

## CONSEQUENCES, DUTIES AND VIRTUES: A THREEFOLD NORMATIVE ETHICAL APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL ETHICS.

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### Abstract

*This paper explores a threefold normative ethical approach to professional ethics. The prevalent moral failure among different professionals exposes the inadequacy of professional codes of conduct in arresting unethical behaviours among professionals. It is obvious that a professional code of conduct is necessary, but not sufficient without the moral growth, conviction and character of the professional. It was discovered that no particular normative ethical theory has the answer to the complex requirements of applied (professional) ethics. Unarguably, there is no single ethical approach that can claim to offer answers to all the challenges and questions arising in professional practice or to be exempted from objections and criticisms. The paper argues that an amalgamation of utilitarian ethical theory, Kantian duty ethics and Aristotelian virtue ethics provides the ethical framework for engendering viable professional ethics if the prescriptions and underlying assumptions of these normative ethical theories are followed by professionals. The prescriptions can be grouped into three main tenets: consequences, duties and virtues. It concludes that there are three key elements that a professional should observe to operate within acceptable ethical parameters, which are the greatest good, respect for human persons and moral virtues.*

**Keywords:** Normative ethics, Consequences, Duties, Virtues, Professional ethics, Professionals.

### INTRODUCTION

Interest in ethics, most especially within the professions, has grown considerably in recent decades because it has been found that good ethics is a crucial requirement of any profession. There exists much diversity of thought and little agreement regarding the most fundamental approaches to professional ethics. In the field of professional ethics, elucidations and applications of ethical theory before now have tended to focus on deontology and utilitarianism (Bowie 130-163; Hinman 176; Sumner 147-156; Clark 73; Freeman 72). Due to the discovery that neither deontology nor utilitarianism on its own is sufficient as an account of professional ethics, nor are they sufficient when they are taken together. In recent years, however, many scholars in this field have become dissatisfied with this simple bifurcation of ethics. For these reasons, some scholars have revived an interest in Aristotelian virtue ethics (Gardiner 291-316; Oakley and Cocking 74-94; Blackburn and McGhee 90-122; Solomon 317-339); still, others have explicated ethics of care and personal relationships (Noddings 128-130; Hugman 67-84).

In as much as ethics is both personal and professional, and cannot be separated, this also suggests that ethics cannot be divorced from practice. At the same time, just as the application of knowledge and skill is situational, so too is ethics. There is no doubt that a great number of professionals face ethical problems in their professional life, as compared to non-professionals, mainly because professionals are trained to provide services to society that cannot be provided by non-professionals. This is a result of the two main features that characterize professionals: “firstly, special knowledge and training and secondly, that other people are rendered especially vulnerable or dependent in their relationship to the practice of the professional” (Fullinwider 73). Consequently, professional associations introduce codes of conduct to increase professional and ethical consciousness among professionals and their sense of ethical responsibility. But, the rampant moral failure among different professionals exposes the inadequacy of professional codes of conduct without strong personal professional ethics of the professional.

However, no particular normative ethical theory has the answer to the complex requirements of applied (professional) ethics. Unarguably, there is no single ethical approach that can claim to offer answers to all the challenges and questions arising in professional practice or to be exempted from limitations, objections and criticisms. To this end, this present paper is an attempt to explore a threefold normative ethical approach to professional ethics. A threefold normative ethical approach offers new insights into the roles and responsibilities of professionals.

#### **CLARIFICATION OF TERMS: Ethics, Normative Ethics, Profession, Professional, and Professional Ethics**

Ethics as a major branch of philosophy concerns itself with the morality of human conduct. It is concerned with studying what is good, right or praiseworthy within human interaction(s). Human conduct and actions form the core and subject matter of ethics or moral philosophy; the study of ethics starts with the study of human deeds and behaviour (Okpo 9). Ethics deals with the way things ought to be, the way human beings ought to behave and what humans ought to do. It helps people to decide what is right, praiseworthy and good or wrong, blameworthy and bad in any given situation. In other words, ethics is the study of standards for determining what behaviour or conduct is right and wrong, praiseworthy and blameworthy or good and bad.

It is important to note that it is not only ethics that is concerned with human behaviour and actions in society. Ethics is not the only discipline concerned with human behaviour and actions. Social sciences like sociology, psychology and anthropology, are also interested in human actions and conduct. Their interest and perspective of ethics is different from that of philosophical ethics. These social sciences tell us how human beings act and why human beings act as they do in society without actually making a value judgement. Philosophical ethics, on the other hand, is interested not in the description and explanation but in the evaluation of human conduct (Randall and Buchler 257). This suggests that philosophical ethics is both evaluative and prescriptive in nature. Philosophical ethics prescribes whether an action is right or wrong, and whether certain

conduct is justifiable or not. It deals with the way things ought to be, the way human beings ought to behave and what human beings ought to do. Its major interests include the nature of ultimate value and the standards by which human actions and conduct can be judged right or wrong. Hence, the study of ethics begins with the study of human action. Without an anchor in human action, ethics loses its meaning and its value to decision-makers. Concerning professionals, Okpo avers that “ethics is about who professionals are – their strength of character and what they do, their deeds and conduct” (10).

Normative ethics as a branch of ethics is concerned with norms, standards or principles by which human actions are to be good or bad, praiseworthy or blameworthy, and right or wrong. The word 'normative' denotes norms, or standards, of judgement. It studies principles about how human beings ought to live and seeks norms about what is right or wrong, virtuous, or just. It asks questions like: what principle ought we to live by? What are the basic principles of right and wrong actions? What are our fundamental moral duties? What makes the right actions right? Which character traits count as virtues or vices and why? The three traditional normative ethical theories include consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics. These normative ethical theories shall be discussed in the subsequent section.

**A profession, according to Umerah citing Connelly and Clandinin, is characterized by thirteen characteristics:**

- i. a high level of education and training based on a unique and specialized body of knowledge;
- ii. requires activities that are predominantly intellectual with members possessing specialized exoteric knowledge;
- iii. a strong ideal of public service with an enforced professional code of conduct and high levels of respect from the public at large;
- iv. registration and regulation by the professional body;
- v. trusted to act in the client's best interest within a framework of accountability;
- vi. have ethical principles;
- vii. an autonomous Association;
- viii. members should show high priority to service as opposed to personal gain;
- ix. should demand continuous in-service growth and provide members opportunities for that;
- x. a supportive working environment;
- xi. similar levels of compensation as to other professions;
- xii. it should be an occupation that affords its practitioners permanent membership in a life career;
- xiii. the spirit of service to God and humanity (42 – 43).

It is clear from the above characteristics of a profession that teaching, medicine, banking, accounting, nursing, pharmacy, engineering, and law are considered professions among many others.

The term 'professional', according to Olu-Owolabi, has “three important defining features: (i) expertise, as a result of long years of training (ii) dependency of the rest of the society on this group of people (iii) the moral obligations that the professionals owe to the rest of the society by protecting the interests and rights of their clients” (68). This suggests that a professional is an expert in a field of human endeavour that most clients know little about. So, clients and the public at large rely on the knowledge, expertise, and honesty of the professional. There is a correlation between a professional's moral responsibility and his/her professional calling. The moral responsibility associated with a professional calling makes professions differ from mere jobs. Professionals are expected to commit themselves forever toward serving - the interest of their clients and public interest - a goal beyond their self-interest. Many of the ethical issues, problems and dilemmas that arise in the world of profession emanate from this expectation. Hence, the moral responsibility associated with a professional calling is the main component of a profession and the essential foundation for professional ethics.

Professional ethics belongs to the area of philosophical ethics known as applied ethics. Professional ethics, according to Olu-Owolabi, refers to “the norms and duties that ought to moderate professional activities in such a way that the conduct of professionals is carried out not for personal gains, but in the overall interest of a community in particular and humanity in general” (67). This implies that professional ethics is concerned with the ethical principles of various professions and how these principles affect the behaviours of professionals and their relationship with the general public. Professional ethics is a set of moral standards that depict the professional conduct that is expected in all fields of human endeavour. It explores the obligations of individuals within the perspective of their professional lives. One principal concern is with the kinds of obligations and responsibilities that professionals (journalists, teachers, physicians, engineers, ministers, public administrators, accountants and managers, to mention but few) have to their various stakeholders: clients, employers, employees, professional colleagues, other professionals and the society.

Professional ethics is also interested in the moral conduct and guidelines regulating the profession and its members. This area of ethical study examines moral issues, problems, conflicts of interest, and social responsibility of the individual professionals as well as the profession itself in the light of moral principles, including duty and obligation. It is important to note that an ethical issue or dilemma is simply a situation or problem that needs an individual or organization to choose between alternatives that must be appraised as right or wrong, moral or immoral, and ethical or unethical. Moreover, professional ethics do not only provide standards that regulate the relationships between professionals and clients, but they also define norms regulating the professional's responsibility to colleagues and the public in general. It also raises central questions that contain ethical issues, problems and dilemmas that arise in the world of profession. Let us at this juncture examine the three major normative ethical theories that provide norms, standards and principles that regulate human conduct.

## **NORMATIVE ETHICAL THEORIES: CONSEQUENTIALISM, DEONTOLOGY AND VIRTUE ETHICS**

As mentioned in the preceding section, professional ethics belongs to the area of philosophical ethics known as applied ethics. In applied ethics, moral philosophers have to make use of the insights derived from meta-ethics and normative ethics in addressing specific ethical issues and cases. Consequently, applied ethics is the application of ethical theories and principles to particular moral dilemmas, issues or cases. The purpose of a normative ethical theory is to be action-guiding, and the actions of a professional cannot be rationally guided by the information he/she does not have and cannot be expected to have. In philosophical ethics, three major normative ethical theories attempt to set rules that regulate human conduct in society. These theories focus on a set of standards and principles or a set of moral character traits that human beings are expected to possess. These normative ethical theories include consequentialism, deontological and virtue ethics. The goal of this section is to examine these three normative ethical theories and an attempt will be made to identify the nature, strengths and weaknesses of each of these theories.

### **Consequentialism**

The term 'consequentialism' is used to classify a common way of moral reasoning about right and wrong actions of a particular set of related ethical theories. The consequentialism normative ethical theory is also referred to as 'teleological theory'. What then is consequentialism or teleological theory? Consequentialist normative ethical theories maintain that it is the results or consequences of actions that determine the rightness or wrongness of such actions. In other words, a moral agent action is right or wrong because, and only because, of the action's results or consequences. Here, the concern is about morally right or wrong conduct. Consequentialists, unlike deontologists, do not ask whether a particular practice is right or wrong but whether it will lead to positive results. What matter to the consequentialists is nothing but the result or consequence of our action.

Consequentialism, according to Ferrell, Fraedrich and Ferrell, “refers to moral philosophies in which an act is considered morally right or acceptable if it produces some desired result such as pleasure, knowledge, career growth, the realization of self-interest, utility, wealth, or even fame” (155). Similarly, Rossouw clearly explains the nature of the consequentialism theory thus:

Consequence-oriented theories emphasize that we should look at the possible consequences or practical implications of our intended actions to determine whether an action is right or wrong. If the bad consequences outweigh the good ones, the proposed action should be abandoned and it should be regarded as morally wrong. Should the good consequence outweigh the bad ones, however, the proposed action can be considered morally permissible (15-16).

This entails that it is the goodness or badness of an action's consequences that determine its rightness or wrongness. For the consequentialists, the moral worth of conduct is determined by its consequences. Put differently, an action is morally right if, and only if,

among the actions that the moral agent could perform, there is no other action, the outcome of which has a greater expected value. To act in any other way is wrong.

It should be noted that different consequentialist normative ethical theories associate the rightness or wrongness of actions with the goodness or badness of their results in different ways. Many normative ethical theories belong to this ethical theory family in philosophical ethics. For this paper, we shall discuss one major version of consequentialism: utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism as an ethical theory is traceable to Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873). These two nineteenth-century British Philosophers are credited with introducing utilitarianism into the mainstream of modern Western ethical thought. Their normative ethical theories are based on the principle of utility, the principle of the greatest good, or the principle of the greatest happiness. According to utilitarianism, utility is the moral standard; it is the parameter or yardstick by which good actions are distinguished from bad actions. By utility, the utilitarian means benefit, advantage, pleasure, good or happiness (Bentham 18; Omoregbe 233).

**Mill, in his book – *On Liberty and Utilitarianism*, defines utilitarianism as:**

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure (118).

This means that those actions which produce or tend to produce pleasure are good while those that produce or tend to produce pain are bad. It is obvious that utilitarianism is concerned with consequences, but the utilitarian pursues the greatest good for the greatest number of persons that would be affected by a decision.

It is important to note that when the utilitarian principle asserts that the right action is the one that produces more utility than any other possible action, it does not mean that the right action is the one that produces the most utility for the moral agent. Rather, an action is right if it produces the most utility for every person affected by the action, including the moral agent (Velasquez 85). Hence, utilitarianism is not egoism (ethical egoism is also a consequentialist ethical theory that holds that the moral agent ought to do what is in his/her self-interest). The purpose of ethics for the utilitarian is to promote human welfare by minimizing harm and maximizing the good for the greatest number of people.

There are two positions of utilitarianism: act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. Act-utilitarianism maintains that the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined only based on the consequences of the action. According to this position, individual actions are to be judged right or wrong if their consequences tend to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Thus act- utilitarianism only considers the consequence of an action and not the nature of the act itself.

Rule-utilitarianism, on the other hand, maintains that an action is right if it is in agreement with a rule of conduct that has been validated by the principle of utility, and wrong, if otherwise. Rule-utilitarianism claims that it is never reasonable in any circumstances to violate a rule and the general observance of which produces the greatest possible good to the greatest number of people. Hence, while act-utilitarianism is preoccupied with specific actions, rule-utilitarianism is preoccupied with rules.

However, all versions of utilitarianism have one thing in common: it is the consequence of an action that decides the rightness or wrongness of that action and not the nature of the act itself. Rather than looking at the intention behind the act, one must explore the best outcome for the greatest number of people.

At the level of business organization, the greatest possible good to all the stakeholders would be situated both in profit and inefficient business behaviour. However, it is when the consequence, such as profit maximization, becomes the only focus of business behaviour that a utilitarian approach may become difficult and harm the rights of others. In the same vein, when an action is taken by a professional to seek the good of the wider society or group, that professional is utilitarian.

For instance, professional journalist or reporter who uses deception to uncover social ills often appeal to the principle of utility on the ground that, in the long run, they are accomplishing some moral good for the public they serve. In other words, the positive consequences for society justify the devious means of gathering information.

The criterion of quality in the utilitarian framework poses so many difficulties, it can be argued that utilitarianism justifies – and perhaps even demands – acts which seem to us to be unjust or immoral. Another way of expressing this objection to utilitarianism is to claim that people have rights which ought not to be violated even when doing so results in a greater total of good. Utilitarianism is incapable of respecting such rights because they can always be overridden in favour of an act or rule which maximizes total good.

It seems to be true that the consequences of action play a significant part in deciding whether that action is right or wrong. But utilitarianism's failure to take into account rights suggests that the rightness of an action does not depend solely upon its consequences – for us or others. Other non-consequentialist factors may also have a bearing on the moral quality of actions. For an approach which does take such factors into account, we turn to the deontology normative ethical theories.

### **Deontology**

Deontology is derived from the Greek word *deon* meaning “duty”. Deontology considers duty, or doing what is right for its own sake, as the basis of morality. Deontology sees the rightness or wrongness of an action in terms of a duty or obligation to respect the right and values of people. This duty-based normative ethical theory asserts that the consequences of an action have nothing to do with whether the action is right or wrong; it is, thus, non-

consequentialism. If consequentialism asks us to think through the consequences of the act, deontology or non-consequentialism asks us to think through the act, without thinking about its consequences. According to deontology or non-consequentialism, some types of actions are forbidden, or necessary, regardless of their consequences.

Deontology, according to Ferrell, Fraedrich and Ferrell, is seen as a “moral philosophy that focuses on the rights of individuals and the intentions associated with a particular behaviour rather than on its consequences” (158). This denotes that deontological theories are based on the philosophy that judging an action of an individual as morally right or wrong should not depend on the consequences of the action but on the intentions of the moral agent. Put differently, Deontology as a normative ethical theory does not look chiefly at the consequences of actions, but examines a situation for the essential moral worth of the intention of act, or rightness or wrongness of the act. Unlike consequentialism, deontologists or non-consequentialists argue that certain behaviours are fundamentally wrong, even if these behaviours bring about greater benefits to society. For instance, deontologists would consider it wrong to commit a serious injustice against an individual, no matter how much greater social utility might result from doing so because such an action would be violating the moral principle of respect for persons. Hence, to decide whether a particular behaviour is morally right, deontologists look for consistency in moral principles, not consequences. One of the outstanding deontologists is Immanuel Kant who believes that respecting the individual and motive matters more than results or consequences in moral deliberations.

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) was the most famous deontologist in the history of moral philosophy. It should be noted that Kantianism is identified with an idea put forward by Kant to the effect that the only thing that is good in all circumstances is goodwill. Unlike the utilitarians, Kant maintains that one ought to perform right actions not because they will produce good results, but because it is our duty as moral agents to do so. His moral philosophy is based on three major notions: his notion of goodwill, his notion of duty and his notion of the categorical imperative.

Kant speaking about goodwill maintains that nothing is good in itself except goodwill. Kant meant that goodwill is the only thing that is good without qualifications; other things regarded as good are not categorically good because their goodness can be bad when misused. What then is goodwill? He sees goodwill as the human ability to act according to the moral law or as a will that acts for the sake of duty. Humans are expected to act in conformity with moral laws or principles regardless of personal interests or consequences.

Kant makes a distinction between two types of duties: “acting for the sake of duty” and “acting according to duty”. While he considers the former as having a moral worth, he considers the latter as having no moral worth. For him, acting for the sake of duty is the only way that one's action can be said to have moral worth. What does it mean to act for the sake of duty and according to duty? To act for the sake of duty, Kant says, is “to act, not because one hopes to gain anything from the action, not because one just feels like doing it



or because one has a natural inclination to doing such things, but purely out of reverence for the moral law” (Omoregbe 220). This implies that when one is said to act for the sake of duty, one is simply acting according to the dictate of the moral law. To act according to duty, on the other hand, Kant asserts, is “to act out of prudent considerations for one's interest” (Omoregbe 220).

It should be noted that Kant never classified such actions as bad, but that those actions have no moral worth, that is, they are not morally praiseworthy. For instance, imagine that you are walking along the road with your friend. You pass a beggar asking for help on the street. And your friend gave the beggar some money out of empathy. For Kant, your friend's action has no moral worth because what is moving him to give money is empathy rather than duty. He is acting by duty, not for the sake of duty. In other words, your friend is not acting out of respect for the moral law.

Kant makes a distinction between hypothetical imperative and categorical imperative. A hypothetical imperative is a conditional imperative which requires an individual to do something which is a means to an end. On the other hand, a categorical imperative is an unconditional imperative. Categorical imperative enjoins actions not as means to ends but as good in themselves. Hence, moral commands are *categorical imperatives*; they are unconditional. The categorical imperative of Kant has two formulations.

For Kant, the criterion for distinguishing right from wrong actions is the principle of universalization. If one wants to know whether the action he intends to perform is morally right or wrong, he should look at the action's underlying principle (i.e., the maxim) and universalize it. In *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant asserts that “I ought never to act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should be a universal law” (18). Hence, one of Kant's formulations of the categorical imperative is “act on the maxim which you can will to be a universal law.” This maxim could be interpreted to mean that before a professional performs a particular action, he/she should ask himself/herself whether he/she would consider it desirable for everyone in a similar situation as his/her to perform a similar action. If the answer is in the affirmative, then his action is morally right, otherwise, it is morally wrong.

If a professional marketer is contemplating a deceptive marketing strategy to market or sell his/her product, for instance, he/she must be willing to endorse a world in which all people lie when it seems to their advantage to do so. If everyone were permitted to lie, one would never be able to tell if a person is lying or telling the truth. Under such situations, the very practice of truth-telling is weakened and lying ceases to be profitable.

Kant postulates a second formulation of the categorical imperative that he claims is similar to the first version. In the second formulation, Kant focuses his attention on the rights of human beings. Kant opines that “act so that you treat humanity, whether in your person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only” (46). Both egoism and utilitarianism (consequentialists) seem to violate this principle. For the egoist, others have value only insofar as they promote the egoist's self-interest; for the utilitarian, every person appears to be a means for the maximization of good.

However, Kant acknowledges that we might often use others as means to an end, as we do, for instance, when we employ them to do a job for us. But he underscores that they also have a value in and of themselves which we must respect. For this reason, a Kantian would take strong exception to the view that employees are to be treated like mere tools in the production process. Human labour should never be treated like machinery, industrial plants and capital solely by economic laws for profit maximization. Any economic system that fails to acknowledge this distinction between human beings and other non-human factors of production is morally deficient (Beauchamp and Bowie 21). The summary of the categorical imperative is to act out of duty in obedience to the categorical imperative is for Kant what it means to be moral.

One advantage of Kant's categorical imperative is that it encourages the furtherance of a mutual relationship between the professional and his/her clients or customers. The principle discourages the professional from formulating maxims that would amount to breaching the principles of veracity and mutual trust embedded in the code of ethics for the different professions. By his categorical imperative formulation, Kant has made it abundantly clear that lying is bad. It constitutes a breach of trust.

Even though it offers some meaningful advantages over consequentialism, Kant's theory is not without its difficulties. It is occasionally difficult to apply general principles to particular unusual circumstances. It can also be argued that moral duties cannot be separated from the consequences of fulfilling those obligations. For instance, the reason that the duty, to tell the truth, is such a fundamental principle is that truth-telling produces good consequences for society. Another criticism often directed at Kant is that although he provides us with a rational basis for rights and duties. He fails to take into consideration that duties can conflict, and he also fails to suggest a framework for resolving such conflicts. Professionals often feel torn between their duty to their employers and their duty to society at large.

Despite its shortcomings, deontology does have some advantages. First, concrete rules that provide for few exceptions take some of the pressure off the moral agents to predict the consequences of their actions. There is a duty to act according to the rules, regardless of the outcome. Second, there is more predictability in deontology, and one who follows these ideas consistently is likely to be regarded as a truthful person.

### **Virtue Ethics**

Although consequentialism and deontology theories differ in many respects, they have one thing in common: they are concerned with principles and standards for evaluating the rightness and wrongness of actions. They focus on what the moral agent should do, not on the kind of person the moral agent ought to be, that is, they ignore the character of the moral agent who acts. While consequentialists and deontologists are concerned about what humans morally ought to do and are prohibited from doing. These ethical theories are invented to answer the question "What should I do?" Virtue ethics, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with the kinds of character humans should develop. There is a much greater emphasis on "character traits" and "type of person want should be", than on

duties, obligations, rules, and rights. Hence, the primary ethical question for virtue ethics is: “What should I be?”

Virtue ethics as a normative ethical theory is more often than not associated with the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E), mainly drawn from his *Nichomachean Ethics*. It is an approach in normative ethics that underscores the virtues or moral character of the moral agent, in contrast to the approach that underscores the consequences of actions of the moral agent (consequentialism) or that underscores duties or rules (deontology). Deontologists and consequentialist theories do more, of course, than provide a foundation for advice on moral decisions. They offer an understanding of what ethics is concerned with. In Kantian ethics, this is first and foremost principles, and also respect for rational beings (including oneself as a rational being). In consequentialist theories, the concern is with values that can be attained or missed. The emphasis of these theories is on the evaluation of actions, and the rules and principles which tell us which actions to perform.

Virtue ethics, on the other hand, does offer a different understanding of what ethics is concerned with. It is thought to provide a much better understanding of humans' moral lives: what it is humans strive to be in pursuing the moral life and why the moral life is important to humans (Waluchow 202). Virtue ethicists are less concerned with individual cases and choices than with what it is to be a good person, an individual who sustains a moral compass based on solid moral values. They would say that judging any action in isolation will miss the point, as we ought to be looking at the person's whole life, all things considered. Hence, virtue ethics as a normative ethical theory emphasizes the moral agent's character and virtues rather than duties and rules, or the consequences of actions. Many virtue ethicists have criticized the notion that actions are the basic subject matter of ethics. Ethics, they have argued, should look not only at the kinds of actions a moral agent ought to perform, but ought to pay attention to the kind of person a moral agent should be. A more suitable approach to ethics, according to these virtue ethicists, would take the virtues such as honesty, courage, temperance, integrity, compassion, and self-control and the vices such as dishonesty, ruthlessness, greed, lack of integrity, cowardliness as the fundamental starting points for ethical reasoning (Velasquez 134). To this end, virtue ethics theories deal with such questions as: “How should I live?”, “What is the good life?” and “What should I be?”

It should be noted at this point that there are many accounts of virtue ethics in the West, apart from Aristotle's account. Other accounts include Plato's, the Stoics', Aquinas', Hume's and Nietzsche's accounts of virtue ethics. Moreover, there are different forms of virtue ethical theories: *eudaimonist* virtue ethics, agent-based virtue ethics and the ethics of care among others. Our concern in this paper is with Aristotle's *eudaimonist* virtue ethics.

Aristotle was a teleologist, a term associated with, but not to be mistaken with, the description “teleological” as applied to normative ethical theories such as Egoism and Utilitarianism. Aristotle was a teleologist because he claimed that all human activities are directed towards the accomplishment of certain ends or goals. His ethics contains certain

statements about the purpose of human beings, their place in society, and what is good for them. The Greek term *telos* refers to the purpose, goal or end of something. Aristotle considered happiness to be the end toward which all actions are directed. It is an end in itself and never a means to something else. Happiness, in the words of Aristotle, “being found to be something final and self-sufficient, is the end at which all actions aim” (12). This entails that happiness is the end which is sought for its own sake, and whatever an individual seeks as an end or as a good, he/she seeks it as a means to happiness. All humans seek happiness, but there is only one way to accomplish it, and that is through morality. Hence, happiness becomes a moral standard for Aristotle.

The view that makes happiness the standard of morality is known as *eudaimonism*. It is derived from the Greek word *eudaimonia* meaning “happiness” or “flourishing” or “fulfilment”. This ethical doctrine asserts that happiness is the basic reason for morality. The aim of all human actions, according to this doctrine, is to produce happiness, and actions are judged as good or right if they produce happiness, while actions that do not produce happiness are said to be bad.

For Aristotle, the highest good is happiness, the end of all human actions. The good life for man, according to him, is happiness and so men ought to behave to achieve happiness (Popkin and Stroll 7). But what then is happiness? Aristotle sees happiness as an activity of the soul in conformity with virtue (Aristotle 22). Aristotle claims that the soul consists of two parts: one irrational and the other capable of reason, that is, rational (23). Virtues, according to Aristotle, are distinguished in conformity with this division of the soul. To this end, there are two types of virtues, namely intellectual virtues (wisdom or intelligence and prudence) and moral virtues (liberality and temperance). In speaking of a person's moral character, we do not describe that person as wise or knowledgeable, but as gentle or self-disciplined. We praise a wise person for his/her character or dispositions, and praiseworthy character or dispositions are the virtues (Aristotle 24).

Intellectual virtue is the result of teaching and for that reason requires experience and time to be cultivated. What constitutes intellectual virtues, according to Aristotle, include scientific knowledge, art, practical wisdom, intuitive reason, theoretical wisdom, sound deliberation, understanding and judgement (Omoregbe 164). Moral virtues, on the other hand, include justice, temperance, liberality, courage, gentleness, wittiness, and truthfulness among others. Aristotle is of the view that virtue lies between two extremes. Virtue is a mean between excess and defect. This is known as the doctrine of the 'golden mean'. For instance, courage is a mean between cowardice and recklessness; self-control is a mean between insensitivity and self-indulgence, and so on. These extremes correspond with particular vices associated with character. These moral virtues are the product of habit. An individual becomes virtuous by doing virtuous acts. For instance, you are courageous by performing acts of courage.

For a better understanding of Aristotle's moral virtues, we present a table of virtues and vices below (*The Nicomachean Ethics* 32):

<b>Class of action or feeling</b>	<b>Excess (vice)</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Deficiency (vice)</b>
fear and confidence	rashness	courage	Cowardice
pleasure and pain	profligacy	temperance	Insensitivity
giving and getting small amounts of money	prodigality	liberality	Meanness
giving and getting large amounts of money	vulgarity	magnificence	Paltriness
major honour and dishonour	vanity	Greatness of soul	Smallness of soul
minor honour and dishonour	ambitiousness	Proper ambition	Unambitiousness
Anger	irascibility	gentleness	Spiritlessness
truthfulness about one's own merits	boastfulness	truthfulness	Self-depreciation
pleasantness in social amusement	buffoonery	wittiness	Boorishness
pleasantness in social conduct	obsequiousness	friendliness	Surliness
Shame	bashfulness	modesty	Shamelessness
pleasure in others' misfortunes	envy	Righteous indignation	Malice

The above list will give us some idea of what Aristotle means by the mean between two extremes. The virtue of courage, for instance, lies between the vices of rashness and cowardice. The coward has too much fear or fear when he/she should have none. The rash person has too little fear and excessive confidence. The courageous person has the right amount. While courage is the virtue related to the emotions of fear and confidence, gentleness is the virtue related to anger. A person who gets angry too quickly will be irascible; a person who never gets angry, even when he/she should, is spiritless. The virtuous person will get angry when he/she should, but not excessively and not contrary to reason. Aristotle calls the virtue of appropriate anger gentleness.

The question that is begging for an answer at this point is: how does an individual acquire a virtue? An individual acquires a virtue by practising virtue just as an individual becomes a swimmer in no other way than by practising swimming continually and ceaselessly until it becomes a habit in him/her. Equally, virtue is acquired in no other way than by practising it continually and ceaselessly until it becomes a habit, second nature (Omogbe 165). Aristotle believed that moral virtues should be acquired at a tender age, that is, from one's youth. It is difficult if not impossible to develop moral virtues in adulthood; a bad or good habit is difficult to acquire at a certain age.

It is a truism that an individual cannot become outstanding at anything worthwhile suddenly. To be outstanding in any worthwhile activity an individual will need both effort and consistent training for some time. Aristotle maintains that the same is true for persons attempting to develop their virtuous character traits in an attempt to live the good life; an individual cannot simply acquire these traits by decision, rather he/she must live these traits to develop them (Dimmock and Fisher 54). Hence, developing and cultivating a moral character is something that happens through practice and habitual action.

What then is the place of practical wisdom in Aristotle's ethics? Practical wisdom is a reaction to how an individual can arrive at a balance between two extremes in any given situation. Thus, practical wisdom can be seen as the moral insight of a virtuous person by which the right course of action in any given situation can be known; only a virtuous person can be a man/woman of practical wisdom and he/she acquires and develops it through experience (Omogbe 166). Consequently, practical wisdom enables an individual to correctly put his/her virtuous character into practice. In other words, practical wisdom is a necessary virtuous disposition to cultivate as without the rule of practical wisdom it may be problematic to truly practice actions that are self-controlled rather than self-indulgent, or just rather than unjust. Hence, virtue is not simply an isolated action but a habit of acting well. For an action to be virtuous an individual must do it deliberately, knowing what he/she is doing, and doing it because it is a noble action. While moral virtues position an individual to behave correctly, it is necessary also to have the right intellectual (like practical wisdom) to reason properly about how to behave in a particular situation.

Aristotle regarded justice as the highest virtue and described it as fairness and lawfulness. He differentiated between two kinds of justice: universal justice and particular justice. Universal justice is practically the same as virtue - the person who possesses justice can make use of it not only by himself/herself but also when relating with others, while particular justice is of two kinds namely, distributive justice and remedial justice. Distributive justice demands that material goods should be distributed fairly according to merit, while remedial justice demands fairness in human transactions (Omogbe 166).

Aristotle's virtue ethics is not without its limitations and objections. A common objection to Aristotelian virtue ethics is based on a concern regarding 'unclear guidance' for moral agents. It has been "accused of being a theory, not of helpful moral guidance, but of unhelpful and non-specific moral platitudes" (Dimmock and Fisher 58). Another objection has to do with his concept of happiness. For him, to achieve happiness, human

beings must act in accordance with the mean, that is, act moderately. But the question is: how can individuals apply the doctrine of the mean to the virtues of truth and honesty? Happiness therefore cannot solely be the moral standard because there are areas where Aristotle's doctrine of the mean would be difficult, if not impossible, to apply (Okpo, *Value Theory* 30).

### **A THREEFOLD NORMATIVE ETHICAL APPROACH TO PROFESSIONAL ETHICS**

In the preceding section, we discussed the nature, strengths and weaknesses of the three traditional normative ethical theories. It is a truism that each of them has some positive aspects to contribute to regulating the behaviour of individuals in society. In this section, our focus is to explore a threefold normative ethical approach to professional ethics, that is, a complementary approach to professional ethics. From the clarification of terms discussed earlier, it is obvious that the terms profession and professional have normative meanings: training, skill and commitment to a set of norms. Given the normative implications of these two terms profession and professional, professional associations and institutions introduce professional codes of ethics to regulate the conduct of their members. These associations and institutions exist to regulate professional practice, grant admission, and disciplinary responsibility, safeguard the interest of clients, public interest, and also the best interest of the profession itself.

Professional associations or institutions introduce their members to the values and norms of a specific profession and endeavour to mould their character and personality traits that are necessary to the profession through codes of conduct. Ethical codes and statements of ethical principles can be read as sets of rules. However, merely following a set of ethical rules is not necessarily to act ethically. To act ethically professionals, need to be motivated by sincere intentions and the inculcation of strong ethical convictions. Moreover, one major criterion of any profession is service to humanity. Every profession's task is to provide socially important services, and thus satisfy important social needs, then fulfilling this task will only be possible if the professionals will comply with three groups of norms: competence, conscientiousness and trust (Moore 13-15). Trust stands out among these three groups of norms. Trust is necessary in any relationship between members of society and the more trust there is between individuals, the better the society functions. The foundation of trust is the virtue of honesty and integrity expected of a professional because a hallmark of the virtue of any profession is that its members act with integrity (Okpo 16). To this end, every professional association has trust (honesty and integrity) at the root of its professional codes of conduct.

Many professional codes of conduct of different professions cover areas like a conflict of interest, integrity, customer privacy, confidentiality, abuse of trust, public safety, offer, and acceptance of gratification among others. One major purpose of codes of conduct is to increase professional and ethical consciousness among professionals and their sense of ethical responsibility. Adeyanju, citing McDowell, asserts that “ethical codes enable definition of the limits of what constitutes acceptable or unacceptable behaviour, and provide a mechanism for communicating ethics policy” (78). This suggests that codes of conduct are meant to guide professionals in making more informed ethical choices.

Moreover, professional codes of conduct provide an overall declaration of ethical values and remind professionals in the profession that ethical conduct is a crucial part of their job. Hence, the codes serve as reminders about peculiar professional responsibilities and obligations. The question that comes to mind is: can the professional codes of conduct ensure ethical behaviour without the professional's moral conviction and character? It is quite disappointing to know that despite the codes of conduct there still exist many unethical practices and behaviours that are prevalent among the different professions. In the course of performing their professional duties to meet up with the professional-client relationship demands, as well as the expectations of their employers and society at large, professionals are confronted with many ethical issues, dilemmas, and problems.

The prevalent moral failure among different professionals shows the limitation of professional codes of conduct in arresting unethical behaviours among professionals. It is obvious that a professional code of conduct is necessary, but not sufficient without the moral growth, conviction and character of the professional. Codes could be said to have a low degree of exactness; creating a code to cover every ethical issue, problem and dilemma that arises in the world of the profession is an ineffective task since it would be difficult, if not impossible, to articulate codes that would apply to every situation faced in the workplace. Moral growth emanates from choice, man's internal disposition and personal conviction; it is not a function of conformity to codes of conduct alone. For this reason, a completely dishonest professional will not be persuaded to mend his/her ways only by an ethical code of conduct, instead, he/she will find a way around the codes. Consequently, it is the view of this paper that the ethical foundation of professional ethics needs to be reformed on three grounds based on the three normative ethical theories discussed in the preceding section: greatest good (public good), human dignity (respect for the human person) and moral virtues.

The notion of the greatest good or public good as an ethical foundation of professional ethics can be understood given the fact that human beings do not exist in isolation from their fellow human beings in society. Greatest good means everything good to more than one individual, that is public good. Professionals are expected to recognise the nature and importance of their relationships with other members of society: this is one of the necessary parameters required for a professional status of a profession. Fundamental components of this relationship “are the professional's desire to do good for the client and to tailor the “good” to the particular needs of the client and the public at large” (Blackburn and McGhee 91). And, one major dimension that characterizes professionals is “performance for the public good” (Fullinwider 73). This means that professionals are required to use their skills and training for the service of the public good, as their means to achieve their personal good such as personal income.

Regarding human dignity, given that it is an essential feature of the conception of human rights (McCrudden 659; Cohen 582), it can be contended that preserving human dignity should be considered the foundation of any human interaction regardless of its setting. To this end, protecting human dignity primarily depends on two considerations. First and foremost, there is a social feature to human dignity, and so, each human person should be perceived as principally connected to society. Put differently, protecting human beings'



dignity suggests maintaining a respectable society. Second, and more seriously, human beings should be treated as an end rather than as means to an end in line with Kantian ethics. Hence, respect for persons in a professional setting is essential to the meaning of being ethical as a professional. Consequently, these thoughts should have a main role in shaping the conduct of the professional as several instances demonstrate the lack of attention to respect for persons in the relationship of professionals to clients via deceptions and other unethical practices. These unethical professionals treated their clients as a means to achieve monetary gains where no thought was given to the sustainability of the relationship.

The abstraction of the pictured ethical foundation of professional ethics cannot be complete without examining the concept of moral virtue. As discussed earlier in the preceding section, Aristotle sets out the foundation of moral virtue as moderation, and so, he sees moral virtue as an average that holds a middle position between two extremes that are deficiency and excess. Excess and deficiency, for him, are characteristics of vice, while virtue is a moderate between the two extremes; a mean. Professionals are expected to be moderate and avoid being deficient or excessive in their professional practices, that is, using good judgement to consider likely consequences and act accordingly.

From our discussion so far, there is no doubt that the three normative ethical theories, discussed earlier, have something to contribute to professional ethics. It is also a truism that no single ethical approach can offer answers to the many questions arising in the professional praxis; no particular ethical approach is exempt from limitations, problems and criticism. As such there is a need to harness their different areas of strength, and then complement and harmonize them into a workable whole. A threefold normative ethical approach seeks to examine the different viewpoints and then see how professionals can eventually harmonize the whole by considering their positive aspects. We argue that an amalgamation of utilitarian ethical theory, Kantian duty ethics and Aristotelian virtue ethics provides the ethical framework for engendering viable professional ethics if the positive prescriptions and fundamental assumptions of these normative ethical theories are followed by professionals. The prescriptions can be grouped into three main tenets: consequences, duties and virtues.

From a threefold normative ethical approach to professional ethics, consequences play a role in the application of moral principles. This approach is against the view that consequences make an action right or wrong, but it is the view that a moral agent (professional) needs to take into account the consequences when making moral choices. It disciplines a professional to be cautious before taking action. Put differently, it gets the professional emotionally disciplined in attending to his/her clients. By calculating the consequence of an action, the professional is obliged to act more cautiously. Hence, if the consequences of breaking a promise are bad enough, then the professional must break the promise. The professional is expected to ponder on what to do to avoid grave consequences to the greatest number of people if not all. Another tenet of the threefold approach is the notion of the sense of duty. Professionals must always act from a sense of duty (duty for the sake of duty), doing what is expected of them from the viewpoint of a good motive. Acting for the sake of duty entails acting, not because one has anything to

gain from the action, not because one feels like doing it or because one likes doing such things, but simply because one has a duty to do it. A sense of duty is necessary for the ethical development of any profession and professional. No profession can strive or make progress if its practitioners lack a sense of duty or do not take the sense of duty seriously, that is, duties of right actions. The third tenet is virtues. Virtues talk about the good character traits in human beings, providing grounds for morally suitable actions when faced with an ethical dilemma. A good act is something that a good person does and a good person has a sure character: a set of virtues rather than vices (Okpo 12). The virtues (honesty, integrity, fairness, truthfulness, and trustworthiness among others) that will be suitable in the profession will be those which allow a professional to contribute to the proper goals of the profession and in so doing lead to human flourishing.

### CONCLUSION

In the course of performing their professional duties to meet up with the professional-client relationship demands, as well as the expectations of their employers and society at large, professionals are confronted with a lot of ethical issues, dilemmas and problems. Given the normative implications of the two terms profession and professional, professionals are expected to be knowledgeable, skilful and ethical individuals. The prevailing moral failure among different professionals exposes their moral deficit and the inadequacy of professional codes of conduct of the different professional associations. Ethics cannot be separated from professional practice. Hence, a professional's moral growth emanates from choice, his/her internal disposition and personal conviction and is not a function of conformity to codes of conduct alone. Consequently, there are three key elements that a professional should observe to operate within acceptable ethical parameters, which are the greatest good, respect for human persons and moral virtues.

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