



## *Morality/Ethics and Politics: An Inter-Relationship*

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### Original Article

#### Abstract

*A homocentric worldview, in which humans are superior to all other kinds of existence, has historically been maintained by classical philosophy and biology. This unquestioned presumption placed human interests, goals, and satisfactions at the centre of value production and social organization, influencing both theoretical and practical understandings of life. The field of morality emerged as a framework for directing and influencing behaviour as a result of this anthropocentric orientation's gradual regulation of human relations through norms, customs, and quasi-transcendental principles. Although morality is defined lexically as the difference between right and wrong or good and terrible, this definition is nevertheless insufficient to convey its conceptual richness and paradigmatic complexity. Morality serves as a system of judgment, behavioural correction, and social interaction in addition to being a binary opposition to immorality, as organized ethical interpretations progressively replaced customary meanings. The study emphasizes the multifaceted nature of morality and its influence on society values and human behaviour, drawing on Frankena's categorization of moral judgments. Therefore, the abstract highlights the shift from an unquestioned homocentric premise to a sophisticated philosophical investigation into the origin and purpose of morality.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Classical philosophy and biology regarded homo-sapiens or human beings as superior to all other living and non-living existents in the physical cosmos. The philosophically assumed homocentric view remained uninterrogated in antiquity, which considered men as the centre of the universe, irrespective of whether they existed individually or in small or large groups, societies, or social networks. The dominant homocentric orientation pervaded the theoretical and practical aspects, that is, the conceptual and empirical representations of life.

The uninterrogated homocentric view, coupled with the concern or pretension to human welfare, relegated and regulated human social relations to prescribed quasi-transcendental norms, conventions, and rules. This embedded the assertion that all value flowed from or centered on human existence, that is, human purposes, needs, and satisfactions, which then became the organizing principles of society or groups. Conduct or influence on conduct came to be understood to fall in the domain of ‘morality’. It appears that with the passage of time, conventional rules or norms started to gravitate around the term ‘morality’. The gravitation compelled philosophers to construct various definitions of the term. However, the Oxford Dictionary lexically defines the term as the principle of distinction between good and bad, right and wrong, behaviour and a system of values or principles of conduct.

However, mere lexical meaning is not sufficient, for the word ‘moral’ does not only mean ‘morally right’ or ‘morally wrong’ but goes beyond the simple demarcation of right and wrong to place it into the complexity of morality that has a paradigmatic configuration. The term morality is sometimes used simply as a polar concept to immorality, as a tool for correcting behaviour, as when we speak of the morality of an action. This difference is obliterated because of certain features morality shares with conventions and law. Frankena lays down three expressions of morality in terms of forms of judgment, “...certain forms of judgment in which particular objects are said to have or not to have a certain moral quality, obligation, or responsibility...some rules, principles, ideals and virtues that can be expressed in more general judgments and that form the background against which particular judgments are made and reasons given for them...certain sanctions, or additional sources of motivation that are also often expressed in verbal judgments, namely, holding responsible, praising, and blaming...”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frankena, WK: Ethics, p. 09.

One may tend to agree with Frankena on the specific characteristics attached to morality. There is, therefore, an emphasis on the 'rule-function' of morality at the cost of ignoring its function of achieving ideals. A distinct analysis of morality may require it to be characterised by its function, the natural preference for it in society, and obviously, the prevalent moral sentiments. In addition to indicating the propensity of an action to promote good or evil, moral judgements are concerned with reason in the sense of cause, aim, or motive because this is where praise and blame may be effective in changing the direction of a person's actions.

The use of terms 'right' and 'wrong' usually qualifies actions that may or may not be acceptable, depending on the prevalent standards of behavior, which should not be understood to be static. The dynamics of establishing these prevalent standards depend on the needs of the day, with ever-changing conditions. The prevalent standards have impacted and continue to impact the moral discourse of the time. However, it may be clarified that 'right' and 'wrong' are not synonyms of 'good' and 'bad'. The term 'good' signifies a positive evaluation, whereas 'right' indicates a conduct accepted, authorised, or sanctioned according to a particular system of morality. But before progressing further, it may be useful to draw out a distinction between 'morality' and 'ethics' in order to get a better understanding.

## **2. Morality and Ethics**

In common parlance, the terms morality and ethics are often used interchangeably. This is primarily because the terms morality and ethics, while distinct, are deeply interrelated. Weiss clarifies the difference between ethics and morality by saying that if a person follows the accepted customs and practices of his group, he is inherently moral. He is ethical if he voluntarily obligates himself to live in accordance with an ideal good.<sup>2</sup> He further explains the distinction or relationship thus: "Morality and ethics are related as body to mind, fact to theory, instrument to purpose, present to future, the concrete to the abstract, practice to promise, roots to fruit. The former is indispensable but conforming; the latter is desirable for its sake, though impotent unless supported by the other".<sup>3</sup>

There is confusion in the elaboration of the distinction between morality and ethics elaborated by Weiss. Initially, the distinction he draws is in terms of the kind of action that ensures morality and ethics, whereas later he establishes a relationship between the two in terms of theory and praxis.

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<sup>2</sup>Weiss, P: Morality and Ethics, p. 383.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

The Latin word "mores" is the etymological source of the term "morality". According to Roth, morality is particularly concerned with one's own beliefs, obligations, and the social elements that influence decisions. 'Ethics' comes from the Greek word 'ethos', which means character and deals with what is rightness and wrongness of action.<sup>4</sup> Philosophers have traditionally defined ethics as the study of moral judgments and choices, and morality as referring to rules by which such choices are made.

According to Duval, for instance, morality is defined as beliefs and practices associated with the notion of right conduct, which is accepted or sanctioned according to some particular system. Ethics is the study of problems of right conduct in the light of moral principles, such as freedom, justice, responsibility, and so on.<sup>5</sup>

Morality, as argued above, implies a standard of conduct. The point is made differently by Lee, who argues that morality evolves as systems of standardised conduct. However, ethics is an attempt to rationally understand these evolving standards of conduct.<sup>6</sup>

Morality is ethics in action, implying the theoretical features of ethics in relation to the practice of morality. It is such an equation that led Johnson to assert that ethics is the theoretical examination of morality.<sup>7</sup> Ethics is purely a theoretical project that refers to practice, that is, doing, acting, and behaving, only insofar as it is employed to substantiate its arguments.

Duval also holds such a view and goes on to argue that a person may have a morality but may have little or no interest in ethics. Morality is a set of codes, such as 'Do not lie' or 'Help others whenever possible', that do not have as a prerequisite an acquaintance or awareness of ethical theories or principles. Ethics, on the other hand, is an inquiry into the validity and structures of moral principles and whether they are intrinsically binding.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Morality refers to conduct, whereas ethics is a branch of philosophy and so only relates to conduct as a reflection on it. The relationship is simple enough that we can philosophise conduct, which is exactly what we do when we study ethics. Thus, ethics is the study of morality from a philosophical perspective.

Morality, as Skorupski argues, is a conceptual framework within the field of normative thinking about action and feeling, but the whole domain is the subject of ethics.<sup>9</sup> Morality exists and continues to exist only within the social sphere. In this sense, Frankena argues, "Morality,

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<sup>4</sup>Roth, JK: International Encyclopedia of Ethics. P. 571.

<sup>5</sup>Duval, RS: Encyclopedia of Ethics, p.187, 181.

<sup>6</sup> Lee, HN: Morals, Morality and Ethics, p. 453.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, OA: Ethics, p.02.

<sup>8</sup> Duval, RS: Encyclopedia of Ethics, p. 187.

<sup>9</sup>Skorupski, J: Morality and Ethics in Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, p.600.

of course, is social...to a considerable extent...it is also largely social in its origins, sanctions and functions. At first encountered by the individual, at any rate, it is an instrument of society as a whole for the guidance of individuals and smaller groups. It makes demands on individuals that are, initially at least, external to them".<sup>10</sup>

Morality is used to refer to what we refer to as moral standards or behaviour. It involves assessing our behaviour using socially acceptable standards to determine how good or bad our conduct is. The formal study of those standards or conduct and their justification is referred to as ethics. In this sense, Lee contends that ethics is not an effort to control behaviour that is categorised as moral.<sup>11</sup>

However, Weiss points out that morality is relative. He asserts that we have agreed beyond moralities to a point where multiplicities or diversities can be recognised and the fact acknowledged as desirable and good. Morality being relative implies diversity in codes of conduct. Weiss argues that relativity helps to interrogate moralities to the point of even deciding which would be better to adopt in a given context of dilemma and have the opportunity of approximating more closely to the status of an ideal social whole.<sup>12</sup>

The social wholes allude to systems of morality, which constitute forms of life, and therefore moral concepts are integrated and embedded in and are partially constitutive of those forms of life. A form of social life may be distinguished from another by identifying the differences in moral concepts involved in the code of conduct determined by the social order of the day. Here, MacIntyre argues, "...the systematic and self-conscious philosophical analysis of moral concepts will be at the heart of moral philosophy; it can nonetheless never be the whole of moral philosophy. For we have to understand not only the logical interrelations of moral concepts, rules...but also...human purposes and motives and in the theory of society, since different kinds of wants and needs are dominant in different social orders".<sup>13</sup>

According to Spencer, morality is a code of rules for the regulation of human behaviour through recognition of the existing defects of character. Spencer does not advocate *a priori* status to moral code, which develops out of human practice. Skorupski agrees, "It is plausible that moral codes have a special function, such as that of maintaining beneficial cooperation; but it does not seem an *a priori* truth".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Frankena, WK: Ethics, p. 06.

<sup>11</sup> Lee, HN: Morals, Morality and Ethics, p. 460.

<sup>12</sup> Weiss, P: Morality and Ethics, P. 385.

<sup>13</sup> MacIntyre, A: A Short History of Ethics, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> Spencer, H: Social Ethics, p. 50

The human practice determines our moral status, the reflection on individual or collective behaviour, and thereby develops rational codes and establishes some stability of moral principles. The collective belongs to the domain of the political and will be taken up later. However, for the present, it needs to be clarified that it is not being argued here that morality has a linear progression. Morality, as the Marxists claim, in every period of history reflects social, political, and economic patterns, and symbolizes the rise and decline of civilization.

Lee argues that morality does not denote conduct but accepted conduct, which is more or less systematically sanctioned conduct. Since morality is a human construct, it breeds within an accepted standard; therefore, there is Christian morality, Confucian morality, and so on. Christian morality is conduct approved by the principles of Christianity, Confucian morality is conduct approved by Confucius, and so on. Conventional morality is the body of conduct approved by the custom or habit of the community to which an individual belongs.<sup>15)</sup>

However, the Marxist thinkers point out that morality evolves, intentionally or unintentionally, from the living relations in society. Engels points out, “Men, consciously or unconsciously, derive their moral ideas in the last resort from the practical relations on which their class position is based – from the economic relations in which they carry on production and exchange”.<sup>16</sup> The Marxist argument primarily revolves around class antagonism. Nowell-Smith, without taking recourse to class antagonism, holds that morality is, “...concerned with relations between men, with how they ought to behave towards each other, with general rules governing relations between man and man, a society ought to adopt”.<sup>17</sup>

Nowell-Smith’s view claims that morality or moral rules are adopted by society and not a characteristic of society. Morality is relevant only in a society, irrespective of whether it is individual morality or group morality. The interrelations within the society set up moral principles, and it is only within the social setup that there are moralities.

### **Morality and Politics**

As argued above, ethics is differentiated from morality by its theoretical nature. The difference between ethics and politics is brought out by McIver, “...there is no theoretical conflict...[between ethics and politics], because politics regards man simply as a member of political society, i.e. in a particular abstract relation, whereas ethics regards man in his concreteness as a human being, one of whose characteristics is to be a ‘political animal’.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Skorupski, J: Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy. P. 600.

<sup>16</sup> Lee, HN: Morals, Morality and Ethics, p.453.

<sup>17</sup>Novack, G: Liberal Morality, p.59. (Quoted from Engels)

<sup>18</sup> Nowell-Smith, OH: Encyclopedia of philosophy, vol-7, p. 150-51.

The abstract relation is what terms man as a ‘political animal’; the social relation and organisation of the group in which man exists. The group may be small or, at times, very large, comprising societies. The study of this group behaviour falls under the purview of political studies. The New Oxford American Dictionary defines politics as activities associated with organising society through regulating the distribution of power. This power interplay comprises certain moral norms as part of social standardisation. Politics is sometimes defined as social ethics, as Jaeger points out, “The complete science of ‘politics’ falls into two parts which may for convenience be called ethics and politics...in...*Ethics*... an individual is essentially a member of a society...[and]in...*Politics*...the good life of the state exists only in the lives of its citizens” [Italics in the original].<sup>19</sup> It is only for convenience that the term ethics is used to depict politics; a more precise identification with morality would be argued to be more relevant as we proceed.

Philosophers, like Plato and Spinoza, argue that the individual’s duty is to suppress his own conviction in favour of the community. We have argued above that morality can be defined as a particular prevalent system of values or principles of conduct, like when the Marxists refer to bourgeois morality. However, regardless of the type of morality we choose, politics can be characterised as a tool of morality. Politics is the term used to define the state's main instruments for its pursuit of power. Politics continues to be subservient to the state and, thus, to the state's moral purpose.

Morality regulates and directs interpersonal relations and interrelations between persons and groups. Similarly, politics regulates relations between individuals, or socio-political organisations, and the state, which is concerned with regulating the functions of state power. An interpersonal relationship can be regulated by moral mechanisms. Here, Barratt argues, “...Morality proper begins when a spontaneous action is intentionally repeated by a personal consciousness, so law or politics proper begins with the conscious enforcement of custom by a central authority”.<sup>20</sup>

All political issues are moral since there is the question as to what ought to be done to ensure proper regulation, i.e., what is good or bad for society, as Barratt argues, “Both morality and politics serve to regulate or direct human behaviour. They differ, however, in the strength of their regulation and demand different, though related, personal qualities. Groups, classes, and separate persons are interrelated morally. Depending on the concrete historical political

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<sup>19</sup> McIver, RM: Ethics and Politics, p. 77.

<sup>20</sup> Jaeger, Werner: Aristotle, (tr. by Richard Robinson, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1948, second edition), p. 288 ff.

peculiarities of this interrelation, some moral qualities of a politician can be easily developed, while others, which concretely and historically conflict with his policy and political goals, could cease to develop and become rudimentary and opposite qualities”.<sup>21</sup> Consider the utilitarian moral obligation to produce the greatest good or happiness. In contrast, a non-utilitarian perspective would only permit exceptions to the principle of producing the greatest happiness in situations where a different kind of moral obligation conflicts with what would otherwise be a duty.

However, Prodanov differs and argues that there is a contradiction between morality and politics. He asserts that the politicisation of morality and the moralisation of politics consist in disregarding the specific character of the political sphere. For him, the politicisation of morality is the introduction of political principles and criteria to regulate interpersonal morality, which affects the relatively independent role of morality. However, Prodanov goes on to suggest that such a politicisation is typical of periods of crisis when there is either a life-and-death struggle for the defense of the global interests of the class and the nation or a revolution.<sup>22</sup>

Prodanov goes on to argue, “When political theory, ideology, and practice come into sharp contradiction with the morality of the people, they lose their efficacy and in the end are doomed to failure. Therefore, every political theory, ideology, and practice seeks moral justification and arguments in order to be accepted by the masses. But when political theory contradicts to some degree the morality of the people or masses, then politicians seek to camouflage this contradiction with political demagogy. The higher the stage at which the politics of a definite organization, party or state contradicts the moral values of the people, the stronger the need for demagogy and the greater the use of different means of propaganda for this purpose”.<sup>23</sup>

Prodonov accepts what is being argued here, for he admits that there is a definite link between morality and politics, namely that politics is the morality of governing groups. It is apparent from his arguments that the contradiction he is alluding to is some kind of conflict between ideology and morality, while it is not clear whether he is suggesting that this is applicable to all ideologies or not. This becomes more apparent when Prodanov praises certain unspecified political systems that take morality into consideration, for in principle these, he says, are constrained by moral boundaries. (Prodanov agrees with us so far as he goes on to classify morality as private and public, the individual morality and political morality. Prodanov

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<sup>21</sup>Barratt, D: p. 454.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 05

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 06-07.

clearly confuses morality with religion, for he argues that the relationship between the public and the private spheres of social life is historical, their separation, and that its division and difference are extremely evident in contemporary times. However, he also argues,

“The flexibility of the boundaries between morality and politics generates the differentiation between public and private morality in social life, between the morality of individuals and the political morality of groups. On one hand, non-democratic centralized political regimes tend to broaden the sphere of action of politics and its related morality...to the life activity and interrelations between separate individuals and between individuals and groups. On the other hand, the relation between the private and public spheres of human life has a historical character...[for Marx] The abstraction of the private life is characterised only of modern times...This abstraction reflects the growing individuality and autonomy of the person and at the same time is an expression of the peculiarities of individualism, with its connection that each individual himself freely pursues specific inalienable rights and freedoms, that he makes decisions which, if they do not interfere with other persons, should not be subject to their control and sanction”.<sup>24</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing discussion brings into sharp relief the nuanced relationship between morality, ethics, and politics, while affirming McIver’s central claim that there is no theoretical conflict between ethics and politics. Ethics, as argued earlier, is distinguished from morality by its reflective and theoretical character, whereas morality denotes the concrete system of values and norms prevailing within a society. Politics, on the other hand, concerns itself with human beings in their abstract social relations as members of a political community — as “political animals.” Ethics views the same human beings in their totality and concreteness, including but not limited to their political existence. Hence, the two spheres do not negate one another; rather, they address different dimensions of human life.

Politics regulates power relations and social organisation, and in doing so, inevitably incorporates moral norms. Jaeger’s conception of politics as social ethics highlights this interdependence: the good life of the state is inseparable from the good lives of its citizens. Yet, for analytical clarity, it is more accurate to associate politics with morality rather than ethics, since political action operates within practical moral frameworks rather than abstract philosophical reflection. The state, as a moral agent in its own right, uses politics as an instrument to pursue what it conceives as collective good, order, or stability.

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<sup>24</sup> Prodanov, V: *Morality and Politics in a Changing World*, p. 07.

Barratt's distinction between spontaneous moral action and the conscious enforcement of custom by authority reinforces the idea that politics institutionalises moral regulation. Every political decision carries an implicit moral judgment about what ought to be done for society. While morality primarily governs interpersonal relations, politics governs relations involving organised power — between individuals, groups, and the state. Differences arise not in purpose but in the intensity and mechanisms of regulation. Political action often demands compromises, strategic calculations, and prioritisation of collective outcomes, as illustrated by the tension between utilitarian and non-utilitarian moral reasoning.

Prodanov's concern about the contradiction between morality and politics draws attention to the dangers of politicising morality and moralising politics, especially during periods of crisis. Yet even he concedes that politics cannot detach itself from moral justification, since political authority ultimately seeks legitimacy in the moral consciousness of the people. His distinction between private morality and political morality reflects the historical evolution of individual autonomy and the differentiation between personal and public spheres. While his argument sometimes conflates morality with religion, his acknowledgment of flexible boundaries supports the broader claim that morality and politics remain interlinked rather than irreconcilable.

In summary, politics, morality, and ethics are related but separate domains. Ethics provides theoretical reflection on values; morality embodies lived norms; politics operationalises these norms within structures of power and governance. The apparent tensions between morality and politics arise not from theoretical incompatibility but from historical, ideological, and practical circumstances. Ultimately, politics functions as the moral practice of governing groups, while ethics continues to offer critical guidance on the principles that ought to shape political life.

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