

Kant's Categorical Imperative: A Foundation for Democratic Governance in Africa

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Abstract

The apparent and alarming state of socio-economic and political decadence in most African countries including Nigeria presupposes the collapse of democratic ideals or values such as equality, freedom, fairness and social justice. This is attributed to the prevalence of a monstrous anti-democratic vice such as corruption. Rocked by a decline in morality and national consciousness in both public and private life, the practice of democracy in Africa and Nigeria in particular since independence, has been a staggering or transfixed one. In this paper, it has been argued that the perceived collapse of democratic ideals in Africa is fundamentally caused by moral decadence thus, introducing false ethical values which have helped in destroying democracy in Africa. Proffering solution to this, a conscious moral will or law with emphasis on the „ought. as against the „is. in both public and private life is examined. This moral law is located in the „Categorical Imperative. a cardinal moral theory in Immanuel Kant's ethical philosophy presented in his work *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785). Understood as an ideal moral principle rooted in selflessness, the categorical imperative is therefore recommended as a foundation upon which the democratic structures in Africa could be constructed. Significantly, it is not the form democratic governance takes that sustains it but the foundation upon which the form is constructed. Thus, democratic stability in Africa is here understood as a major index for democratic success. This no doubt requires the formal institutionalization of the „categorical imperative. in all facets of our lives including educational, religious, social, economic, cultural, military and political structures. This paper is of the view that with a pedagogical approach and the practical adoption of the theory of complementarity as that which contradicts self-interest and aim at a higher sense of integration thereby, resulting in the common good and a just society, the moral tenets of Kant's categorical imperative can consciously be inculcated in the Nigerian citizenry and Africa as a whole. This will further result in a collective moral

will and a reformation of the mind-set of both policy makers and the citizenry with a view to tackling the vexed issues of democracy in Africa.

Key Words: Kant, Categorical Imperative, Democracy, Governance, Africa.

Introduction

Over many decades, democratic instability has been an endemic problem in Africa particularly among its practitioners and not democracy itself as a system of government. Ali Mazrui opined that "Africans are passing through a period when the economic vices of their governments seem to be regarded as more important than their political virtues" (242). This may suggest a derailment of interest as they seek for permanent economic solutions without tinkering or proffering solutions to both political and particularly moral problems that may have overtly or covertly caused the experienced economic crisis. The major problem with democracy in Africa is the abysmal absence of moral values as well as the right political and social consciousness which leads to democratic instability in the region. Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Angola, Sudan, Burundi, Somalia, Nigeria, etc, are few examples of African nations that have directly or indirectly experienced failed democratic governance at different times due to the practical neglect or loss of moral values that is, beliefs about right and wrong.

The consequence of this is military intervention in governance, civil war, religious, socio-economic and political crisis, etc. Human values such as freedom, equality, justice, fairness, etc are no doubt significant factors that have made democracy to endear itself to the hearts of men of different persuasions and cultures. John Locke a political thinker of the modern period had conceived democratic ideas in his age with emphasis on the importance of consent. W. T. Jones pointed out that "In his insistence on this fundamental right, Locke at once reflected the growing sense of individuality that was one of the marks of the new age and laid the basis for democratic theory and practice" (270).

There is no doubt that with his doctrine of consent, Locke aimed at providing a moral foundation for the use of force in securing or putting sovereignty into the hands of the majority of citizens; which is a major characteristic of democracy. The human element here is obviously indispensable. Jean Jacques Rousseau's theory of the "General Will", which is another feature of

democracy, presupposes that the idea of a moral foundation for political consent did not end with Locke's political theory.

Rousseau's political philosophy, which begins by magnifying moral sentiments against reason, appears to be in agreement with Immanuel Kant. Sabine and Thorson buttressed this point by stating that Rousseau; "...denied that rational self-interest is a reputable moral motive and excluded prudence from the list of moral virtues. The outcome might be a more radical doctrine of equality that could be defended on ground of reason and individual rights since Rousseau supposed that the moral virtues exist in the greatest purity among the common people" (532).

Thus morality as a basis for democracy especially when considering the consent of the people implies, the united moral wills of the people where every citizen's action is based on duty or moral obligation without any expectation and purpose. To buttress this, we shall critically examine democratic practice in Nigeria and largely Africa using Immanuel Kant's moral principle the „categorical imperative. as a basic tool. Institutionalizing Kant's Categorical Imperative as a Foundation for Democratic Governance.

The benefits of democracy are most often derived from its ideals such as justice, equality, liberty, self-fulfillment, welfare, socio-economic development, etc. These ideals fundamentally qualify democracy both as a political system and form of government as having the values to be sought for in modern governance. The moment these ideals are lost in any form of democratic governance then the system has failed since the ideals are inseparable from its true practice. They enhance human dignity partly because they are meant to serve man as the ultimate end and not merely as a means to achieving other ends. This position is in line with the tenets of Kant's moral philosophy. If man is conceived as the ultimate end and not a means, then that which enhances man has to come from within man. In other words the moral will inherent in man enables the moral good. Nigeria and most African nations that are sovereign have sought for these democratic ideals. Cultural heterogeneity in Africa may be admitted as a major factor responsible for the diverse paradigms adopted in the practice of democracy. However, beneath every approach, there is the fundamental tenet of the system running parallel that gives it its true identity. Besides the seemingly different cultural values among African states, different levels of literacy, socio-economic, and political awareness may have informed the obvious variations in democratic practice.

Yet, the ultimate goals of democracy such as justice, equality and freedom presupposed by the principle of representationism and majority decision-making, makes the system democratic no matter the paradigm adopted in its practice. Democratic structures in Africa and Nigeria since the first republic have had no solid foundation. Any system without a secure foundation is bound to collapse. This can be architecturally conceived and illustrated with the structure of a building. Thus, the cause(s) of the collapse of democracy in Nigeria and Africa at large over the years has been attributed principally to the lack of a moral foundation in the citizenry especially, among those whom the political leadership is bestowed upon.

It was discovered that self-interest has been the major reason behind the immoral or unethical display of leadership qualities by the leaders as well as the poor general conduct of the citizenry. Accordingly, David Oyedepo in one of the Nigerian dailies *The Nation* is reported to have remarked that; "If you have character, it will enhance capacity development. If you have capacity with character, you are on your way to becoming a great leader" (4). This remark obviously explains the necessity of moral values for dispensing good governance in a democratic state like Nigeria.

Like most African nations, Richard A. Joseph highlights some of the many costs which Nigerian political leaders have long recognized and accepted would have to be paid if their country is ever to emerge from the cycle of democratic collapse followed by Military authoritarianism.

Accordingly, he identifies the features of "Consociationalism" as that which might have to be incorporated into the Nigerian democratic system to enable the system work. „Consociationalism. "... is the recognition that the aim of democratic government sometimes requires the modification of certain fundamental democratic practices" (25).

This modification I believe will enable the conscious practice of the tenets of the categorical imperative. Joseph further opines that "until Nigerians find a way...of not becoming instruments susceptible to being captured by factions of civil society which win (temporary) control of the state, any hope for a constitutional democracy is certain to be regularly frustrated" (169). A deep reflection on this captures one of Kant's categorical formulations or maxims of not using human beings as mere means to ends.

Accordingly, humanbeings are rational hence; they should not be used as instruments or means to ends. If consciously resisted then, frustration in this

context could be averted. Positive discussions about Africa's present and future democracy is indispensable of a prior understanding of the nature, extent and persistence of a certain mode of political behaviour, which affects directly or indirectly its social and economic ramifications. This political behaviour is linked with moral conduct. Morality or immorality is plausibly in human conscience and not in the political system or form of government or its adopted paradigm. Socrates in *The Republic* focused on human conscience expressed in his dictum "an unexamined life is not worth living". Furthermore, Jones argued that "in a democratic theory, the people as a whole are sovereign" (151).

Hence it takes the examination of all the moral wills of the people in Kant's universalizability sense to have a society well founded on morals. Ozumba expressed that, "the deviation of democracy from its pristine form has brought in its wake a series of modifications and perversions consequently muddled up by the meaning of the term .democracy.. It has in recent times assumed as varied a meaning as would leave an untutored mind in confusion and wonderment" (34).

In other words democracy is fast becoming a degenerated concept used only to obtain a „pass. into the hearts of Nigerians who expect miracles from the concept rather than from good human operations of the system. Equally, the accomplishment of this good human operations will be difficult if man's conscience is not sought for given that, the good will which entails what ought to be the case, comes into political theory only to the extent that, man's beliefs about the „ought. influences his conduct.

Kant's „categorical imperative. as a moral principle is devoid of personal interest or desire that may arise from experience or material possessions or passion. In line with Innocent Asouzu, this presumably is predicated on the fact that "human interest is ambivalent because it has a double capacity effect and as such can represent something negative and positive at the same time especially when in a bid to secure our interests we are misled to believing that they are what they are not and in this respect we err in action. Such errors can mislead to all forms of deviant behaviours and indiscretion" (5).

To comprehend political power aright and derive it from its original particularly in a democratic setting, we must consider what estate men naturally are in, and that is, states of perfect freedom to order their actions. This freedom as conceived by Kant is only possible when experiences or sensory awareness or material desire or even passion are excluded from all

that impels our actions overtly or covertly. Our actions have to come from within that is, from reasoning (intelligible world) as the formulation of the „ought.. It definitely has to be duty for duty sake and not for any inclination or extrinsic purpose.

From the foregoing, it is possible to avert the political leadership described here as an opportunistic contrivance from using governmental apparatus in search for personal or private gain contrary to the common good. The common good should have a moral imperative as its basis. That is a moral law rationally guided and independent of materialistic desires or inclinations. With this moral perspective, democratic states in Africa are likely to be credible.

For example, the lack of quality political leadership in Nigeria is a presupposition of the absence of the required moral credibility which indisputably, contradicts democracy. Fundamentally, the moral law from which political actors act unconditionally that is, independent of material desire, passion or personal interest is made possible through practical reason, which is categorical and not hypothetical. In other words, the test for the moral law which entails our common good both in form and matter is the principle of universalizability. This principle for Kant is also a test for our moral actions.

It is stated thus; „Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.. This simply suggests that where a maxim cannot be conceived as a universal law, it must be rejected. The maxim is no doubt a subjective principle of volition. Put in a simple expression, the principle of universalizability could be explained as meaning, putting others in your own shoes or putting yourself in someone else.s shoes, one whom your action is likely to affect. If reason admits the perceived consequences of your action as good then, it becomes a moral law.

However, if reason finds it awkward for you to face such consequences or effects of your proposed action, then, such action has to be rejected as morally wrong. Actions predicated on the universalizability principle will result in a common good. This common good is absolutely perceived as the desired goal of democratic governance – „government of the people, by the people and for the people.. To buttress this point, Kant makes the following remarks in explaining what the good will is;

There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will. Intelligence, wit, Judgment, and whatever talent of the mind one might want to name are doubtless in many respects good and desirable, as are such qualities of temperament as courage, resolution, perseverance. But they can also become extremely bad and harmful if the will, which is to make use of these gifts of nature and which in its special constitution is called character, is not good.

The same holds with gifts of fortune; power, riches, honor, even health, and that complete well-being and contentment with one's condition which is called happiness make for pride and often hereby even arrogance, unless there is a good will to correct their influence on the mind and herewith also to rectify the whole principle of action and make it universally comfortable to its end. The sight of a being who is not forced by any touch of a pure and good will but who yet enjoys an uninterrupted prosperity can never delight a rational and impartial spectator. Thus, a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition of being even worthy of happiness (7).

The point of emphasis here is the unqualified or unconditional quality of our action. In other words, a good will is good not because of what it effects or accomplishes, nor because of its fitness to attain some proposed ends; it is good only through its willing, that is, it is good in itself. It has an intrinsic value and esteemed to be very much higher than anything, which it might ever bring about merely in order to, favour some inclinations or even the sum total of all inclinations.

Kant eliminates from the start the least suggestion that morality can be based on our natural states and inclinations. This can further be expressed to mean that Kant does not begrudge us, say, pleasure and happiness, but wants us to see that such "gifts of nature" cannot be the foundation of morality as rationally conceived. Natural gifts such as intelligence, wit and courage, or the accidental gifts of power, wealth, happiness, etc. are not absolute goods. This is because they have no intrinsic or unconditional value. Any one of these could suddenly be corrupted or turned into an evil.

For Kant therefore, the very thing that these other things depend on for their goodness and without which they would become corrupted and turned into evil is the more basic good that is, the good will, which is absolutely good and necessary, and based on this, has sufficient reason for all right actions. In a nut-shell, the foundation of rational morality is the good will. That is, acting out of a good will is, then, to do „X. because it is right to do „X.,

and for no other reason. It is that which is always good in itself, by virtue of its intrinsic values and not simply in relation to the production of some end, for example, happiness. Happiness ought to be a consequence of a moral good will and not a goal aimed at.

One can see the emergence of an ideal moral community in which each member would act in such a way that if all other members acted in this way, then a community of free and equal members would result and each member would, as he realizes his own purpose, also further the aims of his fellow member. This is characteristic of democracy. Equally, in such a community each member freely disciplines himself under the very same rule that would be prescribed by him for

others; the result no doubt would be that each member would act as a law unto himself (autonomously), but yet would cooperate harmoniously with every other member. If the purpose of democratic governance is the good of the people then, a moral foundation as conceived by Kant becomes indispensable especially where theoretically, democracy is broadly understood as not only a mere form of government but also as a type of state and an order of society. As a form of government, Asservathan and Misra describes it as "Merely a mode of appointing, controlling and dismissing a government" (447).

As a type of state democracy is viewed as a community that possesses sovereign authority and maintains ultimate control over affairs. In this connection, they hold that a democratic government implies a democratic state, but a democratic state does not necessarily mean a democratic government.

Finally as an order of society, democracy is one in which the spirit of equality and fraternity prevails. It embodies a moral principle where every man has value: a position Kant holds in his categorical imperative "treat man not as a means but as an end in him".

One of the basic features of democracy is that it gives us a guarantee that the will of everyone in the community shall be duly considered directly or indirectly and that no one shall be neglected in what is been done by the government. Democracy is sensitive to the wishes and sufferings of its members. Given its political status and ethical concept as well as social condition, democracy means faith in the common man. Accordingly, it implies that all beings have a worth in themselves.

Thus, Kant's formula "so act as to treat humanity, whether in your person or in that of any other, in every case as an end and never merely as a means" shares the common notion of humanity with democracy. In a strict sense, the value of personality is the crux of both democracy and Kant's categorical imperative.

Both theories have the hypothesis of equality in them. Both theories practically are manifestations of the enthusiasm for humanity. Both democracy and Kant's categorical imperative are concrete attempts at the reconciliation of the apparently contradictory principle of liberty, equality and fraternity. It is all these added to the notion of every citizen having the „power. directly or indirectly to make decisions or pursue the common good, that we find the basic connection and relevance of Kant's ethics. Eneh and Okolo stated that "one of the fundamental concerns of political societies is the question of the common good or the goods commonly procured by societies themselves for individual members or groups in their quest for what Aristotle calls a good life" (53).

A „good life. is the end of every political society. Thus, the practice of democracy in Nigeria portrays itself as a political society and as such its major objective as a nation-state is to secure the Aristotelian good life. Significantly, man's nature as a political animal has the tendency to seek and live in communities. This no doubt brings about some sort of tension between the common good (public) and the individual good (private) which ostensibly appears inevitable.

This tension has seriously hit a crisis peak given the African experience. The average Nigerian citizen is mentally blurred with regard to the basic distinction between the common good and the individual good. Public property, government, church property etc are usually dull with no much attention paid to them. The effects have included incidents of looting public funds and property, carefree wastage etc and all these have been painfully and frightfully rife with their tolls on economic and political stability of the nation.

The Nigerian polity can obviously be conceived as a mere theatre for the pursuit of selfish ends, a place for a bitter struggle for who gets what for one's self, one's family and friends. There is the imperative need for the elimination of this problem and put in its place the habit for the attainment of the common good. To do this warrants Kant's „categorical imperative. as a moral principle or instrument for attaining the common good. Ignorance of

the nature of the common good due to selfish interest could result in democratic instability.

In this regard, Eneh and Okolo aver that; "Our basic contention is that ignorance of the true nature of the common good and its relationship to private good on the part of the Nigerian people (leaders and followers alike) and the ill-ordered or disoriented conduct which stems from it is largely responsible for the instability which has so far trailed the nation's political history" (54).

This shows that it is not the system which is wrong in Nigeria. Rather it is the kind of people who run it. People who see themselves as more important than the system. As long as the individual does not understand the total process of himself, no system whether of the left or right can bring order and peace. Thus the individual's moral conduct in particular is a core ingredient for successful democratic governance. In a democratic system, all citizens are perceived to have equal rights to determine and to assess upon due reflection, the first principle of justice by which the basic structure of the society is to be governed.

Equality and freedom are categories of a well-ordered society. In this connection, democracy can be understood as an equal society in which everybody can be fully human and all the respect and attributes accorded to him. This is not far from Kant's notion of the „kingdom of ends. and his principle of universalizability. For John Arthur, "The justifiability of democracy in general rests essentially upon one moral principle likely to meet with universal acceptance that, equals should be treated equally; which is a fundamental principle of distributive justice" (201).

Democracy is justified by the ideal of equality (beginning with Aristotle's account of equality). J. C. Berry sees democracy not as a means to the realization of value (freedom, justice and equality) but as itself their realization. That is as an end in itself. This is against the instrumentalist justifications, which simply regard democracy as a method. Basically this is inadequate because, the instrumentalist eschews values and look beyond democracy thus perceiving it as a bridge to some other end. Kant here would emphasize on deontology (moral obligation) rather than teleology.

Comparatively, Kant's notion of human dignity, equality, freedom and justice in the categorical imperative, are connected with the general tenets of democracy. A democratic community like Kant's ideal „kingdom of ends. or

moral community embodies a worthwhile life where all its citizens as co-participants in a genuinely common good, find equality satisfying.

Kant's ethics and the categorical imperative in particular highlights and respects the dignity and equality of human beings as derivatives of the common good, which obviously is at the centre of democracy as a system of governance. Human dignity, freedom, justice and equality in Kant's categorical imperative cannot be compromised given that they form the essence of man and are equally the fundamental pillars of democracy.

Kant's categorical imperative if institutionalized will definitely impact attitudinal changes to life in the Nigeria society and Africa as a whole given that every action will be duty bound and thus a total transformation of the citizenry. With this in place, democracy will obviously not only thrive but be sustained as a system of governance and both the leader and the led would be detached from selfish interest or pathological tendencies which before now serve as impulse for action.

To actualize this, complementarity becomes a necessity. It focuses on the integration of all the various components that constitutes a system with a view to working harmoniously so as to achieve the common good. Once the components of a system function at variance and in a disintegrative manner, the result obviously will be chaos. It is in this sense that I recommend the theory of complementarity as a drive toward harmonizing all democratic structures or components founded on the categorical imperative. In this vein democracy as a system of governance can only work when each of the diverse units of the system serve as a missing link complementarily and authentically.

This implies that each component is highly valued as being indispensable and a requirement for harmonious relations. The moment the components are viewed in isolation and are in disregard to each other then, it is possible for a unit to be unaware of the other. The very unit that is unaware of by other units that constitute the system is described as a „missing link. of the whole system.

The missing link in this sense is not only vital but also indispensable if the system must work. In this regard, no unit or component of democracy as a system is considered as an instrument or a means rather, it is considered as an indispensable intrinsic value of the entire system. The relevance of this point cannot be over-emphasized. According to Asouzu, the mind-set of complementarity reveals that, the “meaning attached to any given action

(human) goes far beyond their immediate expression to a wider network of relations" (76). This is in agreement with Kant's idea of universalizing our actions by de-emphasizing individuality or self interest as a purpose for our actions. Instead duty or obligation is considered as primarily significant and is determined rationally. Though Kant in his categorical imperative de-emphasized teleological (purposeful) actions in a society of rational beings, the principle of complementarity enables the practical accomplishment of the tenets of the categorical imperative.

This is because it is more realistic and practically possible for complementarity to take place among rational beings in a society than the various formulations of the categorical imperative in isolation. In other words the moment there is a higher level of integration, universalizing our actions and treating every man as an end can simply be attained. This makes Kant's moral principle less utopian.

Social actions derived on personal interest can easily lead to slavery, subjugation of fellow human beings, ethnicity, tribalism, inhumanity, exploitation, corruption, and other anti-democratic vices. Since Kant's moral law depersonalizes our actions, presupposed by freedom from any kind of inclination, in concrete situation, the moral law may appear utopia given that man naturally is self-preservative. However to further attain this preservation, there is need to live in a society where every member aims at protecting the interest of all. This is possible by universalizing every action for the good of all. To buttress this point Asouzu aver that "the underlying interest in dealing with most complex situations that involve differences and similarities is the fundamental human instinct for self preservation" (65).

This further suggests that the complex democratic governance experienced in Nigeria and Africa at large can rightly be attributed to the tendency for self-preservation and its attendant immorality. Suffice it to say that the theory of complementarity gives the moral law or categorical imperative the drive for economic, political, social and moral reforms and a reversal of the status quo of democratic governance in Africa.

Asouzu writing on the „concretization of complementarism in action., explains that complementarism is more about those actions we can take to make the system work or about those things that brings good and positive changes in the lives of the individuals and society. It offers the framework for mutual enrichment towards a systemic transformation. It is hoped that the

harmonious/mutual dependence on complementarity will enable the optimal realization of the gains of democratic governance in Africa and serve as a vital force for the institutionalization of the categorical imperative highly needed for the growth and positive internal changes of democracy in Africa.

Conclusion.

Once the common good referred to as the authentic interest in a democratic system is identified through both complementary and categorical imperative, there is likely to be a perceptive reinforcement of the individual components towards sustaining the optimal life span of both the human society and the system further and this therefore implies democratic stability. The common good which is the primary goal of democracy is fundamentally structured on morality. The major essential role of the complementary relationship in actualizing the various formulations and tenets of the categorical imperative is to enable a basic and genuine fellow feeling, which reinvigorates and sustains the system. It practically eliminates self-interest already conceived as an impediment to attaining the common good and other democratic ideals. The wills and actions of all individuals must be integrated by way of linking each other consciously and systematically and as indispensable components of the whole. Thus, the Nigeria society is in strong need of all our actions in the universalized sense to be consistently subjugated to the insights of the theory of complementarism and universalizability.

Furthermore the process that enables the formulation of a systemic relation cannot make a harmonious whole where each component dose not perform the function for which it is ordained.

Analogically this may not be different from Plato.s tripartite elements of the human soul working harmoniously upon performing discrete functions. Connecting the theory of the categorical imperative and complimentarity, one can assert that once all human wills and actions are founded on the principles of universalizability and are integrated as an authentic or harmonious relation, then the result would be a well ordered system. For example the authentic legitimization of every individual in Nigeria is reached when each is viewed as a missing link of the entity called Nigeria.

Thus whatever a person does in life, his action serves one way or the other as a missing link of reality which makes such action indispensable and directed towards the common good. The principles of complementarity and the categorical imperative can be used as higher principles of integration to redress contextually the weaknesses of democracy in Nigeria and Africa at

large. We need be reminded that the struggle for democratic leadership in Nigeria shows in clear terms that conscience and ethical values as a whole have given way to personal interest. Understood as an ideal moral principle rooted in selflessness, the categorical imperative is therefore recommended

as a foundation upon which the democratic structures in Africa could be constructed. Significantly, it is not the form democratic governance takes that sustains it but the foundation upon which the form is constructed. Omoragbe opines that, „without morality there can be no democracy. Democracy will degenerate into barbarism and dictatorship.. (383). This suggests that, the moral foundation of the state is what determines its capacity to express the common good, as an index of democratic governance, stability and success. Simply put, it is impossible to detach morality from democracy.

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