The Paradox of Ambivalent Human Interest in Innocent Asouzu's Complementary Ethics: A Critical Inquiry

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Patrick Effiong BEN
Department of Philosophy, University of Pretoria
Email: patrickbenblag@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3026-1899

Abstract
In this paper, I argue that the cause of morally self-defeating acts at the collective level is greed and, at the individual level, an unrestrained impulse for pleasure beyond Innocent Asouzu's primordial instinct for self-preservation and ignorance. In investigating why humans act in self-defeating ways, Asouzu came up with two possible factors responsible for self-defeating acts: The primordial instinct for self-preservation and ignorance. Besides Asouzu's explanation, I here argue that the problem of self-defeating acts goes beyond the primordial instinct for self-preservation and ignorance to reveal a flaw characteristic of the human condition. At the collective level, the flaw responsible for self-defeating acts is greed and the unrestrained impulse for pleasure at the individual level. I employ the conversational method to interrogate the different views on self-defeating acts from Socrates to Asouzu and show why my explanation offers a better understanding of the problem.
Keywords: Ambivalent human interest, paradox, self-defeating acts, greed, unrestrained impulse for pleasure.

Introduction

Some philosophers have pondered why humans act in self-defeating ways, even when the consequences of such acts seem obvious from the onset. A self-defeating – or self-destructive – behaviour here as defined by Roy Baumeister and Steven Scher (1988, 3), implies "any deliberate or intentional behavior that has clear, definitely or probably negative effects on the self or on the self's project." These philosophers range from Socrates, who declared that "[N]o intelligent man believes that anyone does wrong freely or acts shamefully and badly of his own free will… all who do shameful and bad things do so other than freely" (PLATO 1976, 345e), to Aristotle who held that "in most things the error seems to be due to pleasure; for it appears a good when it is not" (1999: Book III, 4), before Asouzu (2003, 20-33), who referred to the problem as a paradox of ambivalent human interest. According to Barry Slater (2021), a paradox is generally a puzzling conclusion we seem to be driven towards by our reasoning, which is highly counterintuitive. Asouzu (2003, 21-22; 2013, 11) articulated the 'paradox of ambivalent human interest' as something that denotes the double capacity of human interest to represent something both negative and positive at the same time. A scrutiny of this existential paradox of working against the self besides leaving one nonplussed raises profound questions about the motivations for human

actions, like engaging in drug abuse at the individual level and political corruption at the collective level.

Asouzu, who develops an approach that is similar to that of Socrates, addresses this existential paradox as ambivalent human interest, which can lead us to an error of judgment in our choices (2003, 22). This is because it has the character of concealment that presents our interest to us only from that perspective that appeals to us. In other words, ambivalent human interest is a form of affirmation of a moral subject's negative interest. It is a phenomenon that leads humans to do those things that negate their being by denying them the joy of a noncontradictory complementary existence. Thus, Asouzu (2004, 355) argues that one of the most difficult tasks of ethics is to unravel the root cause of this paradox.

Why do humans generally engage in socially and/or morally self-destructive acts, even when they are often conscious of the negative consequences? For example, why do political officeholders embezzle funds meant to develop the societies they serve and to empower the people who reposed the trust of public leadership in them? Why do people engage in drug abuse when they know that the act may result in negative consequences like mental problems and overdose, leading to death? To engage Asouzu, do humans naturally act in ways detrimental to their ends? If yes, is this a product of ignorance, or a flaw characteristic of the human condition? How can we overcome the paradox of ambivalent human interest as an ethical concern? These questions illustrate the paradox of ambivalent human interest in that they involve people making choices that they often foresee will be bad for themselves in the long run. Finding a response to these questions constitutes the burden of this essay.

As a response, Asouzu seeks to expose the root cause of this problem by creating awareness concerning the impact of this phenomenon on human conduct through a number of processes, to wit: (1) *proclamatory* or *moralizing conscientization* – this involves urging people to change their ways without necessarily providing them with adequate reasons to do so; (2) *contentful conscientization* – this involves appealing to reason based on established insight why a person should act in a certain way (2003, 38-42); (3) *noetic propaedeutic* – this involves a self-imposed act of conscious re-education of the mind (2013, 74-77); and (4) *the truth and authenticity criterion* – this demands that all missing links of reality must concede to their relativity and renounce their absoluteness (2004, 320).

Although Asouzu's proposed solutions were applied primarily to the problem of corruption in leadership, I here broaden the application of his proposed solutions to a more direct problem of drug abuse. Although I believe Asouzu's goal of *contentful conscientization and noetic propaedeutic,* which he proposes and prioritizes over *proclamatory* or *moralizing conscientization* amongst others to be noble and well-intentioned, I contend that Asouzu's approach does not go far enough to address the problem of self-defeating acts. This is because it ignores the nature of the acting agent and focuses more on the actor's motivations. To understand and avoid the problem of morally self-defeating acts like drug abuse, and to expand on the reach of Asouzu's solutions, I propose to first provide a critical understanding of the human condition as being characteristically flawed beyond Asouzu's original considerations of the rational/quasi-rational element, the

primordial inclination to self-preservation (see ASOUZU 2004, 50-60), and '*ihe mkpuchi anya*' or 'phenomenon of concealment' (see ASOUZU 2013, 11-15), hence, serving as a basis for morally/existentially self-defeating actions beyond ignorance. Secondly, I propose re-directing Asouzu's *contentful conscientization* and *noetic propaedeutic* to the above understanding, to improve moral agency by building self-aware moral actors. The aim is to explain what constitutes and informs self-defeating actions like drug abuse, and how to avoid them by refusing to feed the factors that encourage them. The ethical relevance of this inquiry can be found in its promise of broadening our understanding of the root causes of immoral acts. And in proffering solutions to the same in line with Asouzu's notion of complementary ethics.

Complementary ethics, as conceptualized by Asouzu (2004, 354) emphasizes that ethics and morality are not solely concerned with right and wrong conduct but are also primarily concerned with the joy and sadness of human actions. From a complementary moral framework, "[A] morally good act is one, which is performed in the consciousness that it has a comprehensive and total outreach and with a view of being a source of joy to the actor and is capable of radiating such a joy in a dynamic complementary future referential manner" (ASOUZU 2004, 354-355). Although Asouzu did not provide a succinct definition of complementary ethics, from a careful perusal of his works, I here define complementary ethics as 'an ethical system that emphasizes upholding the imperatives establishing human actions to promote the joy of being and the common good'.

In the first section of this essay, I discuss the origin of the question of self-defeating acts. In the third section, I present Asouzu's analysis of ambivalent human interest. In the fifth section, I consider possible ways of avoiding self-defeating acts as an ethical concern for the betterment of the individual and society. I also demonstrate where I differ from Asouzu in his proposed solutions to the problem of ambivalent human interest. Finally, I anticipate some objections to my proposed solution and respond accordingly. In so doing, I hope to provide a deep understanding of the motivations for self-defeating actions. As a theoretic significance, I hope the clarity provided thereof will be handy in a new attempt to redress the moral problem of ambivalent human interest. As a practical significance, I hope this research and its consequent proposal would improve moral agency by helping humans to become better moral subjects and informed decision-makers.

The Question of Self-defeating Acts

The question of self-defeating acts centres around the reason why humans act in ways that are contrary to their well-being. This question which may simply be framed as 'why do humans engage in socially and/or morally self-destructive acts, i.e., actions whose end have negative consequences for the actor?' is arguably as old as man itself. However, before it was systematically problematized as a malady worthy of critical attention by Asouzu in contemporary philosophy, its earliest mention can be found in Simonides' poem as contained in one of Plato's Dialogues, *Protagoras*. The question is brought to the fore in a philosophical conversation between Socrates and Protagoras. In *Protagoras* (1956), which has

Socrates as the leading character, Socrates, in a conversation with Hippocrates, Protagoras, Callias, Hippias, Alcibiades, Prodicus, and his companions, first discussed the problem of self-defeating acts in his critical analysis of Simonides' poem. The discussion which led to the question of self-defeating act began with Protagoras' question to Socrates and his audience about the most important part of a man's education, which Protagoras claims that it centres on being knowledgeable about poetry (1976, 339a). Protagoras' goal here is to establish that "the ability to grasp the good and bad points of a poem, to distinguish them and to give one's reasons in reply to questions" (1976, 339a-b) about matters of poetry, is a mark of excellence. Analyzing Simonides' poetry, which was addressed to Scopas, Protagoras examined the connection between 'excellence' and being 'a truly good man'. Protagoras began by arguing that there is a contradiction in the assertions made by Simonides in his poem addressed to Scopas. For Protagoras, the contradiction can be found when one examines the introductory part of Simonides' poem where he averred that "it is hard, rather, to become a truly good man, foursquare in hand and foot and mind, fashioned without fault" (1976, 339b); and the latter part of his poem where he averred that "Nor do I hold as right the saying of Pittacus, wise though he was; he says it is hard to be noble" (1976, 339c). The basic assumption guiding Protagoras' argument here is that virtue is teachable. This informs his criticism of Simonides for supposing that it is hard to be a good man; that excellence is unattainable.

Socrates responded by refuting Protagoras' claim of the existence of a contradiction in Simonides' poem. In Simonides' defence, Socrates argued that there is no contradiction in the claims of Simonides and that his chastisement of Pittacus, and that Protagoras' distinction between "becoming" and "being" as contained in the poem is because Protagoras misunderstands the Cean dialect (1976, 340b). For Socrates, what Simonides meant was that "it is impossible to be a good man all the time, good all the time, that is, but it is possible to become good and for the same man to become bad" (1976, 345c). Socrates further establishes the justification for this position by examining Simonides's intentions for the poem. The intention of Simonides in the poem for Socrates was "to criticize the saying of Pittacus throughout the poem" (1976, 344b). Simonides intends to prove that "to become a good man is truly difficult, but possible, for a time at least; but having become one, to remain in that state and be a good man…is impossible and beyond human power, but only a god could have that gift" (1976, 344c). The thinking that undergirds Simonides' criticism of Pittacus' position that it is hard to 'be' noble, is best captured in Socrates' analysis of another section of the poem, which Socrates explains thus:

> Now in controlling a ship, who is it whom helpless disaster overthrows? Clearly not the man without knowledge of sailing; for he has been overthrown from the start. So just as you can't throw a man who is already down, but you can throw a man who is on his feet, and put him, and not if he's down already, similarly helpless disaster can sometimes overthrow the resourceful man, but not the man who is always helpless, and a helmsman can be struck and rendered helpless by a great storm, and a farmer made helpless by the onset of a bad season, and the same with a doctor. For the

> noble man can become bad…but the bad man can't become bad, but must always be so. (1976, 344d-e)

The explanation above leads Socrates to his most significant conclusion of what the poem establishes, which Socrates himself agrees to. That conclusion also forms the basis of his position on the question of why humans act in self-defeating ways. In line with Socrates' analysis of the claims made by Simonides in his poem, that "it is hard, rather, to become a truly good man, foursquare in hand and foot and mind, fashioned without fault" (1976, 339b), he proceeded to give an example of how ignorance is the basis of unintelligent acts. In matters of reading and writing, what makes a good reader and writer, is his commitment to learning his letters (1976, 345a-b). The same applies to doctors. For example, a man becomes a good doctor by learning how to care for the sick. So, for one to be a 'bad' reader and writer, one must first be a reader and writer, then a 'good' reader and writer, before one can qualify to be called a bad reader and writer. The same applies to a doctor. This position is drawn from these lines from Simonides, "[F]or when he does very well, every man is good, but bad when he does badly" (1976, 344e). Thus, Socrates argues that those who are ignorant of a particular thing, could never in doing badly become culpable. For example, those who are ignorant of the game of chess could never, in doing badly in chess, become bad chess players; those who are ignorant of sculptures could never, in doing badly, become bad sculptors. 'Doing badly' for Socrates was purely a matter of "being deprived of knowledge" (1976, 345b). Another way to construe this argument is that when we know something and we are good at it, we will do it well. If we do it badly, for us to be culpable, we must first know doing it well. For instance, a man who does evil must first become good before he can be bad. Otherwise, he is naturally evil all the time.

The question of self-defeating acts takes a definite form in Socrates' corollary assertion drawn from the following lines of the poem (1976, 345d):

> "But I praise and love all
> Who do nothing shameful freely;
> But against necessity not even gods fight."[1]

Explaining the above, Socrates provided the earliest philosophical critique of self-defeating actions in Western philosophy when he averred that "[N]o intelligent man believes that anyone does wrong freely or acts shamefully and badly of his own free will… all who do shameful and bad things do so other than freely" (1976, 345e). Socrates here provided a strong argument for why any human would act badly. Evil, for him, was a product of ignorance. Although he never systematically engaged the subject matter of self-defeating acts holistically, Asouzu, over two millennia later, picked up on this question and provided a robust critique of the subject matter. In the next paragraph, I consider the origin of the question of self-defeating acts in Asouzu's works.

The question of self-defeating acts is a central theme in Asouzu's *ibuanyidanda* – Complementary – philosophy. At the foundation of an inquiry into

[1] For a detailed analysis of the poem as presented by Socrates, see Plato (1976, 339b-345e).

the problem of self-defeating acts for Asouzu (2003, 5) is the question: why do people find it difficult to do those things they identify as good but insist on doing those they find distasteful and criticize? Why do people pursue self-interests that are grounded on contradictory foundations? These are some of the questions that characterize Asouzu's inquiry into the subject matter of self-defeating acts. The main thrust of pursuing this question surrounding the motivations for self-defeating acts for Asouzu is to "inquire into the preceding conditions of possibility for rational or irrational human action" (2003, 7). And to "shed light on the ontological precondition of human interest itself" (2003, 8). The philosophical relevance of this inquiry for Asouzu (2007a, 158), is "to grasp all missing links from the preceding condition of their comprehensive interrelatedness and not in the fragmentation and relativity of their world immanency only." By missing links, Asouzu implies all the imaginable distinct units and combinations that make up an entity (2004, 277-291). To achieve this aim, Asouzu adopts the complementarity approach in his investigation and understanding of the nature of being. The complementarity approach, as articulated by Asouzu (2007b, 10), views all existent things as serving a missing link in a complementary whole and seeks to grasp them from the preceding condition of their "intrinsic interrelatedness devoid of polarisation and exclusiveness." This holistic view is vital to properly understanding the problem and for prescribing adequate solutions.[2] The ethical relevance of this inquiry can also be found in its promise of broadening our understanding of the root causes of immoral acts and in proffering solutions to the same.

Expanding the discourse on the motivations for self-defeating acts, Asouzu moved beyond the shroud of ignorance which Socrates blamed as the motivating factor to something more fundamental. Asouzu based his assumptions on two foundations: the first being "our inability to recognize that human interest is ambivalent" (2003, 5). And the second is "our fundamental instincts for self-preservation" (2013, 11; 2004, 52). I will examine this subject matter more thoroughly later in this essay.

Ambivalent Human Interest as a Self-defeating Act

The notion of ambivalent human interest found its most detailed articulation in Asouzu's works. In his 2003 book *Effective Leadership and the Ambivalence of Human Interest*, Asouzu embarked on what he termed to be an inquiry into "why people are not often able to do those things they identify as good but insist on doing those appalling things they vehemently criticise" (2003, 5). Here, the notion of ambivalent human interest, as conceptualized by Asouzu (2003, 22-23), denotes the fact that as human beings, our interests can represent more than one thing at a given time – both negative and positive – with the ability to lead us into making

[2] In *IBUARU: The Heavy Burden of Philosophy Beyond African Philosophy*, Asouzu holistically discussed the importance of grasping the preceding conditions of all missing links of reality. Also discussed is the significance of a comprehensive understanding of the complementary interrelatedness of all missing links in a universal framework. This is informed by Asouzu's belief that truth can never be grasp in fragments. See I. Asouzu (2007a, 157-161; 2007b, 10-23).

erroneous judgments with regards to our choices. Ambivalent human interest arises from our need for self-preservation. According to Asouzu (2004, 50), "[O]ne of the most important basic laws of nature is the law of self-preservation." This law is as old as humanity itself, as human beings have always strived from the cradle of civilization towards the preservation of the self. Asouzu (2004, 50-51) explains that according to this law, "living organisms would do everything possible to uphold those conditions that favour their continued existence." This law is fundamental for the survival of not just the individual within a society, but for the society itself. However, Asouzu argues that this basic law's pivotal role and impact in determining the nature of the kind of relationship that obtains within the human community is often overlooked (2004, 51). This neglect is due to our natural tendency always to presume the rational basis of all human actions. By so doing, we end up forgetting the enormous responsibility that self-preservation imposes on the human subject. One of the effects of that pressure is looking out for our interests to preserve ourselves. This poses some serious problems on a broader scale and I will consider some of them in the next section. Before then, it would be pertinent to discuss self-interest as it forms the primary foundation of self-preservation and Asouzu's complementary problematic of ambivalent human interest.

For Asouzu (2003, 20), self-interest is "the disposition always in all situations to desire undue advantage for and solely for the person or persons involved, in total disregard of the common good."[3] When this is the norm, the consequence is opposition to the common good (2003, 21). According to Asouzu (2004, 61), "[T]he issue of lack of homogeneity with regard to the character of our interests forms the central thesis concerning the ambivalence of human interest." Further, Asouzu states that "this fundamental interest for self-preservation, drives our actions in all circumstances most especially in times of adversity (2004, 53). Driven by this desire for survival, we are constantly forced to make choices. Choices rooted in self-interest. Some of those choices are products of the ambivalence of our human interest for survival. And faced with this ambivalence which presents itself to our consciousness in its double capacity as Asouzu (2013, 11) rightly captures it, we begin to aggressively pursue our interests to survive while neglecting the collective. This inevitably leads to self-defeating actions that become the undoing of the actor. Thus, our ambivalent human interest to constantly seek out our interest become a form of anti-self-interest. Asouzu (2004, 57; 2007a, 230) captures the point better when he averred that "[A] thoroughgoing self-interest is anti-self-interest, since we cannot guarantee our own existence and safety if we are not able to make some concessions to others"; and that "consistent self-interest is anti-self interest."

In the next section that follows, I consider Asouzu's analysis of ambivalent human interest. I also engage the thoughts of Socrates, Teilhard de Chardin, and Asouzu's views in a conversation with regards to the problem of ambivalent human interest.

[3] Asouzu fruitfully discussed the notions of *self-interest*, the *ambivalence of human interest,* and *self-preservation*. For more on the above concepts, see I. Asouzu (2004, 50-61).

Asouzu's Analysis of Ambivalent Human Interest and its Root Causes

In a comprehensive systematization of the problem of ambivalent human interest and its attendant self-defeating acts, Asouzu (2003, 5) expatiates this phenomenon as constituting what he calls "the most fundamental sources of conflict in society." Asouzu contends that the main cause of the problem of self-defeating acts and other social vices generally, is due to human inability to recognize the ambivalent nature of human interest. Ambivalent human interest has the character of concealment, and because of this concealment, our interests present themselves to us from the perspective that appeals to us most (2003, 22). Asouzu further explains that "the ambivalence of human interest can twist people's values in a way that makes them architects of their own woes" (2003, 26-27). This exposes the depth of the problem posed by this condition, which takes place at the individual and collective levels.

According to Asouzu (2003, 5), the problem of ambivalent human interest arises when in a bid to secure our interests, we get misled into believing that they are what they are not, and we end up erring consequently. This leads to a paradox; the paradox of ambivalent human interest. For Asouzu (2003, 15-16), "[I]t is a paradox that a person seeks to conserve his interest but undertake those things that would ensure his destruction." This ambivalence of human interests has many negative consequences. Capturing its dangerous effects Asouzu states thus:

> The ambivalence of human interests exploits the limitations of the human nature to polarise the natural complementary relationship that exists in the world. In this case, it artificially pitches the individual against himself, against others and against society. In this respect, ambivalence of human interest exploits our ignorance, wrong pedagogy, and inadequate understanding of the dynamics of the rules of human cohabitation. (2003, 94)

The questions that may arise from the above passage would be: Why would an individual engage in morally self-defeating acts? Why would a person engage in activities that directly undermine their well-being and existence? As a response to these questions, Asouzu provides us with some detailed examination of its root causes, which, for him, lies in our ontological precondition.

Examining the root causes of ambivalent human interest, Asouzu blames this problem on two things. The first is the ignorance – or lack of awareness – of the ambivalence of our choices. The second is the primordial instinct for self-preservation. Explaining how ignorance affects our ability to make sound decisions and avoid the double capacity of our interests, Asouzu (2003, 57) posits thus: "A person, who through a choice negates his interest, is not choosing what he wants. He does this because he does not know his actions are wrong. Hence, he must become aware of the source of this deceit and this is the fact that his interest is ambivalent." By ambivalent, Asouzu refers to the way the world presents itself to us in a double capacity, which represents both the negative and positive aspects of our interests (2013, 11). Here, Asouzu blames ignorance for partly being responsible for why humans act in self-defeating ways. However, I disagree with

Asouzu on this premise. A careful observation of the motivations for human action shows an overwhelming number of instances where people have a clear knowledge of the consequences of their actions, but still, damn the pellucid negative outcomes that may follow from such acts to engage in them. Ignorance cannot be utterly blamed in such cases. Gagari Chakrabarti and Tapas Chatterjea concede to a position similar to mine, which questions ignorance as being the basis of morally self-defeating acts. For Chakrabarti and Chatterjea (2020, 84), "[D]eviations from ethically appropriate decisions may be intentional, unintentional or even induced." Patricia Werhane, Laura Hartman, Crina Archer, Elaine Englehardt, and Michael Pritchard (2013, 65) favour the same position as they argue that "Unethical decisions are sometimes the outcome of a conscious, deliberate, and reflective choice to "do wrong"." This shows that sometimes humans intentionally act in self-defeating ways. This is a clear case of a moral flaw characteristic of the acting agent, in this case, the human person. I will discuss this point in detail in the next section of this essay.

The second root cause of ambivalent human interest, as posited by Asouzu is the primordial instinct for self-preservation. According to Asouzu (2003, 73), "[O]ne of the laws that sustains the dynamism of existence is the law of self-preservation." Propelled by this fundamental instinct to seek out our interests, we often find ourselves on a collision course with other humans and institutions, because of the ambivalence of our interests. And in a world where everyone is seeking to secure their interest in self-preservation first, there is a danger that lurks as the rules of fair play and natural justice is relegated to the margins in our dealings with other humans on the same course for self-preservation. Asouzu (2003, 74) captures this danger succinctly when he explains that "since human beings tend to consider their interests as something primarily good, the pursuance and realisation of human interest in the face of competition can become very problematic." However, Asouzu (2003, 74) points out that this neglects the fact that we all need the overall interests of others in the form of genuine commitment to the common good as a necessary condition for actualizing our interests.

Analyzing the ambivalence of human interest and the dangers that are inherent in the pursuit of our primordial instincts for self-preservation with endemic selfishness, Asouzu argues thus:

> There is a moment of inherent contradiction in any form of endemic selfishness as to warrant the individual to self-destruct on the platform of his own self-indulgence. This is applicable not only to individuals, but can become a collective self-destructive tendency, where a society is heading to destruction on the basis of known and well established insight but where nothing tangible is undertaken to avert the danger in the hope that something miraculous would happen (2003, 77-78)

In the above passage, Asouzu points out how consistent self-interest and selfishness, pursued under the pretext of self-preservation can become 'anti-self interest' both at the individual and collective level. Here, I agree with Asouzu that 'endemic selfishness' can be destructive both at the individual and collective

levels. However, I disagree with Asouzu on the point that this 'endemic selfishness', which is responsible for self-defeating acts both at the individual and collective levels is only caused by the primordial instinct for self-preservation. I argue that this is caused by greed at the collective level and an evolutionary flaw – unrestrained impulse for pleasure – that is characteristic of the human condition at the individual level. Here, I refer to pleasure as somatic gratification. In a later section, I will explicitly present my reasons for disagreeing with Asouzu on this point.

In the next section that follows, I subject the views of Socrates, Asouzu, and Teilhard de Chardin, to a conversation, to ascertain what each of them would say to each other regarding the problem of self-defeating acts as caused by the paradox of ambivalence of human interest.

A Conversational Analysis of Socrates, Asouzu, and Teilhard de Chardin's Views on the Problem of Ambivalent Human Interest

This section will be concerned with engaging the thoughts of Socrates, Asouzu, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in a conversation and critical analysis on the subject matter of self-defeating acts. The aim is to determine how each of these thinkers would respond to each other in a conversation about the paradox of self-defeating acts. This conversation will follow the method of conversationalism as articulated by Jonathan Chimakonam (2017a, 17-19; 2017b, 120-123). According to Chimakonam (2017a, 17), "[T]he conversational method represents a higher sophistication of portions of the Socratic Method."[4] And as a form of engagement, the philosophical conversation can occur both at the individual and the cultural or group level. This paves the way for intercultural philosophy and cross-border intellectual engagements that opens up new vistas for ideas. Below, I apply this method to the question of self-defeating acts.

In a typical conversational style of engagement, if Asouzu were to ask Socrates what he thinks is responsible for the problem of self-defeating acts, Socrates would most likely respond in line with his theory that undergirds the basis of evil acts. For instance, let us consider the arguments put forward by Socrates in Plato's Dialogue *Gorgias*, to advance the claim he had earlier made in another dialogue with Protagoras, that no one does wrong freely or acts shamefully of his own free will (1976, 345e). Socrates would argue that self-defeating act is a product of ignorance; that those who engage in acts like political corruption which rub off negatively on the society at the collective level, and drug abuse which destroys the wellbeing of the self at the individual level, are doing so from the standpoint of lack of awareness of what is good for them. This is evident in Socrates' conversation with Polus in *Gorgias* (2004, 509e1), where he argued that "[N]o one does wrong willingly and that all wrongdoing is involuntary." For Socrates, self-defeating acts – wrongdoing – is motivated by a false belief in what

[4] The theory and method of conversationalism involves a formal procedure for assessing the relationships of opposed variables, in which thoughts are shuffled through disjunctive and conjunctive modes to constantly recreate fresh thesis and anti-thesis each time at a higher level of discourse, without the expectation of a synthesis. For a detailed articulation of this method, see J. Chimakonam (2017a, 11-33; 2017b, 114-130).

is right (2004, 459b1-4). Since acting in self-defeating ways entails doing wrong to the self and the society, Socrates would necessarily denounce self-defeating acts as morally reprehensible.

If I were to ask Socrates why an individual would engage in a self-defeating act like drug abuse specifically, for the sole purpose of pleasure to the detriment of the self, Socrates would respond in the following manner as presented by Plato (2004, 479b3): "Because he is presumably ignorant of the nature of health and physical well-being." For Socrates, ignorance is the basis of all self-defeating acts. Thus, Socrates argues that "[T]he righteous man will never want to do wrong" (2004, 460c1-3). The above presumption by Socrates is based on a simplistic conception of the human being. It ignores the complex nature of the human person which is influenced by many factors ranging from social, economic, environmental, biological, and political, to mention but five. The argument on ignorance as presented by Socrates and shared by Asouzu fails because it does not successfully establish the case that those who engage in wrongdoing are always ignorant. For example, a kleptomaniac may steal not because they are 'not righteous' or are ignorant of the fact that stealing is morally wrong but because their unrestrained impulse is an evolutionary disorder they are unable to bring under conscious control.

Asouzu would agree with Socrates on this starting point of the conversation as he shares a similar view.[5] However, he would go on to argue that the problem goes a step further beyond ignorance of the dangers of self-defeating acts. For Asouzu (2004, 50-61; 2007a, 35-36), self-defeating acts are also a product of the most primitive of all human drive: The primordial instinct for self-preservation. This tendency to seek out our interests both at the collective and individual level for self-preservation is a major factor that accounts for self-defeating acts. It is self-defeating for Asouzu because "where we pursue only our interests consistently, we jeopardise optimal realisation of the same interests" (2007a, 291). And such consistent self-interest often leads to anti-self-interest (ASOUZU 2007a, 230).

To the argument of the primordial instinct for self-preservation put forward by Asouzu, Socrates would disagree and propose something different. Socrates would argue that far from the primordial instinct for self-preservation, the 'tendency' for doing wrong might just be responsible. This is suggestive of a disposition to do wrong and represents a little shift from Socrates' initial position, primarily based on ignorance. One can find this in his conversation with Callicles where he averred that "For I think, of course, that it is not slowness of foot but a tendency to wrongdoing that causes people to do wrong?" (PLATO 2004, 520d1). There are two ways to interpret this second position. The first is arguing that by taking up this new position which suggests that a 'tendency for wrongdoing causes

[5] Similar to Socrates, Asouzu argued that no normal person will knowingly and willfully seek his own destruction as human beings have a natural tendency to do those things they think are good and serve their interest. Often times, this is not the case. Thus, the resulting negative consequences are not because the agent deliberately sought his own destruction, but because the act itself was based on a lack of awareness of the comprehensive future dimensions of such acts. See I. Asouzu (2003, 6,20-33; 2004, 64,358-359).

wrongdoing', Socrates directly contradicts his earlier position which blamed wrongdoing on ignorance. The second is by arguing that Socrates saw his earlier position as being too weak when subjected to critical analysis of practical cases of knowledgeable wrongdoings. From the above conversational engagement, it is clear that Socrates and Asouzu agree on ignorance as one of the causes of self-defeating acts but disagree on the second level between the 'primordial instinct for self-preservation,' and a 'tendency to wrongdoing'.

However, Teilhard de Chardin (2004, 64), who conceives of a human as a ceaseless discovery and life as a movement, would disagree with the views of Socrates and Asouzu, that blame self-defeating acts on ignorance and the primordial instinct for self-preservation respectively. Firstly, blaming ignorance for wrongdoings even in clear cases of knowledge calls into question the possibility of overcoming self-defeating acts, as the knowledge to do so is presented as an impossibility. Secondly, although human actions may not have been greatly improved to enable humans to act morally without becoming victims of the double capacity of their interests, this is more suggestive of an evolutionary flaw in the human condition than it is of ignorance. As Teilhard de Chardin (2004, 8) aptly captures, that "It is true that the scope of individual human action, as commonly envisaged in the abstract theory of moral and meritorious acts, is not greatly enhanced by growth of human knowledge." The lack of this growth of human disposition to act in a moral and meritorious way speaks to what Teilhard de Chardin (2004, 4) would call "[A] state of very slow movement, or of rest between spells of movement" in the human evolutionary journey.

Furthermore, in explaining this human flaw, Teilhard de Chardin presents a picture of an evolutionary universe and humanity that is increasingly expanding in complexity. This complexity, Teilhard de Chardin (1961, 302) argues, implies that "life is always under pressure everywhere." As a result of this pressure, at the reflective stage of the unfolding complexity that characterizes the evolutionary journey of humans through the universe, humans become naturally subjected to the evil that is built into the structure of this unfolding world. Teilhard de Chardin (1961, 311) classified some of this evil as (1) evil of disorder and failure, (2) evil of decomposition, (3) evil of solitude and anxiety, and (4) evil of growth. Exposing how evil is built into the very structure of the world, Teilhard de Chardin (1961, 312-313) avers thus:

> If we regard the march of the world from this standpoint (i.e. not that of its progress but that of its risks and the efforts it requires) we soon see, under the veil of security and harmony which—viewed from on high—envelop the rise of man, a particular type of cosmos in which evil appears necessarily and as abundantly as you like in the course of evolution—not by accident (which would not much matter) but through the very structure of the system.

Here, Teilhard de Chardin shows how evil is built into the very structure of the universe, and into the very nature of humans that occupy a privileged position in this universe. This position is also shared by Ada Agada (2019, 5; 2022, 118-120) who conceives of the universe as being incomplete, and whose incompleteness is

evident in the reality of moral evil in humans and physical nature. However, a close reading of Teilhard de Chardin's conception of the universe as an increasingly expanding phenomenon exposes one thing: our limited understanding of the universe since it is constantly unfolding. This limited understanding of the universe imposes certain demands on us that can make us act in self-defeating ways to situate ourselves in it. The evil built into the structure of the universe, as mentioned by Teilhard de Chardin above, can also be argued to be capable of making humans act in morally self-defeating ways. Thus, Teilhard de Chardin's argument directly affirms my position that acting in a self-defeating way goes beyond ignorance to expose an evolutionary flaw that is characteristic of the human condition.

In the next section, I move to establish that the paradox of ambivalent human interest as a common moral failing can be overcome by understanding and discouraging the veneration of greed and through mastery of our negative evolutionary conditions.

Possible Ways of Overcoming the Problem of Self-defeating Acts as an Ethical Concern

In this section, I present a robust argument on why I disagree with Asouzu's position on the cause of morally self-defeating acts. I argue that greed is the cause of self-defeating acts at the collective level, as in the case of political corruption. And at the individual level, as in the case of drug abuse, the 'unrestrained impulse for pleasure', a negative characteristic that is a by-product of our evolutionary development is responsible for self-defeating acts. Before I make my argument, a salient distinction between Asouzu's concept of 'ambivalence' and my concept of a 'flawed human condition' would be instructive in understanding where I differ from Asouzu in my analysis of the problem of self-defeating acts. While Asouzu refers to the 'primordial instinct for self-preservation' by the concept of ambivalence, by a 'flawed human condition' I refer to the 'unrestrained impulse for pleasure'.

Asouzu diagnosed the problem of self-defeating acts that characterize the human situation from a broader social perspective of political organization and proposed his solutions to the same. Here, I expand my focus beyond the corrupt practices of political actors at the collective social level to the individual—particularly on the problem of drug abuse. On a broader scale, Asouzu (2007a, 211) posits that "[a]ll acts of selfishness are driven by ulterior motive of absolute possessiveness." This is based on the move towards collective self-preservation at the group level.

Contrary to Asouzu's self-preservation argument, I think such acts of selfishness go beyond the primordial instinct for self-preservation and are driven by what I identify as greed. Asouzu, (2003, 6), similar to Socrates (see PLATO 1976, 345e), also argues that:

> If we were fully aware of the dangers associated with the ambivalence of our interests, we would certainly not sign our own death warrant; we would vehemently resist those things that would complicate matters later and put us into trouble.

Here, Asouzu, like Socrates, shares similar thoughts on the cause of self-defeating acts as being a product of ignorance or lack of awareness of the totality of the negative consequences of our actions. On this point, I disagree that the problem is ignorance, as Asouzu suggests. I here argue that greed is what holds at the collective level. At the individual level – as in the case of drug abuse, which constitutes the second focus of this inquiry – where the threat to self-preservation is diminished, a moral flaw, a negative by-product of human evolutionary development becomes the primary driving force behind self-defeating acts. This flaw is what I call the 'unrestrained impulse for pleasure'. While self-preservation might contribute to self-defeating acts, it cannot be a sufficient explanation for why someone would engage in drug abuse, an act that directly degrades the self by all measures. Ignorance cannot also be a sufficient explanation as, in many cases, drug abusers are proven to be aware of the negative consequences of engaging in the act.

For Asouzu, ignorance and the primordial instinct for self-preservation are at the root of the problem. Socrates also thinks ignorance is the root cause of self-defeating acts. Contrary to Asouzu's – and Socrates' – submission, I here argue that greed is at the foundation of all self-defeating acts at the collective level, and the unrestrained impulse for pleasure at the individual level. Since greed is a product of the privation of contentment and the unrestrained impulse for pleasure – both moral flaws characteristic of human evolutionary development – the problem of self-defeating acts goes beyond ignorance and the primordial instinct for self-preservation. The same applies to the solution; an adequate solution lies beyond wrongly targeted *contentful conscientization* and *noetic propaedeutic*. It is my position that the solution to the problem of self-defeating acts lies in de-emphasizing the veneration of greed as an approach to self-preservation at the collective level, and cultivation of the mind – through *noetic propaedeutic* – to master the human unrestrained impulse for pleasure that drives the individual to engage in drug abuse. It is the veneration of greed and our ignorance of this flaw, that has undermined all attempts at consciously ridding the human person of this negative evolutionary characteristic. An understanding of this foundation of the problem is imperative to know where to direct our proposed solutions. When this is achieved, Asouzu's *contentful conscientization* and *noetic propaedeutic* can then be applied to direct the mind's attention towards overcoming self-defeating acts. Thus, while the perspectives shared by Socrates and Asouzu partly explain some instances of self-defeating acts, my greed and unrestrained impulse for pleasure position offer a better analysis of the problem.

A possible objection that one may raise against my position – and possibly that of Asouzu – may be to question what makes me think that de-emphasizing greed as a survival mechanism and educating the mind against the same would be enough. I have two responses to this objection. First, understanding a problem's comprehensive cause is the first step to proffering an adequate solution to it. I believe a partial diagnosis of a disease means any solution provided based on such a diagnosis would always be incomplete. This leaves an aspect of the disease to fester and the problem unsolved. Thus, while the primordial instinct for self-preservation may be fundamental to human nature and likely difficult – if

not impossible – to do away with, greed and the negative unrestrained impulse for somatic pleasure, which is another characteristic that grew out of this primordial instinct is something that can be overcome. Self-preservation may be partially responsible for self-destructive acts at the group level as Asouzu (2007a, 174-175) rightly explained in the case of the fallacy of "[T]he nearer the better and the safer." However, we cannot rationalize this as being responsible for self-defeating acts at the individual level, for example, when an individual engages in drug abuse whilst being fully aware of the negative consequences to the self. Hence, my emphasis on understanding the place of greed and the evolutionary flaw of unrestrained impulse for pleasure – or negative somatic gratification – as the foundation for 'contrary to the well-being of self' actions, and de-emphasizing the same as a viable approach to overcoming the problem of self-defeating acts.

Secondly, I believe consciously redirecting the mind's attention away from greed is possible because of the human ability for self-mastery. Here, I propose a practical approach to the problem of self-defeating acts. This goes beyond the mere acknowledgment of human evolutionary flaws and listing them as Teilhard de Chardin did. Humans have proven through their evolutionary history through conscious resolve to master and overcome certain negative characteristics associated with the human species. Characteristics like anger, arrogance, deception, delusion, envy, hatred, selfishness, violence, and others, have been successfully mastered and overcome by many humans in the cause of our evolutionary history. This success grounds the basis of my argument for the possibility of overcoming self-defeating acts through conscious self-mastery. This success further grounds my belief that when Asouzu's recommendations of *contentful conscientization* and *noetic propaedeutic* are properly directed to educating the mind against the negative flaw of greed and towards mastering our moral defects, overcoming the problem of self-defeating acts as an ethical problem would become an achievable goal.

However, one might question the veracity – or reliability – of successful self-mastery of some people over their negative evolutionary flaws like anger, violence, and deception, to mention but three, as informing the proper measure of such successes, since these negative characteristics that I argue have been mastered and overcome by many individuals still exist in the society despite this acclaimed successes. I will here state that this does not in any way weaken the basis of my argument. Firstly, for this objection to hold, we would have to prove that the existence of anything contrary to what is proven to be true – irrespective of context – invalidates that truth. For example, this would mean that whenever we can point to cases of drug abuse, or individuals who quit abusing drugs only to relapse into the act, such acts invalidate the fact that many people have successfully quit drug abuse through conscious self-mastery. Basing our judgments on such grounds would be philosophically weak. Secondly, the existence of such parallel cases, if anything, points to the poor application of *noetic propaedeutic* to consciously mastering these negative characteristics. We should work to improve the conscious application of this approach rather than trying to dispute it.

An interesting follow-up question that may arise regarding self-defeating acts would be: Is it possible to act in a non-self-defeating way? To this question,

my response would be yes, it is possible to act in a non-self-defeating way. In the complementary ethical framework, such action would follow what Asouzu (2007c, 201) calls a "complementary comprehensive type of rationality or *complementary totalising mindset or global mindset,*" i.e., acting with a kind of positive intelligence that ensures that our actions remain harmonized and equilibrated. Acting with this mindset entails "*being-in-control*" (2007c, 201), and taking into cognizance the totality of the future dimensions of our actions. For example, consider a man who wants to buy a car. Before buying the car, he would ask: Would my purchasing and driving this car cause any harm to myself and others in the present? If the answer is 'no', he would proceed to ask: Would it cause any harm to others and the environment in the future? If the answer is 'no' in both cases, then the individual by purchasing the car has not just considered the immediate consequences of his act of purchasing the car. He has taken into consideration the future complementary comprehensive dimensions of the consequences of his actions in the present, to avoid acting in a self-defeating manner, whether in terms of the negative consequences of his actions for the present or with regards to their future referentiality. This is a type of action that Asouzu (2004, 435) argues, "give joy to the actor and to all who seek to have better knowledge of the actor through his action." In such a case, this individual who takes into account all the present and future positive and negative dimensions of his action before acting in the present can be said to act in a non-self-defeating way. Here, Asouzu's categories of transcendent complementary unity of consciousness, and the notion of future referentiality, which focuses on the mind's ability to conceptualize and relate facts to each other in time and space, taking into cognizance their past, present, and future relationships becomes instructive (2004, 296-302, 435-437).

Why is overcoming self-defeating acts like drug abuse at the individual level, and political corruption at the collective level a cause for ethical concern? The unrestrained impulse for pleasure manifested in drug abuse is a form of self-corruption and is thus a morally corrupt act. As Asouzu (2003, 47) rightly agrees, "[A]ny gestures that compromise our integrity and puts restrictions on our ability to think and act justly when we must, fall within the category of corruption." This is true of drug abuse; it impairs our ability to act morally and justly. Just as "[T]he worst form of corruption kills the character without the person knowing" (ASOUZU 2003, 48), greed which is another negative flaw that is characteristic of the human condition corrupts our ability to make morally upright choices and overcome the ambivalence of our interests. It is practically unrealistic for drug abusers to act justly or morally. Whether towards themselves or the wider society. This makes the self-defeating act of drug abuse a cause for ethical concern, as the actions of drug abusers have negative consequences for the individual and the wider society, both morally and socially. As Asouzu (2007a, 84) argues, "[T]o be, in the true sense of the word, is being-in-control (*ima-onwe-onye*) of our tension-laden existential situations." When we are unable to control the flaw of greed and our unrestrained impulse for pleasure – a by-product of our evolutionary development – and we allow the same to define our approach to moral and social choices, we fall into the trap of self-defeating acts that are both harmful to us as

individuals and to the society. This makes addressing the problem of self-defeating acts a matter of practical importance.

Finally, as a defensive wall against self-interest that characterizes the ambivalence of human interests, Asouzu (2003, 155; cf. KANT 2002, 4:393-4:405) proposes the 'goodwill' as a tool for liberating the ego from the limitations of its self-defeating laws. According to Asouzu (2003: 153), "[T]he goodwill is that faculty on which the individual relies in turning the limitations of being into the cause of his joy knowing fully (sic) well that anything that exists serves a missing link of reality." This transformation of the ambivalence of self-interest is achieved through the principle of harmonious complementation. These intellectual tools proposed by Asouzu, when properly applied to the problem of self-defeating acts as diagnosed in this essay, would offer a viable way of overcoming the paradox of ambivalent human interest. At this juncture, I believe our major concern should not be on questioning the viability of the approach proposed in this essay but on ensuring that the proposed solutions are effectively applied to the problems raised.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have exposed Asouzu's paradox of ambivalent human interest from the complementary ethical standpoint as constituting the foundation for morally self-defeating acts. I traced the origin of the question of self-defeating acts from Socrates to its comprehensive articulation in the works of Asouzu. I also established why I disagree with some of Asouzu's claims about the causes of this paradox. The marked distinction between my position and that of Asouzu is that while Asouzu believes that self-defeating acts arise from ignorance of the double capacity of human interests and the primordial instinct for self-preservation, I hold a contrary view that humans are conscious of the negative consequences of such acts in most cases. I argued that the only reason they proceed to engage in such acts damning the consequences is an evolutionary flaw – greed and unrestrained impulse for pleasure – that directs their desires towards negative ends. I defended why I think that such consciousness weakens the argument of ignorance as being one of the causes of self-defeating acts. Lastly, I established why understanding the problem holistically as going beyond ignorance, and the primordial instinct for self-preservation is important to applying relevant solutions to remedying the self-defeating acts that spring from the paradox of ambivalent human interest as an ethical concern.

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