O R I G I N A L A R T I C L E

A Critique of Hume's Ethical Empiricism: Towards Addressing Ethical Dilemmas in Making Moral Choices

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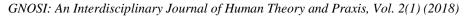leonard4lifeus@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper: "A Critique of Hume's Ethical Empiricism: Towards Addressing Ethical Dilemmas in Making Moral Choices" was written to investigate the nature of Hume's ethical theory. Hume proposed an ethical theory that is not centered on human nature. By this, it means that his moral theory was not built on that which is common to all rational beings (reason). Hume's projection of an ethical theory that is not founded on reason and his subscription to ethical relativism (ethics based on feeling, emotion, or situation) has generated a lot of discourse. This paper used the methods of rational speculation, critical analysis, and evaluation to review Hume's ethical empiricism critically to articulate its merits and demerits.

Keywords: Ethics, reason, empiricism, feelings, sympathy.

INTRODUCTION

As an empiricist, David Hume believed and opined that knowledge is nothing more than impressions and ideas are given to us by the senses. For him, the causal effect between two objects is based on experience. To say that A causes B is a mere expression of our past experiences which have habituated us to think in this way. That is because we have seen in the past that B frequently follows A and never occurs without it, our mind associates B with A such that the presence of one condition the mind to think of the other. Philosophers love wisdom. And it is the very task of this philosophical document to demystify the confusion about the source of moral theories.

Hume argued for an ethical theory based on feelings of pleasure and pain. This particular view of Hume has attracted a lot of discussions and debates, especially from philosophers who derived ethical theory from human reason. Assessing Hume's ethical

empiricism, the argument of this paper will be designed to demonstrate and articulate its advantages and disadvantages as a moral theory.
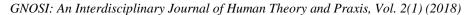
HUME'S ETHICAL EMPIRICISM

Hume developed ethical writings in Book 3 of his *Treaties of Human Nature*, "Of Morals" (which builds in Book 2, "Of the passions"), his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, and some of his *Essays*. Hume maintained that moral laws are the product of feelings of pleasure and pain of a special sort and not, as held by many philosophers since Socrates – from reason. For Hume, "every simple idea was derived from some simple impression and that every complex idea was made up of simple ideas, whereas innate ideas, supposed to be native to the mind were non-existent'' (Ochulor, Ezugwu & Ajor, 2012, pp. 113). Hume argued that man can't know what he ought to do from what he is doing at the moment. The foregoing statement sheds light on the famous "is" "ought" problem raised by David Hume. This problem as raised by Hume questioned the validity of the transition from "is" propositions (propositions of fact) to "ought" propositions (propositions enjoining obligation) (Ochulor and Otu, 2012, pp. 81). It means that to say that man ought not to lie because the reason tells him to do so, is an empty statement and has no existential relevance.

For Hume, 'reason' is not the source of ethical knowledge. "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (Hume 1985, pp. 217). This is the role of reason in Hume's ethics. He added that the rules of morality are not the conclusion of our reason (Hume 1985, pp. 239). He said this to further affirm his claim that morality naturally influences human passion and actions. Since morals influence the actions and affections, it follows that they cannot be derived from reason. To derive a normative proposition from a descriptive proposition is not possible. Hume's ethical philosophy needs a cursory look to understand its merits and demerits.

Hume argued that sympathy is the source of moral values and ethical rules and self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice (Elijah 2012, pp. 140). Hume states: "Thus, self-interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice but sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation which attends that value" (Human 1985, pp. 279). Morality for Hume starts with self-interest and establishes in the public interest. This proposition defines the uniqueness of Hume's ethics (ethics said to be subjective and universal at the same time). The above claim also shows that Hume believes in ethical universalism.

Hume questioned the possibility of ethics built on human nature (ethics built on that which is common to all men – reason). Moral judgment according to Hume can be determined from the effects our action creates on us and others and not the product of reason (mind). Hume State:

> It has been observed that nothing is ever-present to the mind but its perceptions;
> and that all the actions of seeing, hearing, judging, loving, hating and thinking,
> fall under this denomination. The mind can never exert itself in any action,
> which we may not comprehend under the term of perception; and consequently,
> that term is no less applicable to those judgments, by which we distinguish

moral good and evil than to every other operation of the mind. To approve of one character, to condemn another, are only so many different perceptions.

The point here is that moral judgment is not the product of the mind as many deontologists think. Moral adjudication, arbitration, verdict, ruling, perceptiveness, acumen, and appraisal are only perceptions (impression and ideal). When others are displeased by a certain action we feel bad and call such action wrong. Whereas when people are pleased by a certain action we feel happy and approve of action good (Elijah 2012, pp. 138). According to Hume, morality naturally influences human passions and actions.
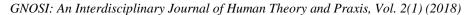
A CRITIQUE OF HUME'S ETHICAL EMPIRICISM

Hume's ethical empiricism states that the foundation upon which moral theory is built is sympathy. Hume illustrates the view that our judgment of the rightness or wrongness of an action can only be correct when we adhere to the theory that morality consists of principles or values which the individual formulates for himself as a matter of personal opinion (Elijah 2012, pp. 138). This personal opinion by extension must conform to public estimation.

The major strength of using empiricism as a way of finding the truth is that rationalism doesn't necessarily account for the way that the world works, whereas empiricism does. The "is" propositions will provide and serve as raw material for other ethicists who believe in the transition from "is" proposition (propositions of fact) to "ought" propositions (propositions enjoining obligation). Empiricism is widely used in science as a method of proving and disproving theories. It is easier to show or see if something is true when it is tested than if the reason is used alone. Galileo stated that beliefs must be tested empirically to check that they work with the law of physics (Act for Libraries). A good example is Aristotle's theory of motion. He argued that heavier things fall faster than light things. But Galileo challenged this claim, arguing that it was air resistance that was responsible for how fast things fall. This claim was proved correct later, empirically on the moon when an astronaut dropped a feather and a hammer and they hit the ground at the same time. This argument demonstrates the usefulness of the empirical method in the acquisition of knowledge. It is true that the feeling of pain when betrayed or lied to, will make one abstain from the act of lying. A mere experience of its side effect alone makes people distance themselves from such an act. The above is one merit of Hume's ethics.

Hume's ethical empiricism accounts for utility in the judgment of moral norms. In his wisdom, utilitarianism is the standard of moral judgment. In other words, an action is seen to be virtuous if it is conducive to the promotion of man's social wellbeing (Elijah 2012, pp. 141). The question we should ask ourselves is; "does my action promote public utility? This paper agrees that it is morally bad if one's action fails to promote the happiness of the society in which he is a fraction. It is not out of place to say that Hume is one of the forerunners of utilitarianism (the ethical doctrine that the value of conduct is determined by the utility of its results). The above is another merit of Hume's ethics.

Hume's ethical empiricism accounts for emotivism and pity based ethics. Emotivism is the theory that ethical statements are feeling-based: The philosophical theory that ethical statements are not statements of fact but instead reflects the feeling of the speaker (Encarta

Dictionaries). According to Hume's ethics, a woman who stole a pot of soup from her neighbor to feed her six hungry children may escape punishment out of pity. In this case, the base for judgment is the feeling of pity for her considering her situation.
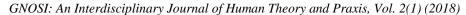
Hume's ethical empiricism accounts for ethical situationism (a position that moral decisions depend on the context in which they are to be made, rather than on general moral principles). Hume's ethical opinion enjoins us to consider the situation within which the action was committed. For example, a crippled woman and a non-crippled woman who committed the same morally wrong acts may not receive the same weight of punishments. Another instance is that, in the law court, teenagers are given less weight of punishments for the same crimes committed by adults. The truth remains that the situation in some cases affects the kind of judgment passed for a particular action at a given time.

On the other hand, although Hume's ethical empiricism is strong in the context of teleological ethical systems (ethical systems that moral action should be judged in relation to their ends or utility) it does not account for actions that are bad or good in themselves. Aristotle as a popular teleologist argued that some actions are bad in themselves not because of their excesses or deficiencies (Uduigwomen 2006, pp. 25). These acts include murder, theft, adultery, lying, hate, envy, and spite. These acts according to Aristotle have no mean. One is always wrong in doing them. This is one weakness of Hume's ethical empiricism.

Hume's rejection of metaphysical analysis is another major weakness in his ethical philosophy "Ethics has to do with the norms of human behaviour. Being is the foundation of goodness; metaphysics is the foundation of ethics and an ethical proposition can validly be derived from an ontological proposition about human nature" (Ochulor and Otu 2012, pp. 80). But, Hume's denial of the claim that metaphysics is the foundation of ethics negates the existence of his ethics. The point is that ethics without foundation is not ethics at all. Hume states:

> When we run over libraries persuaded of these principles what havoc must we make. If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence? No. commit it to the flames, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion (Human 1972, pp. iii).

For Hume, metaphysical propositions do not give knowledge and should be done away with. It only leads to illusion. Consequently, Hume denies the possibility of "ought" propositions (propositions enjoining obligation). Therefore, if being is the foundation of goodness, and metaphysics is the foundation of ethics, it means Hume's ethical philosophy has no theoretical foundation. In this case, Hume has no ethical philosophy. There is no difference between Hume's ethical philosophy and the psychological theory about human behaviour. It is believed that Hume like Machiavelli was not interested in how men ought to behave. He is concerned with the "is" than with the "ought" propositions. He holds that ethical proposition can only be acquired by sentiments and not reason. But, studies have shown that ethics, the study of principles or standards of human conduct, ask only normative questions. These questions include: is abortion right? Should I cheat during an examination? Should I tell the

truth or not in the face of danger? (Uduigwomen 2006, pp. 1) These questions cannot be answered with descriptive propositions. It can only be addressed with normative propositions (proposition enjoining obligations). This kind of proposition cannot be accommodated in Hume's ethical empiricism. The point is that Hume's ethical empiricism has no metaphysical foundation. As such, it has no basic quality that makes it an ethical theory. The question is; can a philosopher that rejects metaphysics have an ethical theory? The answer is No!

There is an element of determinism in Hume's ethical empiricism. Hume denies that human actions are free. For him, human actions are determined (Elijah 2012, pp. 140). Hume states: "Necessity makes an essential part of causation and consequently liberty, by removing necessity also removes causes, and is the very same thing with chance. A chance is commonly thought to imply a contradiction and is at least directly contrary to experience, there are always the same arguments against liberty" (Hume 1985, pp. 210, 211). It is clear from the above that Hume disapproves of any claim that humans are free moral agents. This is a contradiction because; in one sense Hume argued that man acts out of sentiment, which is a product of choice and willingness to uphold a certain action because it brings happiness. But the quote above explicates that human action in terms of cause and effects is not free. The cause of action is the motive behind it (Elijah 2012, pp. 140).

The limitation of the senses as a source of knowledge is another problem with Hume's ethical empiricism. This is because sensitive data is indirect and there has to be mediation between sensation and perception. A mere wearing of yellow eyeglass automatically makes the vision of the bearer assume yellow background. People do experience hallucinations in their lives, in which they have been convinced of the existence of things that don't exist. From the above, it can be inferred that an ethical principle built on sense perception is indirect and has mediation, which is the sense and cannot be trusted completely. Descartes was right when he argued that there is no way of knowing if the things we are seeing and experiencing are real. For example; if it feels like reality while you are in the dream, how do you know that what you're experiencing now isn't also a dream? Based on the above assertions, Hume's ethical empiricism cannot be proved to be accurate.

Aristotle opined that "there are some actions that are bad in themselves not because of their excesses or deficiencies, but because one is always wrong in doing them" (Uduigwomen 2006, pp. 25). These actions include murder, theft, adultery, lying, hate, envy, and spite. The above view contradicts Hume's opinion that the foundation of every moral action is sympathy. For Aristotle and other deontologists (scholars that believe some actions are morally good or bad in themselves), murder, theft, adultery, lying, hate, envy and spite cannot be built on human sympathy for they are bad in themselves, independent of human feelings

CONCLUSION

In Conclusion, Hume's ethical empiricism has strengths and weaknesses, merits and demerits, advantages, and disadvantages. His theory is vital in the ethical judgment of our actions, but cannot account for all moral circumstance, especially for answering questions about intangible moral values (moral values that we cannot perceive with the senses). For these kinds of values, rationalism would be used. Hume's ethical empiricism is only useful in moral

assessment where one can experience everything as they are in themselves. Thus, when the need arises to make ethical judgments in this regard, Hume's ethical empiricism should be employed.

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