

ETHICS, LEADERSHIP AND THE PARADOX OF DUTY IN KANT'S PHILOSOPHY: A CURSORY LOOK AT THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Kant begins his Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals by asserting that the only thing in the world or outside of it that is good without limitation is the goodwill. He then proceeds to associate the goodwill in some way with acting from duty and distinguishes acting from duty and acting with inclination. He claims that only actions done from the perspective of duty have true moral worth, while actions in conformity to duty are done from self-interest. Thus, the only actions that display goodwill are those done from duty. Even though Kant, is not generally considered to be a political philosopher and histories of political thought do not give him pride of place, however his contributions in moral philosophy are valuable tools for political leadership where leaders are called to selfless service and in carrying out this service, it is expected that they see this selflessness in leadership as a duty to humanity whether in oneself or in others and not for the gains of it. This paper therefore suggests that the myriad of problems that bedevil Nigeria is as a result of the erroneous interpretation of this concept of duty by both the leaders and the led. There should exist a dialogue between the leaders and the led, and this dialogue must have its anchor on humanity which should be treated as an end in itself. The method of critical analysis is employed to demonstrate the interrelatedness between political leadership and Kant's moral methodology.

Keywords: ethics, leadership, democracy, moral duty, humanity, goodwill.

Preamble

Kantian outlook on politics is argued here to be justified on the basis that Kant's moral philosophy can have a considerate influence on democratic thought. It was Kant's conceptualization as morality through autonomy of the will that paved way for the Western liberal vision of democracy (Schneewind, 1998:4-5). In "What is Enlightenment?," one of his most outstanding works on politics, Kant points out that people have not only the right but, above all, the duty to strive for self-emancipation. This position is captured impressively by Kant thus: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity (Kant, 1992:132). This "Immaturity," according to Kant has a moral or legal meaning: it refers to a person who, like a minor, lacks full moral or legal responsibility. The important argument is that this lack of responsibility is not caused by a natural handicap or by physical immaturity; it is, as Kant emphasizes, "self-incurred" (133). Self-incurred immaturity is thus a self-imposed dependency on the guidance of another person. In fact, people are too often inclined

to surrender their freedom and self-responsibility to an authority because "it is so convenient to be immature (Heiner, 1995: 5).

In opening part of the *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant made this assertion "nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even outside of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a goodwill (Kant, 1994:2). His point is that we cannot believe that there can be found in this world anything, which is unconditionally good except for the good will. Knowledge, skills and competence may be used opposed to their good purpose if the good will is failing or is absent. The sad experience is that anything can potentially be abused - power, wealth and position. The only guarantee against abuse is that of a good will. The good will is only possible, understood as a positive self-reference, because if the good will changes into something not good, it immediately invalidates and dissolves itself. The statement rests on the principle of non-contradiction. If the good will was not itself an instance of the good it would be a contradiction. The good will therefore has to be good in itself.

So to Kant, the good will is present when acting for the sake of duty and since he has already charged that we should strive for self-emancipation, it therefore becomes our collective responsibility to fulfil the desires and the purpose for which the government was established. A duty is an action, which we are obligated to perform out of respect for the moral law (Kant 1994:13, 400). John Locke and Thomas Hobbes both emphasized that the purpose for which a civil state was established was to

Kant's Teleological Approach to Morality as the Foundation of Political Leadership

The word teleology has its origin in the Greek word *telos*, which when translated means final end, or purpose. The concept of teleology in philosophy has its historical roots in the Aristotelian way of conceiving or explanation of actions in terms of a final end - the *causa finalis*. The final cause is defined by Aristotle as "...that for the sake of which a thing is done..." (Aristotle 1984: 194). This term has the same connotation with the contemporary idea of intentionality and of acting purposeful with a view to an end. There is nothing in Aristotle's definition of teleology as the final cause, which excludes the possibility that a duty or an obligation may be conceived as the final cause, although his own suggestion is that happiness (*eudemonia*) is the *telos* of morally right actions.

Kant believes that in order to be of moral worth an action should be carried out with the intention of duty and that every action should have untainted intent and purpose behind it. Devoid of this pure and untainted intention, an action is meaningless. It is in this vein that the most important aspect of an action is the intention that a person has while carrying out the action. Kant's deontology is opposed to the utilitarian consequentialism to which the final result is the most important aspect of an action. Present-day western concepts as 'the rule of law' and 'the legal constitution of the state' are based on Kant's deontology as are 'codes of governance' and 'codes of conducts' (Verstraeten & Liederkerke, 2008). What Kant seeks to achieve is to establish the supreme principle of morality and in doing that, the first two sections of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* was devoted to this project.

In the first section, Kant started with the clue that only a good will or actions of such a will have unqualified worth. Since a person of good will acts from the intention of duty, analysis

of such actions done from this motive have moral worth (Kant, 1994:23). Acting from duty is not a matter of having certain purposes, Kant argues, for a good purpose, such as helping others, may be adopted either from duty or from natural inclination. The distinguishing feature of an action done from duty is that the agent sees doing the action or promoting its purpose as something that is required of him; something that it is *necessary* for him to do. This feature is captured in the maxim, or the universal principle on which the agent acts. Kant says that a person who acts with a goodwill sees his maxim as having the form of a universal law. The principle of a good will, therefore, is the principle of adopting only those maxims which you can will to be universalized. This yields the first formulation of Kant's categorical imperative, the Formula of Universal Law: "Act only on a maxim which you can at the same time will to be a universal law" (402; 421). Kant believed that in order to determine whether you can will your maxim to be a universal law, you should ask whether you could consistently will it to be a law of nature. What Kant means by "a law of nature" is entirely clear, and seems to be different in the different examples he gives. In some examples, he seems to mean "a practical principle that is and always has been followed by everyone," and his question is whether you could will your maxim to be such a principle while at the same time willing to act on it yourself. For example, Kant argues that if everyone should act on the principle of making a lying promise during political campaigns because it is convenient and effective in achieving one's ends i.e. win an election, then, we can universalize it such that, whether lying brings fortune or calamity, we can apply it in all circumstances as a universal principle.

Kant explains further what kind of motivation is involved in acting from the categorical imperative. He argues that since every willed action is done with an end in view, the prospect of morality depends on the existence of an objectively indispensable end. He proposes that the one indispensable end we must all treat as an end in itself is our humanity, by which he means the rational power of self-determination, and especially the power to determine our own ends. The value we place on ourselves is inherent in the value we place on the ends which we decide to pursue. This leads Kant to a new formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act always so that you treat humanity, in your own person or another, never merely as a means but also at the same time as an end in itself" (429; 433). The Formula of Humanity tells us to respect the power of self-determination in others and to treasure and nurture that power in ourselves. It makes it a duty to share in the ends of others and to treat them only in ways to which they can consent and as not mere instruments to achieving other ends. His point is that we cannot believe that there can be found in this world anything, which is unqualifiedly and unconditionally good except for the humanity and as such, we should cherish it. Humanity therefore has to be good in itself. To Kant the good will is present when acting for the sake of duty with respect for humanity. A duty is an action, which we are obligated to perform out of respect for the moral law in which every rational agent is a self-legislating member (400). The above statement can be interpreted as (1) a duty to rational self-legislation and thereby to oneself (2) a reciprocal duty to recognize other's rational self-legislation (3) a duty to acknowledge all persons' objective and common rational self-legislation. Thus, Kant can in this way be justified because the principle of universalization can be understood as a demand for consistency between one's own judgments and that which all rational persons would arrive at. The rational person's autonomy and self-legislation is presupposed in the idea of a duty commanded by Kant in his categorical imperative, because only to such a person (person with autonomy) can a categorical imperative command; a command of duty is not founded upon the advantages or disadvantages of observing it (Kant 1994:151, 482); its validity rests

solely in our self-understanding as rational beings, on the possible freedom to self-legislation, and on the idea that the rational person necessarily has a moral choice which the irrational person doesn't have. To remain rational, a person must let his choice be guided by reason.

This connection between morality and autonomy led Kant to construct his ideal of the perfect moral community - the Kingdom of Ends. Citizens of the Kingdom of Ends legislate the moral law together. They act only in ways to which all can consent, and share in the pursuit of one another's ends. They are autonomous both because they make their own laws and because those laws direct them to respect one another's autonomy. When they act morally, Kant claims, they act from a conception of themselves as citizens of the Kingdom of Ends.

Ethics, Leadership and the Paradox of Duty

There is no doubt that Kant takes duty as a dominant concept in understanding morally right action as seen from the above. The question to contemplate here is how to comprehend and define duty in our political system according to Immanuel Kant's conception. This question must be answered in order to avoid possible misinterpretations caused by substitute and alternative usages of the concept. This concept of duty can be found in everyday interpretations, where duty is perceived as pertaining to humans in their social, religious, and political lives. These interpretations are very dissimilar from the exact and precise concept of duty as we find in Immanuel Kant's philosophy as it relates to duty in politics. I will therefore present an interpretation of Kant's moral philosophy, wherein I explicate and reconstruct the concept of duty to befit what is expected of democratic leadership.

No doubts, political leaders have often been of questionable and debatable moral character this has been a persistent image in our political sphere. We see dynamic and influential politicians willing to do whatever is strategically important in attaining their desired ends even though doing so may weigh heavily on the people (humanity). And one may be tempted to ask if excellence in governmental leadership is incompatible with moral excellence or whether doing what one ought to do in one's capacity as a leader excludes the possibility of doing what one ought to do as a human being. We hear of such aphorisms like "politics is a dirty game" which refers to the alleged necessity of compromising or abandoning moral principle in order to play the role of a government official effectively. "Dirty game" are said to result when a leader encounters a conflict of duties or values and must choose between alternatives, none of which is entirely satisfactory.

Hoederer in Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Les Mains Sales* (*Dirty hands*), explains the view to Hugo (who refuses to "dirty" his hands):

You cling so tightly to your purity, my lad! How terrified you are of sullyng your hands. Well, go ahead then, stay pure! What good will it do, and why even bother coming here among us? Purity is a concept of fakirs and friars. But you, the intellectuals, the bourgeois anarchists, you invoke purity as your rationalization for doing nothing. Do nothing, don't move, and wrap your arms tight around your body, put on your gloves. As for myself, my hands are dirty. I have plunged my arms up to the elbows in excrement and blood. And what else should one do? Do you suppose that it is possible to govern innocently? (Sartre, 1986: 193–94).

In contemplating this issue, it is appropriate to differentiate self-centered opportunists leaders from those who suffer corruption through their honest efforts to govern well. Self-serving unscrupulous leaders often justify their dubious actions through self-deceptive allusions to altruistic motive i.e. “for the good of the whole,” claiming that morality can be sacrificed on the altar of group-based loyalty or with the utilitarian maxim of “the end justifies the means.” As such morality is reduced to its utility rather than seeing it as an imperative which Kant advocates. The question before us is whether immoral acts in the political realm might arise as a result of the very nature of governance and morality itself or whether rulers simply have more opportunities for temptation and thus succumb more often than the private citizens? Or does good governance sometimes require sacrificing of one’s moral standards? When corrupt governmental agents are detected, society tends toward clemency in its “punishment” to them, which sometimes echo a recognition of the problem intrinsic in politics, which leads people to forgive and forget so easily the corruptions and wrongdoings of their governments. On this issues, both realists and idealists have divergent views whether immoral act in politics is unpreventable. Realists maintain that immoral acts are inescapable in politics in contrast, to the idealists who hold that the so-called problem of immoral acts and compromise is merely an excuse adduced by those who lack the moral strength and fiber to do what they really ought to do in perspectives. Kenneth Winston sums up the opposition between these two positions: “To be a realist in politics is to believe that political life exceeds our capacities in certain crucial ways. Idealism is the view that human capacities are adequate to political life” (Winston, 1994, 39–40).

This moral strength is what Kant articulated as imperatives which are expressed with the word “ought” (Kant 1994:24, 413). Stating imperatively by an “ought” that something would be good to do, or bad and therefore something to be avoided, is like suggesting a course of action to a rational will. For him, there is no justification for saying sometimes immoral means are required to achieve moral ends. If Hoederer in Sartre’s play *Les Mains Sales* truly believes that it is not wrong to renounce the dictates of morality in order to achieve his ends, then he should not consider his hands to be sullied at all. He expresses a pragmatic theory of value when he insists that effective means to one’s ends are good *in virtue of their efficacy*. Because to the pragmatists, there is nothing to the perception of goodness above and beyond efficacy, for there is no supreme and transcendent metaphysical concept of goodness to which good actions might correspond (Laurie, 2004:366). Nor, according to the pragmatists, is there an absolute Form in which actions might “participate” (à la Plato). Goodness is expressed in efficacy. An imperative is not in itself a motivation, but preserves the difference between wish and act. The “ought” in a sentence justifies to a rational will, with a normative force but not with empirical force as the pragmatists would claim, that goodness should be done irrespective of the circumstances. Kant therefore seeks a formula which can validate and justify statements, which expresses moral laws understood as principles which are valid for all rational beings in all circumstances (Kant 1994:23, 412). Kant believes he has found this formula in the *categorical imperative* which is at variance with the views expressed by the utilitarians and pragmatists. For Kant there are two different ways of justifying an action. One is with reference to a purpose considered to be good, the other with reference to a principle or rule, which is self-evidently good and as such, leadership entails acting in accordance with these imperatives (Kant 1994:25, 415).

For instance, the word *corruption* originates from the Latin for “broken” and has a categorically undesirable and negative connotation, indicating a loss of wholeness or integrity in a person. We tend to view corruption as undesirable and lamentable for persons themselves, apart from the dangers that their corruption might have for/on others. Because the sorts of transformations in character that government officials undergo once they are in office is irremediable and irreversible, this is why politics is seen as a dirty game and those who engage in it are seen as people with “dirty hands” which might more aptly be the term appropriate for their activities.

According to Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, “habits build character” (1980), so a person who sacrifices his own principles one time becomes more likely to do so again in the future. Agents who set aside what once were their moral views become increasingly desensitized to the sorts of violations that prompted their moral indignation and resentment. Agents learn, and they become habituated to accept what once seemed unacceptable, they no longer feel compelled to object to what once seemed distasteful and immoral. In clinging to some goal while neglecting, even temporarily, his moral beliefs and principles, the agent thus transforms slowly into a corrupted image. In this vein, those who relinquish moral ideals and principles for the provident goods of a group in this manner transform themselves slowly into persons who no longer cherish and embrace those moral ideals and principles. Some might even claim to know where to set the borderlines, insisting that they will not sacrifice certain fundamental and essential beliefs for any reason. Still, if habits build character, then even the act of surrendering less-essential and less-important beliefs renders one more likely to sacrifice and surrender other more-fundamental beliefs in the future for the same reasons. So issues like corruption may be a long, tantalizing and irresistible voyage down a very slippery slope.

Conclusion

The role of ethics cannot be undervalued as it aims at expounding and interpreting the grounds for the morality of our actions and its range fundamentally covers every action of human life, so long as these actions would warrant moral valuation. We can, therefore, talk of Biomedical Ethics, Environmental Ethics, Legal Ethics, and Political Ethics etc. The ethics of these areas of human endeavor provide the methodical perception of the ideologies and foundations of the morality of the actions and judgments we make in these areas of human life, as well as the norms that function as guiding principles, rules and ideals to standardize decisions in these areas. As such, morality is the life wire of every society (Ochulor, 2010:463), because every society is a composition of people who are apparently moral as well as rational agents who are confronted daily with moral choices in their social relations and interfaces, which in a way is inclined by desires and selfish propensities and preferences. There is the likelihood for any society to degenerate into a Hobbesian state of nature if conventional ethical norms are not designed. Apart from this, the political life of any nation should come under the purview and beam of morality because political activity as a social action does not only have moral implications on the people but also impacts damagingly the life of the individual himself, those around him, the society and the ultimate goal of the political life if proper care is not taken.

Immanuel Kant’s ethics require people to act towards all mankind morally as if they are an end and not just a means to an end. One splendor to behold in Kant’s ethics is that people need to see humanity never as a means only. This is the foundation of his categorical

imperative. Kant's premise of his categorical imperative is that we must seek an end that is devoid of any desires or inclination. He did not see any rational being as existing to be arbitrarily used for whatsoever reason. For him therefore, our duty towards humanity is not hypothetical but categorical. This is what should constitute ethical behavior in our political life. Accordingly, it is expected that the efforts of our political leaders should be to do what they ought to do as matter of duty irrespective of their inclinations and self-interest. This in a way, will determine the level of their effectiveness and success. John Dewy corroborates this by saying that the achievement and disappointment of a government is judged by its effectiveness. Thus, he builds a model of political life on the values of pragmatism. He contends that since human beings are problem solvers, relentlessly making variations to the varying circumstances that challenge them, he identifies a person's response to these qualms as unprompted and impulsive, which is characteristic of humans. So every government is evaluated in terms of effectiveness in solving problems and when such impulsive response is absent, such a system is seen as a colossal failure (Denise 249).

This brief analysis above is aimed at providing a summary of the complexity and absurdities of arriving at an ethical impactful leadership in our democratic system. Nonetheless, it is assumed that leaders should model ethical behavior, possibly by using one of the principles presented by Kant. If leaders were to imbibe these principles in their role, and they are ethically committed to lead in an ethical way following Kant's Universal formulations and the Humanity as an end formulation, we would see more committed leaders. Unfortunately, we see little of this foundation in the behavior of our leaders.

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