

Politics as Social Necessity: Discourse on the Moral Foundation of Politics

By

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Abstract

Politics, in letter and in spirit, will be restricted to the sphere of government, and by implication the state. The paper is philosophical and uses critical method with recourse to secondary data. It admits the contention that politics has its origin in morality and should always be subjected to moral assessment. When politics is mentioned, we mean that which politicians and public and political office holders and statesmen do in the service of the State. Other perspectives of politics, such as what happens in the family circles, boardrooms, market places, industries, religious organizations, in organizations outside government and the State, are hereby suppressed, even as the allusion may only be in passing or by implication. The paper argues that politics, and politicking, have their origin in human moral consciousness. Men, in organized society, could only reasonably evolve a system through which they are rationally organized. Politics is in accord with the moral nature of man. The paper posits that politics must be practiced within the ambit of morality, and is therefore constantly in need of moral assessment; this accounts for the reason civilized countries make high moral demands on their politicians and political office holders. Political parties on their own shop for people of impeccable characters and high level of integrity to fly their flags during elections; a critical objective of a political party is to clinch power. The development or otherwise of any polity is determined in the main by the degree of morality appropriated by the political office holders. A government is adjudged by its moral standing. This therefore underscores the conclusion that politics is consistent with morality. Politics is better understood, assessed, and made intelligible within the

framework of morality. Therefore any attempt to deprive politics its moral inclination will be a disservice to humanity. More so, that politics stems from human activity, and like most human acts, it calls for moral assessment and hence a return to moral consciousness and ethical reorientation in political life.

Keywords: *Common Good, Human Rights, Politics, Politician, Government, Morality, State.*

Introduction

It has been taken for granted that politics is a dirty game. Politicians are mendacious and unpredictable in the way they go about their lives; they are therefore not to be trusted. For that reason it is not supposed to belong to moral category, that is, politics and politicians, and their actions and inactions, should not be evaluated on moral standards, thereby assigning politics to immoral category and politicians unfettered freedom to act as they deem fit even when such acts are not in tandem with the tenets of natural justice, equity and good conscience (Aristotle, 1979). To evaluate politics within the moral standard is seen as effort in futility by many. The popular opinion is that politics and morality should be separated. Many argue that this assertion has been corroborated by experience. This rather erroneous argument, being the opinion of many, is also age old. This may be the contention behind politicians' defying moral rules in their actions and inactions. This has led to the belief that one cannot trust a politician. Many promises that will never be fulfilled are said to be 'political' promises and statements that run counter with reason and logic are taken as 'political' statements. When people gather to listen to speeches of politicians they do so with extra 'ear' so that the normal ear will not tingle with bogus and out-of-the-world promises and statements. What people do is to 'read the lips' and the body language of the politicians, so to say. In fact, the mendacity of politicians are regarded as a way about their lives. In the ordinary course of politics and politicking, all manner of intrigues, subterfuge, half-truths, ambiguities, fallacies, tricks, and whatever that could maneuver and mesmerize the people, are employed. It is a common belief that the activity of politics cannot be pursued by morally minded, ethically conscious, and civilized, thorough bred folks. When politics is mentioned, for example, there is always apprehension. Whatever is said to involve politics bring about suspicion. For instance, when one hears statements such as 'political solution' 'playing politics with' 'political angle to', one knows that something untoward is in the air. Even Politicians are not to be trusted. They are not bound by moral conscience. They should only look at the end, the means does not matter. Nicolo Machiavelli is one of the chief and eloquent voices in this regard. He maintains the position that, in politics, public and private morality should not be taken cognizance of, including political decisions-making, and in matters of statecraft. Some politicians have taken Machiavelli's advice to the *Prince* of Medici as a piece of advice given to them with an 'active oath' to adhere to it in letter and in spirit. Machiavelli (1993, 25) wrote in *The Prince that everyone admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep faith, and to live with*

integrity and not with craft. Nevertheless our experience has been that those princes who have done great things have held good faith of little account, and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft, and in the end have overcome those who have relied on their word. Hence it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity. This rather immoral advice has served as ‘password’ as well as template of politicking, in many climes and for many politicians.

Politics has always been regarded as a game, vocation or profession that is dirty. By that, many have seen Politics as a game not to be engaged in by men of integrity. A dirty game is one that has no civilized rules; but if it has, it will hardly be considered in the course of the game. The umpire or the referee may not be in total control of the proceedings. In Nigeria, (and elsewhere), politics has been left to those who exact extraordinary energy and who can take what it gives and who can give what it takes, in terms of untoward acts. To say that it is dirty in the way it is currently played is to corroborate the self-evident truth. A good number of family members, friends, and loved ones, always discourage intending politicians from engaging in political activities. The fear always expressed is genuine. Anibueze, (1998, 58) for instance, argues that in practice, the interpretation of politics has been a matter of friend or enemy relationship. It seems to be a means by which people engage in a do-or-die activities, brutalizing, dehumanizing and degrading their fellow human beings. As a result some people misconstrue politics to be a dirty game, implying that it is a demonic zone or devil’s workshop. Local and African experiences, in politics and politicking, in particular, are eloquent testimonies with ready, and verifiable truth.

However, no sane and civilized person will welcome lies, deceit, failed and unfulfilled promises, cheating, and any form of corrupt practices, against his person or those close to him. The contention that politics, with all intents and purposes, has moral foundation, moral background, ought to be morally evaluated, and is only meaningful on the basis of morality, is therefore plausible and valid. The basis for politics, right from ancient days till date, is to attain moral goal. Aristotle (1979) argues that politics is intricately bound with the quest for good life in the state as its primary end. There is therefore natural affinity between politics and morality. Moral assessment of politics, leading to moral orientation, is a *sin qua non* for building and operating a virile political system. A good political system can only be founded and sustained on a sound individual and civil moral ground. According to Popper (1962, 36), the criterion of morality is

the interest of the state. Morality is nothing but political hygiene. Even personal morality has its community service only of public morality.

Politics: Meaning, Importance and Purpose

Politics is generally regarded as the authoritative allocation of resources, including benefits and burdens of the state. That exposes it to ethical and moral evaluation. However, politics has always been regarded as a game, vocation or profession that is dirty. By that, many have seen Politics as a game not to be engaged in by men of integrity. A dirty game is one that has no civilized rules; but if it has, it will hardly be considered in the course of the game. The umpire or the referee may not be in total control of the proceedings. In Nigeria, (and elsewhere), politics has been left for those who exact extraordinary energy and who can take what it gives and who can give what it takes. To say that it is dirty in the way it is currently played is to corroborate the self-evident truth. Many members of family, friends and loved ones, always discourage intending politicians from engaging in political activities. The fear always expressed is genuine.

Politics is an activity. It is the sum of activities of those who rule a country by making and enforcing laws, and by regulating the activities of the others, and by providing the enabling environment for the people to live their lives. Politics is government and government is politics. We can now say that politics is what politicians do in the service and administration of the state. It is the activity of distributing the benefits and burdens of the state, the sharing of the commonwealth, supervising the activities of the citizenry, directing affairs, regulating the lives and the business of the citizenry, and making laws for the good of the people. From the above one begins to take politics serious because it is a serious business, and its importance cannot be underscored. The ship of the state is steered by the acts of politicking through the politicians. How safe the ship berths, how it navigates the tide and the turbulence and mucky waters, is determined by how prepared and qualified the captains (politicians) are. The safety of every state, the development of every state, the stability of every state, is by and large, the aggregate of the acts of politics by politicians. Now we begin to see, though vaguely, the place of morality in politics. To this we will return.

Some definitions of politics that will present the meaning, importance, uses, and purpose of the subject matter will suffice. The goal is to present a working knowledge and understanding of the

subject matter. The definitions are those that present politics in terms of government, including all the activities of its various organs in the management of the affairs of the state. The guide to the definition is the etymological or root meaning. The English word Politics has its origin from the Greek root *Politika*, meaning ‘affairs of the cities’, Aristotle (1979). The ancient Greeks had established cities-states known as *Polis* as units where management of public affairs were carried out conveniently and effectively. The *Polis* was independent and managed or administered as such. Athens and Sparta were the most popular. *Politika* (Politics) evolved rationally as the management of *polis* or the city-state, by the Statesmen or politicians. Although city-states were smaller in size and in population, the management approach and system that evolved therefrom were robust, and came to be applied to bigger and larger states, now referred to as countries. Some of the definitions offered here can then suffice.

David Easton (Omilusi, 2021), argues that politics is the authoritative allocation by the political system of values for society. This concerns: who in society is denied what benefits, rewards, and advantages; when and how long they are denied them; and the methods by which they are subjected to such deprivations.

According to Bernard Crick in Omilusi, (2021), politics is a distinctive form of rule whereby people act together through institutionalized procedures to resolve differences, to conciliate diverse interests and values and to make public policies in the pursuit of common purposes. For Adrian Leftwich in Anifowose and Enemu (2005) politics comprises all the activities of co-operation, negotiation and conflict within and between societies, whereby people go about organizing the use, production or distribution of human, natural and other resources in the course of the production and reproduction of their biological and social life. According to Obafemi Awolowo, (1961, 177) politics is the science or the art of the management of public affairs. Politics is understood in terms of what politicians *ought* to do in the service of the state. By politicians or Statesmen here is meant those who are directly involved in the administration and management of the state, *polis*, especially in all systems of government. Politicians are either elected, selected, or at times, appointed, to represent the people. Their period of service, called *tenure*, is always determined by periodic elections and other process approved for that purpose. For McLean and McMillan, (2003, 422) politics is the practice of the art or science of directing and administrating states or other political units; the art and science of government. Politics, as

thus defined is practical. It is ‘something’ that is operational; it is action-based and the actions and/ or inactions, of the politicians in the discharge of political duties are verifiable. The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2010, 1096) defines politics as the activities of the government, members of the law-making organs, or people who try to influence the way a country is governed. The traditional three organs of government: the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, are involved in politics. Together they form the government, together their activities influence and regulate the rest of the citizenry through laws, policies, pronouncements, decrees, directives, programmes, executive orders that are executable and implementable for the good of all. Harold Lasswell (Omilusi, 2021, p.361) captures the contention of this work when he argued that politics is concerned with determination, by official government decision-making and action, in terms of who, in political society receives what benefits, rewards and advantages, and how much of them they receive; when they receive the benefits, rewards and advantages, and, the methods by which they receive them. Politics, naturally, is an ethical and moral activity concerned with creating a just society. Politics is a moral and an ethically activity concerned with creating and maintaining a just society. A just society is a civilized society where political practice is used to uphold the principles that guarantee social justice, equity, fairness, respect for fundamental rights of the citizens, increase in the stock of common good. With the definitions above, we have pointed to the direction of the importance, uses, and imperative of morality in politics. It now behooves on us to show the understanding of morality in order to argue its affinity, relationship, basis, and business with politics.

Meaning of Morality

It is a common knowledge that when words such as morality, morals, immoral, are mentioned, it always sounds as a sermon in the religious place of worship, or from the Holy Writ. What immediately enters people’s minds is ‘preaching sermon’ ‘moralizing’, sermonizing’, all taken with extreme emotions. Yet people want to be treated fairly, not to be cheated, to be told the truth, to have their due claim, their rights respected and granted. People want equity, justice, respect. Of course, those who always frown at the word moral, ethics, condemn political office holders for corrupt practices, for taking their State to wars that pays only the politicians, for not improving on the lots of the masses, for sacrificing social justices on selfish grounds. It all boils down to the erroneous impression of the meaning of morals. It is to be shown however, that

morality is quintessential to humans of all calling, vocation, profession, at all times and in all places. That morality is human heritage as expressed in this argument by Kant. In his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1996, 360), Kant expresses the following observation wherein he summarized men's capacity for ethics and moral living: Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe: the starry heavens above and the moral law within. Pascal (1968) would agree totally. For him, there is no aspect of human existence which is not touched, modified, perhaps completely altered by the imperatives of morality.

Man's moral nature as espoused by Kant and Pascal above is not strange. Morality is native to man. Velasquez (1998, 8) defines morality as the standard that an individual or group has about what is right and wrong, or good and evil. Taking ethics and morality interchangeably, he takes ethics as the activity of examining one's moral standards or the moral standards of a society, and asking how these standards apply to our lives and whether these standards are reasonable or unreasonable. Morality (from Latin *moralitas* 'manner, character, proper behaviour') is the differentiation of intentions, decisions and actions between those that are distinguished as proper (right) and those that are improper (wrong), and it's a construct of justice. Morality can be a body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct of civilized people and is derived from a standard that a person believes should be universal. Morals, ethics, refer to rules and standards of conduct and practice. Morals refers to generally accepted customs of conduct and right living in a society, and to the individual's practice in relation to theses. Morals are the prevailing standards of behavior that enable people to live cooperatively in groups. Morality requires that people sacrifice their own short-term interests for the benefit of society. Its direct opposite is immorality which is opposition to that which is good or right. The primary concern of ethics is with the conduct of life by the individual or by the social group as a whole, whether that group be the family or the state; its focus is on human conduct and the attitudes associated with it. Moral standards are standards that deal with matters that we think have serious consequences, and are based on good reason and not on authority, that override self-interest, that are based on impartial considerations, and whose transgression is associated with feeling of guilt and shame.

Imperative of Morality in Politics

Bell (1988, 19) has underscored the rightful place of morality in politics. He argues that without a sound moral basis, a society cannot be civilized. A society may have good laws, a just constitution, regular elections, well organized courts and an efficient structure of government and administration; but, if it has a weak moral basis, the qualities of a civilized society will nevertheless elude it. A sound moral basis is needed, not only to provide the motive for introducing good laws and policies, but also to ensure that good laws and policies work well. He further argues that many reforms of the law and changes of policy depend only slightly, if not all, on moral considerations for their validity; but, as a matter of general principle, there is much truth in the observation that he concludes that all reform except a moral one will prove unavailing. From our understanding of morality, we begin to see the enviable place of morality in politics. The very meaning of politics predisposes it to moral assessment. Since politics is about activities employed in the distribution of the benefits and burdens of the state, one begins to see that its' imperative is natural. Morality is inherent in actions of men. Politics is an important activity that defines quality of human life. There was no politics in the state of nature where people make war on each other in their own interests, shouting, as it were. 'I will have that', rather than, 'I have the right to that'. It is also absent in other cases, where there is no legitimate authority whose duty is to allocate benefits and burdens, rights and duties. Politics is the art of man to arrest chaos. Louis Halle (1977, 353), argues that having departed from the state of nature, in which the conduct of life is genetically determined and mindless, man is under the necessity of creating, in its place, a world of his own. Any world that one society of men creates, in response to this necessity, is a normative world of the mind. It constitutes a model for the behavior, individual or collective, of the society that created it and lives under its authority. It resolves the chaos that would make sanity and the conduct of life impossible for the chaos that threatens us all.

Politics came about when society has been founded. According to Johannes Althusius (Nisbet, 1979, 180) politics is the art of associating men for the purpose of establishing, cultivating, and conserving social life among them. The subject matter of politics is therefore association, in which the symbioses pledge themselves each to the other, by explicit or tacit agreement, to mutual communication of whatever is useful and necessary for the harmonious exercise of social

life. For society to achieve her desired, civilized objectives, those who act on her behalf should observe the tenets of morality. Boatright (1993, 7), argues that politicking must necessarily follow the moral point of view. The moral point requires us to be impartial. We must regard the interest of everyone, including ourselves, as equally worthy of consideration and give all interests equal weight in deciding what to do.

From the experience of yore, politics without morality has been a fundamental threat to civilized society. Plato, (1967), for instance was disappointed in his days following the existence of politics without recourse to moral life of the politicians. In the Republic, he narrated ugly experience, even as a youth: when I was young, I had the same experience that comes to so many: I thought that, as soon as I should be my own master, I should enter public life. But this dream was shattered. Politicians veered off the moral route. Plato said: when I considered these things and the men who were directing public affairs, and made a closer study, as I grew older, of law and custom, the harder it seemed to me to govern a state rightly. At the time the whole fabric of law and custom was going from bad to worse at an alarming rate. The same ugly experience was also narrated by Thomas Hobbes, (1966, 7) who found himself in a country where peace and security were constantly in jeopardy because of the demands for liberty and a greater share in government by the growing class of traders, professional men, and yeomen farmers, who rated the authority of the Bible and of their own consciences above that of the magistrates, bishops, and councilors of the king. Politics is the culmination of the Social Contract. It is through the art of politics that the various hitherto discordant tunes get harmonized into music. According to Rousseau (1988, 76), the social pact establishes equality among the citizens in that they all pledge themselves under the same conditions and must all enjoy the same rights. Hence by the nature of the pact, every act of sovereignty, that is, every authentic act of general will, binds or favours all the citizens equally, so that the sovereign recognizes only the whole body of the nations and makes no distinction between any of the members who compose it. According to Thomas Hill Green, (Mautner, 2000, 199) the state is a community of communities, and one of its chief functions is to serve as an adjustment-centre for the claims of individuals and societies upon one another. This underscores a state as a plural society. The task before politics and government is how to effectively settle the claims. That is a moral challenge. According to Popper (1962, 36) the criterion of morality is the interest of the state. Morality is nothing but political hygiene.

Political office as higher calling

Politics is an activity; it is a higher activity. As a calling, it is also a higher calling. It is an activity engaged by politicians who qualify to be called statesmen. As an activity, it does not happen in a vacuum. It is people-oriented; it is people-focused. When it is said that ‘politics is life, and life is politics’, it means that it is an activity that touches on the lives of people; its abuse and/or misuse will upset the balance of human existence and punctuate the march towards the realization of good life for citizens. Politics is carried out in the State for the benefit of citizens. For the reason that it is for the purpose of distributing benefits and burdens; for the purpose of bringing equality, equity, justice, to bear in the life of the State, carried out by people selected, elected, chosen, the activity is therefore a moral-dependent activity. The politician should therefore be guided morally. Politics should be seen as a public office; of public trust. That office should therefore be secured and sustained against any form of abuse by any politician or political office holder and the activities open and transparent, not shrouded in secrecy, not even high-handedness and impunity. That calls for public accountability. If public officials are to be accountable to the people they serve, they must be willing to let the people see and judge their actions. When a man assumes a public trust, he should consider himself as public property. A public office is a public trust. The citizens shall have the right to secure and sustain that trust against abuse. The politician is guided through and through by the principle of morality. According to Father Theodore Hesburgh (Richardson 1993, 647) the basic principle is that you don’t make decisions because they are easy, you don’t make them because they are cheap, you don’t make them because they are popular; you make them because they are right. Not distinguishing between rightness and wrongness is where administrators get into trouble. This is an albatross for the politician. Political office holders are always acting on impunity. This should not be the rule. According to William Moyers (Richardson, 1993, 487), we hold our political leaders to such a high standard-not because we expect them to be perfect, but because we know there has to be an image projected, as expectation aroused, a standard raised. In his popular ‘Seven Sins’ Mahatma Gandhi (Richardson, 1993, 680) included politics: Wealth without work, Pleasure without conscience, Knowledge without character, Commerce without morality, Science without humility, Worship without sacrifice, Politics without principle. Extending this to leaders and managers in general, the Japanese, according to Peter Drucker (Richardson, 1993, 648) ‘The Japanese recognize that there are really two demands of leadership: One is to accept

that rank does not confer privilege, it entails responsibilities. The other is to acknowledge that leaders in an organization need to impose on themselves that congruence between deeds and actions, between behavior and professed beliefs and values, that we call 'personal integrity' Aside from being a calling and an activity, politics also is played within the altar of reason. A politician must weigh the moral point of view in all his actions and inactions. Of the moral point of view Boatright (1993, 61) writes on how we ought to act and what will be the criterion of a politicians action. For him the guiding philosophy is the willingness to seek out and act on reason, the best action is the course of action which is supported by *reasons*. For him a good test of moral point of view is whether we would feel comfortable if our friends, family members, and colleagues were to know about a decision we had made. Would we be willing to have an article on it appear on the front page of the local newspaper? The contention of Mark Bell (1988, 19) that without a sound moral basis, a society cannot be civilized. A society may have good laws, a just constitution, regular elections, well organized courts and an efficient structure of government and administration; but, if it has a weak moral basis, the qualities of a civilized society will nevertheless elude it. He contends that a sound moral basis is needed, not only to provide the motive for introducing good laws and policies, but also to ensure that good laws and policies work well. Many reforms of the law and changes of policy, he argues depend only slightly, if not all, on moral considerations for their validity.to be apt.

Conclusions

Politics and political activities that is devoid of the tenets of morality will not achieve the original, primary and fundamental objectives of politics. As human invention for the attainment of higher ideals of equitable distribution of the benefits and burdens in the state, as a process of laying the foundation of providing quality leadership, of the provision of common goods, and of organizing, harmonizing, and galvanizing plural existence in the State, politics, in all intents and purposes, and in practice, ought to be moral-loving and moral-dependent. The enormity of the task before the politicians should not admit deceit. No form of lying and deceit will serve the good purpose for politics is intended. According to Hannah Arendt, in her *Crises of the Republic*, the trouble with lying and deceiving is that their efficiency depends entirely upon a clear notion of the truth that the liar and deceiver wish to hide. In this sense, truth, even if it does not prevail in public, possesses an ineradicable primacy over all falsehoods. Lies can be comparable to the guests at a masquerade ball, they enjoy social approval only so long as they retain the capacity for deception. Truth shines like jewel.

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