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INTERROGATING THE ETHICAL IMPLICATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL FREEWILL AND DETERMINISM ON MORAL RESPONSIBILITY OF TEACHERS AND LEARNERS IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The debate of moral responsibility in education hinges on the justification of philosophical freewill and determinism. In educational institutions, moral responsibility almost always attract punishment or reward justified by the freedom of choice. However, justification of punishment and reward system within the framework of philosophical determinism has been highly contested. This has far-reaching ethical implication on moral responsibility of teachers and learners. Using analytic and argumentative methods, the study stressed the compatibility of philosophical freewill and determinism in evaluating the moral responsibility of teachers and learners. It argues to the conclusion that the action and inaction of teachers are the manifestation of prior conditions as well as their ability to freely choose between alternatives. It recommends clear mapping of deterministic acts and acts of freewill to help in defining the scope of moral responsibility. This will greatly contribute to sound ethical decision making thereby improving self-esteem and creativity in educational institutions.

Key Words: Freewill, Determinism, Educational Institution, Moral Responsibility

Introduction

This study interrogates philosophical freewill and determinism using questions of moral responsibility in educational institutions. Such questions concern issues of punishment and

reward system. It is necessitated by the gruesome decline of punishment and monetization of reward system aimed at disseminating false, fabricated, exaggerated, or strategically constructed narratives to attract public perception, and generate finances for the institutions. Punishment and reward are critical aspects of contemporary education as they are instrumental in encouraging and modifying behavior. However, the contention concerns the justification of such system if human actors are conditioned or determined. It is common to

observe teachers and learners rewarded for their ability to choose between alternatives.
Whereas, choices that militate against the established norms and values are punished. This fact attests to the institutionalization of philosophical freewill rather than determinism in educational sector. The notion of philosophical freewill is divided into two: the ability of man to act without constraint and the ability of man to decide between alternatives. This disposition has been questioned by the opposing philosophical doctrine of determinism. Philosophical determinism is anchored on the premise that events have previous causes. It is a philosophical thesis which postulates that all events are the necessary byproduct of prior conditions. If educational experiences of teachers and learners are characterized by prior conditions, in which they have no disposition to decide otherwise but act within a constraint which defines their engagement, then the reward and punishment system is questionable. This is because determined entities such as robot are not morally responsible and therefore not deserving of any praise or blame. Consequently, it is difficult to argue for determinism in educational institutions given the moral responsibilities of teachers and learners. Is it the moral responsibility of educational institutions to determine for teachers and learners what is right/wrong, good and bad or they should be given the moral right to make choices? Morally, teachers have the responsibility of training students by facilitating the implementation of curriculum through teaching, mentoring and counselling among others. The extent of these deterministic roles and the freedom of learners to decide otherwise generate ethical controversies within moral philosophy. Educational institutions are structured in such a way that the responsibilities of learners necessarily include obedience of rules and regulations that are deterministic in nature (Gregg and Derk 3). However, the contention here concern clear mapping of reward and punishment system which defines the compatibility of philosophical freewill and determinism within educational institutions. To what extent should educational institutions enforce deterministic acts without violating teachers and learner‘s right to freedom of choice? It is expedient for the contours of moral responsibility to be clearly map by educational institutions given the evidential reality of philosophical freewill and determinism as demonstrated in this study.

Conceptual Clarification Concept of Philosophical Freewill

Is man a free being? This historic philosophical question is ambiguous as it elicit different conflicting positions.

The attempt by philosophers to understand the free nature of man connotes the philosophical doctrine of freewill. According to Igbokwe (76) freewill is the ability of a human person to make choices unconstraint by certain factors. He outlines such factors to include metaphysical, physical, social, and mental constraints.

Orji (286) notes that when something arises from its own nature alone and is motivated to act only by itself, it is said to possess free will. This entails that, human freewill is the ability of a human person to act from his nature without interference from external factors. However human action does not always arises from his nature. Also, it is difficult for human acts to be motivated only by itself because humans are caused beings. Self-motivation as connoted in Orj's position can only be the attribute of an uncaused being. It means that only the will of uncaused being (God) is free. This depends on the notion of philosophical freewill.

Igbokwe (77) assert that, there are two notion of philosophical freewill: the notion of freewill

which addresses the principle of alternative possibilities or the ability to do otherwise.
Another notion of philosophical freewill states that, for an action to be free, one must have the ability both to perform the action in question and to refrain from the action in question. The application of these notions in understanding moral responsibility in educational institutions is the concern of this current study.

Concept of Philosophical Determinism

Philosophical determinism is the opposite of philosophical freewill. It is the denial thereof or affirmation that freewill does not exist. There seems to be a scholarly conceptual agreement on philosophical determinism. Many philosophers agree that determinism is the thesis which views all events as necessary byproduct of prior conditions. Igbokwe (76) explains determinism as a philosophical position which ascribed causality to occurrence of every event, including human actions. Such conditions could cause only a particular event. i.e, there are conditions for specific events which distinguishes it from others. Consequently, every event depends on prior conditions.

Tobias et al (3) explains philosophical determinism in relation to natural laws and past experiences. They assert that —determinism is the thesis that certain conditions entail the occurrence of every present and future event. This conception is exclusive of any idea which presupposes the existence of a personal destiny or God, but inclusive of determinism based on natural law and historic experiences.

Concept of Moral Responsibility

The concept of moral responsibility defines the accountable status of a human person for their actions or omissions, which is characterized by praise, blame, reward, and punishment.

It involves the capacity of a human being to act in accordance with a defined moral code of conduct (Soares 143). This capacity is lacking in non-human animals, very young children, and those suffering from severe developmental disabilities or dementia. Thus, they are not morally responsible. However, adult human beings without the above conditions are considered morally responsible for their actions and omissions therefore deserving of certain negative attitudes, judgments, and treatment (Gregg and Derk 1). Yang (147) outlined conditions for moral responsibility to include; capacity to know what is right or wrong, being an apt target for one of the ―reactive attitudes‖ on the basis of the behavior and having free will.

According to Gregg and Derk moral responsibility applies primarily to actions and omissions. That is, adult human beings are responsible for what they have done and fails to do. Moral responsibility is characterized by moral practices such as moral praise and blame, retributive punishment, and the reactive attitudes of resentment (7). Philosophically, discussion of moral responsibility is anchored on the conditions of an agent or justness of an action.

However, in philosophy the term ―responsibility‖ is ambiguous because it is used in a number of different senses. For instance, responsibility connotes the cause of something (causal responsibility), take-charge responsibility, role responsibility, liability responsibility and moral responsibility (Talbert 8). Moral responsibility according to Abun (6) involves the notion of guilt or innocence. It is the degree to which the human person or group deserves

blame or punishment, praise or reward for an act.
McKenna & Widerker (67) state that the issue of moral responsibility is framed within the human characteristics of knowledge and freedom. These characteristic determines the level of moral responsibility. A person may or may be morally responsible if his/her acts are due to fear, anger or external force. That is, the person is not in full control of his acts. They argued that ―Knowledge and free will are the first bases for moral judgment of certain act because we believe that only knowledge and freedom belong to human as a rational being‖. Consequences necessarily preceded actions.

Freewill and Determinism Debate in Philosophy

Philosophers over centuries have engaged in a discourse on man‘s ability and inability to decide for himself.

This discussion hinges on the compatibility of philosophical doctrine of freewill and determinism. Compatibilism is the doctrine that human freedom is reconcilable with determinism while incompatibilism is the view that human freedom is inconsistent with determinism. Igbokwe states that those who define freewill as freedom from determinism are called incompatibilists. They hold determinism to be incompatible with freewill (76). Incompatibilism is divided into determinism and libertarianism. —The determinist believes in the truth of determinism and the falsity of human freedom, whereas the libertarian believes in the truth of human freedom and the falsity of determinism.

Regarding compatibilism the compatibilist believes in the truth of determinism and the truth of human freedom‖ (Adam et al 102).

Yang in response to the tension between determinism and moral responsibility, notes that compatibilism emerges as a potential reconciliatory perspective. Compatibilism seeks to demonstrate that the existence of causal determinism doesn‘t necessarily undermine the concept of free will and moral responsibility (149). Advocates of compatibilism redefine free will in a way that sidesteps the need for alternative possibilities. According to this perspective, an agent possesses free will if their actions align with their desires and values, and if they are not externally coerced into those actions. In other words, an individual can be morally responsible for their choices even if those choices are causally determined, as long as they‘re acting in accordance with their internal motivations (Yang 150).

This study advance the view that the doctrine of freewill is compatible with philosophical determinism particularly in interrogating moral responsibility of teachers and learners in educational institutions. Compatibilist philosophers understand an action to be free, if it is voluntarily performed. Here, human actions are free when performed without coercion or external restraint. This understanding of freedom is indeed compatible with determinism (Adams et al 102).

Spinoza in defending the doctrine of determinism argued that freewill is an illusion. He asserts that —in accordance with the theory of determinism, the universe's established natural rules govern everything and ensure that everything functions as intended. These laws are essential to and inevitably determine these. The preceding law is always followed by the consequence‖ (Orji 282). This implies that man and everything in the universe is the consequence of prior actions. It necessary follows that nature must necessarily govern man.

By doing this, man acts in accordance with God's nature, which is devoid of free will and choice (283).

In Africa, Mbiti (108) proverbialised the doctrine of determinism in community determining role of the individual when he wrote, —I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am‖.

Furthermore, as God's acts are governed by the laws of his own nature, he is not acting with freedom of the will because even God cannot change His own nature because it is what it is and must be. Consequently, God is internally determined but free from eternal compulsion. Kanu (48) notes the involvements of the community in the life of the child, from the time when he is born to the time when he dies, necessitated the question of freewill in African ontology. He reveals ―that the idea of community in the African world does not kill or take the place of the individual and individual freedom.

Although the community gives him a name, the name spells his individuality; he makes his own contribution to the kin as an individual. Although his community name defines him, his successes and failure based on the use of his freedom hugely defines him. While the community has rules and regulations, the individual has a right to keep them or not to‖.

Kanu (49) argues that the African human person is free citing punishment or reward system in all African communities. He states that ―the presence of God, the divinities and spirits in the world of human beings does not take away the freedom of men. If man is not free, it means that he should not be blamed for any failure or mishap in the course of his life journey. Equally, guilt to crimes committed should also not be punished as man wouldn‘t be responsible for his actions‖.

In Christianity, Calvinists believe that God ordained all events and predestined the eternal fate of all humans. That is, one‘s afterlife is already determined by forces outside of their control, which may affect how they act in this world Those with a strong belief in free will may place a stronger emphasis on the importance of their own actions because they believe such actions have important natural and eternal consequences (Adam et al 108). Accordingly, they may be more motivated to care for the earth, engage others with kindness and inclusion, and seek to live moral lives, because the future is malleable rather than predetermined.

Ethical Implication of Freewill and Determinism Debate on Moral Responsibility in Educational Institutions

The philosophical debate on freewill and determinism as discussed above elicited ethical dilemmas related to moral responsibility. The ethical dilemmas include issues such as the punishment and reward system as well as moral discipline of teachers and learners. Basically, this section as an attempt to answer three fundamental questions;

i. If determinism is true, why is reward and punishment system encouraged in our educational institutions?
ii. Is freewill always applicable in all teaching and learning situations?
iii. How does philosophical freewill and determinism define the scope of moral discipline and responsibility in educational institutions?

The reality of punishment and reward system in Nigerian educational institutions is uncontested. In educational institutions, learners and teachers are punished and rewarded accordingly. Jimoh and Abubakar (50) notes that punishment in educational institutions ranges from loss of privileges (denial of break and exclusion from activities), assigning task (cleaning the classroom, arranging books, writing an essay or apology letter, clearing the school premises), beating, kneeling, flogging, flog jump, bike riding, and other corporal punishments employed to curb indiscipline and bad academic performance.

Deduction of salaries and increased work load is a common punishment of teachers in Nigeria schools. Rewards in educational institutions include verbal praise, free homework passes, extra recess, and certificates. Other common rewards are small prizes like stickers, special privileges such as choosing a classroom game or being the line leader, and public recognition like being a Star of the Week (Suleman and Nuhu 70). Increment in salaries almost always characterized teachers reward. Reward is employed in educational institutions to encourage and improve performance while punishments serve as a method of modifying behaviour (Jimoh and Abubakar 51). Suleman and Nuhu (70) note that the use of punishment in educational institutions generates anxiety, anger and negative feelings towards the authority if done without love and affection. Nevertheless, absence of punishment in educational institution creates fertile ground for bullying, lateness, vandalism, alcohol consumption and substance abuse, truancy and inability or unwillingness to do class work at home (Jimoh and Abubakar, 51).

The evidential reality of punishment and reward system in educational sector as presented in analysis above questions the justification of philosophical determinism and its implication on moral responsibility. It is less burdening justifying punishment and reward system within the framework of philosophical freewill than determinism. As noted by Ojomo and Ibrahim (12), this is due to philosophical tenets of moral responsibility. They argued that such philosophical tenets distinguishes the moral responsibility of pre-adolescent children from adult thereby making age an important factor in discussing moral responsibility.

This dichotomy contradicts Kantian moral philosophy which recognize free will as a basis of moral responsibility. As earlier mentioned, moral responsibility is a matter of human agent acting from knowledge and freedom (McKenna and Widerker 67). Moral responsibility shouldn‘t be a matter of age. It may be argue that some children are knowledgeable in certain aspect of life more than some adult. Also, if freewill entails the ability to choice between alternative, it will be absurd exempting children from this human characteristics.

Children with knowledge and the ability to do otherwise are morally responsible but as Schapiro (717) points out, ―this is not to say that we do not hold children responsible for their actions in any sense. But the knowledge that an agent is a child rather than an adult often prompts us to modify our reactive attitudes‖.

This modification is not a pre-requisite of moral responsibility but a description of our reactive attitude. In educational sector, Giesinger (521) suggests that the distinction between strong and weak forms of educational heteronomy is important in understanding philosophical freewill, determinism and moral responsibility. He notes that weak form of educational heteronomy entails influencing or guiding someone while the stronger forms involves controlling or determining the other's behavior.

If strong educational heteronomy is adopted, learners will be controlled and determined. Learners will have only one option as intended by the educator and therefore, unfree. However, Giesinger argued that —a person who is free in this sense is, to some extent,
unreliable. It is often difficult to predict what she will do, because she might change her mind after further deliberation (523). It implied that an unfree person is more reliable and easy to predict. This is why Orji asserts that the notion of educational determination implies the possibility of gaining full control of learners (293). Teachers and learners don't almost always act from the notion of freewill. In many cases, their actions and inactions are inevitable outcomes of internal factors (biological/psychological) and external factors such as environmental/social. This is not to excuse them from moral responsibility but a call for caution in sanction.

Deterministic behavior in educational institutions follows consistently reinforces rules such walking in single file, raising their hand before speaking. Actions such as talking out of turn, arguing, or being physically aggressive are viewed as predetermined behaviors resulting from a combination of biological predispositions to stress/anger and a stressful home or school environment. Even the inactions of learners are determined. Such inactions include inability to complete homework due to lack of access to quiet study spaces, an overwhelming number of family obligations, or a lack of motivation rooted in prior academic struggles.

Consequently, the debate surrounding determinism and moral responsibility impact ethical frameworks and the way we navigate decision-making. The acceptance of determinism could instigate a paradigm shift in how we view our choices and actions. Instead of fixating solely on assigning blame, society might embrace a more holistic perspective that takes into account the intricate interplay of internal motivations and external circumstances (Tait 14). If actions are fundamentally products of deterministic processes, some argue that the concept of blame becomes less meaningful. This shift could potentially lead to a more compassionate and empathetic approach to both individuals and the circumstances that influence their choices (Tait 15).

Conclusion

Philosophical freewill and determinism are a critical ethical perspective that defines the moral responsibility of teachers and learners in educational institutions.

The moral compass and justification of punishment and reward system are substantiated by the tenets of philosophical freewill rather than determinism. It is important to stress the compatibility of these two doctrines in order to solve the ethical dilemmas of moral responsibility. Clear mapping of deterministic acts and acts of free will is instrumental in understanding the moral responsibility of teachers and learners. This will serve as a deterrent for taken caution in sanction of underserving acts and limiting the extent of freewill to avoid excess.

Recommendations

Sequel to the above discussion, the study recommends the following:

i. Deterministic acts are critical to moral upbringing of learners in educational institutions. They should not be relegated and neglected. This will help in promoting the compatibility of philosophical freewill and determinism.
ii. Clear mapping of deterministic acts and acts of freewill is important in adhering to moral responsibility. Therefore, educational institutions should clearly defined the scope of determinism and freewill. This will help teachers and learners to be moral responsible.

iii. Educational institutions should evaluate moral responsibility based on knowledge and freewill rather than age requirement. This will help in the promotion of equality of all human persons irrespective of age.

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