



KANT'S CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE AND THE MORAL CHALLENGE OF POLICE BRUTALITY AND EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The preservation of human dignity remains one of the greatest moral obligations of every society, yet this ideal is constantly challenged whenever those entrusted with enforcing the law become associated with brutality and the unlawful taking of life. The persistent reports of police brutality and extrajudicial killings in Nigeria have generated widespread ethical, legal, and philosophical concerns, raising a fundamental question: Can the use of excessive force and the unlawful deprivation of life by law enforcement officers ever be morally justified within a society governed by the rule of law? This article addresses this question through an analytical examination of Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative as a normative framework for evaluating the ethical implications of police misconduct in Nigeria. Adopting the analytic method, the study critically examines relevant philosophical texts, legal instruments, scholarly literature, and documented cases of police brutality and extrajudicial killings. The analysis reveals that such practices are fundamentally incompatible with Kant's principles of universal moral duty and respect for persons, as they reduce human beings to mere instruments for achieving security objectives while violating their intrinsic dignity and right to due process. The study further finds that the persistence of these abuses is closely linked to institutional weaknesses, inadequate accountability, and the failure to embed ethical responsibility within policing practices. It concludes that effective law enforcement cannot be separated from moral responsibility, as genuine justice requires unwavering respect for human dignity and the rule of law. The study therefore recommends comprehensive ethical reorientation within the Nigerian Police Force, strengthened accountability mechanisms, rigorous enforcement of human rights standards, and the incorporation of Kantian ethical principles into police education and professional training to foster a culture of lawful, humane, and responsible policing.

Keywords: Immanuel Kant, Categorical Imperative, Police Brutality, Extrajudicial Killings, Human Dignity, Ethics, Nigerian Police Force, Rule of Law.

Introduction

The duty of every government is fundamentally tied to the protection of human life, the preservation of justice, and the promotion of the common good. Law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, are entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining public order, preventing crime, and safeguarding the rights and dignity of every citizen. In fulfilling these responsibilities, they are expected to operate within the limits of the law and adhere to universally accepted ethical principles. However, when those empowered to protect life become agents of fear, violence, and unlawful killings, the moral foundation of the state is called into question.



In Nigeria, allegations of police brutality and extrajudicial killings have remained persistent concerns for decades. Reports of excessive use of force, torture, arbitrary arrests, unlawful detention, and the killing of suspects without judicial process have continued to attract national and international condemnation. These incidents not only undermine public confidence in the Nigeria Police Force but also weaken the principles of democracy, accountability, and the rule of law. The widespread protests against police misconduct, particularly the EndSARS movement of 2020, further exposed the depth of public frustration and the urgent need for ethical reforms within the country's policing system.

Beyond the legal implications of these actions lies an equally important moral question: can the deliberate violation of human dignity ever be ethically justified, even in the pursuit of security? This question becomes more compelling when examined through the ethical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, whose moral theory places absolute emphasis on duty, rationality, and respect for persons. Kant argues that every human being possesses intrinsic worth and should always be treated as an end in themselves, never merely as a means to achieve another objective.¹ His Categorical Imperative provides a universal moral standard by which human actions can be judged, regardless of circumstances or expected outcomes.

From a Kantian perspective, acts of police brutality and extrajudicial killings represent not only violations of legal rights but also serious moral failures. Such practices disregard the inherent dignity of individuals, deny them due process, and reduce human beings to instruments of state power or expedient crime control. Even where criminality is involved, Kant's ethical framework insists that justice must be administered through lawful institutions rather than through arbitrary violence or summary execution. Consequently, any action that ignores the humanity of another person stands in direct opposition to the demands of moral duty. This article critically examines police brutality and extra judicial killings in Nigeria through the lens of Kant's Categorical Imperative.

Biography of Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant was born on 22 April 1724 in Königsberg, Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia). He was one of the most influential philosophers of the Enlightenment and is widely regarded as one of the greatest thinkers in the history of Western philosophy. Kant received his education at the University of Königsberg, where he later became a professor of logic and metaphysics. Throughout his academic career, he devoted himself to the study of philosophy, ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics, producing works that profoundly shaped modern philosophical thought.

Kant's philosophy sought to reconcile reason with moral responsibility. He argued that morality is grounded not in personal desires or consequences but in rational duty. His ethical theory, known as deontological ethics, is centred on the Categorical Imperative, a universal moral principle that requires individuals to act only according to rules that they would want everyone else to follow. He also maintained that every human being possesses inherent dignity and should always be treated as an end in themselves rather than merely as a means to an end.²

Among Kant's most important works are *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). He remained in Königsberg throughout his life, dedicating himself to teaching and writing until his death on 12 February 1804. Kant's ethical philosophy continues to influence contemporary debates on justice, human rights, governance, and professional ethics, making his ideas highly relevant to discussions on police brutality and extrajudicial killings in Nigeria.



Kant's Categorical Imperative

Kant's Categorical Imperative is the central principle of his moral philosophy and serves as the foundation of his deontological ethical theory. It is a universal moral law that requires individuals to act according to principles that can be applied consistently to everyone, regardless of personal interests, emotions, or the consequences of their actions. Unlike ethical theories that judge an action by its outcome, Kant maintained that the morality of an action depends on whether it is performed out of duty and in accordance with reason.

The most widely known formulation of the Categorical Imperative states: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."³ This means that before acting, a person should ask whether the rule guiding that action could reasonably be accepted as a law for everyone. If universalizing such an action would lead to contradiction or moral disorder, then the action is morally wrong.

Another important formulation states that humanity should always be treated as an end in itself and never merely as a means to an end. According to Kant, every human being possesses inherent dignity and rational worth that must be respected. Consequently, no individual should be exploited, manipulated, tortured, or deprived of life simply to achieve political, social, or security objectives.⁴ Kant also argued that moral actions must be motivated by good will and a sense of **duty** rather than personal gain, fear of punishment, or the pursuit of favourable consequences. A person acts ethically only when they perform their duty because it is morally right, not because it produces desirable results.

Applied to policing and criminal justice, the Categorical Imperative demands that law enforcement officers respect the dignity and rights of every individual, including criminal suspects. Police officers have a moral duty to enforce the law within legal and ethical boundaries, ensuring that every person receives due process and fair treatment. Practices such as police brutality, torture, arbitrary detention, and extrajudicial killings violate the principles of the Categorical Imperative because they disregard human dignity, cannot be justified as universal moral laws, and treat individuals merely as instruments for achieving security or maintaining public order. From a Kantian perspective, therefore, ethical policing must always be grounded in justice, respect for human life, and unwavering adherence to moral duty.

The Formula of Universal Law: Universalisability and Consistency

The Formula of Universal Law is the first and most fundamental formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative. It states that the moral worth of an action depends on whether the principle guiding that action, known as a maxim, can be applied universally to all rational beings. For Kant, morality is not determined by personal desires, emotions, customs, or the consequences of an action. Instead, it is grounded in reason, objectivity, and the universal application of moral principles. An action is morally right only if its guiding maxim can be consistently willed as a universal law.

Kant expresses this principle in the following words:

Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law. Before performing any action, a rational person must consider whether the rule guiding that action could be accepted as binding on everyone. If it cannot be universalised without contradiction, then it cannot be regarded as morally permissible.⁵



The concept of universalisability requires individuals to examine whether the maxim behind their actions could reasonably serve as a universal rule for everyone. This involves asking whether the action would remain morally acceptable if every rational person acted according to the same principle. If universal adoption of the maxim would produce contradiction or make the action self-defeating, then the action is morally unacceptable. Kant believed that genuine moral principles must be capable of universal application without exception.

Closely related to universalisability is the principle of consistency. Kant argued that moral laws must apply equally to all rational beings and should never be influenced by personal interests, social status, or particular circumstances. Moral reasoning demands impartiality, meaning that an individual cannot claim an exception for themselves while expecting others to follow a different standard. Ethical principles must remain constant because they are grounded in reason rather than subjective preferences.

The Formula of Universal Law therefore establishes a clear test for determining the morality of human actions. Any maxim that cannot be rationally accepted as a universal law fails the test of moral consistency and cannot be regarded as ethically valid. Conversely, actions based on principles that can be universally applied without contradiction possess genuine moral worth because they reflect reason, fairness, and respect for universal moral duty. Through this formulation, Kant presents morality as a system of objective and universally binding principles that guide rational individuals towards ethical conduct regardless of changing circumstances or expected outcomes.

The Culture of Violence and Abuse within the Nigerian Police Force

The Nigerian Police Force (NPF) was established to protect lives and property, maintain public order, prevent crime, and enforce the law. In carrying out these responsibilities, police officers are expected to uphold the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, respect the dignity of every individual, and exercise force only when it is lawful, necessary, and proportionate. Despite these constitutional and professional obligations, the Force has, over the years, been repeatedly associated with allegations of brutality, torture, extortion, arbitrary arrests, unlawful detention, and extrajudicial killings.⁶ These recurring incidents have contributed to the perception that violence has become entrenched in certain aspects of policing in Nigeria.

The culture of violence within the Nigerian Police Force has developed over several decades through repeated patterns of excessive use of force and weak institutional accountability. Rather than being isolated incidents involving a few officers, numerous documented cases suggest systemic problems that have persisted despite successive reform efforts. Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and the National Human Rights Commission have consistently reported cases in which suspects and ordinary citizens were beaten, tortured to extract confessions, detained without lawful justification, or killed before being brought before a competent court of law. Such practices undermine the rule of law and erode public confidence in law enforcement institutions.

One of the most widely known examples of police abuse involved the now-disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Created to combat violent crimes such as armed robbery and kidnapping, SARS gradually became associated with widespread allegations of torture, extortion, harassment, illegal detention, and extrajudicial killings. Many young Nigerians reported being profiled on the basis of their appearance, possession of laptops or smartphones, tattoos, dreadlocks, or expensive vehicles. Victims recounted being unlawfully arrested, forced to pay bribes for their release, or subjected to severe physical abuse while in custody.



Public outrage reached its peak in October 2020 following the circulation of a viral video allegedly showing SARS officers shooting a young man in Ughelli, Delta State. Although concerns about SARS had existed for years, the incident reignited nationwide anger and gave rise to the #EndSARS protests. Thousands of Nigerians, particularly young people, took to the streets across major cities including Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, Enugu, Benin City, and Ibadan to demand an end to police brutality, justice for victims, and comprehensive police reforms. The demonstrations represented one of the largest civic movements in Nigeria's democratic history and attracted widespread international attention.

The protests reached a tragic turning point on **20 October 2020** at the **Lekki Toll Gate** in Lagos, where security forces opened fire during demonstrations after a government-imposed curfew.⁷ Although official accounts and independent investigations have differed regarding the number of casualties and the sequence of events, the incident generated intense national and international concern over the use of force against unarmed protesters. It also deepened public distrust of security institutions and intensified calls for transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights within the Nigerian policing system.

Several factors have contributed to the persistence of this culture of abuse. Weak disciplinary mechanisms, inadequate oversight, corruption, political interference, poor remuneration, insufficient training in human rights, and a history of impunity have created an environment in which some officers believe that misconduct will rarely attract serious consequences. In addition, Nigeria's complex security challenges, including terrorism, kidnapping, armed robbery, and communal conflicts, have sometimes been used to justify aggressive policing tactics. However, security concerns cannot excuse violations of constitutional rights or the unlawful use of force against citizens.

The consequences of police violence extend far beyond the immediate victims. Repeated incidents of abuse have weakened public trust in the police, discouraged citizens from cooperating with law enforcement, and damaged the legitimacy of the criminal justice system. Fear of harassment or brutality has led many Nigerians to avoid reporting crimes or engaging with police officers, thereby reducing the effectiveness of community policing and crime prevention efforts.

Kantian Analysis: Treating Citizens as Mere Means and Not Ends

Central to Kant's moral philosophy is the idea that every human being possesses inherent worth and must be respected as a person rather than used as an instrument for achieving particular goals. Human dignity, according to Kant, is not earned through social status, wealth, occupation, or moral character; it belongs equally to every rational person simply because they possess the capacity for reason and moral choice. This understanding forms the basis of what Kant describes as the **Formula of Humanity**, which establishes one of the most important standards for judging the morality of human actions.

Kant states: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."⁸ To treat a person as an **end** is to recognise their intrinsic dignity, respect their rights, and acknowledge that they are capable of making rational and moral decisions. Every individual should therefore be valued for who they are and not solely for the benefits they can provide to others. Human relationships may involve cooperation in which people assist one another in achieving legitimate objectives, but such



cooperation must always preserve mutual respect and never reduce anyone to an object of use or exploitation.

By contrast, treating a person merely as a **means** occurs when that individual's dignity, freedom, or welfare is ignored in pursuit of another objective. This happens whenever people are manipulated, deceived, coerced, intimidated, or sacrificed for political, economic, or personal gain without regard for their inherent worth. Kant considered such conduct morally unacceptable because it violates the fundamental respect owed to every rational being.

This ethical principle is especially significant in evaluating the conduct of those who exercise public authority. Individuals entrusted with enforcing the law are expected to perform their duties in a manner that respects the humanity of every citizen. The possession of legal authority does not confer unlimited power; rather, it imposes a greater moral obligation to act fairly, responsibly, and within the boundaries of justice. Respect for human dignity must remain the guiding principle behind every official action, regardless of the circumstances involved.

Applied to the issue of police brutality and extrajudicial killings in Nigeria, Kant's Formula of Humanity offers a powerful ethical critique. Victims of torture, unlawful detention, excessive force, and summary execution are often treated as obstacles to security or as instruments through which crime can be controlled. In such situations, their humanity is overlooked, and they are denied the respect and legal protections to which every person is entitled. Instead of being regarded as persons with inherent dignity, they are reduced to tools for achieving institutional objectives such as obtaining confessions, intimidating suspects, or demonstrating authority.

The repeated allegations against the disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) illustrate this ethical failure. Numerous victims reported being tortured to extract confessions, detained without lawful justification, or subjected to extortion and physical abuse. During the #EndSARS protests of 2020, many demonstrators argued that these practices reflected a policing culture in which citizens were no longer treated as individuals deserving of respect but as disposable means for maintaining control.⁹ Such conduct directly contradicts Kant's insistence that every person must always be treated as an end in themselves.

From a Kantian perspective, no objective, including the maintenance of public security or the suppression of crime, can justify actions that deny the intrinsic worth of human beings. Justice loses its moral legitimacy when individuals are treated merely as instruments rather than as persons deserving of equal respect. Ethical governance and professional policing therefore require unwavering commitment to the dignity, rights, and humanity of every citizen, irrespective of the accusations or circumstances surrounding them.

Evaluation

Kant's Categorical Imperative provides a compelling ethical framework for assessing the morality of police conduct, particularly in relation to police brutality and extrajudicial killings. By placing human dignity, moral duty, and universal principles at the centre of ethical decision-making, Kant rejects any action that violates the intrinsic worth of the human person. His insistence that individuals must always be treated as ends in themselves offers a strong moral foundation for the protection of fundamental human rights and the promotion of justice within society.¹⁰



One of the greatest strengths of Kant's ethical theory is its unwavering commitment to the principle of equality. It maintains that moral laws apply to everyone without exception, irrespective of status, occupation, ethnicity, or political influence. This makes the theory particularly relevant in evaluating the conduct of public officials, including law enforcement officers, whose actions ought to be guided by fairness, accountability, and respect for the rule of law. From this perspective, practices such as torture, arbitrary detention, and extrajudicial killings are morally indefensible because they violate universal moral duties and disregard the dignity of those affected.

Kant's philosophy also reinforces the importance of due process and lawful justice. Rather than allowing punishment to be determined by personal discretion or the pursuit of expedient outcomes, it insists that every individual deserves a fair hearing before an impartial legal authority. This approach strengthens democratic governance by promoting accountability and limiting the abuse of state power. It serves as an important reminder that the legitimacy of law enforcement depends not only on achieving security but also on respecting the moral and legal rights of citizens.

Despite its strengths, Kant's ethical theory has been criticised for being overly rigid. Its emphasis on absolute moral duties leaves little room for exceptional circumstances where strict adherence to moral rules may produce undesirable consequences.¹² In situations involving terrorism, hostage crises, or imminent threats to public safety, law enforcement officers are often required to make rapid decisions under extreme pressure. Critics argue that Kant's theory offers limited practical guidance in such complex situations because it prioritises duty over the consequences of action.

Another criticism is that the Categorical Imperative does not adequately address situations where moral duties appear to conflict. For example, the duty to protect innocent lives may sometimes seem to conflict with the duty to respect the rights of a dangerous offender. Kant provides limited direction for resolving such competing obligations, making the practical application of his theory difficult in certain law enforcement contexts.

Nevertheless, these criticisms do not diminish the enduring relevance of Kant's moral philosophy. His emphasis on human dignity, universal justice, and respect for persons continues to provide a valuable ethical standard for evaluating the conduct of individuals and public institutions. In the context of police brutality and extrajudicial killings in Nigeria, the Categorical Imperative clearly demonstrates that no security objective, institutional interest, or exercise of authority can morally justify the violation of human rights or the denial of due process. A just society can only be sustained when those entrusted with enforcing the law are themselves guided by moral duty, respect for human dignity, and unwavering adherence to the principles of justice.

Conclusion

This study has examined police brutality and extrajudicial killings in Nigeria through the ethical lens of Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative. It has shown that Kant's moral philosophy is founded on the principles of duty, universal moral law, and respect for the intrinsic dignity of every human being. By insisting that individuals must always be treated as ends in themselves and never merely as means, Kant provides a powerful ethical standard for evaluating the conduct of law enforcement officers and other public officials.

The analysis demonstrates that practices such as torture, excessive use of force, arbitrary detention, and extrajudicial killings are not only violations of constitutional and human rights principles but also profound moral wrongs. They fail the test of universalisability, disregard the inherent worth of



human beings, and undermine the moral legitimacy of justice itself. Regardless of the intention behind such actions, they cannot be ethically justified within the Kantian framework because they sacrifice human dignity for perceived institutional or security objectives.

Although Kant's ethical theory has been criticised for its rigid emphasis on duty and its limited flexibility in exceptional circumstances, its commitment to justice, equality, and respect for persons remains highly relevant to contemporary society. In a democratic state governed by the rule of law, security and justice must complement rather than contradict one another. The exercise of state power should always reflect moral responsibility and unwavering respect for the rights of every citizen.

In general, reducing police brutality and extrajudicial killings requires more than legal reforms and institutional restructuring. It demands a transformation in ethical consciousness, where respect for human dignity becomes the guiding principle of policing and public service. By embracing the values embedded in Kant's Categorical Imperative, law enforcement institutions can strengthen public trust, uphold justice, and contribute to the development of a society in which the protection of human life remains an inviolable moral duty.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Human rights and ethics training should be strengthened** within the Nigerian Police Force to ensure that all officers understand the importance of respecting human dignity, constitutional rights, and professional standards in the discharge of their duties.
2. **Effective accountability mechanisms should be established and enforced** to ensure that officers involved in police brutality, torture, or extrajudicial killings are promptly investigated and prosecuted in accordance with the law, regardless of their rank or position.
3. **Police operations should strictly comply with due process and the rule of law.** Suspects should be arrested, investigated, and prosecuted through lawful judicial procedures rather than being subjected to unlawful violence or summary execution.
4. **Independent oversight bodies should be empowered** to monitor police activities, investigate complaints from members of the public, and recommend appropriate disciplinary or legal actions where misconduct is established.
5. **The Federal Government and police authorities should improve the welfare, working conditions, and continuous professional development of police officers,** as better remuneration, adequate equipment, and regular ethical training can reduce frustration, corruption, and abusive conduct.

Endnotes

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