing of a viable democratic system. However, more than five decades after independence, such hopes of good governance that would propel development and guarantee better living conditions of the people remain unrealistic. Very much worrisome is the fact that Nigeria is a democratic nation, yet governance in Nigeria is engulfed in lack of accountability and transparency; increasing poverty rate, infrastructural decay, poor educational system, poor healthcare system, a struggling economy, among others. To a concerned citizen, these remain worrisome, as to whether governance is all about self-service as Nigerian leaders have overtime shown. Governance in Nigeria leaves so much to be desired. Political leaders make promises they cannot keep; promises of good governance through provision of social amenities, improved

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid 1993, 20

<sup>20</sup>Gbagir Terungwa Solomon, “An Assessment of John Locke’s Notion of Popular Sovereignty: Its Implications on Nigeria’s Democracy” (Unpublished Research Dissertation, 2019), 64

healthcare, regular payment of workers' salaries, security of lives and property, which remain largely unfulfilled after been elected into office that would be used to bring these dividends of good governance to the people, and this has gradually turned into a political culture in Nigeria. If Nigeria must become the Nigeria we dream of, the Nigeria whose priority is the citizen, elements of good governance must begin to spring from the promises made during political campaigns, so that when a leader says "I will provide free education" then he remains faithful to this promise so that a statement made is replicated in action.

In extrapolating the context of governance in Nigeria above, Hare's ethical prescriptivism becomes imperative as a measure for addressing good governance in Nigeria.

### **R. M Hare's Ethical Prescriptivism and Governance in Nigeria**

Good governance is basically the most instrumental condition for political, social and economic development. This is largely because it (good governance) affords all individuals the opportunity to unraveling their political, cultural, social and economic potentials. Reasonably, where governance fails, the political, social and economic existence of human life becomes immensely affected. Juxtaposing Hare's ethical prescriptivism (in which he maintains that moral statements have direct relation to our moral conduct so that to make a moral statement is to commit one to what one says) and the question of good governance in Nigeria shows a great contrast and a damning gap. As examined earlier in this paper, governance in Nigeria is not relational to the promises made during campaigns. People are persuaded to vote on grounds that dividends of good governance would be brought to them; but it only begins and ends with wonderful speeches.

In a democratic setting as Nigeria, it is only laughable that the people can hardly boast of a government that has fulfilled at least half of its campaign promises. Infrastructural decay, poor healthcare system and educational decay remain matters begging for attention, even after political leaders have gotten into elective positions on the trust the people have reposed in them so that such promises would be fulfilled.

In view of the above, R. M. Hare's ethical prescriptivism becomes relevant in addressing these issues of governance in Nigeria. The issue remains that, for good governance to be achieved, actions (in relation to governance) must be relational to, and a consequence of, the promises made or the manifestoes presented. If political actions in respect of governance must be adjudged moral, they must proceed from the "sweet" words spoken during campaigns. When one says "corruption is evil and must be forbidden", then such must abide by it; that is to say, actions must be carefully preceded. When Hare talks about prescriptivism

in his *The Language of Morals*, the emphasis is that moral terms can be either “descriptive or evaluative”.<sup>21</sup> When moral terms are used in the evaluative sense, they are used to approve or disapprove actions, and when they are used descriptively, they are used to commend actions, and as well, to guide choices. For good governance to be achieved in Nigeria, therefore, the evaluative and descriptive perspectives of Hare’s ethical prescriptivism must be adopted to bear its relevance of governance on Nigeria so that leaders are more responsible, accountable and transparent.

### Conclusion

Nigeria as a democratic state has remained in perpetual want of political, social and economic development, due to lack of good governance. It is either that the state is posed with enormous insecurity challenges or faced with socio-economic crises, at one point or the other. This, undoubtedly, derives from poor governance, as leaders are either insensitive to the ideals of democratic governance or ignorant and thus inconsiderate of what faces the citizens, despite coming into power on well-presented manifestoes. R. M. Hare’s ethical prescriptivism comes in as a ready remedy to this challenge of poor governance. This way, when a leader makes a promise (a moral statement), he is duty-bound to fulfill it. It is, therefore, recommended that for good governance to thrive in Nigeria, the actions of leaders must be a consequence of, or proceed from, their moral statements or judgments.

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<sup>21</sup> Hare R. M, *The Language of Morals* (The Language of Morals (Oxford: OUP, 1952), 20

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