

Philosophy and Shaping of Human Conduct in the Contemporary Society

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Abstract

Unlike other animals, man possesses the capacity for voluntary and involuntary actions. The latter bestows on him the ability for acts of man, while the former enables him to perform human acts. Human conduct falls under these voluntary acts, as it represents actions man performs intentionally, and without coercion. This paper, therefore, critically examined how philosophy shapes human conduct in contemporary society. Precisely, it explored the meaning of human conduct, the factors that affect it, and the role of philosophy in it. Drawing on the ethical theories of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Mill, and Kant, and so on, this paper argues that philosophy has played and is still playing a significant role in shaping human conduct. Relying on conceptual analysis, it broke the topic into its basic components and utilised the essential concepts for analysis, drawing on data from the extant literature and the author's intuition. The result indicated that philosophy plays a crucial role in human conduct today, as it lays its foundation, moulds and moderates it, and determines its endpoint. Thus, this paper concluded that philosophy is an inevitable tool for shaping human conduct today.

Keywords: Contemporary Society, Ethics, Human Conduct, Moral Foundation, Philosophy.

1. Introduction

Philosophy is a rational, reflective, critical, and self-conscious inquiry into the various issues confronting humans in society. It aimed to offer an ultimate inclusive solution to issues affecting man's well-being (Nnaemedo, 2023a). Nnaemedo (2023b) captured this role of philosophy in his discourse on the five-fold role of philosophy in national development, namely, philosophy as a rational foundation, roadmap, roof, moral lens, and a national development stimulant (p. 345). As a scientific discipline, philosophy examines various human experiences using human reason alone.

Philosophy achieves the above diverse roles through its branches: speculative or theoretical, and practical or axiological. The former embodies logic, general, and special metaphysics, while the latter comprises ethics, aesthetics, and political philosophy. Ethics, for instance, concerns human acts rather than the acts of man. Human acts are the voluntary actions of man, while acts of man are the involuntary actions of man. Therefore, ethics deals with the actions of man for which man can be held responsible. Embodied in these voluntary actions of man is human conduct.

Ethics studies human conduct. It investigates factors that impair human conduct as well as those that promote it. Interestingly, some previous works of literature have focused on the former, factors that affect human conduct (Peschke, 1966; Wallace, 1977; Nnaemedo, 2020). Some have also centred on the latter, as evidenced among the proponents of hedonism (Aristippus), virtue

ethics (Plato, 1997; Aristotle, 2009), utilitarianism (Bentham, 2017; Mill, 2009), deontological theory (Kant, 2015), consequentialism (Fletcher, 1966), and so on. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that one area that has remained underexplored is the role of philosophy in shaping human conduct in contemporary society, a society characterised by significant technological advancements, information and communication progress, rapid population growth, and globalisation. Besides, these progressions are never without ethical challenges, such as those posed by artificial intelligence, social media, economic and linguistic dominance and injustice, and climate change, to name but a few. This paper thus examines how philosophy responds to the above ethical challenges, defining and shaping how man ought to conduct himself in contemporary society.

2. Meaning of human conduct

Human conduct refers to the intentional behaviours of man that he exhibits daily. It could be actions or behaviours towards oneself or another. Self-directed actions are the behaviours one exhibits towards oneself. For instance, habits or actions such as reading, physical exercise, etc., are directed at oneself, as Bacon (2022) notes: “Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man” (p.234). So, when one reads or exercises, the actions are directed to his/her person. Hence, they are behaviours towards oneself. Apart from that, humans interact daily with others on various levels. These interactions do not affect only the direct recipients but also others who are remote. Besides, human conduct is not limited to external behaviours; it also includes internal behaviours. So, human conduct is an ethical aspect that concerns diverse behaviours, both external and internal, including intentions, motivations, and attitudes one exhibits towards oneself and others.

2.1 Factors affecting human conducts

Some factors influence human conduct and are broadly divided into impairments of required knowledge and free consent (Peschke, 1966). The former embodies ignorance, error, and inattention, while the latter comprises fear, passion, personal values, beliefs, cultural norms, social pressures, and settings. Discussing the subcategories one by one is crucial for better insight.

2.1.1 Impairments of required knowledge

2.1.1.1 Ignorance

Ignorance “is the lack of knowledge in one naturally capable of having it (Wallace, 1977, p.115). Wallace identified three types of ignorance: invincible or antecedent, vincible or consequent, and concomitant. There is also a crass ignorance.

- **Invincible or antecedent ignorance**

Invincible ignorance precedes the action and effectively makes it non-voluntary. So, ignorance is invincible when it cannot be dispelled or dismissed by the reasonable diligence a judicious or prudent man would be expected to exercise in a given situation (Wallace, 1977).

- **Vincible or consequent ignorance**

Vincible ignorance is a type of ignorance that can be dispelled via reasonable diligence. To the degree that the agent culpably fails to make the effort essential to become better informed, his ignorance is effectively willed. To that degree, the resulting action is voluntary (Wallace, 1977).

- **Concomitant ignorance**

Concomitant ignorance occurs when a person does something he/she is unaware of and would be quite willing to repeat even if he/she were not ignorant (Wallace, 1977).

- **Crass ignorance**

Crass ignorance occurs when one neither knows nor tries to know what he/she ought to know. It is also called supine ignorance. It does not reduce culpability but increases it, as the person caused their own ignorance.

2..1.1.2 Error

The Collins online dictionary defines error as:

- i. A mistake or inaccuracy, as in action or speech;
- ii. An incorrect belief or wrong judgment;
- iii. The condition of deviating from accuracy or correctness, as in belief, action, or speech;
- iv. Deviation from a moral standard; wrongdoing;
- v. A measure of the variance between some quantity and its approximate, often articulated as a percentage.

The numbers one and three in the above definitions lean toward the English conception of error. Dulay et al.'s (1982) view of error as "the flawed side of learned speech or writing" (p.138) also falls within this realm of the English language. Nonetheless, number five of the Collins Dictionary's definition of error tends towards the mathematical and natural sciences. However, the second and fourth definitions tend towards philosophy, particularly ethics.

Therefore, from a philosophical or ethical perspective, an error is a fault or imprecision in deed or speech, a shift from a moral standard and judgment. Wallace (1977) described it as a kind of falsity. Thus, he defines it as "an inadequation or lack of conformity between intellect and thing" (p.115). Hence, since an error is a shift from moral ideals and judgment, it impairs or obstructs human acts and, subsequently, human conduct. Hofer et al. identified two types of errors: execution and planning. The former (execution error) is the failure to execute the intended, planned action, while the latter (planning error) is applying the wrong plan to realise an aim.

2..1.1.3 Inattention

Inattention is an actual, temporary privation of knowledge. The same principle applies to ignorance and inattention when inattention does not extend to the whole action. However, when it extends to the whole action, the following principles apply:

- i. If somebody does not attend to what he is doing, he does not accomplish a human act. For instance, an absent-minded philosopher absorbed in philosophical wonders may fall into a ditch like Thales. However, his action is not a human act. Acts done under complete intoxication are also not human acts. Nevertheless, sometimes the acts may be voluntary in the cause, such as

damage caused by a drunkard who foresaw that such behaviour might result from his drinking (Peschke, 1966).

ii. When a person only half-attends to what he does, his actions are imperfect human acts. Attention is imperfect if disturbed and diminished, though not completely extinguished, by some obstacle (Peschke).

2..1.2 Impairments of free consent

2.1.2.1 Fear

Wallace (1977) defines fear as "the urgent avoidance of an evil that is hard to escape" (p.77). Peschke (1966) distinguished between sensory and intellectual fear. He conceives it as the "shrinking back of the mind on account of impending evil" (p.244). Fear of the senses is one passion that belongs to the principle applicable to passion. Further, Peschke (1966) divided fear into grave and slight. Grave fear is caused by grave evil that is not easily escapable. Slight fear is one caused by slight evil and is easily escapable. Peschke (1966) also distinguishes between unjustly and justly inflicted fear. It is unjust if it is not justifiable by any guilt or potential misbehaviour of the victim or is out of proportion to him. Fear is justly inflicted if the reverse is the case.

Peschke (1966) underscored that fear does not destroy the voluntary nature of an action, but it lessens its guilt and merits. However, he noted that grave fear usually excuses from the obligation of civil law (unless they are, at the same time, precepts of the natural moral laws) and affirmative natural law. According to him, the reason is that moral impossibility excuses the compliance with such laws. However, fear does not excuse if a positive law is of such a nature that its violation would cause great harm to the common good (Peschke, 1966). For instance, it is absolutely prohibited for a Catholic priest to reveal a confessional secret.

2.1.2.2 Violence

As defined by Peschke, violence is a compulsive influence brought to bear upon one against his will by an extrinsic agent. He distinguished two types of violence: absolute and relative.

- **Absolute violence**

Violence is absolute if the will dissents totally, resists as best as possible, and is meaningful. Absolute violence makes an action involuntary.

- **Relative violence**

A relative violence occurs when a person's will is partially weak and may be deficient in its external resistance. It does not adversely affect the freewill but lessens it.

2.1.2.3 Disposition and habit

Disposition is the keenness to respond in a certain manner, temporarily obtained through repeated action. Habit is a "facility and readiness of acting in a certain manner acquired by repeated action" (Peschke, 1966, p.249). The descriptions above show that habit is a firmly

established behavioural pattern, while disposition readily changes. Peschke (1966) identified two habits: deliberately admitted and opposed. A deliberately admitted habit does not dispense an action from voluntariness, while an opposed habit lessens it and sometimes precludes it totally.

2.1.2.4 Passion or concupiscence

Passion is the movement of the sensitive appetite produced by good or evil as apprehended by imagination (Peschke, 1966, p.242). There are two types of passion: antecedent and consequent (Peschke, 1966).

- **Antecedent passion**

It precedes the will's action and induces the will to consent. Antecedent passion lessens the voluntariness of action and sometimes precludes it entirely, given that it hinders the reflection of reason and weakens its attention.

- **Consequent passion**

Consequent passion proceeds from the free determination of the will and is either freely admitted and consented to or deliberately aroused. It does not lessen an action's voluntariness so that it could be good or bad.

2.1.2.5 Personal values

Personal values are individual catalogues of life goals, ranked by importance. Each human being has a different index for different things. Where one places a particular thing shows its relevance to the person. What one person may regard as of great value may be inconsequential to another. However, even if it is inconsequential, it still influences those who value it highly, implying that personal values affect the possessor (the author of the value) either positively or negatively.

2.1.2.6 Belief

Belief is another factor that influences human conduct. It means ascent to a specific system of thought and view. "From its starting point, belief does not need intellectual rigour but needs such as it progresses. Therefore, it requires some rational explanations subsequently" (Nnaemedo, 2023a, p.48). What one believes shapes one's actions and inactions, since our belief patterns greatly control our perception of reality. One is probably to conduct oneself in a manner he/she considers best. Unfortunately, some of these manners are ingrained in faulty beliefs, leading to erroneous or bad human conduct. For instance, today, most of the religious-motivated crises are based on faulty religious beliefs, yet they are guiding the actions and inactions of their adherents.

2.1.2.7 Cultural norms

Culture refers to a people's way of life, the totality of their consistent life patterns, measured over time, that defines them as particular people (Nnaemedo, 2020). Cultural norms, therefore, refer to rules, customs, and laws regulating a culture. Cultural norms define the dos and don'ts in a culture. While some cultural norms help the smooth running of society, others do the opposite, as they propel certain cultural practices that "either marginalise one group against the others or

retard the wheel of societal progress in general" (Nnaemedo, 2020, p.66). Typical instances of cultural practices that marginalise people, especially in the South-East, are:

- i. Marriage between two women,
- ii. Marriage on behalf of a deceased,
- iii. Early and coerced marriages,
- iv. Female circumcision,
- v. Polygamy and arbitrary divorce,
- vi. A custom that requires a wife to return presents given to her in the event of a failed marriage,
- vii. Unhealthy widowhood practices,
- viii. Customary preference of a male child over a female child,
- ix. Inheriting the wife of a deceased brother/relative forcefully,
- x. Depriving a woman of the right to give evidence on land issues, and
- xi. Customs denying women the right to inherit their father's property (Nnaemedo, 2020).

Of course, these practices are repugnant based on Section 14(3) of the Evidence Act (Repugnancy, n.d.). The court can disallow them since they do not pass the repugnancy test and are repugnant to natural justice, equity, and good conscience (Nnaemedo, 2020).

2.1.2.8 Social pressures

This kind of pressure comes from different groups in society. It affects people's behaviours either positively or negatively. For instance, most teenagers act as they do because of peer pressure or influence. Because it often excludes those who do not align with it, it may lead to fear of missing out (FOMO) among teens. Subsequently, their conduct is dictated by what their peers consider right and wrong.

2.1.2.9 Settings

A setting could be a theatre, stage, or podium for an action performance. However, in this discourse, 'settings' refer to the contexts, circumstances, or situations in which an action occurs. Settings are another factor influencing human conduct, shaping how we respond to issues. For instance, how we react to private issues differs from how we respond in a social context. In private settings, external influences are minimal compared to those in public settings. For example, teens react differently to situations amid their peers than alone. They have ego and peer pressure to contain and sustain in public settings. The same is not the case in private settings.

The role of setting in moral evaluation was the driving force behind situationism, as evidenced by Fletcher (1966) and others. "Situationism was a reaction against traditional Christian morality's legalism, emphasising that natural law morality anchors moral evaluation on static and unchanging human nature" (Nnaemedo, 2023c, p.75). The advocates of situationism regard traditional Christian morality as essentialistic and incapable of addressing the complex life situations and challenges of the contemporary era (Nnaemedo, 2023c). For instance, Fletcher (1966) opposed strict adherence to the letter of the law, arguing that it kills. In contrast, he sued for relying on the spirit of the law, which he said gives life. He insists that legalism builds moral judgment on the pedestal of prefabricated rules by resting on *fiat justitia ruat caelum* (do the right even if heaven falls).

3. Philosophy and shaping of human conduct today

As a critical tool, philosophy contributes to shaping human conduct today, especially using its ethical paraphernalia. This paper, however, identified three such apparatuses: laying the foundation of human conduct, moderating, and determining its endpoint.

3.1 Philosophy lays the foundation for human conduct

One of philosophy's roles is to establish theoretical frameworks for human conduct. These frameworks provide an ethical template for erecting human conduct. As frameworks, they offer background for man's internal and external actions. Here, philosophy provides the initial thrust for human conduct, offering the necessary foundation to situate human actions. Some of the ethical templates include virtue theory, deontological theory, consequentialism, natural law theory, modern moral development theories, psychoanalytic theory, behavioural theory, cognitive-developmental theory, theory of moral judgment, social learning theory, psychosocial theory, cognitive moral development theory, Gilligan's theory of moral development, and sociocultural theory. For instance, virtue theory emphasises the character required of an individual rather than actions or rules he should follow (Aristotle, 2009; MacDonald & Marcoux, n.d.). Deontological theory stresses the nature of an action as the determinant of whether to perform it (Kant, 2015). Hedonism underpins an action's ability to generate pleasure as a rationale for its embarkment. Utilitarianism accents an action's ability to offer maximum happiness to the majority (Bentham, 2017; Mill, 2009). Consequentialism holds that the outcome of an action is a basic criterion for justifying it (Fecher, 1966). Using these theories, philosophy offers man the first foundation for grounding human conduct. As the first landing for human conduct, these theoretical frameworks are the launchpads for human conduct. As their point of departure, they provide a firm anchor.

In contemporary society, as a moral foundation, philosophy addresses not only traditional ethical issues but also current ethical challenges. Ipso facto, it focuses on how man ought to conduct himself amid present technological advancement, resisting his subjugation to science, nevertheless, rather than portraying science as a servant, not a master of man. The moral foundation also addresses the challenges posed by artificial intelligence, which is rapidly displacing and relegating humans to the corner in the workplace, while assuming centre stage in the world today. This moral template also deeply enshrines the unbridgeable chasm between man and artificial intelligence by highlighting self-consciousness as man's natural endowment, which artificial intelligence lacks.

Besides, the moral foundation addresses social media-related ethical challenges, such as cyberstalking, cyberbullying, privacy invasion, hate speech, and the spread of fake stories and obscene content. Additionally, the moral foundation addresses the fundamental inequalities in contemporary society, such as gender inequality, economic oppression and disequilibrium, linguistic dominance, and the dehumanisation of unborn children, and other social injustices. In contrast, this moral foundation provides a stronger justification for promoting man's inalienable

right to the dignity of his person, to respect, and to privacy (whether as a fetus in the womb or as an already born). It also recognises the equal validity of all languages, serving as a safeguard against linguistic endangerment and possible extinction.

3.2 Philosophy moulds and directs human conduct

Philosophy's role transcends providing moral foundations for human conduct to serving as its moulder and conduit. As a moulder, it shapes human conduct in rapport with societal ethical expectations and ideals. So, it is not sufficient to provide a robust base for human conduct. It is also important to ensure proper trajectory in its execution. By implication, it means that humans need to follow a certain, defined set of actions in their daily encounters. Without following this proper conduit, there is a high probability of veering off the track. Thus, philosophy comes in with its moral lens to ensure that human conduct aligns with the pre-established template. By so doing, philosophy serves as a moderator of human conduct, sustaining its alliance with the point of departure, the foregrounding template.

Nonetheless, in contemporary society, philosophy's contribution extends beyond formulating a moral foundation to advocating concrete actions that derive from and support the moral templates. It implies that it is not just focused on how man ought to behave, but also engages in what concrete actions they ought to take in concrete situations. Of course, this is already partially the province of situation ethics. However, this paper contends that the inquiry should not be limited to armchair investigation, relying solely on the extant literature and the authors' intuition. Contrastingly, it requires inquiring into the concrete society to derive empirical findings to serve as a matrix for philosophical reflection. This is crucial as philosophy uses people's worldview and culture as a matrix for reflection. In this way, philosophy would be, in essence, an intellectual engagement with the specific issue affecting present-day society, implying setting the entire process against a concrete background to achieve a measurable outcome. In situations where the outcome of philosophical inquiry has no measurable effect, it may resonate with the old charge that philosophy is esoteric and abstract.

3.3 Philosophy determines the endpoint of human conduct

Man does not just act, but acts for a purpose. His action has a base, follows a trajectory, and tends to an end. Just as philosophy provides a moral basis for human conduct, so does it offer man a path to follow and an end to pursue. This point of arrival serves as a light at the end of a tunnel. So, human conduct involves not only following a certain trajectory. It also entails looking to the end in view. The point of arrival is the goal towards which man tends. Achieving this goal requires carefulness and diligence, given the possibility of similar goals in the same tunnel. Amid the possibility of multiple goals, philosophy's task is to determine the best goal to pursue among apparently valuable ones. Philosophy achieves this by connecting man back to its moral base, the theoretical framework, through the moral conduit. In this, it ensures consistency of the point of arrival with the moral template, establishing and reinforcing the entire system of human conduct.

The emphasis on philosophy's role as the determiner of the endpoint of human conduct is pivotal, especially given the transvaluation (Nietzsche, 1929) and the topsy-turvy of values in

contemporary society. On the one hand, technology has transformed the world in remarkable ways and continues to offer more wonders. There is also the strategic role of artificial intelligence, which dominates almost all spheres of human society, including education, aviation, medicine, financial institutions, sports, and the military. Additionally, there is a profound improvement in information and communication technology. Unfortunately, these scientific escapades also raise ethical issues that conflict with societal harmony by often presenting seemingly similar yet conflicting values. Amidst this confusion, philosophy offers endpoints that serve as guides for navigating conflicting situations. In this way, it provides a moral goal that subsists as a buffer amid the challenging and confusing values. Such a goal helps address the distinction between the real end in view and the apparent end (what appears to be the end). Subsequently, relying on the real end provided by philosophy, man can conduct his daily affairs with minimal harmful ethical implications.

4. Conclusion

This paper focused on human conduct, which represents man's diverse, intentional, external and internal behaviours in daily life towards himself and others. These behaviours have factors that promote and impair them. The impairing factors fall into two broad categories: impairments of required knowledge and impairments of free consent. This paper argues that, despite the above impairments, philosophy has and continues to play a significant role in shaping and promoting human conduct today. It identified three ways philosophy plays this role: laying the foundation for human conduct, moulding and moderating it, and determining its endpoint.

Philosophy lays the foundation of human conduct as it plays a strategic role in establishing its theoretical frameworks. These frameworks are moral templates for erecting human conduct, showing its initial justification. Besides, philosophy also serves as a moulder and conduit of human conduct. In this role, philosophy guides human conduct through concrete actions. Additionally, philosophy defines the moral goal in view, that is, the end in view. Thus, this paper concluded that philosophy contributes significantly to shaping human conduct today not merely by laying a moral template, serving as a moral conduit, and moderating and serving as an endpoint, but also by ensuring that these operations and processes take into account concrete ethical issues in contemporary society. This involves using concrete, reliable empirical and non-empirical data from these issues as the basis for a philosophical investigation aimed at a measurable outcome.

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