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ABSTRACT

The question of the consciousness of good and evil is a question intended to demonstrate whether morality is universal or relative. It has been critical to man throughout history. Arguments have been espoused to the effect that good and evil are relative and so there are no universal moral standards applicable across cultures on the one hand; whereas other thinkers have argued that good and evil are objective and u. al and, therefore, independent of any culture or individual on the other hand. Moral relativists, for instance, have argued to the effect that good and evil are people's creations, and in their view, this is the reason why they vary according to time, space, and more so, even from one person to another.

Keywords: moral obligation, first principle, practical reason, universal consciousness.

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Moral Obligation as the First Principle of Practical Reason and Foundation of Universal Consciousness of Good and Evil

Crispin O. Isaboke[α], John Muhenda[σ] & Josephine A. Nyambedha[ρ]

ABSTRACT

The question of the consciousness of good and evil is a question intended to demonstrate whether morality is universal or relative. It has been critical to man throughout history. Arguments have been espoused to the effect that good and evil are relative and so there are no universal moral applicable across cultures on the one hand; whereas other thinkers have argued that good and evil are objective and u. al and, therefore, independent of any culture or individual on the other hand. Moral relativists, for instance, have argued to the effect that good and evil are people's creations, and in their view, this is the reason why they vary according to time, space, and re so, even from one person to another. On the contrary, those thinkers who hold that morality is objective and u. al maintain that moral principles and values are objective and apply regardless of one's culture, race or even religion. This article aims to interrogate the human rational nature, through the moral obligation, with the view of establishing the basic foundation(s) of morality and moral consciousness to unearth the truth whether morality is universal or relative. The article argues that good and evil are qualities of human acts and our awareness of good and evil has its source in the moral law, to which free acts must conform for them to be good. Suitably, the moral law is the first principle of good and evil, founded on the very rational nature of man, and from it flows all moral virtue. Consequently, our consciousness of good and evil must be rooted in rationality (reason), through the moral obligation, and it is a confirmation that as human beings, we share one and the same rational nature for which reason good and evil are universal, corresponding to good acts and bad acts respectively and must be known to be so. The moral obligation must be the foundation of any and all theories of ethics and morality.

Keywords: moral obligation, first principle, practical reason, universal consciousness.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to discuss the moral obligation as the foundation of the consciousness of good and evil (moral consciousness). It argues that the consciousness of good and evil is based on the fact that man has a moral obligation which is the first principle of practical wisdom. Effectively, other primary principles related to, and consistent with, the moral obligation, are dealt with *vis-a-vis natural* justice, the end does not justify the means and, the indirect voluntary. Due to the fact that the moral obligation is a dictate of reason that good be done and evil avoided, *good* and *evil* are elaborated as qualities of human acts in relation to man's last end, *happiness*. This is followed with a discussion of *ethics and the good life*. Moral relativism as a consequence of the denial of the first principle of practical reason is explained in detail. Additionally, it is demonstrated that the moral law, being natural, is universal. A contrast is made between the moral obligation and moral intellectualism in view of showing that Socrates was wrong in thinking that knowledge is virtue and that moral failure is due to ignorance. Finally, it is concluded that the moral obligation is the foundation of universal moral consciousness.

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II. FIRST PRINCIPLE OF PRACTICAL REASON

The moral obligation[1] is one of the two principles of reason originating from the two faculties of the mind, the *intellect* and the *will*. The former is also known as *theoretical reason* while the latter is referred to as *practical reason*. Therefore, "there are two kinds of reasoning within the rational soul. The first is theoretical, giving us knowledge of fixed principles or philosophical wisdom. The other is practical, giving us a rational guide to our moral action under the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves and this is practical wisdom."[2] The two faculties of the mind are a clear manifestation that morality is natural for the reason that man is rational by nature.

Thomas Aquinas argues that the moral obligation is the first principle of practical reason, just like non-contradiction is the first principle of speculative reason. He says that "…the precepts of natural law are related to practical reason in the same way the basic principles of demonstration are related to theoretical reason, since both are sets of self-evident principles."[3] In his view, these principles are evident in themselves and so need not be demonstrated. Clearly, being first principles, there are no other prior truths that can be used to demonstrate them. Accordingly, all other moral principles have their source in, and are inferable from, the moral obligation. The moral law, therefore, states that "good is to be done and pursued, and bad avoided."[4] It is enshrined in the very nature of a human being and is the source of all moral instincts, implying that morality is inevitably universal. The two faculties of the mind function in such a way as to interact mutually;

> The will intrinsically and fundamentally aims at the attainment of some good even though that good may sometimes be perverted, immoral and illegitimate. The good that is pursued by the will, provided it is not perverted, is inherently virtuous, lofty and noble since the attainment of any virtuous act must presuppose and involve a deliberately conscious decision, deliberation and sometimes an exercise of serious contemplation. A conscious decision and deliberation, must *ipso facto*, flow and emanate from the intellect. The intellect, therefore, is always behind the acts of the will explicitly or implicitly, or, in other words, the will must always involve the intellect in producing its own effects, unless it chooses to exceed or disobey the dictates and specifications of the intellect.[5]

It can be deduced from the above quote that the nature of the will is to desire the good yet it requires deliberation to ascertain whether the good it desires is the real and true good. In this regard, it interacts with the intellect, whose sole duty it is to know, for clarity. The will is not blind or does not act without being informed by the intellect.

Theoretical reason is concerned with being in general and how it can be known, and for this reason, its first principle is the principle of noncontradiction which is an expression of the fact that being is not contradictory in itself: being is whatever is in existence and it cannot not be at the same time and in the same respect. Thus, "the first judgment is called the principle of non-contradiction because it expresses the most basic condition of things, namely, that they cannot be self- contradictory. This principle is based on being, and expresses the consistency of being and its opposition to non-being…."[6] On the flip side, practical reason is concerned with action, and due to that it is known as the faculty of action. It expresses the fact that man is not only a knower but also a doer. Knowledge needs to be

[1] The moral obligation is also referred to as the moral law or the law of good and evil, the law of right and wrong. The four terms are therefore used interchangeably in this paper, for they have the same semantic meaning.

[2] Samuel Enock Stumpf & James Fieser, Philosophy and Problems, Sixth Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishers, 2002), p. 94.

[3] Thomas Aquinas, ST-I-II, q. 94 a. 2.

[4] Thomas Aquinas, ST-I-II, q. 94 a. 2.

[5] Joseph Nyasani, *Metaphysical Psychology: Rational Psychology* (Nairobi: Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, 2013), p.31.

[6] Tomas Alvira, Luis Clavell and Tomas Melendo, *Metaphysics* (Manila: Sinag-Tala Publishers, Inc., 1991), p. 33/4.

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put into action, wherefore the latter is a prerogative of the will while the former is a prerogative of the intellect. Yet his action, as Aristotle would argue, has an end, a purpose. This is to say that human beings act for a purpose, this purpose being happiness. With regard to the interplay between the two faculties of the mind (reason), Joseph Nyasani underscores the fact that the intellect "...is the capacity ...of the mind whose task it is to understand, think and reason.... It also happens to be the faculty from which the will flows."[7] What this implies is that the will depends on the intellect to be able to function effectively in spite of the fact that the intellect does not coerce the will to act according to its dictates. On that account, the will acts only on knowledge of good and evil yet this knowledge is a function and preserve of the intellect. The process of deliberation, which precedes moral judgment and decision, takes place at the level of the intellect, which then informs the will of the right course of action to take. In essence, therefore, we deliberate on what we know. In other words action is informed by knowledge of good and evil.

That being the case, a denial of the moral obligation necessarily leads to the denial of universal awareness of right and wrong, of good and evil. Many times we find it easy to accept that good ought to be done, and that it must be done all the time, but we at the same time proceed to argue that there are situations that call for a suspension of the same, especially in the most extreme of circumstances, for instance if a mother is diagnosed with an ectopic pregnancy which eventually threatens her life. The argument of many would be that in such circumstances, abortion should be done in the best interests of the mother, oblivious of the fact that they had initially admitted that good ought to be done. Moreover, they fail to see that the act of abortion is intrinsically evil for it takes away an innocent person's life (that of the defenseless fetus) and that they do it deliberately, willingly, consciously, and by choice; for which reason they must take responsibility. We therefore emphasize the fact that it is impossible to agree that man has an obligation of a moral nature, the obligation to (always) do good and avoid evil, and at the same time justify evil acts in certain circumstances. Nonetheless, one may wonder if there are any other moral principles apart from the moral law.

2.1 Other Related Principles

While the moral obligation is the first principle of good and evil, there are other principles of ethics which trace their source to the moral obligation and equally guide moral behaviour. These principles are; natural justice, the end does not justify the means and, the indirect voluntary. Significantly, all these principles are consistent with the moral obligation from which they draw their legitimacy and validity. Thus, they are an expression of the moral nature by demanding conformity of free acts to the first principle. Acts that are in agreement with these principles are in conformity with the moral law and they are a realization or an actualization of man's rational potential. Man has the potential to be happy, a potentiality he actualizes by acting in accord with the ought to be done. In essence, any act which disagrees with any of these principles is in contravention of the moral law and *ipso facto* detrimental or harmful to human nature.

2.1.1 Natural Justice

One of the principles that are consistent with the moral law is the principle of natural justice, according to which man has an inherent and therefore inviolable dignity. Effectively, "natural justice in human relations, is or ought to be assumed as an objective standard according to which human conduct must correspond, satisfy and emulate in order to placate the instinct of natural equity and the desire to be treated impartially, even-handedly and without variation."[8] It is deducible from this quote that the moral obligation is presupposed. The fact that human conduct must be in accord with the moral obligation cannot be gainsaid. All things considered, whenever we invoke the principle of natural justice we demand to be treated in an objective and equal manner respectful of the inherent dignity. In the views of Joseph Nyasani,

[7] Nyasani, *Metaphysical Psychology* p. 27.

[8] Nyasani, *Legal Philosophy: Jurisprudence* (Nairobi: Consolata Institute of Philosophy Press, 2001), p. 145.

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"when we speak of natural law, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that it is a nature-produced law and not positive or man-made law intended or a law of conduct supposedly inherent in human nature and ascertainable as such by human reason."[9] He proceeds to argue that "it surely must be true to argue that no consistency, objectivity or inalterability of the principles of natural justice would enjoy any validity or even make any sense in total absence of some object of the actual predication base, or simply, some referral object."[10] Yet, "the referral object is the actual appeasement or satisfaction of the human nature itself as objectified and undifferentiated."[11]

It is obvious, therefore, that the principles of natural justice serve the purpose of fulfilling or satisfying the human nature "…which is explicitly or implicitly conscious of its existence and its ontological utility as well as its objective and undifferentiated application."[12] In essence, "in very broad terms, natural justice demands the exercise of an even-handed operation without preference or prejudice to all time and in all places as its principal presuppositions."[13] This principle entails equal treatment of human beings by being fair to them and recognizing all the time that they belong to the kingdom of ends. They must always be treated with dignity rather than as a means to some selfish ends. By virtue of the dignity bestowed on them by nature, human beings should not be used as a means to some end, they should not be used as a tool or thing.

2.1.2 The End does not Justify the Means

Another principle consistent with the moral obligation is the principle which states that "the end does not justify the means." To justify means to make good what is otherwise evil; to rationalize. Given that the ends of our acts are good more often than not, justification does not apply to the end but the means. Many times we use evil means to attain a good end and we justify those evil means on account of their good end.

What this principle signifies is the fact that however good the end of an act can be, if the means used to its attainment are bad, that act remains essentially bad. The meaning of "end" in this and similar contexts is "goal," "purpose," or even "aim;" it signifies "that for the sake of which something is done." Equally, by "means" is meant "how the end is attained or achieved." "Means" refers to that through which something is achieved. Substantially, both of these terms are intimately related so that you cannot refer to one without implying the other. Now that a human being is a moral agent, that is to say that he engages in moral activity, and by fact that he naturally desires to be happy, his acts are always treated in relation to his ultimate end, happiness.

Moral philosophers, therefore, have debated whether human acts have a necessary connection with man's last end or not. So to say, they have attempted to establish if human acts are a means to man's perfection (attainment of the desired happiness) or ends in themselves. If they are a means to a certain end, then they find meaning in that end alone; but if ends in themselves, then their meaning is to be sought in themselves, not in anything else. In our present concern and, in relation, therefore, to the principle that "the end does not justify the means," the question is whether an intrinsically evil act can be used as a means to a good end. Is it good, for example, to steal money to use it to take a very sick person to hospital so as to save his life? Does it matter what we do when the aim is good? Yet, it is abundantly evident that man has a duty of a rational nature to always do good and avoid evil.

This first rule of practical wisdom, and from which all other rules of morality ensue, does not allow for exceptions. It would therefore be in contravention of this first principle to use an evil act as a means to a good end. For instance, it would be evil for one to steal so that they can help save a life. The good end of saving life does not alter the intrinsic nature of the act itself, which is evil. In other words, evil must not be done with the intention to obtain good from it. A good end must not be obtained by use of bad means. This is the same as saying that good must be done all the time regardless of the possible consequences. In

[9] Nyasani, *Legal Philosophy*… p. 143.
[10] Nyasani, *Legal Philosophy*… p. 144.
[11] Nyasani, *Legal Philosophy*…p. 144.
[12] Nyasani, *Legal Philosophy*… p. 144.
[13] Nyasani, *Legal Philosophy*… p. 145.

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other words, whether an act is good or evil is not dependent on that act's possible consequences or effects. For example, a mother who is diagnosed with an ectopic pregnancy may choose the termination of the pregnancy so that her life is saved. But by the fact that termination of a pregnancy is an act of killing, and that it is directly willed, the act done will remain evil at all times. That her life is secured does not change the moral worth of that act; it remains intrinsically evil.

Effectively, an act does not derive its goodness or lack of it from its consequences for two main reasons: first, most of the time our acts result in bad consequences, meaning that if the consequences were to define good acts, morality would be impossible. Second, if an act was to draw its moral worth from its consequences, it would mean that there are no intrinsically good or evil acts but good and evil are a result of consequences. At the same time, consequences normally come after action has taken place. Hence, there cannot be consequences of an act that has not been done. This would still be contrary to the moral obligation which implies that acts are good or evil in themselves, this being the reason why reason dictates that good ought to be done; also due to its connectivity with man's last end (happiness).

Thus, "an act that is bad in itself cannot become good or indifferent by a good motive or good circumstances.... Nothing can change its intrinsically evil nature. No person is ever allowed voluntarily to will that kind of act in any circumstances."[14] As Fagothey observes further, "though a good end renders good the use of indifferent means, a good end cannot justify the use of evil means. We are never allowed to do evil that good may come of it."[15] Morally indifferent acts belong to the category of acts that one may do, and this explains why a good end may render good the use of indifferent means. Surely, good means must be used for the attainment of a good end; otherwise, the act will remain intrinsically evil. Nonetheless, morally good acts and morally bad acts belong to the category of acts that one must do and acts that one must not do respectively. It suffices to know that an act is evil to know that it ought not to be done; or that it is good to know that it ought to be done.

When all is said and done, a good or indifferent act must be done for a good motive and under good circumstances. A good act done for a bad motive though under good circumstances is evil by virtue of its motive. Similarly, a good act done for a good motive but under bad circumstances becomes evil by virtue of its circumstances. Any morally good act, so to speak, is one that is good in itself or at least indifferent, done from a good motive and in good circumstances.

2.1.3 The Indirect Voluntary

The principle of indirect voluntary, frequently called the principle of double effect, is also consistent with human nature as expressed through the moral obligation. It is founded "...on the fact that evil must never be voluntary in itself, must never be willed either as end or as means, for then it is the direct object of the will-act and necessarily renders the act evil."[16] So to speak, evil can only be permitted as an unintended but unavoidable consequence of an otherwise good or morally indifferent act. An intrinsically evil act must not be done even in the most extreme of circumstances.

This principle is known as "principle of double effect" due to the fact that it presupposes two (double) effects flowing from one and the same act (good in itself or indifferent); one of the effects being good while the other is evil. As a matter of principle, it is only a good act or a neutral act that can be done for a good motive and under good circumstances. It is only the two kinds of acts that are consistent with the moral obligation. Whereas a neutral act can become good if done under good motive and in good circumstances, an intrinsically evil act cannot become good due to its good motive and good circumstances. Moreover, many times the good effect is the good intended whereas the evil effect is the evil unintended but unavoidable.

[14]Austin Fagothey, *Right and reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice* (St. Lois: The CV. Mosby Company, 1953), p. 101.

[15] Fagotehy, p. 101.

[16] Fagothey, p. 102.

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This principle is also called "principle of indirect voluntary" due to the fact that the evil effect, although not directly willed, is foreseen but cannot be avoided. What this means is that it is well clear to the doer of the act that the evil effect is inevitable if the act in question is to be done. Yet since it is not intended, it is willed but only indirectly. So, willing indirectly simply means that though one does not intend the evil effect, there is nothing they can do to prevent it. We say that there is nothing they can do because if they must do anything, it must be good or indifferent; good ought to be done. This means that evil is not an option. It is in the sense of being unable to act due to the fact that there is nothing good one can do that we refer to the evil effect as merely allowed or permitted.

Therefore, "though I am never allowed to will evil, I am not always bound to prevent the existence of evil.... Sometimes I cannot will a good without at the same time permitting the existence of an evil which in the very nature of things is inseparably bound up with the good I will.... Sometimes I am bound to prevent evil, and in these cases it would be wrong for me to permit it."[17] According to this principle, while as human beings we are under obligation to do good and avoid evil, we are not obliged to prevent evil by all means:

> Are we obliged to make sure that every single consequence of each of our acts will be morally good, or at least not bad? If so, the scope of human activity becomes so limited as to make life unlivable. One who accepts a job when jobs are scarce cuts someone else out of a livelihood, a doctor who tends the sick during a plague exposes himself to catching the disease...a teacher who gives a competent examination knows that some will probably fail.[18]

If we were to be obligated to ensure that consequences of our acts are good before we act, one would not accept to take a job offer knowing very well that it will disadvantage others; a doctor will not attend the sick during a plague with the knowledge that he may contract the disease and die nor could a teacher give a competent examination knowing very well that other candidates will fail.

As a consequence, if an act that is good in itself or at least indifferent but it is found inevitable that if done it will result to two effects, one good and the other evil, that act is morally permissible under certain conditions, all of which must be fulfilled in order for that act to be morally justifiable. The requirement that all the conditions be fulfilled for the act in question to be morally justifiable is to ensure strict adherence to the moral law as the first principle of morality. A violation of any one of these conditions would render the act contradictory to this first principle of practical reason and by that fact the act is evil. This principle of double effect has four main conditions that must be fulfilled in order for an act to be morally justifiable. The first one states that 'the act to be done must be good in itself or at least indifferent," the second that "the good intended must not be obtained by means of the evil effect." The third maintains that "the evil effect must not be intended for itself but only permitted;" whereas the fourth condition states that "there must be a proportionately grave reason for permitting the evil effect."[19] Nevertheless, it is only when all of these conditions are present that an act can be said to be morally justifiable. If anyone is not present even if all the rest are, that act remains evil. There is no middle ground between good and evil; any human act is either good or evil. It is therefore a misconception to think that there can be less evil. We reiterate that conduct has the quality of being good or evil, or rather, human acts are morally significant.

III. GOOD AND EVIL: QUALITIES OF HUMAN ACTS

It must be borne in mind that good and evil are qualities of human acts, constituting the formal object (*objectum formale*) of ethics. It goes without saying that ethics deals with human acts, commonly referred to as conduct (*objectum materiale* or material object). Human acts, known as *actus humanus*, are contrasted with acts of

[17] Fagothey, p.102.

[18] Fagothey, p.102.

[19] Fagothey, p. 103.

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man, referred to, in Latin, as *actus hominis*. The former are characterized by voluntariness and are therefore done freely, consciously, deliberately, willfully, and for that reason we are held responsible for them, given that they are in our power to do or not do them; while the latter are non-voluntary and are, so to speak, not willed, not in our control, and they characterize us as animals. Acts of man are shared by man and animals, the reason why we are not held responsible for them. They have no moral significance while human acts do have. For instance, stealing, cheating, rape, killing are human acts while walking, eating, sleeping, sitting are acts of man.

More importantly, human acts have a relation with the final end of man, called happiness. Thus, acting virtuously or viciously will necessarily lead to one's happiness or lack of it respectively. Happiness being the supreme good of man is chosen of necessity for, as Thomas Aquinas argues, no one chooses unhappiness. Hence, choice is only of the means to happiness, and so the critical question here is the question: "is happiness attainable by the exercise of both good and evil? Another important question is whether good and evil are universal concepts, standing for human acts. However, the truth is that it is not by the mixture of both good and evil that we attain happiness but only by doing the good. This explains why the moral obligation exists; to connect man to his last end by dictating that good be done and evil avoided. Simply put, the moral obligation states that 'good ought to be done.' According to Kant:

> ...pure reason by itself can determine the will. If this were not possible, he thinks, the whole of morality would be an illusion; action on impulse or in accordance with desire or inclination is, like everything else that is empirically grounded, subject to the laws of physical causality, and all talk of 'ought' is therefore here irrelevant – an 'ought' can arise only when man has a choice between doing what his inclinations, if unchecked by reason, would inevitably lead him to do, and doing what reason tells him is in accordance with the moral law. Moral laws are laws of freedom, as opposed to laws of nature; and man's conduct must somehow come under the first kind of law if there is to be such a thing as morality.[20]

In effect, there is an ought to be done, and if what I do is what I ought to do, then my act is in accord with the moral obligation, and therefore virtuous. My act is equally virtuous if what I avoid is what I ought to avoid. However, if what I do is what I ought not to do or what I avoid to do is what I ought to do, by that very fact, of doing or avoiding, my act is in direct opposition with the moral obligation, is evil and I take responsibility for it. For example, I may want to steal another person's laptop but reason shows me that stealing is evil and that evil ought not to be done. So if I go ahead and steal the laptop, I would have stolen it with complete knowledge that I ought not to steal. Hence, I must be answerable to conscience. In this case, acting or not acting is made possible by the fact that we are free beings. Good and evil go hand in hand with freedom of choice and have everything to do with man's perfection.

3.1 Ethics and the Good Life

In point of fact ethics deals with the question of the good life for an individual; and it is, *ipso facto*, an attempt to answer the question "how do I ought to live to live a good life?" Or still, "what is the nature of morality?" On tackling the ethical question, philosophers have come up with different theories that according to them are sufficient explanations to the ethical problem. Unfortunately, these theories have instead become a source of confusion rather than of clarity and precision in responding to the critical question in ethics: how do I ought to live to live a good life? Such confusion is evident in the way people would want to apply different theories to different case scenarios, eventually begging the question: which is the correct theory among these? It is for this same reason that ethics and morality have been reduced to subjectivism and relativism, positions, which, if accepted to be true, destroy the same morality these theories purport to explain.

[20] John Kemp, *The Philosophy of Kant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 57.

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On the one hand, a good life can be defined as a happy life; meaning that happiness is at the centre of ethics. On the other hand, all attempts that have been made in response to what a good life consists of have identified virtue or rightness of action as equally central to ethics. The two concepts of *happiness* (*eudaimonia*) and *virtue* (*arête*) are therefore of paramount significance in ethics. The most disturbing question in this regard is the question, "is happiness all about virtue or does one lead to the other?" While almost all the existing theories ranging from hedonism, utilitarianism, epicureanism, virtue ethics, if only to mention a few, have concurred that happiness is the ultimate end of man or the highest good that man can ever attain, others arguing that happiness is the reason why one must act virtuously (to be happy), they differ on how it is attained, and this is the reason why there are several theories of ethics yet only one is needed, if the principle of noncontradiction is anything to go by. Some other thinkers have argued that happiness cannot be the motivation for doing good, otherwise, one does not do good if happiness was to be the motive. In that regard, therefore, Immanuel Kant does not view virtue as a condition for happiness although it is necessary for it. He holds the view that the only reason for one to act virtuously is duty.

It is for this reason that Kant argues to the effect that only two things are worthy of admiration and awe; "the starry heaven above us and the moral law within us are, he was accustomed to say, the only objects worthy of supreme admiration."[21] Significantly, he believed in "the supremacy of the moral law...."[22] He holds the view that the moral law has its foundation on consciousness, and for that reason, he says;

> Consciousness tells me that I ought to perform certain actions, and a little thought suffices to convince me that the oughtness is universal and necessary. If I analyze, for example, the sense of obligation in the negative principle, Lie not, I find that, apart from the question of motive or utility, which are contingent determinants, it is a principle valid throughout all time and space.[23]

In other words, regardless of the good that may result from acting in accord with the negative principle or even the reason why I should not lie, the command applies not only to me but goes beyond me to apply universally and objectively. Its application is not limited within the realms of space and time. There is no doubt, therefore, that morality is universal.

We can, therefore, rightly infer that an obligation brings with it a sense of necessity and universality so that whatever is good or evil is neither determined by situations nor times; nor are they dependent on the minds that affirm or deny them. On this understanding, it is inevitable that we need a principle that can be valid and applicable in all time and space. That notwithstanding, the two aspects of necessity and universality "affect the form, not the contents, of the moral law, so that in the example just mentioned, the universality of the prohibition, Lie not, is derived from the general formula, into which all obligation is translatable – So act that you can will that the maxim on which your conduct rests should become a universal law."[24] Being rational beings, human beings have an obligation to behave in a rational way "...and for Kant this means that one ought always to behave as if one's course of conduct were to become universal law."[25] Failure to do so would mean that morality does not exist.

3.2 Moral Relativism: A Consequence of the denial of the Moral Obligation

A denial of the moral obligation would imply that good and evil are relative, be it to individuals, cultures or circumstances. It also implies that morality is merely conventional, not natural. It would therefore mean that good and evil are arbitrary. In this sense, what is good for one person need not be good for another, nor is

[21] William Turner, *History of Philosophy* (London: Ginn and Company, 1929), p. 541.
[22] Turner, p. 541.
[23] Turner, p. 541.
[24] Turner, p. 541.
[25] Richard H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll, *Philosophy Made Simple: A Complete Guide to the World's Most Important Thinkers and Theories*, Second Edition (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993), p. 39.

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whatever is good or evil for one culture applicable in the same sense to other cultures. According to relativism, so to speak, morality is about opinions and preferences yet, "...there is no truth out there to be discovered, and it does not make sense to say that an answer is really correct."[26] Furthermore, "if one says that moral norms change with time, place, or persons he is a relativist. Moral relativism holds that no theory is correct as compared with another; that the goodness of an act depends on a variable norm."[27] What this essentially means is that truth does not exist and consequently a denial of truth leads to the denial of morality.

It therefore follows that any argument that denies the moral obligation does not only destroy the universal moral fabric but also the entire moral spectrum. An act that is good or evil depending on individuals or different situations is not good or evil by that fact alone. It cannot be true that no theory is correct as compared to the other for if this were to be the case, the obvious implications are that there is no truth about human acts. Whether human acts are good or not therefore would be arbitrary and morality would be nonexistent.

However, it is our belief that there must be a theory which is correct about good and evil and such a theory must be founded, and finds its justification, in the moral obligation. In equal measure, any theory purporting to guide ethical behaviour that is contrary to the moral obligation is a false one and cannot be a measure or standard of good and evil. Human nature is one and the same, shared by all human beings, actual or potential, and it dictates how human beings ought to behave to bring themselves to their perfection.

It is this rational nature that is the foundation of morality and human beings are obligated to always act in accord with it for two main reasons: first, and more importantly, simply because it is the right thing to do as rational beings; second, because virtue is intertwined with happiness in a manner that it is only by acting virtuously that one attains happiness, which is his supreme good. In the latter sense, a human being naturally desires to be happy yet it is only by acting in accord with right reason (the ought) that he attains happiness. Acting in conformity with reason signifies acting virtuously while acting contrary to the dictates of right reason means acting viciously. It is deduced therefore that any ethical theories that are inconsistent with the moral obligation, are by that virtue, a denial of this very foundational principle of morality. In that sense, they cannot be guides to morality or good and evil.

Therefore, to act in accord with reason implies that if one knows that a certain human act is good, he does it freely, and if evil he avoids it without coercion. Primarily, as rational beings, we are under obligation to do the good due to the fact that it is what it entails to be a human being. That we will attain happiness due to our virtuous acts is only secondary. We do not engage in virtuous activity due to conditions or so that we may attain happiness. The moral obligation is unconditional, it is categorical: good ought to be done. So, it is good to do just that. As an ideal, it attracts our free acts so that if we conform them to it, they are good and they lead us to our perfection but if we act in the contrary, our acts become evil and detach us from our ultimate end of happiness. It is not the moral obligation to ensue in our free acts, because then every act would be good; it is the source of our virtuous acts.

In this regard, rewards or punishments, as pre-conditions of our good acts are evil for they portray morality as merely conditional besides implying further that in the absence of those pre-existing conditions, one may not act in the same way as they would in their presence. Yet to act virtuously demands that one acts in the presence of conditions as they would under no conditions whatsoever. It is our belief that this is the sense in which Kant states in one of his formulations of the categorical imperative that "act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal

[26] Robert C. Solomon, *Introducing Philosophy: A Text with Integrated Reading,* Eighth Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 147.
[27] Milton A. Gonsalves, *Fagothey's Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice*, Ninth Edition (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1985), p. 99.

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law."[28] The consciousness of good and evil is proper only to human beings, who are rational by nature. Thus, a denial of the moral obligation is a denial of rationality and also of humanity.

23.3 The Universality of the Moral Law

Of critical importance, Kant believed in "the supremacy of the moral law…."[29] Put differently, there was no law that could be above the moral law or to which the moral law can be subjected.

In other words, our actions should be guided by our own reflections as to whether they could be universal laws, and if yes, then they are good, and if not, then they are evil. Kant calls this the categorical imperative as opposed to hypothetical imperative. He goes further to distinguish "inclination" and "obligation" by emphasizing that "an obligation is that which one ought to do despite one's inclination to do otherwise. If no obligation exists, then it becomes a matter of inclination or of taste what one should do."[30]

To act justly or morally, therefore, one has to, and must, suppress their feelings as well as inclinations so that they may do that which they are under obligation to do. If one acts out of fear of any kind, one does not act in accord with reason. So, "…morality, as Kant sees it, is closely bound up with one's duties and obligations."[31] Universalization of our individual acts is the test of a moral act in that an act which can be universalized is good while one that cannot be universalized cannot be good (is evil). Accordingly, it is by virtue of the moral obligation that we are held morally responsible, i.e., when our free acts are not in conformity with the moral law.

Kant goes further to give another formulation of the categorical imperative to reiterate the fact that the dignity of the human person must be given its inherent respect. In this formulation, he says: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal never as a means only."[32] In this he makes an appeal to humanity that people must respect one another due to their rational nature and the inherent value through which they are equal. He emphasizes that "we should treat others as ends in themselves because that is how we regard ourselves. To treat another person only as a means of achieving what we want is to disregard his or her humanity, to treat a person as a thing and to fail to show due respect for his/ her rational nature."[33]

In order to clarify his argument further, Kant distinguishes 'acting in accord with duty' and 'acting from duty,' in which case he avers that the former are not moral acts whereas the latter are moral acts. In effect, he sees the motive from which an act is done as constituting the essence of morality; for a person can only be said to be moral if and when they act from a sense of duty. Consequences have no place in the moral worthiness of an act. It is from this understanding that he argues that "a good person is a person of 'good will,' a person who acts from a sense of duty."[34]

Furthermore, Kant argues that pleasure cannot be the foundation of the moral law. He considers feelings as most unstable yet they determine pleasure. On the contrary, due to the universality and necessity of the moral law, it must inevitably be based on a foundation that cannot be altered. Neither can it be founded on happiness "for the essential characteristic of the moral law is its obligatoriness, and no one is obliged to be happy."[35] We are obliged to do good. It is sufficient, therefore, to say that thinking along the Kantian concept of duty for duty's sake is the only sure way of arriving at a universal moral consciousness. So, could Socrates have been wrong in equating knowledge with virtue?

[28] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor Translation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), p. 222.
[29] Turner, p. 541.
[30] Popkin and Stroll, p. 36.
[31] Popkin and Stroll, p.36.
[32] Popkin and Stroll, p. 40.
[33] Popkin and Stroll, p. 40.
[34] Popkin and Stroll, p. 37.
[35] Turner, p. 542.

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3.4 Moral Intellectualism

The Socratic thinking that knowledge is virtue is known as *moral intellectualism*. This is the thinking that knowledge necessarily leads to action. Contrary to the fact that man acts freely, moral intellectualism maintains that knowing virtue necessarily leads to acting virtuously. Although being in possession of knowledge of virtue enables one to make an informed free choice, a choice which must be preceded by deliberation, such knowledge suffices for virtuous action according to Socrates. It is due to this kind of thinking that he views vice as a product of ignorance.

As it is abundantly evident, the mistake that Socrates makes with regard to moral failure (incontinence) is the thinking that the will always follows the dictates of reason (acts in accord with knowledge of necessity) and *ipso facto* denying the free nature of the will, either knowingly or unknowingly. His thinking implies that man is not free in doing the good; and that is why Socrates attributes *akrasia*[36] to ignorance. Socrates argues that being in possession of knowledge of virtue leads necessarily to virtuous activity. According to him, knowledge, virtue and happiness have a very intimate relationship. However, he also believed that virtue is the most precious possession a person can be in possession of. The element of choice was nonexistent in his thinking. To know the good for him was sufficient to do the good.

Apparently, it must be pointed out that any free choice entails power on the part of the agent to act in one way or another; in this case, to choose to act in accord to knowledge or contrary to knowledge. It goes without saying that reason, as a rational faculty, dictates that we act in conformity with knowledge. On this account, we take responsibility for our free acts. What this means is that we must be answerable for doing evil (acting against the dictates of reason) yet we have power to do the good (act in accord with reason). The power of choice is a necessary component of the moral obligation. It is unsurprising that our choices must be in perfect accordance with the moral obligation. In essence, what I do must be what I ought to do; and what I refrain from doing must be what I ought not (to) do. It occurs to us, though, that such is not always the case but this does not negate the fact that we have a duty to do the right thing. Many are the times when what we do is contrary to what we know; contrary to what we ought to do. Thus, vice is a product of our free choice. It arises when we freely do what we ought not (to) do and the vice-versa is also true.

Aristotle rightly observes that it is not due to ignorance that people do evil. They do evil due to strong desires but with complete knowledge that they are doing evil. As stated in the *Encyclopedia of Ethics*: "incontinents make the right decision…and act against it…. Their failure to stick to their decision is the result of strong appetites; in Aristotle's example, we recognize that we ought to avoid eating this sweet thing, but our recognition that it is sweet actually triggers our appetite for sweet things, which causes us to eat it after all."[37] In other words, Socrates was wrong in assuming that our free acts translate into, and are a true reflection of, the moral obligation. Nevertheless, "from the doctrine that virtuous activity is voluntary and in accordance with choice, it follows that virtue and vice are in our power, and that Socrates' doctrine is false."[38] In his view, our acts are in perfect accord with the moral law, but we hold a different position; that our acts ought to be in perfect accord with the moral obligation although it is not always the case that they are. Man has the freedom of the will to act in accord with the ought or not, and this explains why man must take responsibility for his actions. For instance, one who steals does so with full knowledge that stealing is evil and they ought not to steal but they go ahead to do it. They must therefore take responsibility, in which case their conscience will demand for an answer as to why they did the act yet they knew it was evil. At no point can conscience be answered satisfactorily

[36] *Akrasia* is Greek word that refers to 'incontinence' or 'moral failure.'

[37] Lawrence C. Becker & Charlotte B. Becker eds., *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, Second Edition, Volume 1: A-G (New York: Routledge, 2001), 96.

[38] Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 6: Modern Philosophy Part II: Kant* (New York: Image Books, 1964), p. 339.

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and it is on this understanding that one will always regret their evil actions as long as they live.

So there is a law within me that demands of me to only do the right thing in all circumstances. Thus, we have an onerous duty to do the right thing by always obeying our conscience. But it is also obligatory that we train our conscience to be the type of conscience that can judge as good what is really good and as evil what is really evil. In any case, "we can be said to know, for example, that we ought to tell the truth. But such knowledge is not knowledge of what is, that is to say, of how men actually behave, but of what ought to be, and that is to say, of how men ought to behave. And this knowledge is *a priori*, in the sense that it does not depend on men's actual behaviour."[39] Furthermore, "even if they all told lies, it would still be true that they ought not to do so. We cannot verify the statement that men ought to tell the truth by examining whether they in fact do so or not. The statement is true independently of their conduct, and in this sense is true *a priori*."[40]

IV. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the moral obligation is the first principle of good and evil and the source from which moral goodness flows. Any and all moral principles find meaning in this principle which states categorically that good ought to be done. Due to the fact that it is rooted in the very rational nature of man, it is a universal principle that guides conduct, for which reason good and evil are universal. It is, in this sense, sufficiently evident that universal consciousness of good and evil is rooted in the moral obligation. Any argument to the contrary will only mean that morality does not exist, yet this is defeatist in itself. Man's consciousness of good and evil is intrinsic and demonstrable. We can say without fear of contradiction, that upon the principle of the moral obligation are founded all other moral principles and from it flows the consciousness of good and evil, which is therefore, inevitably universal. Consequently, it follows as a matter of logical necessity that the moral obligation is the source of any, and all, other obligations; be they social, political, economic, or even religious.

[39] Copleston, p. 101.
[40] Copleston, p. 101.

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