Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.7 No.3 September, 2024; p.g. 165 – 173; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS: A KANTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON MORAL DUTY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIAN POLITICIANS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) through the lens of Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, particularly his concept of duty and the categorical imperative. The parable, which contrasts the fates of a wealthy man who ignores the suffering of a poor beggar and Lazarus who suffers in life but finds solace in the afterlife, provides a rich framework for examining issues of moral responsibility. Adopting a comparative research methodology and applying Kant's ethical theory to this biblical narrative, the paper argues that the Rich Man's failure to act in accordance with the duty to treat others as ends in themselves, rather than as means to his own comfort, is a violation of Kantian principles. This analysis has particular relevance to Nigerian politicians, whose actions often seem disconnected from the moral obligation to promote justice, equity, and welfare for all citizens. The paper contends that a Kantian reading of the parable urges Nigerian political leaders to embrace their duties to address socio-economic disparities, practice empathy, and adopt policies that serve the common good. The work highlights the ethical implications of political neglect in the face of widespread poverty and inequality, emphasizing that a Kantian approach to governance would demand a moral shift toward inclusive and responsible leadership.

Keywords: Parable, Kantian Ethics, Poverty, Politics, Nigeria.

Introduction

The biblical parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) vividly juxtaposes the fates of two individuals—one wealthy and self-indulgent, the other poor and suffering—after death. While the parable highlights themes of social justice, compassion, and the moral consequences of one's actions, it also raises questions about ethical responsibility and the treatment of the marginalized. Viewed through the lens of Kantian ethics, which is grounded in principles of duty, moral law, and respect for the intrinsic worth of every human being, the

parable serves as a critique of self-interest and negligence toward the suffering of others. Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, particularly his emphasis on duty and the universal value of human dignity, offers a framework to challenge unethical behaviours, such as those exhibited by the rich man.

This paper aims to explore the relevance of Kantian ethics in the context of Nigerian politics, where systemic inequality, corruption, and neglect of the poor are prevalent. Through a careful appraisal of the parable via the optic of Kant's principles of duty, respect for others as ends in themselves, and justice, this paper seeks to examine how the actions of the Nigerian politicians—or lack thereof—can be evaluated and critiqued in terms of their moral responsibilities toward the vulnerable members of the society. The paper aims to highlight the ethical implications of governance and the potential for applying Kantian ethics to foster justice, accountability, and greater societal equity in Nigeria.

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, found in Luke 16:19-31, is one of the most striking stories in the Gospel, offering deep insights into the themes of wealth, poverty, compassion, and the afterlife. The parable opens with a stark contrast between the two main characters: the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man (ἄνθρωπος πλούσιος, *anthrōposplousios* in Greek) is described as living in luxury (ἐνἀσέλγεια, *enaselgeia*—literally "in indulgence") and splendour (πολυτελή, polutēlēs—literally "of great cost") (Wenham, 1991). The rich man's wealth is manifest not just in his possessions but in his lifestyle. He "dressed in purple and fine linen" (Luke 16:19), a detail that carries significant cultural weight in the ancient world.
In the view of Scott (1989) states that during this time, purple dye was costly, extracted from sea snails, and thus purple garments were a symbol of nobility and immense wealth. On the other hand, fine linen (βύσσος, byssos) was also expensive, often used for garments of the elite. These details showcase the opulence and excess of the rich man's life, which is characterized by self-indulgence and separation from the needs of others. Conversely, Lazarus, the beggar, is portrayed in a state of unimaginable suffering and need. He lies at the rich man's gate, covered in sores (ἰατρῆς, *iatrēs*—sick, needing healing). In line with this observation, Lehtipuu (2004) states that Lazarus' sores differ significantly with the rich man's attire. According to him, although there is no mention of Lazarus' clothing, it is claimed that the skin serves as a wardrobe in this context to contribute to the character differences.

Lazarus is so destitute that he longs for even the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table (Luke 16:21). The imagery here is striking: Lazarus is not merely poor, but his life is marked by suffering and rejection. The beggar's situation is further accentuated by the mention of dogs (κύων, kynos) licking his sores, symbolizing his absolute marginalization. The dogs, considered unclean animals in Jewish culture, serve to underscore the complete abandonment of Lazarus by human society (Vine, 1996).This contrast between the rich man's wealth and Lazarus' poverty is not merely a social or economic observation but a theological one. Lazarus, despite his physical poverty, embodies spiritual dignity and moral integrity. His name, "Lazarus" (meaning "God helps" in Hebrew—אֶלְעָזָר, *El'azar*), is significant in this context because it invokes the idea that God sees and helps those who are suffering, even if human society does not.

The rich man, who remains unnamed in the story, represents those whose identity is defined by their wealth and indulgence rather than their moral or spiritual standing. The moral lessons derived from the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus are thought-provoking, particularly when viewed through the lens of compassion, generosity, and accountability. These lessons are rooted in the disparity between the lives of the two characters and the reversal of their fortunes after death, illustrating the spiritual consequences of their actions (or lack thereof) on earth. The major themes embedded in the parable are highlighted hereunder:

The Importance of Compassion: One of the central themes of the parable is compassion (σπλαγχνίζομαι, splagchnizomai—"to be moved with compassion"). The rich man's failure to show compassion to Lazarus, who is literally at his doorstep, is the moral failing that leads to his downfall (Keener, 1993). Lazarus, although physically impoverished and neglected, exemplifies those in need—whether due to economic hardship, injustice, or oppression. The rich man's lack of empathy for Lazarus's condition—his indifference to the beggar's pain and hunger—highlights the moral blindness that accompanies wealth when it is not coupled with generosity. The parable condemns such indifference and establishes that genuine wealth is not defined by material possessions but by one's ability to show mercy and care for others.

Generosity and Justice: The parable stresses the ethical responsibility of the wealthy to use their resources to benefit those in need. The rich man's wealth is not inherently evil, but his failure to use it justly—specifically, to alleviate the suffering of Lazarus—places him in spiritual jeopardy. In the Hebrew Bible, generosity to the poor is consistently presented as a commandment (צדקה, *tsedaqah*—righteousness, justice) and an expression of covenantal faithfulness (Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Isaiah 58:6-10). The failure to heed this moral duty leads to negative consequences in the afterlife. Justice in the parable is not merely about material wealth but about moral obligation to provide for the marginalized and poor. The rich man's refusal to take action or show generosity reflects a broader societal disregard for justice and a profound lack of moral consciousness.

Accountability in the Afterlife: The parable reveals the theme of accountability (λογίζομαι, logizomai—to account for, reckon) before God. The rich man's fate after death serves as a warning about the spiritual consequences of neglecting one's moral duty to others. In the afterlife, there is no longer the possibility of reversing one's actions, and the rich man is condemned to a place of torment while Lazarus is comforted in "Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:22). The reversal of fortunes here brings to limelight the principle of divine justice, where the poor and oppressed are exalted, while the rich and self-absorbed face punishment. This aligns with the broader biblical theme that the way one lives in this life affects their eternal destiny (Matthew 25:31-46, Revelation 20:12-13). The rich man's plea for mercy (Luke 16:24) further reveals the irrevocability of judgment once one's life is over. His desire to warn his family by sending Lazarus from the dead is denied, indicating that those who have been taught the moral law (through the scriptures and prophetic teachings) are accountable for acting upon it. Faithfulness to God's ethical commands, including caring for the poor, cannot be substituted by external signs or extraordinary events. The "law and the prophets" (Luke 16:29) are sufficient to guide people toward righteousness and justice, suggesting that ethical living is grounded in revelation and the moral duties outlined in scripture.

Kantian Ethics and Moral Duty

Immanuel Kant, one of the most influential philosophers in Western moral philosophy, developed an ethical framework that places immense importance on the role of duty, reason, and universal moral laws in determining what is morally right. Kant's moral philosophy stands in opposition to consequentialist theories like utilitarianism, which focus on the outcomes of actions. Instead, Kantian ethics, according to Kunyihop (1989), is grounded in the intentions behind actions and the principles that guide them. At the heart of Kantian ethics lies the Categorical Imperative, a principle that dictates how individuals should act in any given situation. Kant's philosophy asserts that morality is not dependent on emotions or external consequences, but rather on rationality and adherence to universal moral laws. As noted above, the central tenet of Kant's moral theory is the Categorical Imperative (CI), which commands individuals to act according to maxims (principles or rules of action) that can be universally applied. Kant proposed several formulations of the Categorical Imperative, but the most well-known are:

Universal Law Formula: Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law. In other words, before acting, individuals should consider whether the rule they are following could be adopted by everyone in a similar situation without contradiction.

Humanity Formula: Act in such a way that you treat humanity, both in your own person and in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means. This formulation stresses the intrinsic worth of every human being, demonstrating that people should be treated with dignity and respect, rather than being used for personal gain.

Kingdom of Ends Formula: Act according to maxims of a universally legislating member of a merely possible kingdom of ends. This formulation builds on the idea of universal respect and moral laws, where individuals act in ways that respect the moral agency and autonomy of others.

There are some important principles of the Kantian ethical framework which includes duty, goodwill, justice and fairness

Duty: Kant's moral system is built on the concept of duty, which he defined as the necessity of acting in accordance with moral law, regardless of one's inclinations or personal interests (Noddings, 1984). Duty is not based on the anticipated consequences of an action, but rather on the rightness of the action itself, derived from a universal moral law. Kant believed that moral actions must be guided by reason, not by emotions or outcomes. When an individual performs an action because they believe it is their duty, it reflects their respect for the moral law and their autonomy—the ability to act according to rational principles.

Goodwill: Kant places the highest value on goodwill, which is the intention to do what is morally right. The moral worth of an action, according to Kant, does not depend on the results it produces, but on the intention behind it. A good will acts out of duty—the desire to fulfill one's moral obligations—and not for personal gain or self-interest. This is crucial in Kantian ethics, as the moral worth of an action is independent of its consequences, reinforcing the absolute nature of duty.

Justice and Fairness: Kant's commitment to justice is tied to his moral belief in the equality of persons. His philosophy rejects any form of discrimination or exploitation, emphasizing that each person should be treated as an end in themselves. Justice, for Kant, involves recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, and ensuring that individuals' rights are respected and upheld. His ethics suggest that an individual's actions should never violate the dignity of others, and any violation of justice is a failure to adhere to moral law (Kunyihop, 1989). Kantian ethics also emphasizes fairness in the sense of treating individuals with equal respect. Since every person possesses rationality and autonomy, they are deserving of moral consideration. Kant's notion of fairness is deeply connected to his Universal Law Formula, which asserts that moral principles must be capable of being applied universally, without exception. If an action cannot be universally applied, it cannot be morally justified. Fairness, therefore, requires impartiality and the equal application of moral laws to all people.

Social Inequality and Poverty in Nigeria: Analyzing the Disparity between the Affluent Politicians and the Masses

Nigeria, one of Africa's most resource-rich countries, is marked by a paradox of immense wealth and stark poverty (Udofia, 2020). Despite being the largest economy in Africa and possessing vast oil reserves, the majority of Nigerians continue to experience crushing poverty and deprivation. As of recent reports, more than 56% (about 129milions) of Nigerians live below the poverty line, with millions struggling to meet basic needs such as food, healthcare, and education (The Africa Report, 2024). Yet, a small political elite enjoys a lifestyle of excess, accumulating vast wealth through access to public resources, corruption, and political patronage. The glaring disparity between the affluence of Nigerian politicians and the poverty of ordinary citizens is deeply ingrained in the fabric of the nation's political and economic systems. Politicians in power often amass fortunes by exploiting public resources, using their political positions to engage in corrupt practices, and diverting national wealth into private hands.

According to Udofia and Edem (2024), the political leadership of Nigeria is characterized by the relegation of public interest, malpractices of all forms, crimes of every description, mendacity, lack of candour, readiness to cheat, etc. This is compounded by lack of accountability, and mismanagement of resources, leading to a situation where the rich in the country are growing richer, and the poor are growing poorer. The country's political elite—comprising elected officials, their families, and their business associates—are often characterized by lavish lifestyles. They own mansions, luxury cars, and travel internationally while most Nigerians live on less than $1 per day. Many political leaders have made millions from the nation's vast oil wealth, often through illicit deals and government contracts, while ordinary citizens suffer from inadequate healthcare, poor infrastructure, unemployment, and insecurity (Lawal&Owolabi, 2012).

In fact, the wealthiest Nigerians frequently live in gated communities, protected by security personnel, far removed from the reality of the masses. At the heart of this inequality lies greed, corruption, and the desire for material possession. Greed, especially among the political class, has driven politicians to engage in practices that undermine public trust and rob the nation of resources meant to benefit its citizens. This greed is often institutionalized within the political and economic systems, with politicians using their positions to enrich themselves and their families, rather than serving the public. Corruption in Nigeria is endemic, reaching every level

of government and business. Politicians, especially at the highest echelons, often siphon off public funds meant for development and social welfare programmes, diverting them into personal accounts or funding private ventures (Anekwe, 2020). For example, billions of dollars allocated for infrastructure, education, and healthcare are stolen through embezzlement and bribery.

This culture of corruption entrenches social inequality, as the vast majority of Nigerians see no improvement in their quality of life while a select few amass wealth, this is antithetical to the traditional society where the traditional institutions provided the norms and standards of behaviour for the people and checked criminal activities on the part of the people and the rulers (Edem&Udom, 2024:205). Unfortunately, today, the desire for material possessions is a key factor in this inequality. Many politicians, once in office, prioritize accumulating wealth over fulfilling their duties to the people. Public office is viewed not as a public service, but as an opportunity for personal enrichment. This desire for luxury and affluence, often driven by ego and the pressures of status, leads to the neglect of the basic needs of the population. The rich man in the parable of Lazarus embodies this greed and materialism, as he lives in opulence while Lazarus, the poor man, suffers in his shadow.

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus provides a powerful moral framework for understanding the inequality in Nigeria. As demonstrated in the parable, the rich man lives in excess, enjoying sumptuous meals and luxury, while Lazarus, a poor beggar, sits at his gate, covered in sores and longing for scraps of food. Despite being aware of Lazarus's plight, the rich man does nothing to help him, indifferent to his suffering. When both die, the rich man is condemned to a life of torment, while Lazarus is comforted in the afterlife. This closely mirrors the situation in Nigeria today. The politicians—like the rich man—are in a position of wealth and power, living in luxury while the masses—like Lazarus—suffer from poverty, hunger, and neglect. The politicians ignore the pressing needs of the poor, focusing on their own self-interest and material accumulation.

In Nigeria, the consequences of this disparity are not only social but also political and economic. While the rich benefit from the nation's wealth, the poor remain trapped in cycles of poverty, unable to break free due to lack of access to quality education, healthcare, and job opportunities. The poor can barely feed themselves once a day, and many are forced to endure a variety of excruciating situations and agonizing circumstances in order to provide for their families (Essien&Edem, 2024[a]:204). The inequality that exists in Nigeria today is an extension of the biblical scenario, where the rich have not only failed to help the poor but have actively contributed to their suffering by exploiting the resources that should have been used for the common good.

Kantian Ethics: A Moral Framework for Addressing Inequality in Nigeria

Kantian ethics offers a compelling moral framework for addressing the issues of greed, inequality, and corruption in Nigerian politics. At its core, Kant's ethical system emphasizes duty, goodwill, and the principles of justice and fairness. These principles, when applied to Nigerian politics, offer a pathway for political leaders to move away from self-interest and greed and towards a model of governance that prioritizes the well-being of all citizens.

Duty to Serve the Marginalized: According to Immanuel Kant, as pointed out earlier, individuals are morally obligated to act according to duty, not personal desire or consequence. This duty is universal and applies to everyone equally. Politicians, in the context of Nigerian governance, must recognize that their primary duty is to serve the people, especially the most vulnerable members of society. They must act not for their own personal enrichment but in accordance with what is morally required—that is, to promote the well-being of all citizens, reduce inequality, and ensure that resources are distributed fairly. Politicians must embrace their moral responsibility to care for the people, particularly the poor, much like the rich man in the parable was expected to care for Lazarus. This means making decisions that benefit the common good, rather than securing personal gains or sustaining the status quo of privilege and inequality. Duty-based governance would require Nigerian politicians to prioritize investments in public services—such as healthcare, education, infrastructure, and job creation—that directly address the needs of the poor. Instead of prioritizing contracts and deals that benefit the elite, they must redirect national resources toward poverty alleviation programs and social services that benefit the broader population.

Goodwill and the Treatment of Others as Ends in Themselves: Another key aspect of Kantian ethics is the categorical imperative, which requires individuals to treat others as ends in themselves, not merely as means to an end. In the Nigerian context, politicians often use the masses as tools for personal or political gain, exploiting the poor and marginalized to secure votes or financial support. Kant's imperative demands that political leaders treat every citizen with respect and dignity, and work to ensure that no one is exploited for personal gain. Through the application of this principle, Nigerian politicians can transform their approach to governance. Instead of focusing on personal wealth accumulation and patronage networks, they should focus on empowering the people, providing them with the tools, opportunities, and resources necessary to live dignified lives. This would involve policies aimed at reducing inequality, such as progressive taxation, public healthcare, affordable housing, and job creation programmes. Furthermore, the principle of goodwill implies that Nigerian politicians must act with genuine concern for the welfare of the people. Goodwill requires leaders to seek the good of others not out of personal interest or for the sake of political gain, but out of a moral obligation to treat others as worthy of dignity and respect.

Justice and Fairness in Governance: Kant's philosophy is deeply rooted in the concept of justice, which entails acting according to principles of fairness and equality. For Nigerian politicians, this means creating a political system where justice is not just a theoretical ideal but a practical reality for all citizens. Justice requires that the resources of the nation are used in a way that is equitable and that the needs of the most vulnerable are given special attention. Since politics, according to Essien and Edem (2024[b]), involves the use of power by one person to affect the behaviour of another person… by making choices that affect the common good, the Nigerian politicians must ensure that the nation's wealth—whether from oil revenues, taxes, or foreign aid—is distributed fairly. This could involve rethinking policies that benefit the political elite while neglecting the poor, such as the lavish government spending on political officeholders' salaries and perks. Instead, justice demands that public funds are used to provide essential services for the broader population. In practical terms, this could involve implementing social welfare programs, universal healthcare, free education, and policies that create jobs and reduce unemployment. These measures would help narrow the gap between the rich and poor and align with Kant's vision of a just and equitable society.

Promoting Accountability and Transparency

Finally, Kantian ethics places a strong emphasis on accountability and transparency. Politicians must be accountable for their actions and decisions, particularly when they affect the welfare of the public. Nigerian politicians must take responsibility for the mismanagement of public resources and work to create a transparent system where corruption is minimized, and public funds are used for their intended purposes. Transparency measures, such as public audits, anti-corruption reforms, and open government initiatives, would ensure that politicians are held accountable for their actions and that the public can trust that resources are being used in a way that benefits all citizens, not just the political elite

Conclusion

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, when viewed through the lens of Kantian ethics, presents a persuasive analysis of selfishness, neglect, and failure to fulfill moral duty, with direct implications for Nigerian politicians. The Kantian ethical principles of duty, respect for human dignity, and responsibility to others demand that leaders act with justice and equity, prioritizing the welfare of the marginalized. This ethical framework challenges Nigerian politicians to recognize that their leadership should not be measured by wealth or political power, but by their adherence to moral duty. It is not enough for a leader to simply accumulate wealth or influence; true leadership is demonstrated through the fulfillment of one's obligations to others, especially those who lack the resources or voice to advocate for themselves. This includes enacting policies that foster social justice, creating opportunities for the marginalized, and ensuring that the dignity of every individual is respected.

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