
**Address by Father Smangaliso Mkhathshwa,
Executive Mayor of the City of Tshwane, at the
South African Society for Greek Philosophy
and the Humanities Conference on “Ethics,
Politics, Criminality: Perspectives from Greek
Philosophy and Africa”, Tshwane, 4 May 2005**

Director of Ceremonies – Dr Ladikos, Your Excellency Mr Economides – Greek Ambassador to Our Country, Academics, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am delighted that the Universities of South Africa and Pretoria are hosting a conference on issues which are often viewed as rather theoretical when they are in fact an important basis of societal transformation. Particularly pleasing is the fact that our universities are facilitating a colloquium in a discipline which is often erroneously associated with exoticism. I am, therefore, honoured to welcome you to the pre-eminent city of scholarship in Africa. Let me say upfront that we are discussing tonight perspectives of Greek philosophy and Africa – not contrasting two systems of philosophy. Africa would be at disadvantage.

The theme of your conference, “Ethics, Politics, Criminality: Perspectives from Greek Philosophy and Africa”, raises a number of challenging questions. That is why, besides being here as Executive Mayor to welcome you all to Tshwane, I found it necessary to be associated with this project.

As you know democratic South Africa, is essentially a newly liberated country and is grappling with issues relating to criminality, politics and ethics, especially in a context where the previous regime had a warped definition of ethics. Africa itself, through the African Union, is struggling with the consolidation of ethical practice, criminal dissuasion, and political reconstruction.

The tendency among analysts, commentators, researchers and academics is to interrogate all these concepts and their manifestation in historical and purely theoretical ways, far removed from material conditions, with “scientific distance and disinterest” cited as rationales thereof. For me the question, then, is whether the concrete realities facing our society will be factored into the discourse.

In that question, of course, is implied the further question of whether deliberations at the conference will be contextualised in the sense of addressing themselves to actual experience, or be at the level of exotic

discourse. What one is raising is the age-old question of philosophy as an exclusive discipline or as a popular interrogation of popular issues.

In my view this is not an easy question to answer, given the inescapable reality that the language and the practice of philosophy require levels of understanding beyond the popular level while at the same time the issues interrogated relate to life as lived on a daily basis. The questions of truth and the good, for example, as raised by Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, are matters of daily concern to all societies, but they are hardly interrogated to the extent that the Greek philosophers did, at least outside of the academia.

Another question in my view, is whether there is any connection, real or implied, between ethics, politics and criminality. The link between ethics and politics is immediately apparent. That between politics and criminality, as tacitly or subtly suggested by your theme, is not as immediately apparent. It might well be suspected by some, especially on the political front, that your theme has already concluded that inherent in politics is some criminality. That is an issue I would be interested to hear something about, especially against a background where there has been a tendency, notably by the media, to equate African governments, in particular, with corruption and criminality.

The enduring legacy of Greek philosophy is enquiry, genuine enquiry – as opposed to sophistry or casuistry (as later propounded by Jesuits) – to determine possible solutions to life's challenges. Of course most of the concerns of Greek philosophy seem abstract, though closer scrutiny reveals a direct correlation with matters concrete. Bringing the lessons learned from the Greek philosophers into our own enquiry into questions of right and wrong, and within the theory and praxis of politics, is something we must therefore welcome.

To infuse that interrogation with African experience, both philosophical and actual, is even more commendable.

The challenge of Africa is the challenge of underdevelopment and issues of poverty, unemployment, low levels of health, and other socio-economic ills. A valid question is the extent to which ethical lapses and criminality are traceable to these challenges. If they are traceable to them, the question is whether addressing these socio-economic developmental challenges will necessarily result in an ethical and criminality-free society. Or could it be that, as developed and wealthy societies suggest – at least by virtue of the incidence of crime and unethical behaviour even in them – ethics and criminality are not necessarily linked to material and economic conditions?

And would that apply *mutatis mutandis* to the question of history? Would it mean the history of nations and the material experiences of

societies have no bearing on the level of ethics and criminality in those societies? Would that, therefore, mean that those nations taking it upon themselves to impose their ideological and geopolitical designs upon other nations of different racial and religious beliefs are not in any way influenced by the colonial history which tacitly promoted the mindset that some races and religions are inherently inferior and can therefore be occupied even against their will?

That is a question of some relevance to Africa as certain countries, Zimbabwe being an immediate example, whose ethics may not be acceptable to some western powers, and who are actually perceived to be cases of criminality by those powers, are subjected to condemnation and criticism to a point where economic sanctions are being threatened.

In an essay entitled "Authors, Authority, and the University Curriculum" Christopher Kelly makes the point that "The anthropologists perform the immensely important function of reminding us, as they constantly remind each other, that we can hardly avoid seeing non-Western societies from Western eyes, interpreting them in a way that mostly reinforces our own views... In short it is all too likely that we will see in other cultures only what we choose to see or what we put there. To succeed in the project of understanding others we must be attentive to these dangers."

One can, therefore, make the point that the very analysis and unpacking of other societies and cultures is itself a question of ethics.

As you can hear, your introduction of politics into the equation is useful in that it makes it possible for us to speak beyond individuals and their ethical dilemmas to countries and nations. It is particularly useful in the South African context as inherent in nation-building, which is a project of the new democracy, are questions of ethics and criminality. Attesting to that fact is that, as we talk, a case of alleged unethical practice, allegedly on the strength of political connections, is going through the South African courts. No one knows, as yet, whether the accused is guilty or not of the charges against him, but everyone is aware that South Africa committed to what Nelson Mandela described as the RDP of the soul.

There is a sense in which our adoption of the African model of consultation, negotiation and democracy is also responsible for our preoccupation with issues of political morality as implied by our interrogation of national and individual ethics and criminality. Our take on the matter is that ethical conduct contributes to the common good, and that, therefore, any criminality ultimately compromises not only the individual but also the nation.

From an African perspective individual existence exists only in so far as people are physically separate and distinct from others. Beyond that people are people in communal environments and therefore questions of ethics, politics and criminality are communal, societal and national in character.

It is against that background that South Africa, for example, has moral regeneration as a programme of government, the intention being to create a moral character, a product of popular participation. It is also intended to demystify and translate them into everyday questions with which not only academics and government but also the general public participate.

The real test of this conference, from a South African perspective, then, is the extent to which it is able to disrobe these philosophical questions of any esoteric halo and bring them to the level of public and popular discourse. The big challenge is to take the discourse to the public realm so that it can influence the ethics, the politics and behaviour of our citizenry.

Based purely on the fact that the organisers have seen it fit to bring these issues to open discussion, I have no doubt that in some way they will be availed for broader dissemination and interrogation.

I wish you a very successful conference.