

The Implications of Nietzsche's Notion of Master/Slave Morality for the Nigerian Educational System

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Abstract

This research paper, titled "The Implications of Nietzsche's Notion of Master/Slave Morality for the Nigerian Educational System," analyzes the Nigerian educational system in an attempt to address its heavy reliance on rote learning, external authority, and conformity to inherited rules rather than critical, independent thought. A cursory look at the system reveals a greater emphasis on conformity to strict rules and regulations over critical thinking, which, according to Nietzsche, does not promote individualism, self-creation, or self-discovery. Using critical and analytical methods of philosophical inquiry, the study argues that addressing the problem of rote learning in the Nigerian educational sector requires a critical re-examination of the historically inherited rules governing the system, drawing on Nietzsche's philosophy of master/slave morality and the related close/open society framework developed by Popper. The paper contends that doing so can produce an educational system that yields not merely certificate holders, but graduates equipped for productivity, self-reliance, self-creation, and self-discovery.

Keywords: Educational system, Master/slave morality, Critical thinking, Self-reliance, Productivity.

Introduction

Nigeria is a nation of considerable promise; yet more than sixty years after independence, its educational system continues to operate largely on frameworks inherited from the colonial period, frameworks that remain heavily theoretical rather than oriented toward practical, applied knowledge acquisition. This paper proposes Nietzsche's philosophy of master/slave morality, with its emphasis on individualism, critical thinking, and education as a vehicle for self-creation, as a corrective lens for this inherited orientation. The central problem this paper identifies is that the Nigerian educational system, by prioritizing conformity to fixed curricula and rote memorization over independent reasoning, produces graduates who are certificated but not equipped to think critically, create value, or act with self-reliance, a pattern this paper terms, following

Nietzsche, a "herd mentality." This stands in contrast to more rigid and hierarchical models of social and educational organization associated with philosophers such as Plato.

The distinction between closed societies (governed by a fixed hierarchy) and open societies (in which both rulers and the ruled participate in shaping social life) has roots in ancient Greek political philosophy. In *The Republic*, Plato describes a utopian society in which individuals are assigned specific roles according to their talents and abilities. As Lawhead summarizes Plato's position, political stability and human flourishing depend on the convergence of philosophical wisdom and political power (61). This was a closed society: individuals could not move between classes, and social mobility was restricted. Aristotle, by contrast, envisioned a more open arrangement in which individuals could pursue their own interests and move between social positions. This idea was developed further during the Enlightenment, when thinkers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau advocated for individual rights and freedoms.

In the twentieth century, this distinction gained renewed prominence in the work of Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin, and was thrown into sharp relief by the rise of totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, the fullest expression of what this paper, following Popper, calls the closed society. (This framework and its Nietzschean roots are developed at length in the next section.) The same critical lens applies to more recent closed societies, such as Iran, China, and North Korea, and to open societies such as the United States, Canada, and Germany, before the paper turns to the Nigerian case.

To achieve its objective, the paper proceeds as follows: it begins with an exposition of Nietzsche's philosophy, with particular attention to his idea of master/slave morality and its relation to the closed/open society distinction; it then examines the challenges facing the Nigerian educational system; it considers the implications of Nietzsche's philosophy for addressing the problem of rote learning in that system; and it closes with recommendations, an evaluation, and a conclusion.

Nietzsche's Philosophy of Master/Slave Morality

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (15 October 1844 – 25 August 1900) was a German philosopher and writer who began his career as a classical philologist before turning to philosophy. In 1869, at the age of twenty-four, he was appointed Professor of Classical Philology at the University of Basel. Plagued by ill health for much of his life, he resigned from the university in 1879 and lived thereafter as an independent writer, moving between

Switzerland, Italy, and southern France in search of climates that might ease his condition. It was during this period, in relative solitude and financial insecurity, that he completed most of his major writing. In 1889, aged forty-four, Nietzsche suffered a mental breakdown from which he never recovered, and he spent his final eleven years in the care of his family until his death in 1900.

This biography matters because Nietzsche's philosophy cannot be separated from its circumstances: sustained physical suffering and professional isolation from the institutions he had once served shaped both his hostility toward inherited authority and his insistence that values must be self-created rather than received. Nietzsche was a radical critic of traditional morality, religion, and philosophy, advocating instead for life-affirmation, individualism, and the "will to power." He is best known for declaring that "God is dead," for his perspectivism, the view that truth is always shaped by the observer's position rather than grasped from some neutral vantage point, and for his call for individuals to create their own values and become what he termed the *Übermensch*, or "Overman" (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche describes the *Übermensch* not as an endpoint already achieved but as a future goal: "man is a rope, tied between beast and overman, a rope over an abyss" (14). Humanity, on this view, is a bridge toward a higher form of existence rather than a finished product, and objective truth in the strong sense does not exist, since every act of perception is shaped by the perspective of the one who perceives.

Nietzsche's political thought is notoriously unsystematic. He expressed open disdain for the modern nation-state, democracy, and egalitarianism, favoring instead what commentators call an "aristocratic radicalism" centered on individual excellence and the will to power. He described the state as "the coldest of all cold monsters," one that "coldly lies" and falsely claims to speak for "the people" (111). For Nietzsche, the good is whatever enhances a person's feeling of power; the bad is whatever stems from weakness (2). This is the conceptual foundation of master and slave morality: master morality evaluates actions by their capacity to affirm life and express strength, while slave morality, the morality of the herd, evaluates actions by their conformity to inherited rules and their protection of the weak from the strong.

This distinction between master and slave morality grounds Nietzsche's critique of the closed society. He characterizes it as a form of "herd mentality" marked by conformity and a suspicion of individual assertion. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he writes that "the individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe," insisting that "no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself" (38). The closed society, on this account, suppresses individual freedom in favor of a uniform mode of thought and conduct. Nietzsche's own account of this master/slave distinction, in section 260 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, presents the two moralities as arising from opposite positions of power. Master morality, he explains, is the outlook of a ruling and self-assured class, one that defines the good directly in terms of its own qualities and experiences the "bad" only as an afterthought, a category for whatever falls short of its own standard. Slave morality, by contrast, develops among the ruled and dependent, and begins from the opposite direction: it starts by naming what is threatening or "evil" in those who hold power over it, and only from that starting point arrives, often grudgingly, at its own notion of the good. Nietzsche adds that virtually every developed society carries traces of both moralities at once, sometimes reconciled and sometimes in open tension, even within a single person (260).

The open society, which Nietzsche associates with the "free spirit," instead fosters individualism, creativity, and the pursuit of self-determined goals; it is composed of individuals willing to interrogate inherited values and create meaning for themselves. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he captures this creative demand in a memorable image: "one must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star" (7).

Max Weber extended this line of thinking in a different register. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he argues that the rise of Western capitalism is attributable in part to the open society: the Protestant Reformation's encouragement of individual initiative helped clear the path for capitalist development, though Weber also acknowledged the costs of this shift, including the erosion of traditional communal values and the rise of alienation (121).

Karl Popper, writing during and after the Second World War, developed the closed/open society distinction further in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. He understood human societies as situated along a historical continuum: from the organic, tribal, or closed society, through the open society marked by a critical attitude toward tradition, to an abstract, depersonalized society lacking face-to-face interaction altogether

(Jarvie and Pralong 43–44). On this view, the open society is the only form of social organization compatible with sustained individual freedom and genuine progress; closed and totalitarian societies suppress freedom and arrest development.

A parallel critical spirit appears in the philosophy of science. Paul Feyerabend insisted that scientific theories should never be treated as sacrosanct or immune from revision (Udo 56), that, a theory earns provisional acceptance only for as long as it survives attempts to falsify it, and once its predictions are falsified, "their falsification also falsifies the theory from which they were logically deduced" (33). On this view, theories are always in competition for acceptance by the scientific community (Udo 56). Applied to education, this suggests that a healthy sector requires continuous openness to revision rather than a static, rigid curriculum that forecloses new approaches to learning and institutional design, from the primary level through to university.

Taken together, these strands of thought, Nietzsche's master/slave morality, Popper's closed/open society, and Feyerabend's, insistence on the revisability of theories, from the interpretive framework this paper brings to bear on the Nigerian educational system. What unites them is a shared conviction that systems of thought and social organization is stagnate when they treat inherited rules as beyond question, and that they flourish only when individuals are equipped and permitted to challenge, revise, and recreate.

The Challenges Facing the Nigerian Educational System

The Nigerian educational system faces several interlocking challenges that together constitute a significant setback to national development, for instance, inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, insufficient training and development of teachers, an outdated curriculum, examination malpractice, and inadequate access to educational technological tools. (Odia and Omofonmwan 82-85).

Inadequate funding. One of the most pressing challenges facing the Nigerian educational system is insufficient government investment. Budget allocations to education are frequently inadequate, resulting in poorly equipped schools, a shortage of essential resources, and low teacher salaries (Odia and Omofonmwan 82). This directly affects the quality of education and makes it difficult for schools to sustain a conducive learning environment.

Poor infrastructure. Many Nigerian schools lack basic infrastructure, including classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and computers, which limits students' access to quality instruction and to the technology increasingly essential in the contemporary world (Odia and Omofonmwan 82-83).

Inadequate training and development for teachers. The quality of Nigerian education depends heavily on the quality of its teaching workforce, yet many teachers lack access to sufficient professional training and ongoing development, which constrains their capacity to teach effectively (Odia and Omofonmwan 83).

Outdated curriculum. The Nigerian educational curriculum is frequently criticized for lagging behind current global economic and social trends, leaving students without the skills and knowledge the contemporary job market demands (Odia and Omofonmwan 84).

Inadequate access to education, and proper tools. Despite government initiatives such as the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, many Nigerian children, particularly in rural areas, where schools remain scarce, still lack access to quality education, and tools to aid learning. (Odia and Omofonmwan 84-85).

Examination malpractice. Cheating during examinations has become widespread, undermining the integrity and credibility of the education system as a whole (Oko and Adie 60-61).

Addressing these challenges will require sustained, coordinated effort from government, the private sector, and other education stakeholders. Continuous review and reform of the system will be necessary if Nigeria's education sector is to prepare its citizens adequately for the future.

Obioha locates the underdevelopment and social disorder afflicting African states, Nigeria included, as the failure of leadership, compounded by corruption and tribal politics, and argues that addressing it requires cultivating an ethic of identity and solidarity grounded in Afro-communitarian values such as love, care, and fairness in governance (20-24). He develops this point at length in *"An Afro-communal Ethic for Good Governance."*

He argues that proposals for economic, political, and constitutional restructuring, while helpful, do not by themselves reach the deeper problem:

what most African states actually lack is a shared ethic of identity and solidarity rooted in Afro-communitarian thought, one capable of cultivating virtues such as love, care, complementarity, justice, equity, fairness, and patriotism within governance itself. Through a critical analysis of present-day realities across sub-Saharan Africa,... he contends that it is the absence of precisely these virtues that has produced the tribal, ethnic, inept, and corrupt patterns of leadership now common across the continent (20-38).

This echoes Plato's insight in "*The Republic*" that sustained education for those who govern is essential to the health of the polis: where education is absent, as when leaders attain office through fraudulent credentials or without meaningful education at all, the result is ineffective representation, corruption, and institutional failure, including embezzlement of public funds, inter-ethnic and inter-religious tension, and a broader erosion of public trust. As Ekpo argues that, "the country's inability to attain socio-economic, political and technological heights despite its abundant human and natural resources could be traced to the fact that Nigeria is in the throes of moral crisis which gives birth to corruption" (qtd. in Udo and Udoh 11). Plato makes essentially the same demand at the close of Book V of *The Republic*, paraphrasing we put that,

Socrates argues that a city's troubles will have no end until philosophers themselves become rulers, or until those who currently rule come to possess a genuine philosophical spirit, so that political power and philosophical wisdom are united in the same persons. Those who chase one of these goods while neglecting the other, he insists, must be kept from power altogether, since without this union of wisdom and authority a city can never be free of its evils, nor, he adds, can humanity as a whole (473c-e).

In a nut shell, education must start from the top. And then go round to the list citizen of a society for a better system.

Implications of Nietzsche's Philosophy For the Nigerian Educational System

Nietzsche's philosophy calls for a reassessment of inherited educational values. Central to this reassessment is his emphasis on individualism, the conviction that education should cultivate each person's distinctive talents rather than mold individuals to a common standard. This stands in tension with the conformity-oriented character of Nigerian education, which from the primary level onward has privileged theoretical

instruction and standardized performance over individual capacity, as Kehinde pointed out that, Nigeria's education system seems to have been characterized by too much of theories and memorization at the expense of critical thinking, a problem-solving skill, over the years. (1). Applied deliberately, Nietzsche's individualism could instead foster creativity and diversity of thought, outcomes with plausible downstream benefits for poverty reduction, since sustained improvement in material conditions depends substantially on the quality of a country's leadership. Udofia's work on leadership offers a complementary account of what such leadership requires: effective leadership, on his view, demands "a direct correspondence between possessing virtues and displaying good leadership" (24). Azikiwe's account of welfarism develops a related institutional vision, arguing that a welfarist state provides equal access to education, health care, housing, pensions, and rehabilitation for its citizens, with free education and free health care available to all. His welfarism sought to combine what Nietzsche's framework would describe as the open society, associated with the commoner, or "slave," with the closed society of the "master," on the reasoning that a hybrid state allows essential services to be delivered efficiently: fees for expensive medical treatment stay minimal, unemployment benefits go to contributors to a social insurance fund, and services such as nursing, midwifery, and physiotherapy are offered at little or no cost (71). A Nietzschean orientation would instead call for a more hands-on, experiential pedagogy, one capable of preparing students for real-world challenges, fostering critical thinking, and prompting a broader re-evaluation of the goals and methods that currently define Nigerian education.

The Way Forward: Recommendations

Addressing the challenges outlined above will require the Nigerian government to take direct and sustained ownership of educational reform. The following recommendations follow from the challenges identified earlier on.

On funding, the government should increase its budget allocation to education and ensure that allocated funds are properly disbursed and utilized for school development, the hiring of qualified teachers, and the provision of resources necessary for effective learning. (Odia and Omofonmwan 85).

On infrastructure, the government should invest directly in building and renovating school facilities to create a conducive learning environment, while public-

private partnerships can help extend this investment further than government funding alone would allow.

On teacher preparation, because the quality of any educational system rests substantially on the quality of its teachers, the government should provide continuous professional training and development opportunities so that teachers can keep pace with modern pedagogical methods, thereby improving both instructional quality and student learning outcomes.

On curriculum, the outdated character of the current curriculum calls for systematic review to make it more practical and relevant to contemporary social and economic needs, equipping students with skills that improve their employ ability and their capacity to contribute to national economic growth.

On access, the government should prioritize establishing schools in under-served rural areas and offering incentives to teachers willing to work there, alongside measures to ensure equal access to education for all children, girls included.

On examination integrity, stricter measures are needed to prevent and penalize examination malpractice, alongside a sustained institutional effort to instill honesty and integrity in students from an early age (Okon and Adie 63).

using Nietzschean lens, these recommendations point toward a more fundamental shift than policy adjustment alone can achieve. The amalgamation Nietzsche's framework invites, of the closed society's traditional cultural constraints with the open society's radical individualism, implies that Nigerian education must move from rote, herd-mentality learning toward what Nietzsche calls a "revaluation of values": the cultivation of independent, creative thinkers capable of confronting entrenched corruption and establishing new, life-affirming cultural standards and Jonas and Yacek wrote that;

Another notion commonly discussed in philosophy of education inspired by Nietzsche is his figure of the *Übermensch* as a metaphor for self-discovering ... the authors take issue with a frequent (mis)conception of self-overcoming as the ability to reject one's own identity. The error, they say, stems from a misreading of Nietzsche's conception of perspectivism and his reputation of the transcendent self. (3).

This is not a call for rebellion for its own sake, but for students to become "legislators" of their own ethical frameworks, participants in an authentically Nigerian culture that is neither a simple continuation of tradition nor an uncritical adoption of Western models.

Nietzsche's own account of this transformative education was elitist rather than universal: he held that the capacity to create one's own values responsibly belongs to a select few (Jonas and Yacek 4), which suggests that any Nigerian application should include specialized, rigorous provision for especially capable students positioned to lead broader social transformation. Because the fusion of Western-derived education with indigenous Nigerian tradition is inherently difficult, students working within it will need to examine both in order to determine what is genuinely workable in their own context, dismantling, in the process, the rigid master/slave hierarchy that still structures many Nigerian institutions.

Dennis's ethics of posterity supplies a further reason why this reform cannot be deferred. On his account, presently living people owe an obligation to remote, yet-to-be-conceived generations, one that includes securing for them a quality standard of life and genuine opportunity to meet their own needs. Applied to the Nigerian case, this suggests that reforming the educational system is not merely a present-day policy concern but an intergenerational obligation: the students shaped by today's curricula will in turn shape the opportunities available to the Nigerians who come after them, so that a failure to reform now becomes a debt passed on to a future that had no part in incurring it.

Dennis develops this argument through a Heideggerian lens, in "*A Heideggerian Paradigm for Ethics of Posterity*". He poses the question directly, do people alive today owe anything to posterity, to remote and as yet unconceived generations who might live two hundred years from now, in terms of the quality of life and the opportunities available to them? Many thinkers reject this idea outright, finding it burdened with paradox and uncertainty.⁽¹⁾ Dennis, working from Heidegger's account of Dasein and its temporal structure, argues that the rejection is mistaken, and that living people do in fact bear this obligation.⁽⁸⁾ In later work applying the same framework to industrial and environmental policy, he treats sustainability itself as a moral duty owed to future generations, one that requires the present to balance its own needs against the resources and conditions it will leave behind, in a nutshell he wrote;

As an aspect of his historical being, man only affirms his existence when he acts for posterity unjust as he acts for his contemporaries). This self-affirmation is logically consistent with Heideggerian notion of authentic living. Where such authenticity of being lacks, and inauthenticity, say in life of consumerism, becomes a way of life, then man rents his being apart and immerses himself in conflicts and crises . (10).

This argues that educational independence requires shifting from corporate-driven, present-focused pedagogy to a curriculum rooted in *sorge* (care) for future generations. This approach utilizes “antipatory resoluteness” to free education from modern systemic constraints (Gestell), aiming to foster long-term, trans-generational responsibility and sustainable development.

Evaluation

Popper coined the term "closed society," a term he associated with both ancient tribal structures and modern totalitarian regimes such as Nazism and Stalinism, in “*The Open Society and Its Enemies*”. He argued that such societies privilege a collective "destiny" over individual choice, in direct opposition to the open society's encouragement of critical thinking and democratic change (234). Henri Bergson anticipates a related point: "the closed society is that whose members hold together, caring nothing for the rest of humanity, on the alert for attack or defence" (233). In the preface to *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper frames the entire book as an attempt to show that modern civilization has still not fully recovered from the shock of its own beginning, the shift away from a tribal, closed order that submitted to magical and collective forces, and toward an open order that instead frees the individual's critical faculties. Later, in Chapter 10, he sharpens the distinction further: a closed society is one governed by magical, tribal, or collectivist thinking, in which the individual has no standing apart from the group, while an open society is one in which people are confronted with, and expected to make, their own personal decisions. Popper treats the historical passage from the first kind of society to the second as one of the most consequential transformations humanity has undergone (165-167).

Nietzsche on the other hand, emphasis on master/slave morality, applied to this Nigerian context, helps explain why the country's educational system has remained comparatively stagnant, producing limited practical benefit relative to global standards

(Odia and Omofonmwan 85). Where Nietzsche called for lifting the constraints imposed by a rigid master/slave (closed/open) hierarchy in favor of a liberated, amalgamated system, one that extends equal standing to all participants, the Nigerian case suggests that such a shift could foster growth, individualism, and critical thinking, and could produce a meaningful transformation of the educational system as a whole.

This transformation, however, cannot rest on philosophical argument alone; it requires a corresponding moral formation. Udo and Udoh, in "Moral Education and Corruption in Nigeria: A Reflection on Plato's Counsel on Education," argue that one of education's core objectives is the inculcation of the right knowledge and values in individuals, so that they become functional members of society; a genuinely effective educational programme, on their view, must develop individual potential while also meeting the sociocultural needs of the wider community (3). They traced Nigeria's corruption problem to what they call moral ignorance: a gap between knowing what is right and having the will to act on it. Drawing on Plato's counsel on education, they argue that genuine moral formation requires training both the intellect and the will together, since knowledge of the good on its own does not guarantee virtuous conduct. They cited Plato's own definition of education, by way of Schofield, as the training given through suitable habits to a child's earliest instincts toward virtue, at the stage when pleasure and pain are still being rightly shaped in the non-rational soul. On this reading, Plato's ideal Philosopher-King is not simply someone who has acquired abstract knowledge, but someone whose knowledge, virtue, and wisdom have been fused into a single disciplined character, and it is the want of such leaders, they argue, that has allowed moral ignorance and corruption to take root in Nigerian public life (3-9).

If Nigeria is to make sustained progress in its fight against corruption and to realize the aspirations of its founding generation, its current leaders, working in collaboration with the youth who will succeed them, must be equipped not only with sufficient knowledge of what is good but also with the will to act on that knowledge, the "powerful connectivity" that translates moral knowledge into responsible governance (Udo and Udoh 10). Obioha's Afro-communal ethic offers a complementary resource here, since it grounds this connective will in an ethic of identity and solidarity rather than in individual knowledge alone, on the premise that a shared, relational understanding of the land and its resources is what makes such virtues sustainable across a diverse and often fractured polity (20-24).

Conclusion

Nietzsche's philosophy challenges the traditional values and methods that currently define education in Nigeria, calling instead for a more individualistic, critical, and experiential approach. This paper has argued that incorporating these ideas into the Nigerian educational system offers a path toward a more diverse, productive, and well-rounded society, one capable of producing not merely certificate holders, but graduates equipped for genuine self-reliance and self-creation.

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