

Whistle-blowing: An Examination of its Nature and Moral Justification

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Abstract

As whistle-blowers continue to receive praises and rewards from governments and organizations, it is important for the governments and organizations concerned to understand the motives which usually underlie the act of whistle-blowing. While this paper recognizes the value of reporting wrongdoing for the common good of the society and even considers it a moral duty, there is also the need to point out the motives and intentions of the individual whistle-blowers, which help in determining the morality of the particular instances of the act. Arguing from the perspective of Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics, this paper submits that whistle-blowing is justified only when disclosures are made with the right intention/motivation. It also recommends that the welfare and security of whistle-blowers are necessary, especially in the contemporary fight against institutional criminal behaviour.

Keywords: Whistle-blowing, Misconduct, Morality, Categorical Imperative, Motivation.

Introduction

Whistleblowing is a dutiful practice that all legitimate organizations should implement to monitor its overall performance and contributions that its members give towards or against it. The aim is to bring corrective action to address wrong organizational practices or behaviours. The term whistle-blowing was introduced in the

domain of politics to indicate the exposure of corruption, frauds, injustices, or abuses of power. Whistle-blowing is thus the practice through which the members of an organization (public or private) voluntarily report some wrongdoing occurring within that organization, with a view to bringing about some corrective actions to address it (Ceva and Bocchiola 2018:21).

This paper provides an understanding of the concept of whistle-blowing. Some have argued that whistle-blowing is unethical and a mark of disloyalty for breaching of confidentiality between the employer and the employee or between a principal and an agent (Ukaeje 2019:41). This paper contends that whistle-blowing can be positive or negative and that the positive whistle-blowing (i.e. moral whistle-blowing) is an obligation and therefore justified, while the negative whistle-blowing (i.e. immoral whistle-blowing) is not justified and as such not permissible.

The voluntary act of exposure of misconducts to a third party is at the heart of whistle-blowing. This exposure can occur intentionally within the organization or outside the organization. Hence, there exists internal and external whistle-blowing respectively. While internal whistle-blowing is used to describe an exposure of wrongdoing which occurs within the organization, external whistle-blowing describes an exposure of wrongdoing to a third party outside the organization (Rays 2006). Hence, whistle-blowing is associated with a complex ethical dilemma and risks. For this reason, we believe that a well-meaning whistle-blower should opt for internal whistle-blowing except it has become obvious that it will offer no solution.

T. Hill rightly recommends that certain questions should be considered before a whistle-blower can consider blowing the whistle externally. They include the following:

- Whose interests are being served by the whistle-blowing?
- Who could be damaged?
- What is my motivation as a whistle-blower?
- Do I have the ethical obligation to blow the whistle?
- Will the act of whistle-blowing solve the problem or prevent harms? (Hill, 2010:48)

With these questions, a potential whistle-blower will be able to make an informed, rational decision or whether or not to blow the whistle. They also help to strength the whistle-blower's disposition and moral obligation by helping him to figure out the best course of action and follow it. Organizations and governments can therefore help them in this difficult task by putting in place a comprehensive whistle-blowing policy which will guarantee their safety and protection, for as Gagnon and Perron (2020) have remarked, sound ethical decision-making does not protect whistle-blowers from the negative consequences of whistle-blowing.

Meaning and Nature of Whistle-blowing

A whistle-blower is one who reveals information about what is going on within an organization which is understood to be immoral or illegal. He is someone who reports waste, fraud, abuse, corruption or dangers to public health and safety to someone who is in the position to rectify the wrongdoing (Ukeje 2019:13). This revealed information may be brought to the attention of the public through the media or law enforcement agency, or directed to a superior or any third party within the organization, with the hope that the problem

will be addressed. It can happen in any sector of life: schools, government, finance, religion, companies, etc. Ordinarily, the whistle-blower (if identified) would face certain challenges, including punishment, retaliations and unjust treatments.

The term is used in relation to the use of a whistle during a game (say football) to alert the public about the commission of fouls or breaking rules. In this way, it attaches itself to law enforcement in response to the crime committed. Hence, the sports referees, who use a whistle to indicate a foul play during a game, are equally referred to as whistle-blowers (Katie & Kleiner 2011). Generally, the term is used to refer to those who reveal wrongdoing in the society.

Miceli and Near, characterized whistle-blowing with the following elements: action, object, agent, locus, addressee, and aim (Miceli & Near 1992). They noted that whistle-blowing is a specific kind of action, namely a report. Reports could be either open or confidential. In other words, it could be either a form of public accusation or disclosure of information through some specific channels. It can also be either authorized or unauthorized, depending on the object of the report under the law of a particular country (Sagar 2013). By object of whistle-blowing is meant the actual offence in question. They may include abuse of power, unlawful or illegal activities, violation of some set standards, or morally impermissible actions such as unwelcome sexual advances, etc. The agents of whistle-blowing are the whistle-blowers themselves. These are not only the individuals who come forward with reports but also the organization within which the crime occurred. From here, it follows that organizations are the *loci* where the reported misconducts occur. The term organization is understood to include the broad term of institutions.

They may be public or private (hospitals, schools, businesses, etc.), governmental offices, or non-governmental such as civil society associations. Then, by the addressee is meant the body to which the report is directed. This could be either internal or external. It is internal when it is addressed to the whistle-blower's direct superior or to a dedicated office within the organization, and external when it is addressed to such entities as state or national authority, the police or the media.

Finally, it is worth noting that whistle blowing is a purposeful action which aims at correcting a misconduct. While a whistle-blower's actual subjective intention may be either selfish or altruistic, whistleblowers' actions are generally taken to be a commitment towards the common good. An example of whistle-blowing is when a member of an organization, whether private or public, reports a wrong doing to someone in higher position or to law enforcement agency or to the organizations lawyer (assuming the lawyer is not involved in the wrongdoing). Whistle-blowers often suffer maltreatment from superior officers or their employers. They are often taken to be *at-will employees*. To be sure, at-will employees are employers who, to the detriment of the organization/employer, take adverse employment actions (Lee & Brain 2011). For this reason, they can be sacked without a tangible reason.

The Morality of Whistle-blowing

It is no longer uncommon to see people coming forward secretly to report misconducts, and for that reason, receiving huge financial rewards from government and organizations as the case may be. This is praiseworthy, but it behooves on the organization or the government to find out the motives behind the whistle-blower's

action, as this will help create morally enabling ground for the practice of whistle-blowing. The fact remains that there are several grounds for whistle-blowing. Let us look at few of them.

First, it could be the desire to put an end to unethical practices and injustices in the society or within an organization. A violation of appropriate laws and given ethical policies thus becomes a justification for whistle-blowing. It is noteworthy also that some whistle-blowers are compelled by their own personal codes of ethics, often interpreted by critiques as bias. Whistle-blowers could also be motivated by societal pressure. As a study by Ogbo and Uozie (2017) shows, people who ordinarily may wish not to blow the whistle could do otherwise on the ground that others are aware of the crime. They believe that not blowing the whistle will come with some consequence. Whistle-blowing often comes from reasons of selfish interest. Some whistle-blowers come forward simply because of what they desire to gain from the exercise. To achieve this end, they direct the report to wherever they think gainful desires will be achieved. It is also not uncommon to find some of them telling lies against innocent victims, however law of the state provides penalty for false whistle-blowing

Now, for a whistle-blower to be morally justified, certain conditions are to be met. First, the claims or report he or she is coming forward with must be the case. Research has shown that many whistle-blowers come up with falsehood against innocent persons (Ogbo and Uozie 2017: 13). Such acts often have great consequences both on the government or the organization, the accused person, as well as the whistle-blower. This consequence could have been avoided if the whistleblower acted in goodwill and avoided falsehood. Again, a

morally permissible whistle-blowing requires that the whistle-blower's reports is from his or her conviction that he or she is acting based on ethical duty to right the wrong. . Therefore, as much as we encourage the practice of whistle-blowing, we encourage equally that the practice should have moral justifications. Whistle-blowing is justified when disclosures are made with the right intention/motivation, namely the conviction that one has moral duty to right a wrong.

Often socioeconomic reasons will compel whistle-blowers to ignore the right ethics of the practice. For instance, right ethics of the practice requires that the report be properly channeled, it also demands proper channeling of the motives for blowing the whistle. The aim of whistle-blowing should be to right the wrong. Any punishment consequently imposed on the wrong party should be intended for this purpose and for the reason of deterrence. For this reason, it will be unwise to report to the government a misconduct that could have better been handled and corrected internally within an organization or a group.

Research has shown that unnecessary huge rewards will entice whistle-blowers to go to where they will be so rewarded (such as the government) with problems that local employers would have addressed (Oswald 2012) This may surely lead to a devastating consequence on the organization. Sometimes the evidence of misconduct that the investigation produced might even be ignored in the quest for punishment and for rewards. Therefore, under the right circumstance, namely that every organization has a proper whistle-blowing channels in place, whistle-blowers have an ethical responsibility to first disclose misconducts to the organization

before they can consider to move forward to the government, for clarity of purpose and for the sake of due process.

Note that we are not trying to say that the offer of rewards to ethical whistle-blowers is not necessary. As a matter of fact, the act is praiseworthy. However, care must be taken that the morality of whistle-blowing is not relegated to the background in favor of benefits and rewards.

The question of why and under what circumstances people report unacceptable behavior in the society or within an organization cannot be taken for granted. The point is that harm can as well be done by the whistle-blowers to innocent people. This may result in unjust treatment or even the death of persons concerned, in addition to huge amount of money which might be spent investigating a false charge. It is not impossible to believe too that some of the whistle-blowers are simply pursuing selfish interests and personal glory as already remarked.

Rosemary O'leary, a Professor of Public Administration at the University of Kansas, provides an important example in the analysis of what she calls guerrilla government (O'Leary 2020: 7). She noted that instead of acting openly, guerrillas often choose to remain in the closet, moving clandestinely behind the scenes against the current of power. She avers that their acts are generally as inspiring as saving human lives out of love for humanity and as disgusting as slowing the issuance of a report out of spite. What O'Leary is saying is that some whistle-blowers, because of the principle of secrecy, are quick to come up with unsubstantiated allegations upon individuals of their choice. It follows, therefore, that whistle-blowers of this sort

should also be disciplined and punished by appropriate authority upon unfounded accusations.

Indeed, some see whistle-blowing as being disloyal for the fact that it breaches confidentiality (Firtko & Jackson 2005). This seems appealing to common sense. However, it must be kept in mind that the public good supersedes that of an individual or a group. Hence, Robert Larmer argues that though an employee possesses *prima facie* duties of loyalty and confidentiality to his/her employer, whistle-blowing can be justified on the basis of higher duty to the public good, otherwise it cannot be justified (Larmer 1992). It entails simply telling the truth to stop illegal harmful activities.

Ethical Dilemma with Whistle-blowing

Whistle-blowers often face retaliation which may come in many forms such as unfair dismissal, suspension, discrimination, persecution, demotion, loss of relationships, injustices, etc. This in turn may result to certain psychological effects such as depression, stress-related illness, thoughts of suicide, etc. For this reason, many people do not consider blowing the whistle, especially in cultures where speaking out is not well encouraged. Rowe and Bendersky (2002) argue that some organizations, associate whistle-blowing with traitor and treason; and the punishment for treason is death penalty in many places.

Therefore, when, as a worker, one becomes aware of crimes, either from an employee or from the employer, one's desire to be honest and ethical might run in conflict with one's promise of loyalty. Indeed, many people find it difficult to blow the whistle even when they know the objective truth that they have a moral duty to do so.

There are several reasons for this. First, consider a situation where the organization does not promote transparency or where it actively discourages it. No matter the belief of the potential whistle-blower, he or she would certainly be hesitant to come forward. He might be worried that he would not be considered a team worker or that his job might be at risk if he speaks up.

Furthermore, for an employee, whistle-blowing seems to be an act against his or her own interests. This is because in the end, the organization may have to be finned heavily, which could in turn affect the job of the whistle-blower. Also, whistle-blowing can feel like a violation of trust if the offending party works closely with the whistle-blower. Since man is a social animal, we naturally become close with the people we see every day in the working place. Therefore, revealing an information that will gravely affect our friends and relatives can make us feel guilty, and that feeling can prevent us from blowing the whistle.

Despite these risks, however, there has been a growing support for whistle-blowing all over the world, especially in the areas of governance, public accountability and fight against corruption (Rowe & Bendersky 2002). In Nigeria, for instance, which has been lagging behind in putting up comprehensive policy, the federal government has put in place a whistle-blowing policy to encourage people to expose frauds in the public and private sectors. According to that policy, the whistle-blower stands to get a reward of about 5% of the monies recovered. Hence, the whistle-blowing policy encourages individuals to come forward with any concerns, but at the same time, it discourages malicious reports of falsehood and false accusations of innocent persons. A whistle blower needs to first

examine the depths of the wrongdoing and take action if it is substantial.

Whistle-blowing and the Imperatives in Kantian Ethics

The “imperatives” in Kantian ethics is fitting for the evaluation of motivations for human actions. According to Kant (1993), the morality of human acts can be summed up in an imperative from which all duties and obligations derive. This imperative is knowable to all since it is a commandment of reason. He defines an imperative as any proposition declaring a certain action (or inaction) to be necessary. There are two such imperatives, namely hypothetical and categorical imperatives. While a hypothetical imperative applies to someone who wishes to attain certain ends and, as such, conditional upon the ends in view, a categorical imperative denotes an unconditional requirement that must be obeyed in all situations and is justified as an end in itself. An example of the former is the maxim, 'I must lead a good life to make heaven'. An example of categorical imperative is the maxim 'I must lead a good life'.

The act of whistle-blowing can be evaluated by means of these criteria. One realizes in the first place that blowing the whistle is an imperative. This is because it is deemed to be necessary from both points of the imperatives. Whether the whistle-blower's action is on the condition that he or she will go with some rewards or simply on the conviction that he is acting morally, blowing the whistle is necessary. Its necessity, however, cannot stem from the point of view of mere hypothetical imperatives, otherwise one will be motivated on the condition of what one will get out of the exercise. Instead, the necessity of whistle-blowing is from the point of view of the categorical imperative. In this case, the whistle-blower's motivation

is not on the condition of what he or she stands to gain, but simply because it is the right thing to do. Not for socioeconomic gains, but because it is a moral duty. And as Kant averred every rational being will possibly arrive at this same belief.

The categorical imperative states: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant 1993: 30). For this reason, the categorical imperative is also called the principle of universalizability. This imperative, therefore, relies solely on objective considerations. Indeed, Kant is of the view that hypothetical moral systems (such as utilitarianism) cannot persuade moral action or be regarded as bases for moral judgments against others, because the imperatives on which they are based rely too heavily on subjective considerations. As an alternative, he presented a deontological moral system, based on the demands of the categorical imperatives.

The categorical imperative is characterized as an objective, rationally necessary and unconditional moral principle that must be followed despite any natural desires we may have to the contrary. Indeed, any action that violates the principle is not moral. Thus, the categorical imperative commands all right actions to be a moral obligation on all. Hence, blowing the whistle is actually a moral duty. It is a duty because all hands should be on deck in exposing corruption which naturally impedes justice, development and progress in any society. One of the major challenges in the fight against corruption is its detection and exposition. Whistle-blowing thus becomes an indispensable means of achieving this goal.

As Onuegbulam (2017: 174) noted, no obligations can dispense with

that which lies on every member of the society, to discover every design which may be formed, contrary to the laws of the society, to destroy the public welfare. One thus realizes that whistle-blowing is truly linked to ethics and morality. The act of whistle-blowing is not necessarily a legal obligation but a moral obligation; a personal choice, if you like. The motivation for the act is the call for personal responsibility. The question is whether the individual is willing to shoulder the responsibilities, for whistle-blowing despite the many risks.

Understanding the Motivating Factors of Whistle-blowing

The motivating Factor plays a very important role in Kantian ethics. For him, what matters in moral judgments is not the consequences of the action but what informs the choice we make. Our choices must be informed by good will. The will, according to Kant, is the power of rational moral choice the presence of which gives man his inherent dignity. But what makes the will good? The will is good when it acts out of duty, not out of inclinations. One is acting out of inclination when he does something because it makes one feel good or because one hopes to gain something from it. On the contrary, to act of duty is to act from respect for moral norms, which is contained and knowable from the categorical imperative.

The categorical imperative is, thus, a rule for testing moral actions. It requires one to consider the principles on which one is acting before acting. If the principle once generalized, it contradicts itself, then, it is not right to use that principle or maxim as a basis for action. And if it makes sense, then, ask whether you would choose to live in a world where it is followed by everyone. If yes, act on the maxim; if no, do not act on the maxim.

Let us consider the example of blowing the whistle because of the benefits we will get from it.

- Maxim: I may report a misconduct in order to reap financial gains.
- Generalized: Anyone may report perceived misconducts in order to reap financial benefits.

One finds out that this maxim permits doing the right things for wrong reasons, as such, it is morally contradictory upon examination and no one will reasonably choose to live in a world where it is followed by everyone. One cannot right a wrong with a wrong. Any maxim permitting something wrong must be rejected.

Now, in blowing the whistle in order to get material benefits, the whistle-blower treats the offender as a means to an end. He or she is simply exposing the other in order to achieve some selfish ends. This is quite contrary to Kant's moral reasoning which invites us to always act so as to treat rational nature (i.e. human beings) as an end, never as a means only (Ogbo & Uzozie: 12-13). Therefore, the act of whistle-blowing should be pursued not because of the consequence but because it is right.

Justification for Whistle-blowing

Whistle-blowing requires moral justification because it is a breach of trust and a violation of confidence and sometimes a neglect of loyalty owed at least *prima facie*. The foundation of whistle-blowing, to be sure, should be one or all of the following: personal values, organizational value, or public/common good.

Whistle-blowing brings two moral values among others into

conflict, namely justice and loyalty. Doing what is fair or just often conflicts with showing loyalty. Now loyalty is an ethical value because there is need to maintain the existence of trust between co-workers (for instance) and employed. By exposing unethical behaviors, whistle-blowers tend to go against this prevailing relationship of trust. Nevertheless, the ethical value of loyalty cannot override that of justice and fairness. In other words, loyalty cannot be placed above one's obligation to act in the best interest of the society or organization.

Responsible people blow the whistle when it is believed that more harm than good will occur if the whistle-blower stays silent. A virtuous whistle-blower, acts in an ethical manner if he or she truly believes a responsibility exists to protect the public interest. Such a one is thus willing to accept the consequences of one's actions. An ethical whistle blower is courageous, and his or her decision is propelled by integrity. He or she is willing to stand his or her ground even in the face of pressure to remain silent. To be sure, an ethical whistle blower is compelled by moral duty, and never because of desire to receive a benefit or reward.

The most important consideration in assessing whether a whistle-blower's action is justified is, therefore, the motivation/intention for his or her action. Is it to right a wrong? Is it to give voice to a value which one considers a moral duty to uphold? Or, is the basis for the action the pursuit of self-interests? After all, greed is a motivating force when considering whether or not the whistle should be blown on wrongdoings. While we would agree with the value of reporting wrongdoing for the common good of the society and even considers it a moral duty, we argue that motivation/intention can color

acceptance and perception. Whistle-blowing is not bad in itself and it is not the exclusive preserve of any one. We all are called to responsibility and accountability and to positively influence change. We all are called to help create a more ethical society.

Whistle blowing, therefore, is a moral duty, and the whistle-blower ought to be motivated by duty, and his action ought to be a product of good will irrespective of the consequences. Acting from duty is acting out of reverence for a universal moral law – deemed to be an imperative for all rational agents. According to Kant (1993), an imperative is any command of reason that necessitates the will – the function of reason being to make the will good in itself. The idea of good will supposes to be the idea of one who is committed only to making decisions that he or she holds to be morally worthy. Only in fulfillment of these requirements is one's action of whistle-blowing morally justified.

Recommendations

It is true that laws protecting the rights of whistle-blowers and regulating their activities are already existing in many places. Yet these laws sometimes ignore the ethical dimension of the practice. Certainly, many countries do not have any whistle-blowing policies in their laws. Whistle-blowing policies should be all encompassing; first, a disclosure should be made to the accused person. This disclosure should be well protected. If any retaliation resulted, and if a genuine connection between the retaliation and the whistle-blower's action is established, then the accused should take responsibility. Yet the policy should not only encourage potential whistle blowers to come forward but also discourage malicious whistle-blowers from lying against innocent persons and against

using the practice simply to satisfy socioeconomic needs.

Organizations' whistle-blowing policy should project anonymous reporting mechanism and provides adequate environment for reporting of potential or actual crimes/wrongdoing without fear of retaliations and molestation. To facilitate this, complaint systems that offer choice of absolute confidentiality outside the dictates of the organization should be put in place. Also, involvement of third party in which the whistle-blower is anonymous even to the third party is necessary for an organization to promote/encourage compliance.

Not every country has put laws in place to protect whistle-blowers from retaliation. Many of them are left to their own fate after their choices to stand a moral high ground by reporting wrongdoing. Some of them of course lose their jobs and/or reputation. Indeed, some lose their lives. In this way, potential whistle-blowers are discouraged, resulting in the rise of corruption and wrongdoing. Therefore, it is paramount for every government to introduce laws to protect whistle-blowers both in the private and public sectors. These laws will help to prevent corruption and encourage people to expose wrongdoing for the benefit of the people. The law, for instance, should restrict the government from taking, or threatening to take, any personal action against someone because he/she disclosed information which portrays the government's wrongdoing: abuse of authority, danger to public safety, mismanagement, breach of law, waste of fund etc., for the good of the society, no matter the consequence of such revelation upon the government.

Government, organization leaders, and business managements have

a responsibility to the public to act on whistle-blowers' intelligence. They should not fail to use the data collected from whistle-blowers' reports in a progressive manner. They ought to analyze the trends, carry out necessary investigations, and adequately resolve the issues, else the benefits of whistle-blowing services would be negated considerably, which will in turn encourage crimes and wrongdoing. Also, they too must abide by the ethics in which they believe. For, as Steven Mintz rightly noted, the worst thing that can happen in a society or an organization is for the government or management to say they believe in a code of conduct and then violate that very same code when it comes to their real-life practices.

Conclusion

Whistle-blowing is the process by which an individual can report a misconduct or corrupt practice which is in the public interest about wrong doing by a third party without fear of repercussions. The fact that corruption cannot be fought unless it is detected, reported and addressed is indispensable. This notwithstanding, the fight against corruption, like any other crimes, has to be in accordance with some moral standards. An ethical whistle-blower acts in an ethical manner if he or she truly believes a responsibility exists to protect the public interest or for the whistle to be blown. A whistle-blowing policy can help facilitate the ethical dimension of the process. A whistle-blowing policy should clearly define what whistle-blowing is, set out the whistle-blowing process, describe the whistle-blower's protection and rights, and describe the punishment put in place for deliberate false report

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