

AN APPRAISAL OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIA VIS-À-VIS KANTIAN ETHICS

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Abstract

In this paper, we shall explore the application of Kant's ethics to political leadership in Nigeria, showing its potential to address persistent challenges such as corruption, nepotism, and weak governance structures. Rooted in the principles of duty, the categorical imperative and the inherent dignity of individuals, Kant's ethical framework provides a moral compass for leaders to prioritize the collective good over personal or sectional interests. By examining the principles of universalizability and the moral autonomy of individuals, this study argues that Kantian ethics offers an invaluable tool for fostering accountability, justice and respect for human rights in Nigerian governance. The paper critiques the current state of political leadership in Nigeria characterized by moral lapses and neglect of the citizen welfare, while proposing Kantian moral principles as a foundation for ethical governance. Furthermore, it is argued that adopting these principles can lead to a transformative shift in Nigeria's political landscape, promoting a leadership ethos rooted in fairness, transparency and human dignity.

Keywords: Kant, Corruption, Political Leadership, Categorical Imperative

Introduction

The moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant, rooted in deontology, provides a compelling framework for assessing ethical leadership, particularly in political contexts. Kant's categorical imperative emphasizes universal moral laws and the intrinsic dignity of every individual, mandating leaders to act in ways that respect human worth and promote justice (Kant, 30-32). In Nigeria, where political leadership is often criticized for corruption, inefficiency and disregard for the common good, Kant's ethics offers an evaluative lens to explore whether leaders adhere to moral imperatives that serve the greater societal interest. Scholars like Joseph Omoregbe argue that Kant's principles, particularly the emphasis on duty and moral autonomy, remain relevant for addressing the moral failures evident in Nigerian politics (45). Nigeria's political landscape has been characterized by persistent gap between ethical ideals and practical governance, with leaders frequently accused of prioritizing self-interest over collective welfare. Ajayi asserts that this misalignment can be traced to a deficiency in moral accountability, a core tenet of Kantian philosophy (27). Kantian ethics, with its insistence on the universality of moral actions and the prioritization of duty over expediency, challenges Nigerian political leaders to transcend ethnic, religious and personal biases in their decision-making processes. By examining the intersections of Kant's moral philosophy and Nigeria's political realities, this study seeks to illuminate the ethical deficits in leadership and propose pathways for fostering integrity and justice in governance.

The Foundations of Kantian Ethics

Kant's moral philosophy, grounded in deontology, emphasizes the primacy of duty and the inherent worth of individuals. Unlike consequentialist frameworks, which focus on outcomes, Kantian ethics insists that morality is rooted in the principle guiding an action, irrespective of its consequences. At the heart of Kantian ethics lies the categorical imperative, a universal moral law that binds individuals to act out of duty and not mere inclination (Kant 30). For example, a Kantian approach would advocate for telling the truth even if it leads to negative consequences, as lying would violate the universal principle of honesty. In a workplace setting, this could mean reporting a mistake to a superior even if it risks your reputation. This strict adherence to moral principles can sometimes be seen as inflexible or even impractical, especially in situations where the consequences of an action are significant. However, proponents of Kantian ethics argue that by prioritizing duty and universal moral laws, individuals can maintain their integrity and uphold a sense of moral consistency. Kantian ethics is a potent framework for directing people's choices and actions in a way that puts moral values ahead of convenience or self-interest. Kant's categorical imperative is foundational to his ethical framework and can be summarized in three main formulations.

Universalizability Principle: The first formulation, often called the principle of universalizability, states, "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 31). This principle requires individuals to evaluate whether their actions could be universally applicable without contradiction. For instance, lying would fail this test because, if universalized, it would undermine the very concept of truth-telling. Omoregbe asserts that this formulation promotes consistency and impartiality in moral reasoning, which are essential qualities for leadership (50). For example, a leader facing a decision to manipulate the truth to gain an advantage would need to consider whether they would want everyone to lie in similar situations without consequence. If lying became a universal law, trust and integrity within the organization would break down, ultimately harming the leader's ability to lead effectively. Therefore, Omoregbe's argument underscores the importance of moral integrity and honesty in leadership. By adhering to the principle of universality in truth-telling, leaders can maintain trust and respect within their organization. This not only sets a positive example for others to follow but also allows for more transparent and ethical decision-making processes. Thus, leaders who prioritize truth-telling over personal gain are more likely to inspire loyalty and confidence in their followers, leading to long-term success and sustainability in their leadership roles.

Treating Humanity as an End: The second formulation emphasizes respect for human dignity: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means to an end" (Kant 36). This principle underscores the intrinsic worth of every individual and prohibits exploiting others for selfish purposes. Ajayi observes that this ethical mandate is particularly relevant to leadership, as it obliges leaders to prioritize the well-being of their constituents over personal or sectional gains (72). For example, a good leader would ensure that their decisions and actions are made with the best interests of their followers in mind, rather than using them solely for personal gain. This could mean prioritizing fair treatment, providing opportunities for growth and development, and fostering a positive and inclusive work environment. While it may be tempting for leaders to pursue their own agenda at the expense of others, true ethical leadership requires a higher standard of behavior. By putting

the well-being of their constituents first, leaders not only create a more productive and harmonious work environment but also earn the respect and trust of their followers. In the long run, this approach leads to greater success and satisfaction for both the leader and their team. One can rightly argue that ethical leadership is about more than just making the right decisions; it is about embodying a set of values that prioritize the greater good above personal gain.

Autonomy Principle: This principle emphasizes the need for everyone to act as a rational autonomous being by making one's own moral laws and obeying them, rather than being subject to external influences or desires. According to Kant, true moral action stems from a good will, motivated by the moral law itself. This third principle follows (from the first two) as the ultimate condition of their harmony with practical reason: the idea of the will of every rational being as a universally legislating will (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Moral*, 43). The import of this position is that, it is not enough that the right conduct be followed, but that one also demands that conduct of oneself.

Central to Kantian ethics is the notion of acting out of moral duty rather than self-interest or external compulsion. Leaders guided by duty demonstrate autonomy, adhering to ethical principles regardless of external pressures. Kant posits, "Autonomy of the will is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself" (42). This autonomy ensures that ethical leaders act in ways that reflect universal moral standards, fostering trust and integrity in governance.

Implications for Justice, Fairness, and Accountability

Kantian ethics has profound implications for justice and fairness, particularly in political leadership. The principle of universalizability demands that laws and policies apply equally to all, ensuring fairness and the eradication of favouritism. Similarly, the principle of treating humanity as an end obliges leaders to uphold the rights and dignity of every individual, thereby promoting social justice. Ajayi notes, "A Kantian framework for leadership necessitates accountability, as leaders must justify their actions based on universal moral standards, not personal or political expediency" (85). Tersely, Kantian ethics offers a robust moral foundation for leadership, particularly in contexts requiring justice, fairness, and accountability. By adhering to principles of universalizability, respect for human dignity, and moral autonomy, leaders can build ethical governance structures that inspire trust and uphold the common good.

Challenges for Implementing Kant's Ethics in Nigeria

Kant's ethics or deontological ethics, focuses on the intrinsic morality of actions rather than their consequences. Central to Kant's philosophy is the categorical imperative, which insists that moral actions must be universally applicable, stemming from a sense of duty and respect for all individuals as ends in themselves rather than means to an end (Kant 30). This involves consistently evaluating actions to ensure they align with the essential criteria of the categorical imperative which entails acting on maxims that stem from individual actions but hold the potential to be universally applicable laws (Pokotylo 1). The principle of universalization mandates that every action must align with a maxim that can be universally applied (Eyo & Udofia 164). The categorical imperative of moral action also constitutes the imperative for actions that could be qualified as good. On this note, a leadership that could be qualified as good must necessarily abide by the categorical imperative principle. They are

different versions of the expression of the principle of the categorical imperative derivable from Kant (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 39 - 52) thus;

1. Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.
2. I am never to act otherwise than so that my maxim should become a universal law.
3. Act only so that the will through its maxim could regard itself at the same time as making universal laws.
4. Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never simply as a means.
5. Act so that your will regards itself as making universal law through its maxims.
6. Act as if you were always through your maxims a law-making member in a universal kingdom of ends.

These principles present an appealing framework for political leadership, advocating for impartiality, transparency, and commitment to moral duties, elements essential for effective governance. However, applying Kant's ethics to governance in Nigeria, a nation marked by complex socio-political dynamics is challenging. Nigeria's political culture, socio-economic conditions, ethnic and religious allegiances, weak legal system, and prevalent issues of corruption often counter the universal moral standards Kant espouses.

In theory, Kant's ethics offers a robust framework for governance, especially in promoting justice, transparency, and impartiality. These principles align with ideals of good governance, as they prioritize the common good over individual benefit and prevent the misuse of power. However, implementing these principles in governance requires leaders to act impartially, an expectation often unmet in Nigeria due to various socio-political and economic factors. Nigeria's political and socio-economic landscape presents significant challenges to implementing ethical principles rooted in impartiality and duty. Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has experienced various forms of governance, from military dictatorships to democratic administrations. These shifts have created a political culture where power is often centralized, with many leaders prioritizing their interests and those of their ethnic or religious groups over national concerns. Political favoritism, corruption, and a lack of transparency are recurring issues, making it difficult to adhere to universal ethical standards in public office. A renowned novelist, Chinua Achebe, in *The Trouble with Nigeria*, reveals the root cause of Nigeria's predicament:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land, climate, water, air, or anything else. The main problem facing Nigeria is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to their responsibility, to the challenge of personal example, which is the hallmark of true leadership (1).

One may not totally agree with Achebe's sweeping declaration, though he may probably be right in the sense that despite being blessed with vast oil reserves, Nigeria has faced numerous issues relating to corruption and mismanagement in the oil industry. Leaders have failed to prioritize the well-being of the Nigerian people and instead prioritized their gain, contributing to ongoing economic challenges in the country. This lack of ethical leadership has caused immense harm to the government, stifling progress and perpetuating poverty and inequality. Until Nigerian leaders prioritize the needs of their citizens over their interests,

the government will continue to face obstacles in achieving its full potential. Leaders need to lead by example and work towards the common good of all Nigerians to bring about positive change and development. This calls for a critical examination of leadership in Nigeria and emphasizes the urgent need for transformative leaders who prioritize the collective good over personal or sectional interests. Also, Nigeria's socio-economic challenges - such as poverty, unemployment and inadequate public infrastructure - foster an environment where survival often takes precedence over ethical considerations. This reality complicates Kant's mandate for leaders to act out of duty to moral law. In a setting where citizens face severe economic hardship, political loyalty, and patronage often become mechanisms of survival, undermining Kant's call for universal moral principles in governance. This work considers the following as challenges to implementing Kant's ethics in Nigeria:

Corruption and Favoritism: As published in Punch Newspaper, Shaibu opines "Nigeria has ranked 145 out of 180 countries and scored 25 out of 100 points in the recently launched 2023 Corruption Perception Index, published by Transparency International Nigeria." During the launch of the CPI in Abuja, Ibrahim Musa Rafsanjani, Executive Director of the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre, stressed that Nigeria still faces significant challenges in combating corruption. Despite a slight improvement in its 2023 Corruption Perception Index score 25 from 24 in 2022 and ranking 145 from 150, Nigeria remains below the Sub-Saharan African average of 33. Highlighting widespread regional corruption, Rafsanjani noted that 90% of Sub-Saharan countries scored below 50 and criticized rising political corruption in Nigeria, where looters are rewarded with appointments. He called for urgent reforms to promote development, democracy, and transparency. The CPI score reflects the perceived degree of corruption within the public sector, ranging from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (least corrupt). Nigeria recorded its lowest CPI score of 6.9 in 1996, while its highest score of 28 was achieved in 2016 during President Muhammadu Buhari's first year in office. Friday Odeh, Country Director of Accountability Lab Nigeria, identifies judicial, electoral, and security sector corruption as key weaknesses contributing to Nigeria's stagnant progress in combating corruption. The electoral corruption, undermined public trust, particularly after the disappointing 2023 elections that disillusioned many young voters. Second, judicial corruption, marked by conflicting court rulings, has cast doubt on the judiciary's independence and integrity. Third, corruption in the security sector is significant, with defense and security consistently receiving the largest share of the national budget - 13.4% - dwarfing allocations to education (8.2%) and infrastructure (5.7%). Corruption is one of the most significant obstacles to implementing Kant's ethics in Nigeria's political leadership. Kant's ethics advocates for integrity and transparency, but the pervasive culture of corruption contradicts these ideals. Political officials often disregard the moral duty to serve the public, opting instead for actions that serve personal interests, undermining the categorical imperative, which calls for actions to be universally ethical.

Weak Institutions: In Nigeria, it is certain that weak institutions constitute one of the major hindrances to development. Almost every institution in Nigeria is weak and corrupt. Perhaps, it is in this respect that Elijah John submits *inter alia*:

The judiciary, the security agencies like the Police Force, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), the legislature, labour unions, Directorate of State Security (DSS), Independent National

Electoral Commission (INEC), the press, civil society groups, religious, economic, political parties and other trade and professional bodies are highly sentimental, biased, corrupt and, as a result, very weak and incapable of supporting democratic ideals in different African nations (2019: 229).

From the above picture, it is doubtful if Kant's ethics can work in a society without strong institutions. This is the case as strong institutions are the driving force that propel enviable leadership. Strong institutions checkmate the excesses of the leaders and curtail executive rascality as witnessed in Nigeria.

Ethnic and Religious Divisions

Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity adds another layer of complexity to ethical governance. With over 250 ethnic groups and two major religions - Islam and Christianity - politics is often driven by ethnic and religious affiliations, leading to favoritism and partiality. Kant's deontology bases morality on the universalizability of actions, asserting that actions are only moral if they can be universally applied, including to oneself (Obioha & Adegboyega 28). Kant's ethics requires that decisions be made impartially, without bias toward any group, but in Nigeria, leaders frequently face pressure to prioritize the interests of their ethnic or religious communities. This allegiance often supersedes national concerns, contradicting Kant's imperative for universal moral principles and equal treatment.

Weak Judicial and Legal Systems

The Judiciary, as the branch of government is responsible for interpreting and enforcing the law, and plays a critical role in delivering justice within society. Its primary purpose is to uphold justice, making it the ultimate safeguard and hope in a democratic system. Ogbonna refers to it as "The last bastion of hope for the citizenry" (1) It stands as the boundary between constitutional governance and authoritarian rule, highlighting its crucial importance. The Judiciary also has the authority to hold other branches of government accountable, ensuring the Legislature operates within its constitutional boundaries and the executive adheres to the rule of law. However, the pressing question remains: is the Nigerian judiciary effectively fulfilling this role? The judiciary can hinder the fight against corruption through inefficiencies, delays, and lack of transparency in the judicial process. Issues such as conflicting rulings, judicial corruption, and compromised independence undermine public trust. When the judiciary fails to hold corrupt individuals accountable or allows political interference, it perpetuates impunity and weakens anti-corruption efforts. The effectiveness of Kant's ethics in governance relies heavily on the strength of a nation's legal and judicial systems to enforce moral and legal standards. In a context where the legal system is often compromised, the ideal of enforcing Kant's ethics becomes impractical. For example, cases of political corruption are often either delayed indefinitely or dismissed due to the lack of impartial enforcement. This reality undermines the concept of universal justice and fairness in governance, essential to Kant's ethics.

Applying Kant's Ethics to Political Leadership in Nigeria

Immanuel Kant's ethical framework provides a vital philosophical basis for evaluating and addressing Nigeria's political leadership challenges. Kantian ethics emphasizes universal moral principles, respect for human dignity, and the prioritization of duty over personal

interests. These principles have significant implications for tackling corruption, nepotism, and inequality while fostering accountability and social justice in governance. One important question that could arise here is how Kant's moral principles influence moral duty in Nigerian leadership. In response to this question, one could argue that Kantian principles influence moral duty in Nigerian leadership by emphasizing the importance of duty or obligation as the foundation of rational morality. Kant's concept of unconditional goodwill gives rise to categorical imperatives that serve as the litmus test for all moral actions, including those in leadership. Leadership falls within the realm of practical reason or morality, dealing with the oughtness of human behaviour according to Kant. Kant distinguishes moral actions from non-moral ones based on the motive that occasions the act, with moral actions being guided by duty or obligation rather than contingent factors like utility or inclination. Therefore, for Nigerian leadership to align with Kantian principles, decisions and actions must be deontological in nature and guided by the maxims of the categorical imperative to be considered moral (Udofia, 5). Kant's moral principles emphasize the importance of universal rules that apply to all individuals equally, regardless of their position or power.

Universalizability and Unethical Practices

Kant's principle of universalizability requires that actions conform to maxims that could be willed as universal laws without contradiction. This principle directly critiques unethical practices like nepotism and corruption, which undermine fairness and equity in governance. Nepotism, for instance, violates this principle because a system where favoritism is universally practiced would render merit and justice irrelevant, leading to systemic inefficiency. According to Omoregbe, "Corruption and nepotism thrive on self-interest and disregard for universal moral principles, creating social inequality and eroding public trust" (75). By adopting the universalizability principle, Nigerian leaders can develop impartial policies that benefit all citizens rather than a select few.

Treating Citizens as Ends

The Kantian imperative to treat humanity as an end rather than a means mandates leaders to respect the intrinsic worth of every citizen. In the Nigerian context, this principle demands an active effort to address social and economic inequalities and promote justice. Ajayi observes, "When leaders exploit citizens for political gain or economic advantage, they fail to acknowledge their inherent dignity, perpetuating cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement" (92). Policies grounded in this principle would prioritize education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation to ensure that all citizens have opportunities to thrive.

The Moral Duty to Prioritize Public Welfare

Kantian ethics obliges leaders to act from a sense of duty that aligns with the greater good, rather than personal or sectional interests. This moral duty is critical in Nigeria, where leadership is often characterized by self-interest and ethnic or religious bias. Kant's assertion that "the will is a law to itself" (47) underscores the need for leaders to internalize moral principles and act autonomously in pursuit of public welfare. Ethical leadership in Nigeria would require prioritizing national unity, infrastructure development, and transparent governance over political expediency.

Moral Foundation for Governance

Kant's ethics can serve as a moral compass for Nigerian political leaders, emphasizing the need for integrity and accountability. The prevailing issues of corruption and political deceit in Nigeria highlight a significant gap between ethical obligations and political practice. By adopting Kantian principles, leaders could foster a culture of duty for duty's sake, prioritizing the welfare of citizens over personal gain (Uzoigwe and Chukwuma-offor, 79). For example, instead of embezzling funds for personal enrichment, a political leader could prioritize the allocation of resources towards infrastructure projects that benefit the entire population. This shift in focus towards the greater good could ultimately lead to increased national unity and development in Nigeria.

Strategies for Embedding Kantian Ethics in Nigerian Political Systems

Educational Reforms Focused on Moral Philosophy: Integrating Kantian ethics into the curriculum at all levels of education can foster a culture of ethical reasoning among future leaders. Omoregbe argues that “philosophical education equips individuals with the capacity for critical moral reflection, a prerequisite for ethical leadership” (112). Schools may contribute to the development of a generation of morally upright leaders who give ethical considerations top priority in their activities by educating students to think critically about moral concerns and use ethical principles in their decision-making. Educational institutions must stress the value of moral philosophy in producing people who are competent in their subjects and behave ethically and conscientiously in a world that is changing quickly and where moral quandaries are always changing. In the end, including Kantian ethics in the curriculum can help create a society in which moral leadership is respected and applied in both public and private spheres.

Institutional Mechanisms for Accountability: Strengthening institutions to enforce transparency and combat corruption is essential. Policies requiring leaders to justify decisions in alignment with universal ethical standards can promote accountability. Ajayi suggests establishing independent bodies to monitor government activities and enforce ethical compliance (105). These independent bodies can serve as watchdogs, holding government officials accountable for their actions and ensuring that they act in the public's best interest. Establishing a system of checks and balances can assist institutions prevent corruption and boost public confidence in the government. Finally, putting these institutional accountability systems into place may guarantee that leaders are held accountable for their actions and support good governance.

Encouraging Value-Based Leadership Training: Leadership training programs that emphasize Kantian principles can cultivate a generation of leaders committed to moral duty and public service. Workshops, mentorship programs, and political party reforms can be tailored to instill values of integrity and respect for human dignity.

Conclusion

Kant's ethics, with its emphasis on duty, moral law, and the categorical imperative, provides a robust framework for evaluating political leadership in Nigeria. Kant's insistence that moral actions must stem from duty and be universally applicable challenges Nigerian leaders to prioritize the common good over personal or sectional interests. As Odera Oruka observes,

"A leader's commitment to moral principles often determines the trajectory of societal development" (115). This underscores the need for leaders to adopt ethical principles that transcend ethnic, religious, or political affiliations. Moreover, the application of Kant's principle of humanity, which mandates treating individuals as ends in themselves, offers a transformative lens for governance in Nigeria. Current political practices, characterized by corruption, nepotism, and the neglect of citizens' welfare, starkly contrast with this ideal. Emmanuel Eze, in his critique of African leadership ethics, argues that "a moral reconstruction rooted in universal ethical principles is imperative for sustainable governance in Africa" (87). Kant's philosophy thus provides an ethical template for fostering accountability, justice, and respect for human dignity in Nigerian politics. It is imperative to stipulate that the integration of Kantian ethics into political leadership in Nigeria is not merely an academic exercise but a moral imperative for national development. By adopting leadership practices that align with the categorical imperative, Nigerian leaders can build a society founded on justice and fairness, thereby addressing the challenges of corruption and inequality. As Kwasi Wiredu aptly observes, "Ethical governance is the bedrock of societal progress" (132). Thus, Kant's ethical theory remains a timeless guide for the moral rejuvenation of Nigeria's political leadership.

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