

Moral Optimism versus Moral Pessimism: In Search Of an Existential Prima

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Abstract

Arguments abound as to the *raison d'être* of morality. These have created a deep moral disagreement across cultures leading to widespread skepticism about the objectivity of morality. These have also led a lot of thinkers to theorize on morality either from an optimist or pessimist point of view. This work enquires into the value of moral optimism and moral pessimism from the standpoint of man's existential situation and aspires to understand which of the two positions will *prima facie*, benefit man as he lives in the society.

Keywords: Morality, Optimism, Pessimism, Existentialism, *Prima facie*.

1. Introduction

Generally, optimism and pessimism are in a sense opposed to each other. This parallelism is best understood on the basis of their extremisms. Such extremisms may lead ultimately to a defense of the indefensible. While optimism of this category in its logical end will lead to an "orgy of everything that is bad" for reason of lack of meretricious discriminations in its beliefs, a pessimist that is thorough-going will abhor all forms of reforms necessitating inaction of the worst kind. Thus, there will be no obligation about doing anything even about a problem the solution of which we are capable of finding. The presuppositions of both viewpoints will lead us to a dangerous alley and the implications of these to man's existential survival is worth noting. Christian (2009) hit at the heart of the matter when he asserts that:

All philosophizing is one simple fact of our existence: each of us is trapped in an egocentric predicament that sets the limit on the way we perceive the world and relate with others (p. 77).

Suffice it to say that the optimist's and pessimist's positions are drawn from observations of lived experiences occasioned by their state of mind. But whether the optimist and the pessimist will opt to leave their comfort zones and, run the risks of being seen as stale in their thinking and action, or desire positive and radical changes rather than remaining a perpetual fault finder who reels in satisfaction is better left to posterity.

Our concern in this work is to explore these two existential concepts as they relate to morality with a view to ascertaining which of them makes the most meaning to man's existence, and fortifies our considered moral nature. Let us now move a step further by attempting to understand what moral optimism and moral pessimism implies.

2. What is moral optimism?

In the discourse on morality man remains the central or key actor. He is described either as good or evil above other defining attributes. Teleologism primarily is associated with the ascription of goodness to nature. Since man is significant specie of nature, goodness is an end ascribable to human actions as well.

G. W. Leibniz and Hegel in their philosophical speculations canvass the idea of goodness as not only belonging to the universe but that everything occurring within it is in a fundamental sense good. Leibniz reasoned that God must have created a universe better than any other that could possibly be created. For Hegel the whole of existence is a web, a unity which everything is an integral and indissoluble part-the absolute, yet the absolute is a process. From his point of view, the moral justification of whatever occurs lies in the fact that its occurrence is a necessary step to the realization of the Spirit or Reason. From these viewpoints, evil can be accounted for as an

element in the perfection process set in motion by the creator or God, and could not possibly have been better adapted to the perfection of the whole.

This perhaps informs Randall's (1971) assertion that optimism is the view "that all things tend to achieve ultimately the character of goodness" (p. 256); while Bradley in Randall (1971) ironically defines it as the view that "this is the best possible world and everything in it is a necessary evil" (p. 256).

Thus, holistically considered, optimism is a positive psychological disposition about the future. The belief that the future will be good or at least better than what experience has hitherto provided. From the foregoing discussion we can characterize moral optimism as a moral view that is informed by the belief that human beings are generally or fundamentally good. It holds that life is good and as such worth living. And if this is the case, then human behavior can provide a helpful guide in the structuring of moral theory. It is in line with this thinking that Blackburn (2005) noted that:

Optimistic philosophies include Platonism, with the ruling place assigned to the form of good; Aristotelianism, with the sense of the harmony of nature and the attainability of ends; Epicureanism, which denies the evil of death, and stoicism, which denies the evil of pain as well (p. 262).

The implication of the above view is that all of the moral or ethical views referred to were borne from an optimistic philosophical or moral back ground. Moral optimism therefore entail the acceptance that there are moral codes and rules that govern man and society without which society will be one hell of a place to live in. For the moral optimist, even though human beings are not omniscient or do not always do what is right, that cannot discountenance her goodness as her moral failings can be attributed to lot of factors such as social conditions or lack of self control through negligence. Thus what stands out here is not the character of man as such, but the situation he finds himself. A better example is the work of Gilbert Harman and John Doris who argue against "character based virtue ethics" (Harman, 2000: p. 176).

Kant upholds the truth that character is needful to the moral life. Little wonder he identifies "good character" with the "good will". According to him:

The person that ought not to trust himself with respect to his resolutions is in a state of hopelessness of all good ... the most important part of character is that the human being has a constant will and act according to it... Before a good or evil character is built for a human being, a character altogether must be built, with which he first has a character in general, that is, he first must get into the habit of acting from principles. (Frierson, 2005: p.630-31, 2006: p.1386-88).

Kant makes a very salient point that there is something called the "good will". And this "goodwill" is in the ambience of man. By inference then, man can be said to possess goodwill, and that makes him fundamentally, morally good; but that does not however, exclude man from making mistakes and acting in an evil way. Even when this happens, man should not be condemned as morally evil. Harman (2000) lend his voice on this again when he declares:

When things go wrong, we typically blame the agent, attributing the bad results to the agent's bad character. Even when things do not go bad, we are quick to interpreted actions as expressive of character traits, often hostile traits. For example, a person with poor vision may fail to recognize an acquaintance, who then attributes this to coldness in that person. A greater understanding of the agent's situation and how it contributed to the action can lead to a greater tolerance and understanding of others (p. 1777).

Thus, the moral optimist argument is neatly weaved around the belief that man is inherently good. If anything contrary to goodness occurs, then something must have gone wrong somewhere and it will be wise to situate it in a context. But without this external influence, man is naturally good and this should be taken at face value. In the same vein, the world is so good and nothing better could be thought of. Let us turn to consider moral pessimism.

3. What is Moral Pessimism?

Just as the moral optimist holds that man is fundamentally good and that the world is the work of an author of infinite goodness and wisdom if I may so add, the moral pessimist sees man as fundamentally evil and condemned to it. In fact the Buddhists hold that the world is vanity and life is filled with only sorrow. Moral pessimists anchor their arguments on the basis of the belief that most human beings, at least most of the time act in a morally deficient way and this misdeed is traceable to man's moral deficiency. Wallace (1977) thus opines that:

The morality of a human act is specified by three determinants of the action: the object, the end, and the circumstances. The object is that which is actually done or projected as a possible human accomplishment. The end is the purpose or motive for which the agent acts. An act, otherwise good, might be vitiated by being performed for an evil purpose. The consequences are individuating conditions that modify in some real way its moral quality (p. 163).

The moral pessimist will argue that just as a person is considered good only when he has all the perfections belonging to its nature, so an action is good only when all the determinants of its morality are good. But they hold that this nature or goodness is bereft of man and this is why his actions cannot be said to be good.

Hence, moral pessimism is a negative disposition about life, nature, and the future, and considers all forms of goodness ascribable to nature and man as untenable and unrealistic. It sees morality as an unsure bait or useless to societal progress if at all it makes sense to speak of such. Let us briefly X-ray man's existential predicaments at this point to enable us make further inferences about the moral perspectives under consideration.

4. Man's Existential Predicament

Man happens to be at the centre of events in the universe. Compare to the vast nature of the world he finds himself, he appears to be like a grain of sand according to the existentialist. Despite man's feat in conquering nature and having dominion over other creatures, he is still faced with a lot of myriads of problems some of which have left him hopelessly powerless. Thus, man's existence is one of contentions with the several odds around and against him, amongst them is moral evil.

The existentialist philosophy is focused primarily on the experiences of anxiety, dread, guilt, aloneness, choosing, and the confrontation with the possibility of death as revelatory of the human situation. The finitude of man is revealed in the very fact that he asks the question concerning being: in his concern for being man realizes himself as an essentially limited power-to-be (Mann & Kreyche, 1966: p.569).

The metaphysical revival in the twentieth-century Europe arose in large measure from the convergence of a profound insight and a powerful method (existentialism) with its emphasis on the uniqueness and dignity of the human person, and the method of phenomenology concerned with the exact description of the whole range of man's concretely given awareness. Even though existentialism is a movement that began after the second world war, which left despair in the air and brought to the fore the existential condition of man. The finitude of man is evident always, everywhere and in a thousand different ways.

The subjugation and powerlessness of man in the face of certain occurrences, and the failure to have a satisfactory explanation for these; the uncertainties surrounding man's decisions and expectations with respect to their accomplishments, the realization by man that the more he attempts to grapple with perplexing problems of life the more confused he becomes; and the more his effort to encourage himself in the face of challenges the more obvious his despair unfolds, are some of those instances that reveal man's predicament.

Our aim here is not to adumbrate the individual theorizing of existential thinkers like Heidegger, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Marcel, Buber, and Tillich among others, but to build a web around the conditions of man that militates against his exercising full control and freedom. In a bid for man to exist, he is confronted with a lot of unpleasant situations some of which he seems helpless to confront. Quoting Heidegger, Lawhead (2002) asserts:

Our existence is characterized by "facticity". By this Heidegger means we always find ourselves in a situation where certain "givens" structure our existence. Some are the result of past choices. Other givens are thrust on you by the features of your personal history that you did not choose. Related to facticity

is the concept of “thrownness”. Because there is no reason or purpose for the fact that you exist and exist as this person in this situation, it is almost as though you have been thrown into the world (p. 538).

In the face of this “thrownness” how does man live a pleasant life? Such existential predicament with which man is confronted and the inability of perfectly seeing through the future raises serious concerns that gives the erroneous impression that moral pessimism is an undeniable moral viewpoint. The tendency to see nothing or something good in life super-imposes themselves on the moral psychic and ones choice is determined by ones background, ones existential situation and ones conviction about the essence of life.

But what exactly should be one’s disposition towards these realities of existence depicted above? What are the implications of each perspective especially to the flourishing of the enterprise of man generally conceived? How does each of these view points contribute to the flourishing of human lives and his social community? Which is a more rewarding moral view point to hold and why? These considerations will engage our attention in the concluding part of this discussion.

5. An Appraisal of the Moral Optimist and the Moral Pessimist World Views

What inform both moral standpoints and views of life are man’s existential experiences. Let us begin our examination with the pessimist viewpoint. In agreement with moral pessimism it is true that man often times find himself in a precarious situation that robs life sometimes of its meaning. Granted that the pessimist’s viewpoint emanates from his perception of life, does this posture addresses the concerns or ameliorate in any significant way the situation in question? It does not seem so as it is far from convincing that the proper response to a perceived hopeless situation is living hopelessly. In fact, is man’s existential situation hopeless? To answer in the affirmative will entail the assumption of a complete knowledge of the future which we had earlier denied. But the pessimist may argue that this is one of such predicament that informs its moral stance.

Such assertion however, only reveals the weakness of moral pessimism; and confirms the obvious that man’s experiences are not consistently miserable. Such concepts as joy, happiness and fulfillment to mention but a few refer to instances of events in man’s life. In view of this, moral pessimism is less appealing as the most suitable reaction to man’s existential situation.

Again moral pessimism founded on the supposed moral deficiency of man and his susceptibility at making errors is questionable. If we accept the views of thinkers who deny man of any essential nature, then we are bound to fault the pessimist assessment of man. More importantly, the pessimists’ view of human nature has severally been faulted in experience. In ancient Greece for example, we see the case of Socrates who was charged for blasphemy and corrupting the youths by misguided Athenians who feared the consequences of his encouraging the youths to question traditional beliefs. Although we do not know all the facts, apparently his trial left much to be desired, the outcome was for-ordained even before the evidence was presented (Minton and Shipka, 1982: p.383).

Socrates refused to escape with Crito his disciple when the opportunity presented itself not because he wished to be a martyr, but because he believed genuinely that he was under an obligation not to do so. Minton and Shipka (1982) states Socrates profound reason thus:

He (Socrates) observes the customs, traditions, institutional life, the workings of government, and citizens exercising rights and duties. If he finds this offensive, he may go elsewhere, to a place where the surroundings are more suitable and satisfactory, to his view. Should he stay however, he must accept the duties of a citizen as the price of his rights (p. 384).

This conviction stems from an understanding of what Kant will call “duty” and exemplify an instance of some innate goodness in man. However, Socrates decision may be discountenance by the argument that evil must not triumph over good, but this is different from the truth that moral goodness flows inherently from man. Kant (1959) calls this the “goodwill” and he puts it thus: “nothing in the world-indeed nothing even beyond the world-can possibly be conceived which could be called good without qualification except a goodwill” (p.9). It is thus not a necessary truth that man is bereft of goodness.

The pessimists bait if swallowed hook, line and sinker would only lead to greater despair, hopelessness, dread and sorrow with a fatal impact on the social order. This is how Hafiz of Shiraz (1974) captures a pessimist mood:

The axiomatic sigh of the pessimist is in a way the pure word of philosophy, a thought that thinks without you, speaks where you are not. The live pneumatic form of the soul's eventful exit from the dead body's mouth, the sigh restores consciousness to the funeral of being; to the passing away that is existence. Pessimism speaks in piercing aphorisms because first it sighs "beyond the sphere passeth the arrow of our sigh" (p.9-10).

The mood above typifies frustration, resignation and helplessness which inadvertently weakens and ultimately destroy any urge for a meaningful and a viable society. Besides, there will be no justification for life as worthwhile and suicide may be a moral option for all. But this will in no way lessen the evil in the world.

The presence of moral evil in the world has been accounted for one way or the other by various religions, movements and traditions, and if the explanations are suspect, then moral pessimism isn't a better explanation either. The point is that extreme moral pessimism is fundamentally flawed and need not even to be considered a moral perspective because of its weird implications. The foregoing consideration is not to deny the role of moderate pessimism as a product or requirement of human existence. Such does not dissuade from positive actions, but it does not seem that a thorough going moral pessimism can find convincing validation or substantiation in nature-human and non-human. This is not to overlook the truth that a thorough-going optimism will not seek reforms because it is already satisfied with the moral status-quo and hence, evil is disguise as good; but it has inbuilt in its moral framework the belief that we may find answers to what cannot be explained now sometime in the future.

Moral optimism therefore presents itself as a more valid, morally persuasive or acceptable position. The universe may be capricious sometimes, but in it we find order. Man may be described as "baseless and corrupt" or as "brutish and selfish" like Machiavelli and Hobbes opined, yet there is no denying the fact that some men are selfless and altruistic.

Again this is not to deny the existence of evil or wickedness in the universe most of which are perpetuated by man. External inputs like socialization and other environmental factors equally play some role in man's moral actions. Moreover, without the existence of moral rules, codes, and other social mechanisms (which extreme pessimism does not recognize) to mitigate man's potential or actual wrongs, man would have been condemned to an abyss of hopelessness. The state of despondency affirmed by a thorough going moral pessimist ultimately lacks confirmation from man's existential experience.

6. Conclusion

While moral optimism offers confidence and assurance to man, moral pessimism brings to the fore anxiety, insecurity, fear and despair in an exaggerated manner. In view of the reality of man's existential experiences, what is urgently required is some form of optimism about life, the universe and the place of man in it.

Prima facie, man does not need any philosophy that will throw him back to the abyss that he is trying to come out from. This is the more reason why moral optimism fits very well into man's existential condition because it offers him something to look forward to and brings order out of the chaos he is so acquainted with.

Finally, for man to make the most of his existence as a being in the world, a being with others and a being unto death, he must take to the path of optimism for their in lies all the potentials that he needs to make sense of his present existence.

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