

**KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE AS A PANACEA TO THE
MORAL DEPRAVITY OF THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY**

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ABSTRACT

There is a pervasiveness of moral depravity in the contemporary Nigerian society which manifests in prostitution, rape, kidnapping for ransom, ritual killing, among others. The moral depravity has attendant calamitous consequences including growing inhumanity to others, relegation of virtues, destruction of lives and properties, sexual perversions and weakening of societal institutions. All these make the value placed on the human person low, life more precarious and the future very bleak. Consequently, it is desirable to stem the tide of moral depravity of the contemporary Nigerian society. And Kant's categorical imperative is proposed as a tool to achieve this goal.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

There is a growing concern about the future of mankind in the world. Among others, one reason for the concern is the moral disintegration which is threatening the security and welfare of individuals, making relationships more precarious and difficult, leading to reckless abandonment of cherished values and weakening societal institutions. As a result, resources are being wasted, lives destroyed, families destroyed. As a part of the world, Nigeria is not immune from the growing concern about the future.

In the light of the above, there is need to address the rise of the moral depravity of the Nigerian society. This is the rationale for the paper. Its thrust is that Kant's ethics can provide some suggestions for addressing the negative moral trend in the Nigerian society and for creating a better society and a more hopeful future. The paper examines some manifestations of contemporary Nigerian moral depravity, namely, prostitution, rape, kidnapping for ransom and ritual killing. Also, it discusses Kant's ethics and makes suggestions on how Kant's ethics can help in reducing the moral depravity in the contemporary Nigerian society.

2.0 AN EXAMINATION OF THE MORAL SITUATION IN NIGERIA

An examination of the moral situation of the contemporary Nigerian society shows a downward trend which is a cause for concern. For example, with reference to the failed promise of Nigeria at 55 in 2015, Emotimi, Agbere affirms, "Nigeria is faced with so many vices such as corruption, insecurity, poverty, indiscipline, fraud, among others."¹ In a similar vein, Ozeigbe Ilami observes, "Sexual malady and other forms of anti-social and aberrant behaviours, brought about by so-called modern civilization, are threatening to tear the society

apart.”² For the purpose of the paper four dimensions of moral depravity will be examined, namely, prostitution, rape, kidnapping for ransom and ritual killing.

2.1 Prostitution

Prostitution is merchandizing one’s body for the sake of money and other gratifications. It is a debasing means of survival. Prostitution sees the other person as a sexual object for gratifications. While prostitution is not a new menace, its increase has reached alarming proportions. Factors predisposing people into it include bad parental influence, poverty, lack of positive and godly virtues, materialism and peer pressure. In his discussion, Samuel Waje Kunhiyop notes that “The rise of prostitution and sex trafficking in contemporary Africa is traceable to changing attitudes towards sex and marriage, the emergence of towns and cities, unemployment and poverty, the breakdown of traditional values, cross-cultural contacts and international trade.”³

Prostitution is linked with some other vices and it has grave consequences for the individuals involved and the society as a whole. Prostitution promotes drugs and violence. It facilitates the spread of STD and exposes prostitutes and those who patronize them to other health hazards. It propels prostitutes into a dangerous lifestyle which may affect them to the end. Some have been killed by serial killers who disguise as those who patronize prostitutes. In related cases, some were victims of ritual killers who removed parts of their bodies.

Also, prostitution promotes unfaithfulness in marriage and family life thus weakening and destabilizing the family institution. Some younger ones may also be lured into the dangerous lifestyle thus having rippling effects on future generations. For those who are members of churches, the lifestyle affects the Church’s witness negatively. Kunhiyop affirms that prostitution is immoral for the following reasons, among others:

- 1) Prostitution is based on purely materialistic, short-lived and self-destructive motives;
- 2) Prostitution and sex-trafficking debase womanhood;
- 3) Prostitution and sex-trafficking clearly manifest underlying social moral problems.
- 4) Prostitution exposes women to many other evils – violence, abuse death.⁴

Prostitution affects the dignity of the people involved. From the biblical perspective, human beings are created in the image of God. Thus they are to be accorded honor and respect because of their dignity. Prostitution, however, compromises this understanding of the human person and promotes the bastardization of moral values. Consequently, it weakens the society’s moral fiber.

2.2 Rape

Kunhiyop notes that rape is from a Latin word meaning to seize. “In rape, the perpetrator seizes the victim’s body and engages in sexual activities without his or her consent.”⁵ He further adds: “Rape is a clear violation of the victim’s body, dignity and self-determination, and has enormous consequences physically, emotionally and socially.”⁶ In recent times, there has been increase in rape cases. It is so bad that even minors as young as 2 years have been

molested. In some cases, even fathers have molested their daughters with few resulting into pregnancies. For instance, Onozure Dania reported the case of a 52 year-old man, Akin Issaac, who was sentenced to 21 years imprisonment for raping his 18 year-old daughter for 12 years in Lagos State.⁷ In a related case, two men, Solomon Barry and Bright Omega were arrested by the Lagos State Police Command for raping a 21 year-old dancer to coma inside a car.⁸ Also, in some of the kidnappers' dens, girls and women are raped regularly.⁹ In some of the cases, in addition to the forceful sex, victims are subjected to forms of wickedness like beating, battering and gang raping. Indeed few of the victims die consequent upon the maltreatment they received from the perpetrators.

A related dimension of the menace is that it propels some other vices and problems both as causative factors and effects. For instance, some of the perpetrators depend on hard drugs and substances. A paper published in the Public Health Reviews found that drugs influence "activities such as theft, armed robbery, cult violence, prostitution, and rape."¹⁰ The outcome includes waste of resources, time and opportunities, and destruction of lives. The nation is thus further robbed of the usefulness and contribution of such especially young people as some become mad and contract chronic diseases like AIDS/HIV. For the victims, the physical and psychological effects include shame and bitterness, unwanted pregnancy, emotional scars, depression and difficulty in future relationships.

In a further analysis of the menace, the negative effects on the society's institutions and the general destabilization of the society are additional consequences of rape. Invariably, perpetrators become sadists, having evil effects on the society. Some may influence younger, unsuspecting individuals, thus compounding the problem. Above all, it impacts such institutions as the family, educational and even religious institutions in terms of weakening them, inadequate preparation for entering them and reduction of participation in these institutions.

2.3 Kidnapping for Ransom

A recent manifestation of the moral depravity in the modern Nigeria State is the problem of kidnapping people for ransom. The problem is a major concern because it negates the government's principal function of protecting life and properties. The greatest philosophical issue with kidnapping for money is the subjugation of the human person, reducing a person to an object for money. Related to the problem is the indignities kidnappers subject victims before the release including beating, starving or giving inadequate food and disallowing access to Medicare. At the extreme end of the harrowing experience are cases of those killed before ransom could be secured and few who were killed even after ransom was paid.

Earlier in the year, the nation was shocked with the news of the kidnap and death of one Hanifa Abubakar in Kano State. Reflecting on the tragedy, *The Nation's* Editorial observed, "Five-year-old Hanifa Abubakar's death at the hands of the proprietor of her school, Abdulmalik Tanko, who confessed to killing her with rat poison and burying her after collecting ransom from her parents, reflects how kidnapping for ransom has gone out of control in Nigeria."¹¹ The Editorial also reported a similar case in Kaduna State of an eight-year-old Asma'u who was kidnapped and killed after her captors had collected N3m ransom

from her father.¹² Indeed, some are killed at the kidnapping scenes, like the Abuja – Kaduna train kidnap, some victims of which have not been released six months after.

Related to the victims' harrowing experiences are the trauma, emotional torture and mental agony family and relatives of victims go through in "negotiating" with kidnapers and raising the ransom. It has been reported that some sell their properties in raising the ransom. This has the additional pain of retrogression and increasing the poverty in the nation. In this regard, it is disheartening to mention the scandalous amount paid for individuals and or groups of people ranging generally from ₦3-100 million. The absurdity and utter irrationality of the amount is compounded when seen in the background of the minimum wage of ₦18,000 per month which some state governments and private employers are not paying.

In the case of those who eventually die, either in the kidnap process or in the kidnapers' camps, the nation is robbed of the possible future contributions while their families and relatives have sorrow and pain. Alaka reported a kidnapers' victim who confessed that victims lived in a very deplorable condition and that the kidnapers were ruthless. "On some occasions, they would just come, pick some people and say, 'Carry these ones; they are not productive; they have been here four months; go and waste them.'¹³ And such people would be shut dead. As Nnaji Jekwu Onovo has opined, "A society that has no respect for human life is a dangerous place to live. Human beings are not animals to be slaughtered at will."¹⁴ The disregard for the sanctity of human life is a sad commentary on the state of the nation.

There have also been cases of those not killed but not released by kidnapers for years, many of whom had been married off. The celebrated case of Leah Sheribu, one of the Chibok girls who refused to deny her faith, is a good example in this regard. The General Officer Commanding (GOC) 7 Division, Maiduguri, Maj-Gen. Waidi Shuaibu, reported that three more Chibok girls were rescued – Falmata Lawan, Asabe Ali and Jinkal Yama.¹⁵ This was 8 years after the kidnap. The kidnapers' action is unlawful adoption of people against their wishes. Indeed it can be interpreted as treating victims as slaves with whom they can do whatever pleases them.

The issue of the negative influence on the nation can be discussed at this point. Kidnapping for ransom is a security factor which has culminated in describing Nigeria as one of the most dangerous nations to live. In addition to the colossal waste of lives involved in the menace, it also discourages foreign investment and local business incentives and propels capital flight. This further impacts negatively on the rating of the nation and contributes to an uncondusive atmosphere to live. Unless some drastic measures are taken to curb the problem, the future of the country is bleak indeed.

Kidnapping for ransom has contributed to the astronomical level of arms and ammunition in the country which has grave consequences for peace and stability of the nation. Also, it has partly increased mistrust among the tribes in the nation compounding the general tension in the country. It has also contributed to distrust in the government as some feel the government, some functionaries, are involved in the problem. Any objective analyst of the current situation in Nigeria will agree that there is great instability in the country now with many wondering about what would happen next. With the general insecurity in the nation, some are

even doubting the possibility and/or credibility of next year's general elections. Kidnapping is a factor for this political instability and incredulity about the future of the nation.

2.4 Ritual Murder

There has been an upsurge in killing people for rituals in recent times in Nigeria. According to Afeez Hanafi, "Though killing for money ritual purposes is not alien to Nigeria, the rate at which the horrendous crime is perpetrated especially among the youth in recent times has been remarkably worrisome. In January alone, several cases of money ritual-related killings across the country were recorded."¹⁶ In some of its manifestations, even young people and children were involved, like the dastardly case in Abeokuta widely reported months back. "Killings for 'money rituals' have become an epidemic of sorts in Nigeria. In the past couple of months, reports from various parts of the country show that this frightening trend is getting out of hand and requires urgent, holistic actions to checkmate it.... The latest episode happened over the weekend when four teenagers were caught in an uncompleted building roasting the head of one Rofiat in preparation for money rituals in Abeokuta, Ogun State."¹⁷ With reference to the dastardly action, Niran Adedokun avers, "What last week's event in Abeokuta tells Nigeria is that we are preparing for a future where brigandage may be the order of the day. With an estimated 13 million children out of school all over the country, Nigeria is building a pipeline of assorted forms of insurgencies manifesting via banditry, terrorism ritual killing, kidnappings and others for which there are telling signals."¹⁸

Greg Odogwu also narrates another episode: "A boy of 17 cut off the head of his girlfriend for money rituals. He said he learnt how to do it on Facebook. Money ritual lectures are now as accessible as motivational speeches and comedy skits online. That is how low we have sunk. Worsened by insurgency in the Northern part of the country, our sensibilities have been inured to shock and gore. And, the worst part of the national noir is that our moral compass is jammed."¹⁹ Similarly, Oludayo Tade opines: "A society with more than half of its population living inside poverty will have few people conforming to cherished norms and values; when they see lavish spending on a daily basis, majority will innovate survival strategies."²⁰ Without controversy, there is the problem of the cutting short of the lives of the victims with the attendant issues of the aborting of their dreams and aspirations, the grief and sorrow such losses bring to their families, and the nation being robbed of their possible future contributions. In some of the camps victims are taken to, as attested by few who escaped, people are chained for weeks and months before they are killed, apart from those that are killed for the body parts to be sold or even left to rot in various degrees of decomposition. On the part of the perpetrators, with time, it may be difficult for them to live normal life and make positive contributions to the society. Again, they may also win younger ones thus perpetuating the menace.

Like the other problems discussed above, ritual murder also has its role in compounding the problems of the use of hard drug and substances and societal vices and crimes. Among others, it is a factor for political violence and armed robbery. Also, it retards national growth and development by contributing to the problem of insecurity in the nation. Furthermore, it is a manifestation of the low value placed on human life and the bastardization of the dignity of the human person.

3.0 KANT'S ETHICAL THEORY

Kant's ethics is a version of deontological ethics. According to deontology, "there are certain absolute (or nearly absolute) ethical rules that must be followed (for example, the rule that we must respect people's privacy, and the rule that says we must respect other people's right to make decisions about their own lives). This implies that certain actions (perhaps including lying, and killing people) are absolutely prohibited."²¹

In establishing the basis of morality, "Kant proposed that there are two kinds of Oughts, which are distinguished by their logical form. Hypothetical Oughts are in the form of a conditional, while Categorical Oughts are not--they are *unconditional*."²² Kant's view is that moral actions should not be hypothetical but categorical. "Kant was not a consequentialist, but attempted to base his moral theory on human reason rather than on feeling, as the utilitarians do."²³ Kant's ethics emphasizes motives, not consequences, in good acts. Kant insists that the right motive is a "sense of obligation to do what is right, no matter the consequences. This moral conviction, the awareness that we ought to do right, Kant (calls) the categorical imperative of duty."²⁴ He rejects moral relativism because "the true moral ideal is (not) to be found in such an empirical morality" and maintains that our moral should be rational, that is, "self-consistent and universally applicable"²⁵

The two maxims of the categorical imperative are:

- 1) Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law;
- 2) Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.²⁶

Elucidating on the significance of Kantian ethics, Charles E. Regel observes: "The criterion of universality is the hallmark of Kant's formalism. Universality is the 'Royal Road to Kant's view of moral obligation. Kant's genius was to place in the same person the power to command and the power to obey, or disobey the command. The moral law is an autonomous,' a universal law of reason that the autonomous subject gives to himself."²⁷ However, in the African context, the community also defines morality and in the final analysis, God is the ultimate source of morality. So, the individual as an autonomous self will be a part of the morality continuum.

In a further analysis, W. H. Walsh affirms, "The moral worth of an action, as Kant puts it, lies not in the purpose to be attained by it, but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon."²⁸ With reference to actions serving some purposes, Walsh adds: "Kant is not unaware of the importance of ends and purposes in actions.... But he holds, even so, that consideration of ends cannot be of primary importance for the moral agent, since a moral action is one that is commanded for its own sake, not with a view to some purpose it is expected to bring about."²⁹ The assertion implies that purposes have some roles in the moral action, but they should not be the primary basis of moral actions.

In the categorical imperative, the morality of an action is judged on the basis of principles, maxims and rules and the primary focus of moral judgment is on the intentions or reasons for

an individual's action.³⁰ Thus, obedience and reverence for the moral law is critical in the categorical imperative. As Frederick Copleston notes, "A man's action, therefore, if they are to have moral worth, must be performed out of reverence for the law. Their moral worth is derived, according to Kant, not from their results, whether actual or intended, but from the maxim of the agent. And this maxim, to confer moral worth on actions, must be that of abiding by law, of obeying it, out of reverence for the law."³¹ Radoslav A. Tsanoff also observes that, "By his maxim of universality, Kant rightly intended to distinguish a genuinely moral choice from a pursuit of mere expediency."³² For Kant, the task of moral philosophy is to discover how humans arrive at universal principles of behavior.³³ Thus, Kant sees the categorical imperative as a fundamental principle of the moral law which can be applied to specific cases.³⁴ While some may see the categorical imperative as too difficult to attain, and indeed some objections have been raised against it, it should be pointed out that the moral ideal is to make humans to aspire towards a life that is perfect, leading to having better individuals in the society and a more conducive atmosphere. The moral situation of the nation discussed earlier underscores the need to emphasize the moral ideal and encourage people to aspire to attain it.

It is good to note that humans are moral beings who live in a moral universe where there are consequences of actions. This is in line with Kant's conviction that humans are free moral agents.³⁵ Accordingly, maxims that will help individuals and the society to know that humans are moral beings and to enable them to reflect this reality most appropriately are imperative. This is a responsibility humans must accept. The moral perversions manifest in the contemporary society is an outcome of the failure to accept this responsibility on the part of an increasing number of people. That is why it is necessary to engage such maxims to facilitate our position in the world as humans. Anyone who has concern for the contemporary moral situation will accept that this is a way forward in navigating the moral landscape of the contemporary society.

4.0 KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE AND NIGERIA'S MORAL DEPRAVITY

This section interfaces Kant's ethical theory with the four moral issues isolated earlier in the paper.

4.1 Categorical Imperative and Prostitution

Both the prostitute and the one who patronizes her cannot say in truth and clear conscience that they would want their actions to be universalized, not with the damages prostitution causes to those engaged in it and the society. The idea of inability to universalize their action should be a challenge to desist from it. This good goal will be achieved when an increasing number of prostitutes abandon prostitution for more painful employments, and many who patronize prostitutes refrain from doing so. .

Prostitution portrays prostitutes as sex objects, instruments for the gratification of the men who patronize them. As such, it runs against the second maxim of the categorical imperative. The fact that most prostitutes get money for their services does not invalidate the above assertion. From reports, two or more men can slept with a prostitute per time. There is no gainsaying the fact that this is demeaning and dehumanizing. The prostitute can be described

as a means to an end, which further makes the practice condemnable. This explains the drugs they use on the one hand to have strength and one hand, and to prevent pregnancy on the other hand. They do this without regard to the present and future damages the use of such drugs have on their bodies. It is significant to note in this regard the feelings of low self-esteem, rejection and guilt suffered by many prostitutes.

4.2 Categorical Imperative and Rape

The rapist is confronted with the challenge of whether he/she would want his/her action to be universalized. Certainly no one would want rape, a manifestation of moral depravity and an act of wickedness, to be universalized. Indeed the secrecy, deception and use of substances involved are pointers that many rapists know the action is wrong.

Also, recognizing the victim not as an object will make rapists to desist from the act. It is demeaning when another human being is seen as an object of gratification. This is what the second maxim of the categorical imperative addresses, that human beings in oneself or others should not be seen as a means to an end but as end in themselves. Indeed we can raise the stake higher still by nothing that it runs contrary to the concept of man as a creature in the image of God. This is why in the final analysis rape, like any other sin indeed, is a sin against God. Thus perpetrators should understand that while rape is an offence punishable by law, it has even deeper implications.

Consequently, within the Nigerian context, the church should collaborate with the state in addressing the rape menace. While the state's emphasis is on punishment, the church's emphasis is redemption and transformation. And since redemption and transformation are issues of the heart internal of man, they are more enduring. The import of what has been said above is that both the state and the church should see rape as a serious problem and work tenaciously for its reduction in the society so that the colossal damages and injuries it brings to individuals, families and the society at large will be reduced correspondingly.

4.3 Categorical Imperative and Kidnapping for Money

Kidnapping people for ransom is one of the most flagrant contradictions of the categorical imperative. Certainly those involved in the menace would not wish that their action be universalized. Indeed it stands against reason and common sense that a human being will be kidnapped for ransom.

Kidnapping for ransom also sees other human beings as objects for making money and as means to an end. This is against the second maxim of the categorical imperative which urges that one should see humanity, in oneself or others rather as ends. It is the writer's strong conviction that except the state seriously addresses the menace, the potential greatness of the nation will continue to be mirage. It is very sad that the menace has contributed greatly to the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness sweeping across the nation. In recent time, the exodus of especially the youth from the nation to Europe and America has greatly accelerated. The brain drain syndrome is the resultant outcome of the trend. Certainly this would affect the nation's growth and development adversely.

A nation that is losing her youth to other countries is a nation that is playing with her future. The youth are the future leaders of any nation. If things are all right, they should be idealistic, being optimistic of their own contributions to the further development of the nation for the actualization of her greatness. Thus the exodus of increasing number of youth from the nation is an abnormal sign. In a sense, it is tantamount to giving up on the possibility that there can be a change in the nation. The problem is compounded by the fact that several of youth are not planning to come back to Nigeria. Indeed from the from the writer's interactions, even some adults are encouraging youth to leave, and also counselling them against coming back.

Based on the above, there should be more concentrated efforts to reduce the menace to the barest minimum. Those engaged in the menace should desist and find more legitimate, appropriate means to make money without endangering the lives of others or putting them at risk. On the part of the governments, steps should be intensified to bring about reorientation for such people to desist from the act, and to provide more employment. At the same time, the state should do more in checking the menace and appropriate punishments should be meted to those caught. Certainly, this will serve as a deterrent to others when they know that stiff penalties await those caught engaged in the menace.

Social institutions are also critical in the reducing the menace and others in the society, especial the family and religious institutions. To a great extent the menace is a factor of the failure of the family institution and this is where the reduction of the menace should begin. Parents must take seriously their parental responsibilities of nurturing children and complimenting the nurture by their own lifestyles and examples. The menace is due to the fact that money has been ranked out of proportion in the nation to the point that values have been bastardized and some are desperate to have it even at the danger and destruction of other people's lives. Families must return to the cultivation of virtues such as diligence, truth, modesty, commitment and faithfulness if we are to retrace our steps from the moral crisis of the contemporary society.

Like the family, religious institutions should also intensify efforts to address the myriads of menaces afflicting the nation. For instance, the heart of the Christian message is change and the assurance that, with God's help, one can overcome any sinful lifestyle and any bondage. Accordingly, the Church should explore means to reach those involved in the menace. It may be argued that most of the perpetrators do not identify with religious organizations. However, it is equally true that most were members of religious organizations before they went the wrong direction. This buttresses the truth that religious organizations should maximize the time they have with especially teenagers and youth to inculcate godly virtues in them before they are exposed to negative influences with disastrous consequences.

4.4 Categorical Imperative and Ritual Killing

Ritual killing brings great pains to the victims and their families and relatives. Sometimes it is carried out with deceptions and cruelty in the process of taking victims to be killed (Drugs, hypnotism and fetish items are also involved). Unarguably, it is one of the greatest manifestations of wickedness and man's inhumanity to man. Thus no one would ever think of such act being universalized.

Also, ritual killing makes victims as objects of money, maintenance of covenants and sacrifices which are both against God's laws and abhorrent to humanity. It provokes great anger and disgust to see how some people have degenerated so lowly that they will carry out such an act. Again, the dangerous and destructive lifestyle of those involved can be noted. They move in the wrong direction in life and the society is robbed of the positive contributions they can make. Becoming instruments of terror and destruction, their potentials are not realized and thus their lives become waste and disaster. If they succeed in attracting younger ones to the act, the problems and danger they cause are compounded extending into the next generation.

Making others objects, that is, seeing them as means to an end, flies in the face of the categorical imperative. More importantly, it is also against God's intention for creating man in His image and His laws that no one should kill another person. Besides, ritual killing has also contributed to the general insecurity in the nation contributing to the low value placed on human beings and the precarious human existence in Africa as a whole. The problem contributes to the unconducive atmosphere for living and doing business leading to capital flight and perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty. It is disheartening to see the unenviable state of the nation in spite of the enormous human and natural resources.

5.0 CONCLUSION

It is evident from the discussion in the paper that a widespread understanding and application of the categorical imperative will help in reducing the menaces of prostitution, rape, kidnapping for ransom and ritual killing in Nigeria. To this end, the suggestions contained in the paper should be valued and taught especially to children, teenagers and youth especially by parents, guardians and teachers. Other members of the society should also embrace the categorical imperative.

The governments should create a more conducive environment, carry out her constitutional role of protecting citizens seriously and address such problems as out of school children and youth employment. This implies that governments should be more committed to education and invest heavily on providing employments. Finally, parents, social and religious institutions should complement the governments in reducing the menaces of prostitution, rape, kidnapping for ransom and ritual killing.

ENDNOTES

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