

Kant's Deontological Ethics and its Relevance to Political Development in the Society

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Abstract: In this article, “Kant's deontological ethics: its relevance to the political development of the society,” I argue that Kant's deontological ethics, with its emphasis on duty for duty sake and its recognition of the moral law knowable through human reason, is the key to readdressing the moral problem of the (Nigerian) society. Aware of the place of morality in political and so national development, I posit that, the society would be better ordered if Kant's deontological ethics is applied. It would sharpen politics, re-activate respect for law and re-energize the consciousness of duty and the work that promotes the common good. The article deploys the philosophical method of critical examination to evaluate Kant's ethics that is deontological and the social issues of the society.

Keywords: Deontology, Ethics, Political Development.

Introduction

Deontology implies actions that are performed independent of the results that are expected therefrom; things done for their own sake and not for the sake of something else. Actions that are universal and necessary, unconditional and absolute. “The term deontology, deontological and *deontologism* is from the Greek word *deon* and it stands for what one must do, what ought to be done, or duty” (Kuusela, 2011:22). It denotes an ethical theory that compels compulsory obligation to conformity as a matter of duty. Deontological ethics grounds morality on a moral law which all human beings have an obligation to conform to.

It can be juxtaposed with teleology understood as actions performed with some ends or goals in view. The term *telos* simply means ends or goals. They are particular and contingent actions. It can also be placed side-by-side with consequentialism understood as actions performed because of their consequences. Kant's ethics is deontological or deontic in the sense that it is not dependent on teleological or consequentialistic influence. Uduigwomen (2001:48-49) supports this view, “Kant ethical theory is not dependent upon any empirical factors such as consequences (not teleological). For him the notion of rightness of actions is grounded a priori in reason. Thus Kant holds a deontological view of ethics.” This means that Kant's ethics is not influenced by any external considerations but by intrinsic value of the actions themselves, for their own sake. This is what Kant means by duty for duty sake.

Kant's Deontological Ethics

In this section, Kant's deontological ethics would be philosophically appraised in the context of political development, and the practice of politics in Nigeria. In a way, it is applying Kant's ethics, to the political problems of Nigeria. It is using Kant's ethics as a paradigm to Nigeria's political quagmire. Kant (2011) admits that there is substantially, intrinsically and objectively, no conflict, division and separation, between politics and morality. He argues that one cannot be without the other; politics cannot take one good step without the guidance that comes from morality. If there is a perceived conflict, he concludes, it is in the selfish interest of those who call themselves politicians. (Kant, 2011:469) asserts:

The politics cannot take a single step without first paying homage to morals, and while politics by itself is a difficult art, its combination with morals is no art

at all; for morals cuts the Gordian knot which politics cannot solve as soon as the two are in conflict.

It is rather surprising that Nigerian politicians see politics as a dirty game that is devoid of ethics and morality and engage in it with a crooked and perverse disposition. There is no game that is played without rules as guide. Politics cannot be an exception if it must satisfy the demands of its institution.

The fundamentals of Kant's deontological ethical theories that deal with the principles of Goodwill, duty for duty sake, reason, law and the categorical imperatives of universalization, kingdoms of ends, the autonomy of the will, and duty for duty sake can serve as ethical bedrock for the restructuring of Nigeria's political framework. The article contends that Nigeria's politics is ailing because there is no solid moral and ethical base. Ethics (Kant's Deontological Ethics), provides that framework upon which to build the edifice of Nigeria's politics. In this case and in this article, not just any ethics, but Kant's deontological ethics.

One may be tempted to conclude in view of the appalling political crisis in Nigeria that, politics and political development in Nigeria are suffering from moral epilepsy and disequilibrium. In it (Nigeria's politics), there is the obvious collapse of moral values. Otakpor (2000:5-6) argues that, "a sober reflection on the moral life of the nation would reveal that all is not well with it... all this is because there is no morality." Without morality, man loses direction and bearing and begins to float like a pendulum in the tides. In this kind of reckless moral life, he is no better than a brute and a beast. It is morality that gives man the unique identity and dignity that defines and distinguishes him from the lower animals. It is ethics that lays down the rules and principles of man's moral actions. Ethics is a normative and a prescriptive science that tells man how he ought to live; it is the science of right conduct. It is the science that judges right and wrong, good and bad, actions of human life. Ethics is the moral legislator of human actions. Uduigwomen (2001:1) also offers his intellectual insight into this discussion. He says:

Unlike many other branches of philosophy which deal with abstract problems, the problem of ethics or moral philosophy are ones which everybody seem to be familiar with. In short, ethics deals with problems or questions which normally arise in everyday life.

There are some basic questions which ethics seeks to address and these questions touch directly on human life and living. Should a person cheat? (In Nigeria's case, should Nigerians embezzle government funds)? Should a person deceive others? Should a person steal? Should a person use violence to achieve his or her aim? (In Nigeria's case, militancy in the Niger Delta and Boko Haram, in the North, are these in the best interest of the country?) Should one make money at all cost? (In Nigeria's case, should lecturers collect money from students in order to pass them or to give them good grades?) In fact, simply put, what is the moral life for a person? "Is there a standard, an objective moral standard for judging the rightness and the wrongness of human actions? What does badness or goodness of human actions mean? What is duty? What is obligation? How should men conduct themselves?" (Uduigwomen, 2001:1).

These and many more questions may be asked in dealing with ethical standards of morality. These questions belong to the spheres of ethics and they deal with the conduct of human life in the society. In ethics, therefore, the focus is on what ought to be done. What constitutes the ideal moral life for man? The purpose of ethics is to guide man through his freedom, freewill, rationality, to make good choices in the midst of alternatives. Ethics helps man in thinking better about moral issues. Corroborating this point Uduigwomen (2001:3) holds that "the purpose of ethics is to help us to better conform to the norms of morality or to influence our conduct for good." Ethics helps people to conform their lives to moral standard. Omoregbe (1991:9-10) summarizes the purpose of ethics thus, "nevertheless, the study of ethics is intended to help and does to evaluate one's moral standard." In any case not just a person's

behaviour but also the behaviours of others. It therefore stands to reason that ethics is a metaphysical as well as normative or prescriptive science that tells man how to live the morally upright life.

This then is the concern of this article, to use Kant's deontological ethics to philosophically appraise the political quagmire and moral decadence and decay in Nigeria's polity. Politics if it must have a head way must clothe itself in moral garment. It is this moral garment that Kant's deontological ethics provides.

Moral Foundation for Politics

Even though Kant's ethics deals with morality and not politics as such, it is related to politics in many ways. In this Giuseppe, (cited by MacDonald and McWalter, 2005:237) says, "Kant's philosophy constitutes a sure sense of direction for social and personal life." It is this dimension of social life that links it up with politics. In the same vein, Seung (2007:94) makes the point much clearer:

Kant conceives of moral law in a political framework. The function of the moral law is to harmonize the freedom of each individual with the freedom of others. Kant's conception of morality covers both the life of the individual and that of the community.

Since politics affects the lives of the individual and the society or community, morality is necessary in the society to establish order and harmony in the regulation of human conduct.

In the principle of the Kingdoms of Ends, Kant deals extensively with the whole issue of the equality of all men and their fundamental human rights. Here he argues that man should not be treated as a means to an end but as an end himself. "Treat humanity either in thy own self or in that of any other always as an end and never as a means only." In this principle, human rights and the equality of all men is given due and proper attention. Fundamental human rights and equality before the law are cherished political concepts used frequently in democratic governments. Popkin and Stroll (1993:40), complement this view when they assert, "Kant's deontological ethics supports the democratic view that all people are created equal, where this equality is interpreted to mean that no one person should be discriminated against before the law." In this maxim 'act always as to treat humanity either in their own self or in any other always as an end and never as a mean only,' Kant lays a moral/political foundation for the concept of equality of all people. It is this concept that has given democracy its relevance. Human beings are of more value than every other thing in the universe. The created things of nature and all the manufactured things of technology none can be compared value with humanity. Every meaningful development must therefore put man first above all other things.

Amucheazi (1980:9) also notes that, "development should be man-oriented (person oriented) and not institution-oriented? Any development that is not people oriented is a distorted development that cannot yield its required results. The anthropocentric reconstruction of the society is the road map for authentic development in Nigeria. In Nigeria, the human person is still not given this respect, priority and value arising from his intrinsic nature as a rational being created by God. The human person is treated as a tool especially by the politicians who use him only for the advancement of their own selfish political interest. Government policies are not people-oriented. The people's welfare is not paramount in these policies. The recent agitation for minimum (not maximum) wage is still a tug of war. Some states are not implementing it. It can be said that Nigeria is in political slumber with regard to issues of welfare and fundamental rights of the human person.

In this principle, Kant gives people, (Nigerians), a wakeup call for the proper and wholistic re-assessment of human worth and dignity. This principle is also the foundation upon which human rights activists and other humanitarian worker's build their doctrines and draw their inspiration.

In addition, Kant's ethics properly understood and applied will reduce the prevalence of deceit (promise and fail syndrome; lying promise, deceitful promise) being demonstrated by politicians especially during election campaigns as they move around canvassing and soliciting for votes from the electorates.

David Owens (2008:752) argues in a rather controvertible article, 'Promising without Intending,' that some promises are not binding under certain circumstances. He makes the point that for a promise to be valid for both the promisor and the promisee, then it must be accompanied by the desire and the intention to fulfill it. He asserts that, "one can make a promise while communicating neither the intention of keeping it nor the intention that it be kept." He therefore argues that there is something fundamentally wrong with making a promise without at the same time forming the desire of keeping. In this he submits that the obligation created by a valid promise is so significant that a good person should give weight to it in practical deliberations. It is morally indicting to make any promise that one knows *ab initio* he will not keep. The moral ground for ever making that promise is totally lacking *ipso facto*. It is this level of the moral perversity of the Nigerian society that institutes this ugly trend makes it thrive as people are not held accountable for their actions. No political system can thrive where people do not take seriously their obligations to the masses as a matter of necessity and responsibility.

There is urgent need to re-sharpen people's sense of duty. Duty for duty sake as Kant would put it and not duty with some interest in view. Against the background of the selfish-interest and personal aggrandizement that is today the bane of Nigeria's politics. Kant's duty for duty sake will go a long way in sharpening Nigeria's moral sense of judgment. Duty is much more important than personal gain. Duty calls people to consider first their obligation towards others before their own private interest especially those called to serve the public. This sense of duty is what ought to be injected into the polity. This duty (political duty) should first of all be to the electorates before considering the personal interest of the elected representatives. Duty for duty sake is the dispassionate way political ought to carry out their political obligation to the people who form the basis of these political positions.

Respect for Law

MacDonald considers Kant a great moral physician whose moral reformation addresses man in the core of his innermost existence to which man is capable of attaining. He argues that man's moral life ought to shine through his social and political life. Kant 2001:242-243) says:

The grand end that Professor Kant has in view, in all his writings is, a grand system of moral reformation: fundamental principles for the exercise and use of intellectual power, both in theory and practice, which, supported by true science, and therefore accessible to every intelligent mind, should forever secure to mankind at large the art of seeing with their own eyes, and standing on their own feet... Professor Kant thinks that one, and perhaps the greatest, reason why moral truth, till now, seem to have had so little effect on mankind, is, that the teachers never applied those truths in their original [purity. It is the concentrated rays of the purest light only that will take fire in the human breast.... Such, and similar, are the ideas of Kant and his pupils on the interesting subject of moral and social life. The endeavours of Kant on this subject, they consider as particularly useful in our times, when empiricism in politics is the predominant spirit: a spirit not detrimental, but, in some respect, useful in natural philosophy, but totally subversive of good morals and social order, and which, therefore, must be brought to the bar of speculative reason.

Kant in his moral revolution has internalized the moral law, inscribing it in a way in men's heart, not in *abstracto* but *concreto*. Not in abstract theoretical speculations but in concrete practical

situations. He emphasizes the fact that for people's teaching to make any impression it must be backed by concrete actions. This he demonstrates practically in the way he lives himself. Politics, social life and indeed every aspect of life would be greatly transformed if men were to match their words with actions. This is what Kant has done.

The moral law for Kant is a natural law, knowable through rationality. The fact that all human beings are rational implies that all are also equally capable of discovering and adhering to this law. Anyone who obeys this law, freely and willingly, as a matter of duty and moral obligation, cannot but also respect others. Law considers what is objective for the common good. The imperative that all laws are commands that ought to be obeyed as a matter of necessity can become a stimulating principle and a driving force in people's life, both private and social life. The obligation that law imposes is so profound that it should not be taken lightly but ought to be given the force of compelling obedience. The sublime importance of law in human social and interpersonal relations cannot be over-emphasized. If laws generally are seen from this perspective the moral laws ought to be seen in a deeper and wider context of requiring a greater measure of adherence and conformity. Laws are not for fancy. They constitute obligations that must always be heeded to, which man has no option and no choice whatsoever. In matters of laws and its observance there is only a one way traffic, that of conformity. Kant's contention is that for any moral act to be truly moral it must contain and retain the capacity for universalization. This is because laws are not made for particular or specific people. There are no special laws for the rich and extra laws for the poor. The first fundamental principle of the law is that all are equal before it and the second is that of impartiality. These two principles of impartiality and equality before the law are central to the understanding of the essence of the whole theory and concept of the rule of law. Whoever is acting under the law must consider those actions as conforming to that law and so can be universalized implying by this that others can also act in the same way without breaching that law or taking exceptions to it. This is what Kant (2001:268) means by "act only on that maxim whereby thou canst will at the same time that it should become a universal law." Kant's ethics is deeply rooted in legislation without which no law can be known. Legislation is an important element in politics. It is what makes laws knowable and obeyable. Laws are indispensable for the good life. Kant's thesis is that these laws are embedded in the human heart through reason. They should therefore be moralized in conduct, by respecting an objective and universalizing principle. This would also in a way strengthen the institution of the law and its role as a guide to authentic human action. Law exists to check the excesses of the strong and as well as to protect the weak. It is therefore a means of balancing life in the society. It stands to reason that the observance of laws creates a well ordered society. This then is Kant's contention that man is under obligation to obey the law.

The law of all laws is the moral law. It is the moral law that gives credence to all other laws and also forms the basis for the understanding of other laws. Any that contradicts or contravenes the moral is no law at all *ipso facto*.

Conscience in Politics

A careful reading of Kant's moral/ethical theories will reveal something very striking. At the core of Kant's ethical formulation is the issue of conscience. Kant (2001:375) sees the conscience as:

Not a thing to be acquired, and it is not a duty to acquire it; but every man, as a moral being, has it originally within him.... For conscience is practical reason, which in every case of law, holds before a man his duty for acquittal or condemnation.

Conscience is the internal judge of the human person. It convicts and acquits as the case may be and everyone, much as he is human has it. It is perhaps in this light that MacDonald and McWalter (2005:227) assert that:

For a moment the Kantian formulae of the moral law seemed to remind him of something like Reids of this moral sense, in the new meaning of a law of conscience of a law of duty independent of self-interest....

Kant's arguments refer to the individual's interiority as a free, rational and moral agent and who should act as such. His theory of goodwill, reason, duty, and laws are all addressing the individual in the sacred and secret chambers of the quiet of his inner life. His imperatives call on man to externalize, to bring to the fore, these convictions inherent therein. In this Kant seems to be analyzing the "golden rule" found in the scriptures. "Do unto others, what you would like them to do unto you" (Matthew 7:12). It calls people to put others in their shoes. They are called to see others as their extended or multiplied selves. If people's consciences become their guiding principles, they would have done a lot in regulating and regularizing their conducts. The conscience is the first guide to peoples conduct and action. Anyanwu (2004:13) says that:

Conscience is a formidable weapon for moral change. If it is well trained it can hardly be resisted since it will stick to what is good as good and what is evil as evil. Conscience is a very essential part of man as man.... It is reasonable to suggest that most of us in Nigerian (sic) who behave in the despicable way... have no social conscience. If they develop it, they will think less about themselves and what Nigeria can do for them. The social conscience will help us to think more about other people together with whom we live in the society....

Care must be taken to help people develop a healthy conscience for healthy living. For any transformation that is aimed at changing people's ways of life to have any meaningful impact on people, the conscience must play a leading and a prominent role. Character change begins with the conscience, the mindset and the general orientation of the people. The society would certainly work better if people work more with their consciences using them as a secret *vigilante* or private policemen that accompany them around.

Conclusion

Kant's deontological ethics with its emphasis on duty for duty sake has the potentials for reactivating the moral consciousness (consciences) of the negligent Nigerian society. It is important to note that it is not everything one does that should be premised on monetary gains or selfish interest. The real things that truly satisfy human needs are rendered through services that cannot be paid for. Any society that people work mainly for some pecuniary gains cannot hope to make any serious progress. It is sacrifice and service on the part of a great majority that scales the value and development of any society Kant's deontological ethics is the panacea to Nigeria's developmental problems. It has the capacity to make people up to a better consciousness of their duties and obligations as the moral law that is dictated by reason impinges on all so to adjust.

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