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NIGERIA'S MULTI-MORAL LEADERSHIP CRISIS: IMMANUEL KANT'S 'DUTY SAKE' TO THE RESCUE

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Abstract

This study examines Immanuel Kant's 'duty for duty's sake' in relation to Nigeria's persistent leadership and governance crises. Kantian ethics, particularly the concept of goodwill, asserts that moral worth is derived from duty rather than personal gain or external consequences. Goodwill, as the only intrinsically good principle, serves as the foundation of ethical leadership and public responsibility. Given Nigeria's deep-seated governance challenges ranging from corruption and political impunity to weak institutional frameworks, this research explores how Kant's moral framework can provide an ethical foundation for leadership and governance reforms. Using a qualitative, analytical approach, the study engages Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* alongside contemporary literature on ethical leadership and governance. The analysis highlights the categorical imperative as a model for leadership accountability, emphasizing justice, integrity, and the primacy of moral duty in public service. Findings reveal that Kant's deontological ethics offers a transformative framework for addressing Nigeria's leadership failures by reinforcing institutional integrity, legal enforcement, and moral responsibility. The study concludes that incorporating Kantian moral principles into Nigeria's leadership training and policy frameworks could foster ethical governance, curb corruption, and instill a sense of duty-bound responsibility. By advocating for goodwill as a core ethical standard, this research contributes to the broader discourse on leadership and moral rectitude in Nigeria.

Keywords: Kantian Ethics, Moral Leadership, Governance, Duty, Corruption.

Introduction

This study is inspired by the recognition that Nigeria's leadership crisis is deeply rooted in corruption, moral decay, and the absence of ethical accountability. According to I. Egere and N. Egere (2020), "Corruption means a deliberate act perpetuated to amass the common good, tribalism, sectionalism, favouritism, nepotism, abuse of power, office and position for private or personal interest" (p. 21). In the context of Nigeria, corruption goes beyond the misuse of public funds; it represents a culture of self-interest that has penetrated every level of governance. It is often characterized by impunity, bribery, nepotism, electoral malpractice, falsification of documents, evasion, and a general disregard for moral principles in public service. The effects are visible in Nigeria's persistent underdevelopment, from decaying infrastructure and poor healthcare system to unstable electricity and systemic poverty. For instance, despite billions of dollars earned from oil exports, many Nigerians still lack access to clean water and quality education. Additionally, embezzlement of public funds by political office holders illustrates how corruption has stalled national progress. As a result, corruption is not merely a moral issue but a central factor behind Nigeria's backwardness and failure to achieve sustainable growth. As Inoka (2006) asserts, "Nigeria is sick and hence its susceptibility to collapse because it is bereft of unshakable principles held from conviction" (p. 2). These persistent leadership failures necessitate a philosophical interrogation of ethical governance, and this study turns to Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy particularly his concept of goodwill and the categorical imperative as a potential framework for addressing Nigeria's leadership crisis. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) provides a moral philosophy that emphasizes duty, universal moral laws, and rationality as the foundation of ethical conduct. His categorical imperative commands individuals to act only according to maxims that can be universally applied, reinforcing the necessity of integrity, justice, and accountability in leadership. Kant further asserts that goodwill is the only inherently good quality, as it is guided solely by moral law rather than personal ambition or external influences. According to Kant, "it is impossible to think of anything in the world, or indeed even outside it, that can be taken to be good without qualification, except a goodwill" (2019, p. 393). This principle is crucial in reshaping leadership ethics in Nigeria, where political and institutional corruption have eroded public trust.

A historical survey of moral philosophy provides context for Kant's ethical framework. Classical thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle linked morality to virtue and the common good, while medieval scholars grounded ethics in divine law. However, with the rise of modern philosophy, figures like David Hume argued that moral judgment is driven by human emotions rather than reason. Kant opposed this notion, maintaining that morality must be grounded in rational principles independent of subjective feelings. As Gomez (2018) notes, "Hume famously claimed that reason is the slave of passions... Kant explicitly rejected this claim and argued that pure reason by itself can determine the will independently of our passions" (p. 1). By prioritizing duty over personal desires, Kant's moral philosophy presents an ethical structure that is particularly relevant for resolving Nigeria's leadership crisis. This study argues that Kant's moral philosophy, particularly his emphasis on duty and universal moral principles, provides a compelling ethical model for leadership accountability and governance reforms in Nigeria. Given the widespread corruption and failures in political and institutional leadership, a Kantian framework could serve as a moral corrective, fostering integrity, accountability, and responsible governance. By critically appraising the implications of Kant's moral philosophy, this study aims to highlight its relevance in addressing Nigeria's leadership crisis and promoting ethical transformation in governance.

Kant's 'Duty Sake' - Moral Philosophy and Ethical Leadership

At the core of Kant's philosophy lies the concept of the categorical imperative, a principle that requires individuals to act according to maxims that can be universally applied without contradiction. This universalizability principle suggests that actions should not be based on personal desires or the consequences they might bring but, on the duty, to follow a moral law that applies equally to all rational beings (Kant, 2019, p. 421). Kant's moral law demands that leaders act in ways that can be universally adopted, ensuring fairness, justice, and consistency in their decisions. A central component of Kant's ethics is the idea of goodwill, which he considers the only thing that is absolutely good, independent of any external outcomes. Kant argues that goodwill is valuable not because it achieves specific results, but because it is inherently good. "The goodwill is not good because of what it brings about or accomplishes... it is good through its willing, and therefore good in itself" (Kant, 2019, p. 394). For leaders, this notion means that their actions should not be motivated by the pursuit of power, honor, or personal gain but by a sincere commitment to moral principles. The idea of goodwill encourages leaders to focus on acting with integrity, irrespective of the circumstances or outcomes, thereby setting an ethical example for those they lead. The danger of misusing power, wealth, and honor is also present in Kant's view. He warns that without goodwill, qualities such as self-control, moderation, and deliberation which are typically virtuous can be distorted into vices. Kant notes, "Power, riches, honor, even health... make a person bold but quite even arrogant as well, if no goodwill is present" (Kant, 2019, p. 393). This insight is vital for ethical leadership, as it emphasizes the responsibility of leaders to approach their positions with humility, ensuring that their actions are guided by ethical principles rather than the allure of personal benefits. Leaders who lack goodwill risk becoming self-serving and using their positions for personal gain, undermining their ethical responsibility. In contrast, a leader who acts from goodwill is motivated by a desire to do what is morally right, not for recognition or reward. Kant's distinction between the inner goodness of goodwill and the potential external consequences of actions reinforces the idea that true ethical leadership stems from a commitment to moral duty, irrespective of external factors.

The Categorical Imperative and Leadership

Kant's ethics is built upon the idea of the categorical imperative, which provides a universal framework for assessing the morality of human actions. The categorical imperative contrasts with the hypothetical imperative, which is contingent upon specific desires or outcomes. Unlike the hypothetical imperative, which prescribes actions based on a conditional goal or result, the categorical imperative demands that actions be performed because they are morally required, irrespective of the consequences (Kant, 2019, p. 414). This foundational concept can be applied not only to individual ethics but also to leadership accountability, as it requires that individuals, especially leaders, act according to principles that can be universally applied, ensuring moral behavior regardless of the context or outcome. The categorical imperative is rooted in the concept of universalizability, which is the idea that one should act only on maxims that one can will to become a universal law. Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative, the principle of universalization, asserts that the maxim behind an action must be capable of being universally adopted by all rational beings without contradiction (Kant, 2019, p. 421). For leaders, this principle requires that their actions align with values that can be generalized to everyone, ensuring fairness, justice, and integrity in their decisions. Leadership accountability, therefore, is rooted in the

responsibility of leaders to uphold principles that are universally acceptable, acting in ways that benefit not just themselves but society as a whole.

In his critique of various actions, Kant provides compelling examples of how the principle of universalization works. For instance, he condemns suicide as morally wrong, arguing that the maxim of ending one's life in times of despair cannot be universalized because it contradicts the inherent drive for self-preservation, which is necessary for the flourishing of human life (Kant, 2019, p. 422). In the context of leadership, this implies that leaders should never act in ways that harm others, even if they may perceive personal benefit from doing so. Leadership actions that undermine the well-being of others such as exploiting employees, engaging in corruption, or violating human rights cannot be universalized and are, therefore, inherently immoral. A leader's responsibility is to act in accordance with ethical principles that ensure the well-being of all stakeholders, including employees, citizens, and the broader community. Kant's second example illustrates the moral wrongness of lying, particularly in the case of borrowing money with no intention to repay it. He argues that the maxim behind such an act "When I need money, I should borrow some and promise to repay it, even though I know I never will" would be self-defeating if universalized, as it would render promises meaningless (Kant, 2019, p. 423). This example is highly relevant to leadership accountability. If leaders engage in dishonest practices, such as making false promises to constituents or stakeholders, their actions undermine trust and create a culture of dishonesty. If such behavior were universalized, it would collapse the very system of governance or organizational integrity upon which leaders rely. Leadership, therefore, must be founded on truth, transparency, and trustworthiness, as leaders who violate these principles undermine their own legitimacy and moral standing.

The principle of universalization also addresses the moral duties of individuals towards themselves and others. Kant contends that one's duties extend beyond the self and include obligations to fellow human beings. For instance, he provides the example of an individual with great talents who chooses to neglect them in favor of personal indulgence. Kant asserts that this action is morally wrong because it contradicts the rational purpose of human existence: to develop one's faculties for the betterment of society (Kant, 2019, p. 425). In the leadership context, this example highlights the importance of self-development and the responsible use of one's position and talents for the common good. Leaders who fail to develop their abilities, neglect their responsibilities, or indulge in personal gain at the expense of their duties are not only failing themselves but also betraying their constituents and the broader society. The universalization principle demands that leaders act with a sense of duty and responsibility, cultivating their skills and using their positions to make positive contributions to society. Another significant example Kant provides is that of a wealthy individual who refuses to help those in need. He argues that such a maxim "I should not help those who are experiencing hardship" would also be morally wrong if universalized because it undermines the social fabric of empathy and mutual support (Kant, 2019, p. 424). In leadership, this principle underscores the importance of compassion, empathy, and social responsibility. Leaders who refuse to assist those in need or who perpetuate systems of inequality violate the universal duty to support others, especially the vulnerable. Leadership accountability, in this sense, is not only about making ethical decisions in one's personal life but also about creating systems that promote fairness, justice, and equal opportunities for all.

Ultimately, the categorical imperative, with its principle of universalization, provides a powerful moral framework for leadership accountability. Leaders are required to act

according to maxims that they can rationally will to be universal laws. This ensures that their actions are not based on personal desires, expediency, or selfishness, but are guided by principles that uphold the dignity and well-being of all individuals. By adhering to these moral imperatives, leaders can foster environments of trust, justice, and ethical conduct, ensuring that their leadership is accountable to all people.

Political Ethics and Leadership (Governance) Crisis in Nigeria

Political accountability, which mandates that leaders justify their actions to the public, remains a key pillar of governance in Nigeria. However, weak institutional structures, corruption, and a lack of ethical leadership have severely compromised this principle (Akinola, 2020, p. 45). Despite the provisions of the Nigerian Constitution ensuring accountability through elections and judicial oversight, systemic corruption and lack of transparency have led to a crisis in governance. The erosion of public trust in political institutions is largely attributed to leaders failing to fulfill their promises and evade responsibility for their actions (Akinola, 2020, p. 60). Corruption is at the core of Nigeria's governance crisis, infiltrating various sectors, including politics, economy, and public administration. According to Uzoigwe and Chukwuma-Offor (2021), "corruption is deeply entrenched in Nigerian society, making governance ineffective" (pp. 71-72). Politicians engage in illicit activities such as embezzlement, bribery, and patronage, depriving citizens of resources meant for development. Kantian ethics provides a useful framework for understanding the ethical obligations of political leaders. According to Kant's concept of goodwill, true ethical leadership stems from the duty to serve the public without personal gain (Soyinka, 2018, p. 130). In the Nigerian context, political leaders often engage in populist acts for electoral gain rather than genuine public service. For instance, distributing food supplies before elections is not inherently wrong, but Kantian ethics questions the moral worth of such actions if they are solely intended to secure votes rather than to fulfill a duty to serve (Ogunbadejo, 2018, p. 110). The governance crisis in Nigeria, characterized by self-serving leadership, contradicts the ethical standards expected in a democratic society.

Beyond elections, lack of accountability in governance manifests in arbitrary arrests and suppression of dissent. Political leaders use state institutions to silence critics, violating fundamental rights (Khotami, 2017, p. 12). The absence of a robust accountability mechanism enables impunity, further weakening democratic structures. When politicians are not held accountable, they prioritize personal interests over national development, deepening the crisis in governance (Mulgan, 2003, p. 18). It is striking to observe that "embezzlement of public fund, excessive greed, irresponsibility, lack of public accountability, tribalism, sectionalism, nepotism, absolute lack of patriotic spirit etc. are the problems of Africa, all perpetrated by African political leaders and those highly placed in public offices" (Okolo, 1985, p. 12). In our analysis of goodwill and corruption in Nigeria, it is clear that our quest for moral rectitude in Nigeria is dependent on both the leaders and the led in living a morally upright life, by being accountable, responsible, detribalized, and most importantly, possessing the Kantian goodwill. As Asuoze (2003) noted, "the goodwill is the urge in all things, at all places and at all times, always to be positively extraordinary in our approach to issues" (p. 156). It is in the light of this that we note that "where there is no goodwill, all laws have no focus, all rules ineffective; all meanings become distorted and ambiguous" (Asuoze, 2003, p. 156). If Kant's goodwill is adopted in Nigeria, it would go a long way to ensure moral rectitude as well as remove the greatest obstacle to her growth. Where there is no goodwill, we are condemned to our personal interest. Without goodwill, nothing grows, everything is a farce. From the foregoing, we can understand that one of the greatest obstacles to

Nigeria's growth is lack of goodwill. Having come to terms with Kant's idea of goodwill, the underlying question remains: what bearing does it have on the moral rectitude in Nigeria? What has Kant's notion of goodwill got to do with political accountability in Nigeria? In response to this intriguing question, one needs to re-examine the moral standing of the Nigerian state. It is the case that one of the greatest mistakes has always been the assumption that we can think of the politics of a state without its morality. But it must be noted that no state can think well politically without morality. Morality determines politics; and is the basis for any "good" politics.

As Otakpor (2005) maintained, "Nigeria is one country where corruption and corrupt practices are allowed free and unfettered reign, where crime, graft, and corruption are celebrated and offenders crowned with Chieftaincy and other titles. Nigeria is one country where upstarts easily become millionaires and no questions are asked concerning the sources of sudden wealth. Those who dare to ask such questions are regarded as enemies of human progress" (p. 44). Based on the above discussion, one is therefore not surprised why the country is still where it is today because of bad leadership, lack of accountability and lack of goodwill. Little wonder Kant says it is only the goodwill that is good in itself. Indeed, there is corruption at all levels of government and all aspects of our national life. Hence, going back to Kant, the goodwill must be brought back into the scheme of Nigerian politics. Another critical issue that hinders political accountability in Nigeria is the dysfunctionality of the country's political institutions. The Nigerian Constitution establishes several institutions designed to act as checks and balances to prevent the abuse of power, including the legislature and the judiciary. However, these institutions often fail to serve their intended purpose. The Nigerian legislature, particularly the National Assembly, is expected to oversee the executive branch of government, scrutinizing policies and expenditure. Unfortunately, it has become increasingly evident that the legislature is often complicit in the executive's disregard for accountability. The National Assembly has been accused of prioritizing personal and party interests over the public good (Ogunjimi, 2019, p. 13). Moreover, the Nigerian judiciary, which is supposed to ensure the rule of law and serve as an impartial adjudicator of justice, has become increasingly politicized. Judicial independence is one of the cornerstones of any democracy, ensuring that the legal system is free from external political influence. However, in Nigeria, the judiciary is frequently subjected to pressure from political elites, who use their influence to manipulate judicial outcomes, particularly in high-profile cases involving government corruption or abuse of power (Akinola, 2017, p. 34). This manipulation undermines the judicial system's ability to deliver justice and enforce accountability. The political culture in Nigeria further exacerbates the challenges of accountability. Nigerian politics is characterized by patronage networks and political godfatherism, where loyalty to political patrons and party loyalty often outweigh the rule of law and democratic principles. In this environment, political figures frequently operate with impunity, making governance less about public service and more about personal enrichment. Addressing these issues requires a moral and ethical revolution rooted in Kantian principles, where governance is driven by duty rather than self-interest.

Goodwill, Institutional Integrity, and Legal Enforcement

The moral and institutional challenges facing Nigeria's governance system have long been a subject of debate. Issues of judicial corruption, weak law enforcement, and a lack of institutional integrity continue to plague the nation, undermining democratic governance and the rule of law. A critical engagement with Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy offers a philosophical framework for addressing these issues, particularly through the concepts of

goodwill, duty, and universal moral principles. Kant's emphasis on moral duty and ethical governance provides an essential foundation for rethinking Nigeria's leadership challenges and institutional failures. Kant defines goodwill as the only intrinsically good thing, an intention to act in accordance with moral duty rather than self-interest (Kant, 2019, p. 17). Applied to leadership, goodwill implies that political and institutional leaders must act not out of personal ambition or external pressures but from a principled commitment to justice and the common good. In Nigeria, however, leadership is often characterized by political expediency, nepotism, and self-serving decision-making, which directly contradicts the Kantian imperative of ethical governance. One of the primary barriers to goodwill in Nigerian leadership is the prevalence of political corruption. The manipulation of judicial and law enforcement agencies by political elites undermines institutional independence and weakens legal enforcement. Adekanye (2017) highlights that judicial corruption manifests in bribery, favoritism, and political influence, reducing the judiciary's ability to function independently (p. 78). When court rulings are influenced by political considerations rather than legal principles, the very foundation of justice is eroded. A Kantian approach would demand that judicial officers adhere to their moral duty, ensuring that justice is served impartially, regardless of political affiliations.

Institutional integrity is essential for good governance, yet in Nigeria, many public institutions suffer from a lack of transparency and accountability. According to Kant's categorical imperative, individuals and institutions must act according to principles that could be universally applied without contradiction (Kant, 2019, p. 23). This means that laws and policies should be applied consistently and without bias, ensuring that all citizens are treated equally under the law. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Nigeria's foremost anti-corruption agency, has often been accused of selective prosecution. Adebayo (2019) notes that the EFCC operates under political influence, targeting opponents while protecting allies (p. 134). This selective enforcement violates the Kantian imperative, which demands impartial justice. If institutions such as the EFCC were guided by Kantian ethics, they would function with integrity, ensuring that corruption cases are prosecuted fairly and without political interference. Institutional integrity requires that the rule of law be upheld universally, rather than selectively enforced for political gains. Similarly, Nigeria's National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) and the Standards Organization of Nigeria (SON) are critical in regulating consumer goods and ensuring public safety. However, corruption and inefficiency in these agencies have led to an influx of substandard and counterfeit products in the market (Onuoha, 2018, p. 45). Kantian ethics demand that regulatory bodies act in accordance with moral duty, prioritizing public welfare over financial gain. When regulatory agencies succumb to bribery or political interference, they fail to meet their moral obligations, leading to systemic failures that harm citizens.

A strong legal system is fundamental to governance, yet Nigeria's law enforcement agencies, particularly the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), are widely criticized for human rights abuses, bribery, and extrajudicial killings (*Human Rights Watch*, 2020, p. 29). These issues reflect a deeper ethical crisis in law enforcement, where officers prioritize personal gain over their duty to uphold justice. According to Agboola (2019), many police officers exploit their positions for financial gain, engaging in bribery and extortion (p. 126). Such practices create an environment of impunity, eroding public trust in the legal system. A Kantian approach to law enforcement would emphasize duty-bound service. Police officers must be trained to act in accordance with moral principles, treating all citizens with dignity and fairness. Kant's principle of treating individuals as ends rather than means underscores the importance of

ethical policing, where law enforcement serves the people rather than exploiting them for personal benefit. This shift requires structural reforms, including better training, improved officer welfare, and stricter accountability measures to curb corruption and misconduct. Goodwill in governance is not just an abstract ideal; it is a necessary condition for sustainable development. However, Nigeria's political leadership often lacks the will to implement meaningful reforms. Aiyede (2020) argues that successive governments have introduced governance reforms that remain largely unimplemented due to political inertia (p. 153). The centralization of power in the presidency has further weakened democratic institutions, limiting their ability to function effectively (Olusola, 2021, p. 89). Kantian ethics suggest that leadership must be guided by universal moral laws rather than self-interest or political convenience. If Nigerian leaders embraced Kant's moral philosophy, they would prioritize institutional integrity over personal or political gains. This requires a commitment to transparency, legal enforcement without bias, and policies that promote the welfare of all citizens rather than a select few.

Summary and Conclusion

This study has critically examined the relevance of Immanuel Kant's 'duty for duty's sake', nay his moral philosophy to the persistent leadership, hydra-headed and multi-moral leadership crisis in Nigeria. It has established that the fundamental principles of Kantian ethics-goodwill, duty, and the categorical imperative, offer a viable moral framework for addressing Nigeria's governance failures. The findings demonstrate that ethical lapses in leadership, entrenched corruption, and the disregard for public accountability are direct consequences of a governance culture devoid of moral duty. Kant's deontological ethics underscores the necessity of leadership founded on moral obligation rather than self-interest, reinforcing integrity, justice, and impartiality as indispensable virtues in governance. To foster ethical leadership in Nigeria, policymakers and public officials must integrate Kantian principles into leadership training, institutional reforms, and governance structures. The imperative of duty must supersede political expediency, ensuring that laws and policies are applied universally and without bias. Legal and institutional enforcement mechanisms must also be strengthened to uphold ethical governance and combat impunity. Ultimately, embracing Kantian ethics could serve as a transformative force in Nigeria's political landscape, fostering a culture of moral responsibility and national progress. By prioritizing goodwill and moral rectitude, leadership in Nigeria can move beyond self-serving interests toward a governance model that truly serves the common good. Without such a shift, Nigeria's leadership crisis will persist, further eroding public trust and national development.

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