

The Moral Range of Political Duty

OLADELE DANIEL IDOWU

Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria

Abstract. Political duty is either the central or fundamental problem of political philosophy. There is no doubt, however, that the history of political thought is replete with attempts to provide a satisfactory account of political duty from the time of Socrates to the present. To have a political obligation is to have a moral duty to obey the laws of one's country or state. On that point, there is almost complete agreement among political philosophers. But how does one acquire such an obligation? Is political duty more a matter of being than of doing – that is, of simply being a matter of the country or state in question? Many answers have been proffered but none commands widespread assent. However, this study is an attempt to add to the existing debate, by suggesting a solution to the problem of political duty. The paper adopts expository and analytic approaches that are usually associated with philosophical scholarship. Indeed, a number of contemporary political philosophers deny that a satisfactory theory of political duty either has been or can be devised. Others, however, continue to believe that there is a solution to what is called 'the problem of political obligation', and they are presently engaged in lively debate not only with the skeptics but also with one another on the question of which theory, if any, provides the solution to the problem. We therefore, show that the political leader, in ensuring the peace and growth of the society, must consciously embrace morality. For morality and politics are bound together.

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1. Introduction

Politics, as has been defined by the ancient philosophers, is the art of managing the city (Polis); and the politician has as role to play so much so that the citizens should enjoy peace and grow in prosperity in their activities. He must resolve the inevitable conflicts intervening between the citizens and safeguard justice by promoting the good and banishing the evil. In so doing, it is out of doubt that he is achieving moral goals. So morality and politics are bound together. However, one can easily notice that in the real history of the people and particularly in the contemporary world, politics has not always been understood as a highly moral duty, rather, what one can witness today is a Machiavelli's politics, pragmatist in its worst sense. However such state of affairs is doomed to come to a tragic end; for as has been stated by V. Lenin "one can cheat the people for a certain time..." Because there will be the reversal of the situation and a new social order will arise, which is unavoidably achieved on the moral ground. So the moral range of political duty can never be removed.

For ease of discussion, the paper shall be divided as follows:

- The political duty
- The implication of morality in politics
- Present Day-Politics
- The inevitable consequences

2. The Political Duty

Politics, as Pious said, is "the greatest science and service of mankind" . Of course we are

referring to politics not as a science but as an art, that is a societal activity and it is engendered through the interrelationship among men, the conception of politics as a human or social activity is enunciated by Bernard Lucks when he says:

Politics is then an activity – and this platitude must be brought to life: it is not just a thing, like a natural object on a work of art, which would exist if individuals did not continue to act upon it...The more one is involved, in relationship with others, the more conflict of interest or of character and circumstance will arise. These conflicts, when personal, create the activity we call “Ethics”... and when public create political activity.

So, politics is a human or social activity; it remains to define its nature, there are various approaches of the concept, nevertheless, despite the conflict in various definitions of politics, there is still a confluence between them and the concept of power. As Gbadegesin puts it; “the most glaring and immediate objective of all political action is acquisition of power or at least gaining access to the use of power. Power is the most important element in politics.

This view is in harmony with Harold Haswell’s definition of politics as “who gets what, when and how”. This definition underlines the importance of power as a major ingredient of politics; this suggests that politics is nothing more than the struggle for positions of power and influence which enables those who have the monopoly of such positions in the society to make decisions having all pervasive consequences. It follows from this, that, politics consists in the manner of the acquisition of political power and its use. The significance of politics and its contributions to the development of a civilized society derive from the opportunity it provides for contesting for and using power. Power confers to its wielder certain attributes which enable him to take some decisions and make certain authoritative allocations within the society. The divergence in human nature, interest, natural, social and economic dispositions are constant and potent sources of political agitations and diversities which are controlled and resolved by power (i.e. politics)

which brings some order into public life. It is the recognition of this fact that a political system is conceived as the type of government where politics proves successful in ensuring reasonable stability and order, reconciliation and consensus of differing interests in the society is seen in its use as a mechanism for regulating the excesses of human nature. It is the possession of power which enables the holder to back up decisions made with sanctions, relative to conflict in the society. As Gbadegesin has pointed out:

The co-ordination of human activities, the distribution of scarce resources among competing groups and individuals, and the award of honor and blames/punishment are carried out within the context of power.

Hence, ordinarily the politician should be the custodian of morality and the onus of keeping the moral life of a society from falling apart lies with the political leaders who are expected to give it expression in their conducts, and to lay forth worthy examples capable of raising the level of its public morality. This in fact used to be the case in the traditional African societies. As Nkeonye Otakpor puts it:

...the Obas in Yoruba land and in Bini kingdom were both religious and political leaders, they performed both religious and political and legal functions altogether. They were equally the ultimate source of moral law or code.

Hence the rulers, that is, Obas, chiefs and Emirs used to be the custodian of moral. As Fox opined, “what is morally wrong can never be politically right” because as Apparadorai has observed,

The state exists to promote social good on the largest scale. If that object is to be achieved, the state has progressively to embody the fundamental rights of man, political, economic and private; the basis of these rights is the membership of man in society and the moral order underlying social relations.⁹

Moreover if politics is conceived as the exercise of power, as power is the vehicle of distributing scarce resources among competing groups in the society, political realism demands that the holder of such power be aware of whence that power flows from. Power comes from the people either

directly or indirectly, therefore those who wield political power do so in order to promote the common good.

3. The Implication of Morality in Politics

One can ask what we mean by morality. Morality is a familiar phenomenon in human existence. It consists in day-to-day judgments made on action and character. So morality is a phenomenon which has both form and content, that is both formal and substantive aspects. Immanuel Kant was emphasizing the formal aspect of morality when he posited that moral judgment must be universalizable i.e. its application must be universal, thus ruling out the act of making irrelevant exception in the application of moral rules. A basic requirement of morality is the readiness to universalize one's moral judgment. Apart from this formal aspect underlined by Kant there is the substantive aspect i.e. the material requirements which should govern human actions. These requirements are moral duties in a moral community. They are what could be termed as components or ingredients of morality. These components are many. We will review a few of them.

- (i) A first ingredient of morality is the duty of altruism which requires the relegation of self-interest and egoism and reasonable readiness to assist others in need of help.
- (ii) Truth-telling is another requisite of morality and it requires a good moral agent to exhibit the habit of telling the truth at all times, this is because truth-telling promotes trust and cooperation among individuals thereby eliminating possible grounds of conflict.
- (iii) Fidelity is another requisite of morality. This duty demands that promises are kept. Promising as it were, raises expectation in others and as such deliberate frustration of this is, is unjustified.
- (iv) Another important requisite of morality is justice. This duty also

among others, fosters love, trust and co-operation among individuals within a given moral community. It consists in fairness and equity in dealing with people; in fact this duty is so important that Saint Augustine says "remove justice, and what are kingdoms, but gangs of criminals on a large scale".

From the foregoing, it is clear that politics as a human or political activity is not and cannot be devoid of morality; that for political actions or the use of power to have beneficial consequence for a society, they have to conform to some of the ingredients of morality mentioned above. This tight link between politics and morality has been well perceived by the earlier philosophers for example, man, according to Aristotle "is by nature a political animal", which is to say that man is by nature intended to live in a political society. Thus a life outside the political society for Aristotle is quite impossible because according to him, he who is unable to live in society or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself must be either a beast or a god.

He opines that it is only in a society that man can develop his potentialities as a human being. The political society or a society therefore exists to serve man's need, to provide the individual with those things that will enable him to develop himself and reach the goal of life, namely happiness. For Aristotle, while the society exists for the sake of life, it continues to exist for the sake of good life. Aiming at reaching this result, he contends that a state must be based on justice, a virtue so much extolled by him. He says "justice is something essential to a state, for right in the basis of political association and right is the criterion for deciding what is just".

The extolment of justice within the state by Aristotle was born out of the Greek's conception of justice which they consider as the most fundamental of all virtues. In continuation of his moral interest in politics, Aristotle further made a distinction between a good government and a bad government. A good government according to him is that which aims at the interest of the community at a wider scale, and a bad

government is one which seeks its own private interest rather than that of the whole community. His ethics is social and its politics is ethical.

Another philosopher who saw a necessary connection between morality and politics is Thomas Hobbes. Though an apostle of authoritarianism himself, his moral interest in politics cannot be over-emphasized. Hobbes is mainly known for his idea of the state of nature, a state in which men lived prior to the promotion of the civil society. In this state, there were no laws, no authority, no morality, no sense of right and wrong, no sense of justice or injustice. Everybody merely pursued the satisfaction of his self-interest; whatever satisfied anybody's appetite was for him good and he would pursue it, and whatever he has aversion for he called it bad and would avoid it. In short, the only rule of action in the state of nature is nothing other than self-interest and its satisfaction, ordinarily this often leads to conflict among men. Thus according to Hobbes, the state of nature was a state of war and insecurity among men. Hence, it was the state in which conflicts, struggle and war thrived among men. In such a state, Hobbes says, there was neither development nor progress. No knowledge on the face of the earth, no account of time, no letter, no society, and the worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short¹⁴.

It was in this ambience that men decided to come together and form an organized society. They entered into a social contract within which they formed a political society and empowered the sovereign to decide what is right and what is wrong. Thus, according to Hobbes as could be seen, morality originated with the establishment of civil society for this was the origin of the notion, of right and wrong, justice and injustice, good and evil. Moral concepts therefore originated with political society and have meaning only within the society. In other words, we can say that according to Hobbes, the political is the source as well as the custodian of the moral.

The French philosopher, J.J. Rousseau is also to be mentioned as one of the vanguards of the

theory of social contract. However Rousseau disagrees with Hobbes that the state of nature was a state of war. It was, according to Rousseau, a state of innocence and peace. Conflict, strife, war, hostility etc. came with the formation of political society. Prior to the advent of political society (i.e. in the state of nature), man was good, peaceful and happy. He was at peace with both nature and his fellowmen. He was not greedy, not aggressive, not violent as Hobbes portrays him. He needed very few things and was happy. There was no private ownership of things. This peaceful and happy state of affairs was however disturbed when one man got up one day and laid claim to a piece of land, as his own private property. Unfortunately nobody challenged him. He was allowed to claim for himself what nature has provided for everybody. Others, seeing that he was allowed to get away with it, followed his example and also laid claim over certain things as their own. This was followed by scramble, ruthless struggle, strife, competition and fight as each person tried to acquire as much property for himself as he could. The strong and powerful ones amassed a lot of wealth for themselves at the expense of the weak who became poor. This was the origin of inequality among men. When the rich saw that their lives and properties were no longer safe, they came up with the idea of forming a political society with laws and law enforcement agents to protect them and their properties from the attack of the poor. This was the origin of political society and morality. For it was the origin of the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice. So like other philosophers, Rousseau maintains that morality and political society came into existence together.

4. Present Day-Politics

From the above, it is obvious that morality cannot be separated from politics; the political duty is a moral duty. However what one can witness actually in the society and mainly in the contemporary society is quite the contrary. Gbadegesin puts this succinctly when he writes that, "...today, we are used to thinking that politics is the antithesis to morality". One can observe today that the general tendency is to separate morality from politics. This tendency

involves also the jettisoning of the generally recognized principles of political morality. This tendency according to Denisov:

finds expression in particular in the escalation of violent actions and acts of aggression observed in the world today... the manipulating of social mechanism for narrow selfish, egoistical ends, political speculation of people's natural feelings on their lack of information, deliberate misinformation of public opinion, treachery and perfidy.

The consequence of this state of affairs is the moral emptiness that is inherent in most of the contemporary states. The scorning of moral values leads inevitably to the application of the law of the jungle at the level of state policy. As a consequence, most politicians are not concerned with the common good which is the end of political actions; they are rather concerned with the immediate goal of acquiring power for its own sake. In fact, their concern with gaining power is such that the ultimate end of power is relegated to the background. To this group of politicians who are thriving today, power is seen as an end in itself and whatever means could be used in acquiring it is justified. Put in another way, we can say that politics with this set of politicians is a game of absolute moral permissiveness.

It is interesting to note that this immoral conception of politics has been embodied and systematized into theory by the Italian thinker, Niccolo Machiavelli. To Machiavelli, politics ceased to be a means, but rather an end in itself. For him, rather than ganging politics with morality, success should be the ultimate end of all political actions and leaders according to him must be aware of this. In his words:

... a prince therefore who desires to maintain himself must learn to be not always good, but to be so or not as necessity may require. Nor used to care about incurring censure for such vices, without which the preservation of the state may be difficult. For all things considered, it is found that anything that seems like virtue will lead you to ruin if you follow them, while others, that apparently, are vices, will if followed, result in your safety and well-being.

Thus, for him, the leaders or seekers of political power do not have to be morally upright.

Nietzsche is another philosopher who tried to separate morality from politics. The first thing that should be noted in Nietzsche is his identification of two kinds of morality, namely: the slave-morality and the master-morality. The slave morality according to Nietzsche is the one taught by Christianity which preaches love, meekness, humility, kindness, sympathy etc. all of which are considered as virtue by the slave-morality. This kind of morality sees weakness as virtue and strength of character as a vice, and also aims at bringing men to the same laws that are applicable to all men. Furthermore, the slave-morality prevents people from developing into strong and powerful men. Hence, it becomes an impediment to human development. Christianity does these things mentioned above in the name of God whose commands and prohibitions it claims to hand over to men. Thus Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God. With the death of God, man is now free from his oppressive development of mankind. So the master-morality takes over from the slave-morality and vice-versa. Thus in this new morality:

...pride, great passion, strength, instincts of man, desire for conquest, revenge, ambition, adventure, voluptuousness, self-assertion, violence are marks of noble spirit which should be encouraged, whereas peace, patience, meekness etc are marks of weakness of character. The master-morality is a morality of power of ruthlessness, of valor, of strength and ambition.

Moreover, Nietzsche holds that the happiness of the common people is not part of good per se, all that is good or bad exists only in the superior few, what happens to the rest is of no account. The misery of the whole nation, he says is of less importance than the suffering of a great individual. From the foregoing it is obvious that Nietzsche has no place for morality in the existence of political power by the rulers. However, it is such conception of politics as has been developed by Machiavelli and Nietzsche which is prevailing in many parts of the world.

5. The Inevitable Consequences

This "realistic" philosophy of politics above expounded seems very seductive and in fact

many politicians today have been won over by such an anti-humanistic political realism. However, whenever such a state of affairs as above discussed takes over into a state, the situation however baffling it may be, is always temporary. As Lenin said “one can cheat the people for a certain time, but nobody can cheat the people all the time”. For it will happen that at a given period, when the objective and subjective conditions should be met, there will be a social reversal. That is the truth and the great lesson of the revolutions and social changes humanity has experienced. For instance the French revolutions in 1789 and 1848 have been engendered by social political bankruptcy because of jettisoning morality by the rulers of those times. The great October revolution in Soviet Union is also caused by such worse a state of affairs. The Machiavellian stance was adopted by Adolf Hitler and what it succeeded in achieving is that led humanity to the world war, as a result, more than 35 million people perished in the war and Germany was occupied and divided into two states, meanwhile, Hitler himself committed suicide in order to escape from requital.

As regards Africa, it is the scorning of morality in political affairs which has led some African countries such as South-Sudan, Kenya, Egypt and recently Zimbabwe into civil unrest. These are high illustrations of the necessity for morality and politics to be bound together; therefore politics without morality leads not only its protagonist (the ruler) but the whole society to chaos.

6. Conclusion

To make the point, so far we have been maintaining that the political duty is a highly moral duty. In order to prove our contention we have first tried to define what political duty is, and we have pointed out that power plays an important role in achieving this duty. Afterwards, showed that there is an implication of morality in the political duty in as much as morality and politics seem to be (and actually are) the two faces of the same coin. However, this fact has never been well understood in the history of humanity, so much so that one can agree with Hegel who posits in his Philosophy

of History that “the greatest lesson of history is that men never draw lesson from history”.

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