

## A Moral Normative Approach to Issues of Social Vices in Nigerian Schools

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### Abstract

Moral instruction in the Nigerian secondary school curriculum is intended to help students develop good moral behaviour. However, the prevalence of deviant and unethical behaviours among students in Nigerian secondary schools raises concerns about the effectiveness and viability of the country's moral instruction and curriculum. While this issue may be attributed to pedagogical dynamics in Nigeria, particularly in translating the curriculum into practice, the current study argues that the application of moral theories is essential in understanding the complexities of moral instruction in Nigerian secondary schools. This approach aims to uncover the underlying reasons for the interaction between students' moral conduct and the ethical principles taught in moral instruction. By conducting in-depth and critical data exploration, as well as drawing on Kant's categorical imperative, the current study advocates for the incorporation of normative moral theory into the existing curriculum. This will provide students with clear ethical guidelines to help them understand how their actions will impact their own interests and those of others.

### Keywords

consequentialism, deontological ethics, Kant's categorical imperative, Nigerian students, social vices, teaching of moral education

### Introduction

Moral instruction in Nigerian secondary schools' curriculum is designed to assist students in acquiring excellent moral behaviour. However, this aim has not been

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significantly achieved as social vices continue to be prevalent in every aspect of society, including Nigerian secondary schools, where the translation of moral principles into practice is institutionalised (Okonkwo et al., 2023). According to Elujekwute et al. (2021), social vices – particularly cultism – are becoming more and more common among students in secondary schools in Nigeria. They emphasised the importance of parents and educators’ active involvement in promoting moral development in secondary school students. Clipa and Iorga (2013) admit that school and family play essential roles in improving students’ moral abilities. They argue that “the teacher needs actual parental support in order to fix and maintain the children’s experience, knowledge, abilities, positive attitudes and moral standards transmitted or developed during the teaching process” (p. 198). However, parents’ and teachers’ efforts to prevent moral decadence among secondary school students in Nigeria have produced insignificant results (Idoko, 2022). Though parents and instructors play roles in the formation of excellent moral behaviour in secondary school pupils, Okonkwo et al (2023) claim that the integration of “moral and ethics education into the curriculum of secondary school in Nigeria is extremely important” (p. 210).

The problem of unethical practices among students in Nigeria can be attributed to a disconnect between moral principles taught in theory and their practical application. This means that the moral teachings incorporated into the curriculum of Nigerian secondary schools are not effectively translated into actionable concepts that students can apply in their daily lives. The terms “morality in theory” and “morality in practice” are used to distinguish between the moral principles taught in schools and how students actually behave. “Morality in theory” refers to the principles intended to be imparted to students, while “morality in practice” refers to how these principles are reflected in students’ actions and decisions. It is important to note that there is a significant gap between morality in theory and morality in practice among Nigerian secondary school students, which raises questions about the reasons behind this gap and how to address it. The objective of the current study is to explore the perspectives of teachers, parents and educational stakeholders in order to bridge this gap between theoretical and practical applications of moral principles in Nigerian secondary schools. This study argues that addressing this issue requires multifaceted interventions. Therefore, a philosophical approach will be adopted to interpret moral instructions and curricula, with the aim of enhancing their effectiveness and feasibility in bridging the gap between morality in theory and in practice within Nigerian secondary schools.

In pursuit of this goal, the study uses Kant's categorical imperative to explain how the faculty of reason can help students distinguish between moral and immoral behaviour. It also tries to raise awareness among students, including instructors, about the impact of their activities on moral norms in both the school and larger society contexts.

### **Challenges facing teaching of effective moral education in Nigerian schools**

Moral education in Nigeria has garnered much attention in the scholarly circle. In their investigation of factors hindering effective moral education, scholars have provided insightful measures that will help combat social vices in Nigerian schools. This study will examine some of these studies. I will start with a paper titled 'Moral education in Nigeria: problems and prospects' by Iheoma (1985). The author offered three stages of moral education in Nigeria in this research. The first concern was the nature of moral teaching prior to the advent of Western education in Nigeria. At this time, African moral education aided in the development of moral consciousness among Nigerians by basing moral principles on what she referred to as "African humanism and communalism". She contended that these moral principles had been neglected due to the influence of some Western cultures that are incompatible with African values and should be revisited to help overcome moral degeneration in contemporary Nigerian society. In the second stage, moral teaching was based on beliefs of Western religion and was designed to inculcate Christian values and prepare future Christian missionaries. The final phase was what the author referred to as "secular moral education", a moral education proposed by Lord Lugard, the Governor-General of Nigeria from 1912 to 1919 (p. 188), which aimed to promote moral abilities in schools, particularly to teach citizens that respect for those in authority should be regarded as a duty of all citizens. The author identified a flaw in the way moral lessons are taught in Nigerian schools. This flaw is that moral teachings are primarily centred on religious principles, ignoring the fact that the overall goal of moral education extends beyond promoting any particular religious belief. Ihuoma links the increase in social vices in schools to a disrespect for African moral norms and proposes using a consequentialist approach to moral teaching to minimise social vices in Nigerian schools. Ihuoma's argument is that if secular moral education is taught in Nigerian secondary schools alongside the current religious subjects taught in the classroom, social vices among students will be addressed.

Uwaezuoke (2020) acknowledges that philosophical or secular morality can assist students in managing morally charged situations and advises parents and teachers to pay close attention to the importance of secular moral principles in preventing social vices in society. These claims are relevant to the study's objective and will be discussed later in the paper.

Secular morality is a source of morality that exists outside of religion. Historically, religious leaders, particularly in Western nations, were opposed to the introduction of this morality – which was based on rational thought – into the school curriculum as a viable alternative to religious moral instruction (see, for example: Stock-Morton, 1988). Stock-Morton focused on the situation in France and the reasons why some individuals prefer secular morality over religious morality. Stock-Morton explains: “Enlightened thinkers saw the church as a regressive and oppressive force in French life; they laboured to elaborate theories of the good society without benefit of clergy.” Thus, nineteenth-century thinkers had a broad spectrum of ethical thought independent of religion to refer to in their own flight from a morality tied to Catholicism (p. 2). Secular morality also exists in Africa, and its objective is to prioritise social interests over individual ones. I agree that some people may not accept this argument because it is commonly stated that moral principles in Africa are tied to African traditional religion. However, given that it has not been established that moral principles in Africa were revealed by a supernatural being, as in the case of Western religious morality, the assertion that secular morality exists in Africa is not unreasonable. In accordance with the purpose of this study, I shall investigate moral theories outside of religion in Western tradition, focusing on ethical decision-making models in philosophy. In the literature reviewed above, Iheoma (1985) argued for a holistic approach to moral instruction in Nigerian schools, specifically recommending a consequentialist approach. Consequentialism is one of the normative theories in Western tradition, and I agree that it is necessary to adopt a holistic approach when teaching moral education. There are several reasons for this. First, relying solely on religious morality in the teaching of moral education may lead students to overlook the harm done to individuals who do not adhere to their religion, all in the name of belief. Second, a comprehensive approach will help students expand their perspectives on moral values beyond their own religious beliefs. Essentially, Iheoma has emphasised an important aspect of normative ethics, which is consequentialism. Consequentialism is a moral theory that evaluates the goodness or wrongness of actions based on the outcomes or consequences of those

actions (Horta et al., 2022; van Esch et al., 2023). Particularly, utilitarianism, a form of consequentialism, defines right action as one that maximises happiness for the greatest number of people involved (Mill, 1966).

Normative ethics consists of three major moral theories: consequentialism, virtue ethics and deontology. The goal of normative ethics is to demonstrate the criterion by which an action can be judged morally right or wrong (Gustafson, 2021). Normative theories such as consequentialism and deontology explain how we should act in order to arrive at what is morally right (McCain, 1991). The former bases its moral assessment of what constitutes a right action on the result or consequence of the decision made, whereas the latter maintains that the outcome of an activity should not be used to distinguish between right and wrong actions (Alexander, 2000). To understand the goal of these moral theories and their opposing viewpoints, we can deduce that both deontologists and consequentialists agree that moral principles are necessary to promote the common good, but they disagree on what we should base our moral judgment on. Alexander explains that “deontologist can, like the consequentialist, consider consequences to be morally relevant within the domain beyond the deontological core. But he cannot, under any circumstances, countenance the view that people are resources for others’ benefit. It is his rejection of that view that defines him as a deontologist” (p. 911).

Normative ethics, as a branch of moral philosophy, undoubtedly possesses innate values essential for developing moral qualities (Moral Education, n.d.). Moral education requires a moral theory, such as normative ethics, to serve as a guide for moral deliberation. Hence, incorporating philosophical ethical decision-making models into moral education teaching will provide students with a solid understanding of what moral actions entail. As Breakey (2014) puts it: “Most moral theories build on a core insight. Utilitarianism tells us that consequences for others’ well-being matter. Deontology stresses that morality requires each person accepting they are duty-bound to act in certain ways towards other people. Virtue theory reminds us that character drives action, and that ethical life carries its own rewards. These insights all provide valuable perspectives on the larger mosaic of human moral life. Moral education is at its best when it introduces students to these different perspectives, and their unique insights.” This implies that moral education draws on moral philosophy as a road map that instructs learners to avoid moral decision-making biases.

Although consequentialism has useful inherent moral values that are required for the development of moral abilities in students, this research focuses on deonto-

logical moral arguments, specifically Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative. This paper, however, recognises that consequentialism and virtue ethics will be useful in offering moral guidelines that can be used to address the issue of social vices in secondary education in Nigeria. For instance, virtue ethics promotes the virtue-based lifestyle necessary for students' moral ability development. Consequentialism will encourage students to focus on actions that will promote the happiness of the greatest number of people. However, applying consequentialism may be problematic because many Nigerian secondary school students engage in social vices. Virtue ethics, on the other hand, emphasises the cultivation of positive moral character and behaviour. However, if virtuous behaviour is not common among students, implementing this ethical ideal may face opposition or prove difficult. For this reason, I believe deontology works best in this context: it motivates students to act morally even when doing so would adversely affect the happiness of the greatest number of people or when acting morally contradicts the beliefs of our model virtuous individuals. Thus, including deontological viewpoints in the curriculum may offer important tools and approaches to aid in closing the gap between morality in theory and in practice.

### **Normative ethics**

Deontology, a branch of normative ethics, prescribes how to determine what is morally right (Rawling, 2023). It is more concerned with whether a course of action is inherently right or wrong than with the consequence of that action (Mill, 2016). In other words, if an action is inconsistent with the established rules, it should be avoided – even if it results in some sort of gain. For example, if a social norm states that we should not lie, we are expected to tell the truth at all times – even if doing so will result in circumstances that are detrimental to our personal interests. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a proponent of deontological ethics, attempted to demonstrate that there are universal general ethical principles, and that moral action should conform to this universal ethical rule rather than any other purpose (Kranak, 2019). A process for determining what is always right or evil is presented by Kant in his work 'foundations of the metaphysics of morals'. This method entails examining whether one's maxim aligns with the criteria outlined in the formulations of the categorical imperative. In other words, the categorical imperative is a moral concept that guides humans in making morally acceptable decisions (Timmermann, 2013). Scholars (Wood, 2007; Kant et al., 2002) seem to contend that the search for the greatest guiding principle of morality inspired the formulation of this moral norm.

Kant considers categorical imperative (CI) as a fundamental moral concept. In his view, the CI is an unwavering moral principle that is reasonable, rationally necessary and must be adhered to regardless of our innate wants. Kant continued by stating that the CI validates all particular ethical norms, meaning that any moral precept that conflicts with the CI is seen as unethical (see: Johnson & Cureton, 2004). In other words, Kant implies that the “categorical imperative” (CI) is a moral compass that reduces or eliminates the possibility of committing immoral acts if strictly followed by a moral agent. Kant describes the categorical imperative in three different ways: Act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature; act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means; act only so that your will could regard itself as giving universal law through its maxim (Kant et al., 2002, p. 34). Scholars have offered several interpretations of what the CI entails, with some revising them to present a new viewpoint. (Potter Jr., 1975), and others aiming to highlight faults in critics’ interpretations (Kemp, 1958). There is no doubt that arguments and counterarguments about Kant’s CI’s relevance have either provided insights into the theory’s usefulness in determining what right actions entail or, on the other hand, drawn scholars’ attention to areas where Kant’s CI failed to rationally demonstrate how the CI could solve some moral problems. For instance, Sullivan (1994) explains that embracing Kant’s claim that reason is the sole source of morality implies empowering individuals to create their own moral judgments. It may mean that people can now determine for themselves what is right and wrong. Additionally, if the categorical imperative suggests that “we may act only on maxims that everyone else may adopt, all other things being equal, what is morally permissible for one person is also morally permissible for everyone else similarly situated” (p. 96). However, Robinson (2019) explains that one part of the categorical imperative prohibits using others as a means to an end and that if people follow and respect this rule, justice in society would improve. This assertion aligns with the goal of this paper.

I argue that both the proponents and critics of Kant’s CI have contributed to knowledge in some way. However, the purpose of this study is not to join this intellectual debate, but to demonstrate how the CI can be used to demonstrate practically how the social vices mentioned by scholars in this work failed to meet moral standards in both schools and Nigerian society. In other words, the purpose of this study is not to point out flaws in their arguments, but rather to draw lessons from Kant’s



moral philosophy with the goal of demonstrating what students should take into account when determining whether their action will benefit humanity if it becomes the standard in every community in Nigeria.

### **Social vices in Nigerian schools**

To explain how the CI can help prevent social vices in Nigerian secondary schools, we must first investigate the types of social vices that Nigerian secondary school students engage in. Social vices are actions that violate social norms and values (Shaibu et al., 2020). Umar (2020, p. 173) defines social vices as “any immoral activities which are likely to become involved in any profitable venture or activity, like prostitution, gambling, pornography, drugs, etc.”

Scholars in Nigeria have focused their efforts on determining the causes and consequences of social vices in Nigerian schools, and many identified poor parenting as a major factor (Ezenwafor, n.d; Njoku, 2016). Nwogu (2016) acknowledges that the type of parenting style a child is exposed to influences their behaviour. Elujekwute et al. (2021) highlight the relationship between social vices and teaching methods in Nigerian secondary schools. They claimed that some instructors hardly ever let their pupils speak up or pose questions during class. Teachers want their students to obey the rules, even if they think they are harsh. Additionally, they asserted that due of the method of training employed, pupils in this group are more prone to participate in social vices since they are unable to reject directives that infringe upon their rights. Ladebo (2003) focused on sexual harassment of female students and observed that school administrators and the government had failed to take necessary measures to prevent this unhealthy conduct, which has now become prevalent in most Nigerian institutions of higher learning. The literature reviewed in this study presented informative measures to help reduce social vices in Nigerian schools, and scholars propose a holistic approach to moral education teaching. In other words, incorporating secular morality or moral lessons outside of religion into moral education in Nigeria will aid in combating social vices among Nigerian students.

### **Kant's categorical imperative and social vices in Nigerian schools**

The literature reviewed above highlighted some social vices common in Nigerian schools. This study will focus on two: cultism and sexual harassment of female students [by teachers]. I will try to connect Kant's moral philosophy to social vices in Nigerian schools and will focus on two maxims of the CI: “act only according to



that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”; “so act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in another, always as an end and never as only a means.” Scholars have interpreted these moral principles to make them more explicit for readers who want to draw moral lessons from them. Regarding the first maxim, Kant appears to explain that “men do, in fact, use the formula of the universal law as a criterion for judging action” (Kemp, 1958, p. 65). Kleingeld (2017) noted that Kant appears to suggest that we only act in line with maxims that we can will as both personal principles and general rules. Scholars have also provided useful interpretations of Kant’s moral maxim that encourages us to treat others as an end. Hodson & Hodson (1983) notes that this dictum might be understood to suggest that we should not use other people as a tool to further our own selfish interests, but rather that in our interactions with others, we should respect their dignity, rights and choices. The first maxim could also imply that before acting, one should consider whether the proposed action complies with social norms and whether he wants it to become the standard for everyone to follow. Regarding the second maxim, we are encouraged to assess the rightness of the means we use to achieve our goal and the goal itself (Atwell, 1986). Goal implies “end”, and this end should be right in our opinion and right if everyone pursues the same aim (Wood, 2007). Although scholars have interpreted these rules differently, for the purpose of this paper, the second maxim implies that we should not exploit people as a means to achieve selfish goals. In other words, Kant argues that in our interpersonal relationships, we should always treat people as ends. What does it mean to use someone as an end? It simply means that we should treat human beings with respect. People are not objects and should not be treated as such. Every person has intrinsic value, worth, dignity and purpose, and we shouldn’t use them simply as tools or instruments to achieve our own ends. Instead, we should see people as ends in themselves, as individuals who have their own realities (What is Kant’s second formulation, 2022). At this point, an attempt will be made to connect Kant’s CI to the two social vices already mentioned.

### **Cultism in Nigerian schools**

The origin, causes and effects of cultism in Nigeria schools have been discussed by scholars (see: Oyemwinmina & Aibieyi, 2015; Ogunsanya, 2015). I would rather concentrate on the consequences of these unethical practices, which often result in clashes between rival cult groups – resulting in the deaths of students (Gboyega,

2005; Oyibo, 2020). Let's subject the outcome of student cultism to the first maxim – “act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”. Cult members frequently resolve conflicts of interest with cultists from rival gangs through violent conflict. When the first maxim is applied, it simply means that whenever two or more students from different cult groups disagree on an issue, a cultist clash should be used to settle their differences. Can you wish for this to become the norm in every tertiary institution in Nigeria? If you answered yes, consider the following outcomes: insecurity within and outside the school environment, school closure, daily reports of mass murder on campuses, parents mourning their children who died as a result of cultist clashes and innocent students who died as a result of stray bullets, rustications of students, and so on. When we apply the second maxim – “so act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in another, always as an end and never as only a means” – it means treating people as ends in themselves. When one murders a fellow student belonging to a rival cult, they are treating that person merely as a means to an end. Employing someone in such a manner, as a tool to assert dominance and showcase the supremacy of their own group, violates the second principle. This is because human beings possess dignity and deserve to be treated with respect.

### **Sexual harassment of female students by lecturers**

Reports that some teachers demand sex from their female students in exchange for higher grades have been a major topic in Nigerian newspapers (Rotimi, 2021; Osuji, 2019). Omonigho (2019) identified this act as a social vice. Okafor et al. (2022) investigated the prevalence of sexual harassment in some higher education institutions in south-east Nigeria. They discovered that a large number of female students have experienced this immoral behaviour at some point in their lives and that some of these victims are hesitant to report perpetrators to authorities for fear of not getting justice. As Okafor et al. put it: “on a number of occasions, reporting sexual harassment to the school authority has resulted to further victimisation against the victims due to invisible networks of the domination of men in the institution of higher learning” (p. 106). Some argue that inappropriate dressing contributes to sexual harassment of female students; however, when viewed through the lens of the CI, this excuse is insufficient to justify such unguided behaviour. Kant agrees that our emotions often conflict with established social rules, but “there is only one true virtue, which is the wholehearted commitment and effective capacity to fulfil our

moral duties out of respect for the moral law, despite our tendencies to indulge in our opposing natural desires” (see: Cureton & Hill, 2017, p. 263). This means that it is a moral obligation for every teacher to follow the rules and regulations governing the teaching profession in Nigeria, and the school authority must punish anyone who violates these rules.

This action violates both the first and second rule of the CI. The first maxim: if a teacher, referred to as Teacher X, engages in sexual activities in exchange for grades in order to fulfil their sexual desires, is it reasonable for Teacher X to desire that this behaviour becomes a general rule followed by all teachers who have the same motive? Furthermore, can Teacher X still wish for this practice to become universally accepted if their daughter or any female relatives studying at other universities become victims of this immoral act? It is important to note that this behaviour also violates the second rule, as mentioned earlier, as it involves using another person as a means to an end. Let’s now explore additional ethical issues that may arise if this kind of behaviour were to become the norm in all Nigerian higher education institutions: (a) it will discourage hardworking students because students who agree to exchange sex for higher grades will not have to attend classes or do their homework in order to pass; (b) it may cause suicidal thoughts in some students, as those who are unwilling to engage in this unethical behaviour may consider suicide when frustrated by these lecturers; (c) as the number of incompetent graduates’ increases, the quality of service delivery in society will suffer. This is because accepting and engaging in this unethical behaviour opens the door to good academic grades, which reduces the desire to study and prepare for exams.

These maxims can be added to the moral courses currently taught in Nigerian secondary schools, such as Islamic Religious Knowledge and Christian Religious Studies (CRS). When teaching Christian Religious Studies, for instance, teachers can have students examine Christian teachings of universal human dignity and values and assess their understanding of how the Christian religion promotes ethical behaviour toward others, including those of different faiths. This is one way to apply the CI maxim, which encourages respecting human dignity. Similarly, students studying Islamic religious knowledge can look at Islamic teachings regarding the value of humanity and how these ideas motivate good behaviour toward all people, regardless of religion.

## Conclusion

The manifestation of “morality in practice” and “morality in theory” is evident in Nigerian secondary schools, where a significant disconnect exists between the moral principles outlined in the Nigerian curriculum and the moral behaviour of secondary school students, who are the consumers of this curriculum. This study explores the integration of deontological ethics into moral instruction as a means to bridge the gap between these two aspects of morality: morality in practice and theory. Previous research has shown that moral lesson teachers tend to focus predominantly on religious moral teachings, giving less attention to secular morality. While these previous studies are important for understanding the issue, the discussions in this paper suggest that incorporating Kant’s categorical imperative into Nigerian moral instruction could significantly reduce social vices among secondary school students. Such an incorporation would help narrow the gap between morality in practice and morality in theory.

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