

AN APPRAISAL OF THE MORALITY OF ABORTION IN JOHN HICK'S ETHICS

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Annotation

This research examines the morality of abortion in John Hick's ethics. There exists a recurrent knowledge cum research gap on the question of the morality of abortion. This research exercise addresses this lacuna by interrogating the phenomenon of abortion from the perspective of the moral citations of John Hick. Consequently, the cardinal objective of this essay is to appraise the morality of abortion in line with Hick's ethics in order to establish whether the act of abortion is right or wrong. The philosophical methods of exposition, analysis and criticism were utilized in the conduct of this research. John Hick's ethics was adopted as the framework for this study. The paper discovered that Hick frowns at induced abortion and sees it as an aberration despite the fact that every human has the freedom to choose either what is right or wrong. The study concludes that abortion is necessary if and only if it threatens the life of the mother.

Keywords: Morality, Abortion, Woman, Foetus, Deontology, Teleology, Pro-Choice, Pro-Life..

INTRODUCTION

A plethora of researchers have paid scholarly interest to issues concerning abortion. Most of these researches which have been bioethical in nature, have generated arguments and counter-arguments resulting in what could be called "an ethical dilemma". Theologians, Philosophers, and other scholars have in various dimensions negotiated meaning through arguments in an attempt to reach a universal ethical theory regarding abortion. So far, their attempts have arrived at varying conclusions and have been unsuccessful in creating a formidable ethical theory and legal standing on abortion. Currently, most nation states are divided on whether or not to legalize abortion. For instance, the United States of America's supreme court on 29th January,

1973, handed down a ruling in *Roe V. Wade*, making women's decision to have an abortion a constitutionally protected right (Craig & O'Brien, 1993). The abortion in view is the induced type of abortion.

Since ancient time, abortion has been carried out through herbal medicine, sharp tools, or through other traditional methods. Today, advancement in science and technology has resulted in several techniques and methods being employed to perform it. The statistics on abortion are staggering and alarming. According to the records from World Health Organization (WHO) in 2012, around 36 million abortions are performed each year in the world with a little under half, done unsafely. Between 2015 and 2019, according to WHO, an average of 73.3 million induced (safe and unsafe) abortion occurred yearly worldwide.

The arguments on abortion gave birth to two antagonistic views and groups – the pro-choicers and the pro-lifers. The pro-lifers enunciated personhood of the foetus from conception, while the pro-choicers articulated personhood of the foetus from a certain period of time. Banner, a pro-lifer asserted that “restriction of embryo in the mother's womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed upon this nascent life” (1999: 39). Many other theologians and philosophers are in support of Banner's view. However, the pro-choicers have opposed this notion and have asserted that the foetus only becomes a person either during the gestation period or at birth.

According to Craig & O'Brien

Those who favour keeping abortion legal discuss the issue of a woman's right to control her own body or as a matter of personal privacy that obtains to the doctor – patient relationship. Those opposed to abortion speak in terms of the right of the unborn and of murder (1993: 8).

These discussions on abortion have led to scholarly submissions which deserve to be examined. Thus, this paper intends to look at the idea and arguments surrounding abortion in the lights of John Hick's Ethics, the conception of the morality of abortion as well as the evaluation of their implications in the society.

An Overview of John Hick's Morality

John Hick was arguably one of the most important and influential philosophers of religion of the twentieth century. Sinkinson opines that he was born on 20 January, 1922 in Scarborough, Yorkshire (1995). He has published so many books on philosophy of religion where in some of them, the contents reflect his position on morality. Hick saw man as a moral agent who must take responsibility for his actions. This he said in one of his works *Evil and the God of Love* that “in order to be a person, man must be free to choose right or wrong. He must be a morally responsible agent with a real power of moral choice” (2010: 266). Two things are prominent in this assertion. The first is that man is a rational being who is endowed with the ability to make choices. Human choice is the foundation of morality, because one has to either choose to do good or bad. The second idea is that man should take responsibility for

whatever choice he might make at any time. This includes, for instance, the choice to either keep a pregnancy or to terminate it. As shown in Hick's postulations, his standard of ethics is deontological owing to the fact that it describes "the intrinsic nature of goodness or badness of an action" (Ekpoudom 2011: 32).

Hick opined in his work, *The Interpretation of Religion: Human Response to the Transcendent* that loving kindness, for example is intrinsically good and cruelty intrinsically evil; with the implication that their rightness and wrongness do not depend upon the decision of a supreme being (1989: 97).

He went on to relate morality to human populace and their environment, where in this case, an imperfect environment results in the need for moral choices; the need to build a genuine moral personality as part of one's choice in the society. By this Hick meant that the human environment is a moral environment, and a moral environment is a law-governed environment; and a law-governed environment is the environment where the goodness and badness of an action is intrinsic. Consolidating this position, he asserts that "the moral life presupposes a world inhabited in common by the community of those who have rights and obligations in relation to one another namely, the human race" (*God and the Universe of Faiths*, 1988:55).

It is to be noted that Hick did not accept the fact that morality is confined to the Christian religion or a peculiar religion in the world, rather he saw moral behaviour among people of many religions as being the same. In his work, *Problem of Religious Pluralism*, he said:

Coming to know both ordinary families and some extraordinary individuals, whose spirituality has been formed by these different traditions and whose lives are lived within them, I have not found that the people of the other world religions are in general, on a different moral and spiritual level from Christians. They seem on average to be neither better nor worse than are Christian (1985: 39).

Through his personal observation and reading, he enthuses that "we should think of salvation in more universal terms than has been customary in Christian Theology" (1985: 43). By implication, Hick seems to assert that at the moral plane, people of all religions are on par with one another as regards their moral behavior. There is no room for moral superiority to be claimed by people of any religion. However, the point Hick fails to consider is the distinction between salvation and morality. In order to account for the presence of moral evil in the world, Hick builds upon the thesis he advanced in faith and knowledge that there are variations in interpretive freedom over the three main orders of cognition. Moral evil arises, Hick maintains, when humans are not fully conscious of the presence of God, it would make impossible the natural egoism in which we each treat ourselves as the center of our own world, while the awareness of God's universal care and watchful love would render needless that protective self-concern by which we seek to safeguard our own interests in imagined competition with our neighbors" as he opined in "Evil and the God of love" (2010: 262).

Why, then, does God not create us fully conscious of himself so that we would be unable to fall into moral evil? Or, in epistemological terms, why does He not force Himself upon our attention in the way that the natural world forces itself upon our attention. According to Mesle, if God did so, we would no longer be free beings:

In such a situation the disproportion between creator and creatures would be so great that the latter would have no freedom in relation to God; they would indeed not exist as independent autonomous person. For what freedom could finite beings have in an immediate consciousness of the presence of the one who has created them, who knows them through and through, who is limitlessly powerful as well as limitlessly loving and good and who claims their total obedience (1991: xx).

In this case, Mesle echoes Hick's assumption that God preserves human freedom by placing them away from His immediate presence at an "epistemic distance" from himself (Evil and the God of Love, 2010:10). In order to survive in such an environment and because God's presence is not "borne in upon (us) in the coercive way in which (the) natural environment forces itself upon (our) attention" (Evil and the God of Love, 2010: 281), humans inevitably distance themselves from God by turning their attention away from Him and in upon themselves in self-centeredness: in causing man to evolve... out of lower forms of life God has placed His human creature away from the immediate divine presence, in a world with its own structure and laws in which he has a certain relative but real autonomy and freedom over against his creator. He exists in such a close organic relationship to the natural world that this is the first object of his knowledge and interest, and he can become conscious of God's presence in and beyond this only in so far as he is willing to know himself as subordinate to a personal mind and will infinitely superior to himself in worth as well as in power (Evil and the God of Love 2010: 286).

Why does God not create us morally perfect, yet at an epistemic distance from himself; or, in epistemological terms, why is moral significance not "borne in upon (us) in the coercive way in which (the) natural environment forces itself upon (our) attention?" (Evil and the God of Love, 2010: 281). This, Hick concedes, are questions that bother the mind. However, according to Mesle, Hick is of the opinion that, virtue which has been formed within the agent as a hard won deposit of his own right decisions in situations of challenge and temptation, are intrinsically more valuable than virtues created within him ready made and without any effort on his own part (Mesle, 1991: xxii).

Since Hick's theory of moral evil is built on the epistemology that he established in Faith and Knowledge, we may summarize the theory in terms of that epistemology. Moral evil arises from the fact that religions and moral significance are non-coercive whilst natural significance is coercive. More so, since humans are organic to the natural world, it becomes necessary for their survival that they turn their attention towards it and upon themselves in self-centeredness. However, they then inevitably

fail to “see” religious significance mediated through it. Hick looks at morality as both universal in the civil and religious community. Being universal means that it is deontological and not teleological. Deontology according to Ekpoudom in Essien means that “an action is intrinsically good (right) or bad (wrong) in themselves, the consequences of such actions notwithstanding” (2011: 32). Hick in his book, *Faith and Knowledge* opines that “man is by nature an ethical animal” (1988: 138). This means that so long as man exists, “he has the capacity to device reasons for approving or condemning human acts as right or wrong, good or bad, and as worthy or unworthy of a rational being” (Echekwube, 2005: 29).

Being a social being means that we should live morally. Not only do we move about in a world of enduring physical objects, we also move about in a world of social relationships in which we may recognize or fail to recognize moral responsibility. Moral awareness also involves a basic act of interpretation. We have an “innate disposition” to interpret or experience what is being morally significant, but we can refuse to do so (Faith and Knowledge 1988). Hick believes that failure to sense that one has moral responsibility is analogous to physical blindness. Moral significance is the second main order of significance.

Hick maintains that moral significance is mediated by natural significance. He asks us to consider this instance: I am standing on a cliff top and I look down and see a man caught by the incoming tide. He is shouting for help. So far I see the cliff, the sea coming in – a group of objects in a naturally significant arrangement (Hick calls this “situation” as it is in his work *God and the Universe of Faiths* 1988). However, I also interpret the natural situation to be morally significant. I am aware of a moral obligation towards the man and am disposed to fetch help – to find the nearest telephone box in order to phone for the police and fire brigade. This example shows that moral obligation is sensed in the natural situation, yet it cannot be reduced to a simple description of the empirical state of affairs. Moral significance is mediated by natural significance. Essential to this relationship of mediation is the precondition that natural significance implies a stable physical environment in which one can predict the outcome of one’s actions.

Hick continued in his work, *God and the Universe of Faith* that the human environment is imperfect thus prompting an environment that is law – governed.

The general character of the world as an objective, causally law – governed environment of psycho-physical life sets the stage for the emergence of moral life. For only a world that is imperfect, in the sense that it is no stress – free and pain – free paradise can be an environment in which moral choices are called for and in which the development of moral personality can take place. In a paradise no one would be able to help or to harm another, since there could be no form of want or need, danger or injury (1988: 55).

By this, Hick meant that the human physical environment is a moral and morally motivated environment which must be governed by law, since it is not devoid of vices. Hick notes that:

moral life presupposes a world inhabited in common by the community of those who have rights and obligations in relation to one another, namely, the human race (1988: 55).

Hick also saw human being as a moral agent who must take responsibility of his actions. He opines in his book, *Evil and the God of love* that “in order to be human, a person must be free to choose right or wrong. He must be a morally responsible agent with a real power of moral choice” (2010: 266). Again, two ideas predominate this assertion, firstly, man is a rational being who is endowed with the ability to make moral choice of good from evil and vice versa. Secondly, whatever choice man makes, he must take a responsibility. In this sense, therefore, humans should be always ready to make the right choice not minding the situation, since the consequence of their decision making will befall one another. This choice includes abortion (induced), and other vices.

Hick went further to consider morality in a religious community. He states that every major religion has its own definition of saintly and spiritual individuals. He again maintained that moral behaviour among people of many religions are the same. In his words:

Coming to know both ordinary families, and some extra-ordinary individuals, whose spirituality has been formed by these different traditions and whose lives are lived within them, I have not found that the people of the other world religions are, in general, on a different moral and spiritual level from Christians. They seem on average to be neither – better nor worse than are Christians (1985: 39).

He came to this assertion from his readings of their different literatures, scriptures, philosophies, poetry and his personal observations. He went further to distinguish salvation from morality. He said “we should think of salvation in more universal term than has been customary in Christian Theology” (1983: 43). Shaw opines that “salvation should not be considered salvation in Christ alone” (1985: 9). This means that as far as morality is concerned, there is no room for moral superiority to be claimed by any group. The idea of morality in religion or civil society is universal and intrinsic. But Hick should equally note that salvation and its agents differ in different religions of the world.

The Morality of Abortion in John Hick’s Ethics

Hick wrote in his work “*The interpretation of Religion: Human Response to the Transcendent*” that

Loving kindness, for example, is intrinsically good and cruelty is intrinsically evil; with the implication that their rightness and wrongness do not depend upon the decision of the supreme (1966: 97).

Looking at this from the stand point of Bagema who argues from both biology and theology viewpoints that personhood begins at conception, there is an answer to the question whether abortion is murder. This is summarised in the review that abortion, except, to save the life of the mother, is wrong (1974). Thus, abortion is cruelty to the life of an unborn child and its intrinsically evil.

So long as Hick saw intrinsicity of goodness and badness of an action, therefore, abortion is intrinsically immoral, unless one is referring to the non-induced kind or non-therapeutic abortion in induced abortion. The stand point of Hick is deontological. It describes an action being morally good because of some characteristic of the action itself, not because the product of the action is good. Hick went on to say that,

The ethical circumstance which has been seen as pointing to the existence of God include both the general fact that we are conscious of moral ideals as exercising a claim upon us, and the particular sense of a demand to perform or restrain from performing this or that act or type of act as morally obligatory or forbidden (1996: 6).

By application, God must be at the center of every action, and the idea of God in our mind becomes the determining factor to perform or refrain from an action. The idea above suggests that man is inherently conscious of “moral ideals”, therefore, they do not need persuasion any way to either refrain from or carry out an evil action.

The idea of abortion (its goodness or badness) is inherent in the mind. To perform or refrain from it is a choice. Hick opines in “Evil and the God of love” that “in order to be human, a person must be free to choose what is right or wrong. He must be a morally responsible agent with a real power of moral choice” (2010: 266). This brings to mind Kant’s position that whenever an action is to be performed, one should ask these questions:

1. Can I rationally will that everyone acts as I propose to act? If the answer is no, then we must not perform the action
2. Does my action respect the goals of human beings rather than merely use them for my own purpose? Again, if the answer is no, then we must not perform the action. Therefore, man should always bear the consequence of his action.

Morality is not only individualistic; it can equally be relational. “for the moral life presupposes a world inhabited in common by the community of those who have rights and obligations in relationship to one another, namely, the human race” (God and the Universe of Faiths, 1988: 55). This means that every action that is performed or restrained from being performed will affect a fellow person. In the case of abortion (induced), this voluntary action may affect people or community of people. Since man is not an Island. However, man must not live to determine his or her action in every situation, irrespective of how this may affect others. Such, being the case means that there should be a maxim that prohibit people from performing actions, apart from the

individual intuition and rational ability which is inherent in him to cognize the goodness and badness of an action. Hick writes:

This general character of the world as an objective, causally law – governed environment of psycho-physical life sets the stage for the emergence of moral life. For only a world that is imperfect, in the sense that it is no stress-free and pain-free paradise, can be an environment in which moral choices are called for and in which the development of moral personality can take place (1988: 55).

Generally, Hick recognised the fact that human vices (including abortion, euthanasia et cetera) have an inherent evil, but that they remain a choice to either perform them or not. To either perform or not is subjective and relational.

The Implication of John Hick’s Ethics for the Morality of Abortion Generally, John Hick’s ethics in nature and content expresses the principle of “Deontologism”, as against “Teleologism” which is associated with pro-abortionists like Joseph Fletcher. Deontologism marks that “certain actions are intrinsically evil actions and others intrinsically good irrespective of the circumstantial facts of the situation under examination” as asserted by Ozumba in his work *A Course Text on Ethics* (2008: 187). Upholding this point, Hick asserts in his book *Faith and Knowledge* that “man is by nature an ethical being” (1988: 136). This means that the idea of morality is inherent in human nature and did not just develop in the process of time or through a situation. Also in his book, *Evil and the God of Love*, Hick described the totality of man in morality and ethics as that which “in order to be a person, man must be free to choose right or wrong. He must be a morally responsible agent with a real power of moral choice” (2010: 266). He also notes that for the world to survive, it must be governed by law since it is imperfect. In his book, *God and the Universe of faith*, he asserts that “for only a world that is imperfect, in the sense that it is no stress – free and pain paradise, can be an environment in which moral choices are called for and in which the development of moral personality can take place” (1988:55). This means that human environment is a moral environment, and that moral environment is a law-governed environment.

These are few ethical assertions of John Hick which describe morality as inherent in actions. However, the study of his entire works reveals the idea of ethics is described in one way or the other as, the intrinsicality of the goodness and badness of an action, which means that actions are inherently good or bad in themselves, not minding the situation. This, in essence, promotes legalism and formalism in ethics. His idea in ethics encapsulates deontologism whose key proponent is Immanuel Kant.

From the foregoing, abortion (induced) in the ethics of John Hick is an aberration, not worth attending to nor advocated, hence, it is against natural law, and even scriptural rule. It is cruelty to a developing human foetus who by veto of the pro-lifers has right of life from conception. Hick opines that “... loving kindness, for example, is intrinsically good and cruelty is intrinsically evil” (*The interpretation of Religion:*

Human Response to the Transcendent, 1989:97). Abortion is inherently evil, since the unborn child is far more than merely a piece of tissue. Perhaps, it was this philosophy that made a catholic lawyer flatly says that “one person’s freedom to obtain an abortion is the danger of another person’s right to live” (Norman, 1970: P. 71). In support, Channer (1985) describes abortion as immoral because it is the deliberate killing of an innocent and helpless human being. Be that as it may, the deontology of John Hick’s ethics does not permit actions performed teleologically as moral.

Conclusion

In this intellectual piece, the question of the morality of abortion has been succinctly discussed through an examination of the ethical framework of John Hick. Evident in the discourse is the fact that deontology is the defining ethical principle that colours the ethics of John Hick. Since deontology abhors acts borne out of consequentialism, teleologism and contingency, then the implication of Hick’s deontology for induced abortion is that induced abortion is intrinsically immoral.

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