

PHILOSOPHY AND CHARACTER FORMATION IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: REFLECTIONS FROM PLATO'S VIRTUE ETHICS

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Abstract

The philosopher, Plato, in his *Republic* suggests that philosophy has to do with human formation and in order for human beings to achieve this and act as rational beings; the rational part of their soul has to act or command both the appetitive and spirited parts of the soul (the higher and lower emotions respectively). However, some people in Nigerian society often allow the emotions to control reason and this often leads to wrong choices and decision-making thereby preventing the human character from being properly formed by reason. This is why many Nigerians are corrupt overhead and ears. This article therefore used Plato's concept of virtue ethics to discuss human character formation in Nigerian society. The work employed a qualitative method of research and data was sourced from books, journal, newspapers and the internet. The work further employed the evaluative and analytic methods of philosophical study with a view to exposing Plato's concept of virtue ethics with those of other philosophers as well as existentialism and their implication on human character formation in Nigerian society. The work tried to see how possible these could be applied to human life with a view to forming people in Nigerian society not only intellectually but morally as well.

Keywords: Philosophy, Character, and Formation.

Introduction

Human beings, as social animals necessarily live with others in the society with a view to achieving their goals and means of

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sustenance. This is because everyone needs the others for survival. It was in view of this that the philosopher, Aristotle in his *Politics*, said that a person who lives alone and does not need others for survival is either a beast or a god.⁴ As human beings necessarily live with others in the same society, there has to be a code of conduct for each one to follow for the well-being of man and the society in general. How then are people supposed to behave or act in the society? Whose duty or authority is responsible for forming human character in the society? How can people know whether what they are saying, writing, or doing is the right thing? These and other questions always bring about how character is formed in the individual person or group. All these hinges on the need for proper education. It is not untrue that true education encompasses both intellectual and moral development than mere knowledge acquisition without a foundation in character is insufficient.

It is not untrue that people behave or act differently in the society based on their natural or human background. Some people act in certain ways because they belong to a particular race, culture, or tradition and that is what is obtainable among members of such race, culture, or tradition. Some behave or act in another way because they belong to a particular religious group and that is how their religion has taught them to act or behave. All these pave ways to character formation in the human society. But the question here is that some of the doctrines of the above-mentioned institutions are often incompatible with each other. For example, a typical African man is formed in the way to swallow it hook, line, and sinker that there is nothing wrong with polygamy, while another African man who is converted to Christianity is formed in the way to believe that

⁴ Aristotle. *Complete Works*. Jonathan Barnes (Ed. & trans.) (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023), 1253a27.

polygamy is a bad practice. An African man who is neither a core traditionalist nor a Christian therefore finds himself at the crossroads here; which type of character formation should he follow; traditional formation or religious formation?

Many people hold that philosophy is so abstract that it has nothing to do with the practical life or character formation. This erroneous conception has blindfolded some people and prevented them from seeing the practical aspect of philosophy in the well-being of man and the society in general. This article is an attempt to buttress how philosophy can help in building or forming human character in the right way each rational being is supposed to behave and act. It was the philosopher, Pythagoras, who by trying to expatiate on the practical aspect of philosophy according to Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* distinguished three categories of human beings that go to an Olympic competition: the first are those who go there to buy and sell (and for him, these fall under the least group); the second are those who go there to participate in the tournament or competition with a view to winning a prize (which for him is the second to the last). The third and highest group, according to him are people who go there to watch and analyse things that happen (which for him are the philosophers).⁵ Later, in his *Republic* the philosopher, Plato while trying to demonstrate how philosophy can shape character formation brought about the three aspects of the human soul as: the rational part, the appetitive part, and the spirited part, just like Pythagoras' three divisions of those who go to an Olympic competition. The highest part or level (which for Pythagoras is philosophical reasoning/reflection and analysis – those who watch the game and analyse it, the philosophers who use

⁵. Diogenes, L. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Stephen White (Ed. & trans.). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) (Diogenes Bk VIII, Ch. 1)

reason in doing so), is for Plato, the rational part of the soul which has to reflect and command the appetitive and spirited parts (the higher and lower emotions respectively; which for Pythagoras are the buyers/sellers and the competitors) on what to execute.

It was Plato's belief that reason does not mistake; however, the emotions often override reason and refuse to follow its instruction or command and that often leads to human error or mistake thereby paving way to immoral acts. But if the passions are always controlled by reason, human character can easily be formed in the right way or direction. This work therefore sees Plato's ethics as a background to discussing Philosophy and Character Formation. The work will also bring in the views of other philosophers on this with a view to bringing home about how human character can be formed in the right way in this contemporary era.

Philosophy therefore aids character formation by developing critical thinking, promoting self-awareness, defining virtues, and offering ethical frameworks for guiding actions and decisions. Through studying philosophical concepts like virtue ethics or existentialism, individuals gain tools to understand their values, question societal norms, make informed choices, and cultivate traits such as wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice, which are mentioned by Plato as the four cardinal virtues. This work will dwell chiefly on virtue ethics and existentialism as philosophical tools for character formation. The work will define the key terms: philosophy, character, and formation and then move to virtue ethics as background to character formation. The work will further discuss the four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice using different philosophical perspectives and finally offers an evaluation and conclusion.

Concept Labyrinth: Philosophy, Character, and Formation

Philosophy: There are many definitions of the term, philosophy, which is a combination of two Greek words: *philos* and *Sophia*. The former means 'love', while the latter means, 'wisdom'. Etymologically therefore, philosophy means the love of wisdom. However, as this work is going to use Plato's ethics as a background for discussing philosophy and character formation, it will also employ his own explanation of what philosophy is. In his work, *Republic*, Books V-VII Plato sees philosophy as a love of wisdom and a path to understanding the true nature of reality, particularly the realm of Forms. For Plato, philosophy was not the merely intellectual pursuit, but a way of life focused on reason, contemplation, and the pursuit of virtue. This involved striving for self-knowledge and detaching from the distractions of the physical world to grasp eternal truths.⁶ Thus, Plato's explanation of the concept, philosophy is relevant to this work because it sees philosophy not just as an intellectual pursuit but also a way of life, focusing on reason and contemplation and the pursuit of virtue. These are exactly what character formation is hinged upon.

Character Formation: Character in simple language refers to a distinguishing feature; characteristic, trait, nature, or *phene*, of a particular person or group of people. Plato's concept of character is centred on the idea that a virtuous character is achieved through a harmonious balance of reason, spirit, and appetite within the soul. He believes that true character is revealed when one possesses and wields power responsibly, making choices that align with wisdom and virtue.⁷ In order to have the right character formation, Plato's

^{6.} *Republic* (439e-440d) in Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition). (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2023).

^{7.} (442c)

concept of balancing the three aspects of the soul has to be put in place. There has to be a balance or harmony between the three aspects of the human soul, the rational part, the appetitive part, and the spirited part with reason being in control of the two and the two obeying and carrying out the dictates of reason.

Formation: Formation has to do with the process of influencing or guiding a person to a deeper understanding of a particular way of life. In his *Republic*, Plato holds that character formation is heavily influenced during youth, as the formative years are crucial for imprinting lasting impressions. He emphasises the importance of cultivating virtuous habits early on, as the character is most pliable and receptive to positive influences during that period. He also believes that character is shaped or formed by the interplay of reason, appetite, and spirit. Formation, for Plato, therefore has to do with the interplay of the three aspects of the human soul, reason, appetite, and spirit.⁸ It is when these three work together that formation of character takes place. This work therefore moves to Plato's virtue ethics as a background to how philosophy can lead to character formation.

Plato's Virtue Ethics: A Background to Philosophy and Character Formation

Plato started his virtue ethics as the mouth piece of his master, Socrates via his *Dialogues* in the *Republic*. He defines virtue as a form of knowledge, specifically knowledge of the Good. He argues that all wrongdoing stems from ignorance, meaning that if one truly understands what is good, one will naturally act virtuously.⁹ He identifies four cardinal virtues as: wisdom, courage, temperance,

⁸. *Republic*, 442d-e in Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition).

⁹. *Gorgias* 482e ff in Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition)

and justice. It is these four virtues that can pave way to good character formation. With a view to achieving virtue in the city (society), Plato brings out two separate divisions of the city and the soul, linking them together. In his view, the city has three classes of citizens: the rulers, the auxiliaries, and the workers or producers. The rulers, for him, are the leaders of the society who are characterised by their knowledge about and devotion to the welfare of the city (society).¹⁰ The auxiliaries are the warrior class that helps the rulers. These are collectively the guardians of the city (society). Then finally are the workers or producers (farmers, artisans, mechanics, etc). These are the people who are concerned with the production of material goods necessary for daily life.¹¹ He sums up that there will be virtue in the city (society) if each class carries out its function diligently without interfering into the work that belongs to others. One's function in the city (society) is determined by the class which one belongs to.¹² Therefore, one has to be formed based on the class one belongs to in the city or society. One has to know the duties of that class and how to carry out such duties diligently.

From the analysis of the three classes of citizens in the city (society), Plato moves to the analogy of the three divisions of the human soul. He argues that the human soul has three parts: the rational part, the appetitive part, and the spirited part. The rational part has to do with reason which is the function of calculating, especially about what is good for the soul. The appetitive part has to do with the appetites which are for food, drink, and sex, which are like the producing class – they are necessary for bodily existence.¹³

^{10.} Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition) (413c-414b; 428c-d)

^{11.} Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition) (369b-371e)

^{12.} Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition) (433a-b)

^{13.} Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition) (439c-e)

The spirited part is associated with the heart; it is an aggressive drive concerned with honour. The spirited part is manifested as anger with those who attack one's honour. Perhaps, more importantly, it is manifested as anger with oneself when failing to do what one knows one should do.¹⁴

Through the above analysis, Plato believes that there is always conflict in the soul. For instance, the appetites can lead one towards pleasure which reason recognises is not good for the whole soul. In cases of conflict, Plato says the spirited part sides with reason against appetite. This implies that reason knows what is good both for oneself and in the treatment of others. The appetites, short-sighted and self-centred, pull in the opposite direction. However, it is worthy to note that the appetite is not corrupt or evil; it is just indifferent to the soul's welfare. Virtue, for Plato, has two aspects here, the first is to acquire knowledge which is the basis of virtue; the second is to instil in the appetites and emotions – which cannot grasp the knowledge – a docility so that they react in a compliant way to what reason knows to be the best thing to do. This shows that the non-rational parts of the soul acquire reliable habits on which the moral virtues depend. Thus, character formation through this philosophical analysis of Plato can come about only if reason (the rulers) is allowed to rule both the appetite and the spirited parts (the auxiliaries and the producers respectively). However, there will be chaos in the individual if the appetite refuses to obey reason and goes on execution what reason does not recommend that it should do. This is what makes good character formation very difficult to take place.

¹⁴. Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition) (439e-440d)

In order to have a good character formation, Plato in his virtue ethics mentions four cardinal virtues which can help one to achieve this, these are: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice.

Wisdom: In his *Republic*, Plato sees wisdom as a cardinal virtue and a form of intellectual excellence, especially within the ruling class of his ideal state. He links wisdom to *euboulia*, that is, the capacity for sound judgement and giving good advice. For him, true wisdom is not merely knowledge of facts, but an understanding of the Forms, particularly the Form of the Good, and the ability to apply this understanding to govern justly and harmoniously.¹⁵ For Plato, a person who is wise always makes use of a sound judgement in order to carryout actions that are right. He emphasises that his role is not to impart knowledge, but to help others bring their own thoughts to light, and access their validity.

From the above, one can clearly see the work of philosophy in shaping character formation. Through the Socratic Method, one is able to cross-examine one's thoughts before putting them into action. By so doing one is able to determine by oneself whether that which one wishes to carryout is right or wrong. This is the more reason why Socrates through the mouthpiece of Plato in his dialogue, *Phaedrus* says, "Know thyself".¹⁶ Of course, it is very difficult to have character formation if the person in question does not know him/herself. One who follows crowd mentality cannot claim to have known oneself.

Courage: Plato discusses the virtue of courage, or *andreia*, in dialogues like the *Laches* and *The Republic*, portraying it not as

^{15.} *Republic* (427d-445e) in Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition).

^{16.} *Phaedrus* (229e) in Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition).

mere fearlessness but as courage rooted in knowledge, temperance, and wisdom. In the *Laches*, Socrates challenges simple definitions of courage as just facing danger, emphasising the need for understanding the situation and the role of reason.¹⁷ In *The Republic*, courage is linked to the spirited part of the soul, particularly in the warrior class, where it serves to uphold correct beliefs about what is good and fearful, acting as an ally to reason.¹⁸ For Plato, the virtue of courage is important when it comes to character formation because it helps one to uphold correct beliefs about what is good and fearful with the aid of reason. Reason can detect that which is good but it takes the virtue of courage to execute it. It was reason that detected to Socrates the negative aspect of the Greek City States and courage aided him to stand up boldly and condemn such. It was also the virtue of courage that aided him to stand for the truth even at the point of death without fear.

Temperance: For Plato, in his *Republic*, temperance (sophrosyne) is a virtue of self-mastery and inner order, where the rational part of the soul controls the appetites for bodily pleasures like: food, drink, and sex.¹⁹ He distinguished between superficial temperance, driven by fear of pain, and true philosophical temperance which is a pure and complete self-control stemming from wisdom and a purification of the soul from worldly desires. The inner harmony is also reflected at the societal level in his ideal state, where different classes are attuned and united under a wise and just leadership.²⁰ The virtue of temperance has to do with self-control with the use of reason controlling the appetites or emotions. Plato believes that

^{17.} (190e-193c) in Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition).

^{18.} (429c-430b) in Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition).

^{19.} (442c) in Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition).

^{20.} Republic (442d-e) in Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition).

when people allow their emotions or appetites to disobey reason, their actions are always wrong. The virtue of temperance can help people to have good character formation because it helps them to control themselves and avoid the excesses of the appetites.

Justice: Plato defines the virtue of justice as “an internal and external harmony, where each part of a person's soul (reason, spirit, and appetite) and each class in society (rulers, auxiliaries, and producers) performs its proper function without interfering with the others”.²¹ For an individual, this means the rational part of the soul governs the others, leading to self-consistency and internal order. For society, it means each person fulfils their role and contributes according to their unique abilities, leading to social harmony and collective good. One's function, in turn, is determined by the class to which one belongs. So, rulers should rule and not amass wealth – the function of the farmers, artisans, and merchants; if the rulers turn from ruling to money-making, they are unjust.

Omoregbe in his *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study* corroborated the above when he averred that “justice in this case is the harmony that is produced when each class does its duty properly. Justice in this case is the harmony that is produced when each class fulfils its function effectively”.²² He goes on that “justice is to Greek ethics, what love is to Christian ethics. In Christian ethics, love is the all-embracing virtue and the 'mother' of all virtues. But Greek ethics it is justice; justice is the all-embracing virtue and the greatest of all virtues”.²³

^{21.} Republic (433a-b) in Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition).

^{22.} Omoregbe, J. *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*. (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 2018), Pg.162.

^{23.} Omoregbe, J. *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*, 162.

Application of Plato's Philosophy of Character Formation on Nigerian Society

It is no exaggeration to state that the Nigerian society has serious problem when it comes to character formation. Religious and cultural prejudices have blindfolded many Nigerians such that they are adamant to accept anything new or any doctrine that goes contrary to their religious and cultural beliefs. The Islamic sect known as *Boko Haram* has already stood firm in condemning Western education. In the same vein, some Christian sects, such as the Jehovah's witnesses and others are too rigid to bend to new teachings that go contrary to the doctrines of their churches. In the same vein, some Nigerian cultures vehemently oppose anything that goes contrary to their cultural beliefs.

It is therefore the duty of the Nigerian government to incorporate the study of philosophical ethics as a mandatory subject for all pupils and students. By so doing, all pupils and students in both private and government schools in Nigerian will be able to inculcate character formation in the lives of the younger generation. According to Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, it was the philosopher Diogenes of Sinope who said that “The foundation of each society is the education of its youths”.²⁴ It is through this implementation of philosophical ethics in the basic and post-basic classes in Nigerian schools that true character formation will emerge right from the grassroots. In the same vein, the Nigerian politicians and intending politicians have to undergo some rigorous studies in moral philosophy with a view to developing good moral conduct that will nip the evils of bribery and corruption from the bud. It was in view of this that the philosopher,

²⁴. Diogenes, L. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Stephen White (Ed. & trans.). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) (Book VI, par.20-81)

Plato, in his *Republic* suggests that for any society to be great, it has to make philosophers her leaders or change her leaders to philosophers.²⁵

The crux of the matter treated in this paper revolves around how philosophy can help in character formation which has to do with the developmental process through which an individual's or group of individuals' core set of values, attitudes, habits, and morals are shaped, influencing their identity, future actions and decisions as rational beings. Character formation deals with the morality of the individual person or group of people in the society. How could people develop good morals and live in harmony as rational beings with one another in the society? This work answered this question by applying the philosophical ethical views of Plato with a view bringing about how this could be achieved. The work made use of the four cardinal virtues presented by Plato, which are: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice with the emphases on the use of reason in applying these virtues.

It is also worthy to note that all the aforementioned four cardinal virtues are fundamentally one; for they are different expressions of (or different ways of looking at) the rule of reason over the rest of man and all human activities. Hence, it is impossible, in Plato's view, to have one virtue and lack another because to have one virtue is to have all, and to lack one is to lack all. When reason is in control of the whole man and all human activities, then all virtues are present. It is therefore the duty of man as a rational being to always allow reason to control all his thoughts and actions. Without philosophical reasoning, man cannot form good characters and live as a virtuous person in the society. Human beings should therefore

²⁵. Plato *Republic*, 473d-473e. in Plato. *Complete Works*. (Grapevine Edition).

control their appetites or passions with the use of reason in order to live virtuously in the society. The work therefore suggested that the Nigerian society should implement moral philosophy (ethics) as a mandatory subject in both the basic and post-basic classes as well as rigorous training of politicians and would-be politicians in the area of ethics with a view to bringing about character formation in the country (Nigeria).

Conclusion

This work discussed Plato's virtue ethics as a way forward for philosophy and character formation with a focus on the Nigerian society. Many a person often feels that philosophy is too abstract and as such cannot be applied to concrete life situations. This work took that as a challenge to prove to such people that philosophy can be used to solve concrete situations in human society. In this work, philosophical discourses have been thrown wide open for the general public to read and understand how philosophy can be used to transform human behaviour or character with the application of the virtue ethics of Plato. These views are summed up in three groups of citizens in the City State and the four cardinal virtues of the philosopher, Plato. The work concludes here that all the citizens are important in the society and each citizen has very important role to play in the society. It is only when each citizen performs his/her work diligently without interfering into the work of others that justice will be achieved in the society. The work also suggests that human beings as rational beings should always allow reason to rule over the appetites or passions in order to cultivate the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. These four virtues are fundamental for good character formation; without them, there will be no good character formation and one can get to know them and how to apply them properly through philosophical

reflections. Thus, philosophy can aid good character formation as discussed above.

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