



NIETZSCHE'S CONCEPT OF MORALITY: AN EVALUATION

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Abstract

*This article focuses on an evaluation of Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of morality. Nietzsche's idea of morality represents a radical departure from traditional ethical systems grounded in religion, rationalism, and social convention. His critique of traditional concept of morality, articulated in works such as *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*, unmasks morality as historically contingent, psychologically motivated, and intimately bound up with relations of power. The fundamental questions are: How does Nietzsche conceive morality? What are Nietzsche's criticisms against traditional concept of morality? How did Nietzsche distinguish between Master morality and Slave morality? What are his criticisms against Christian morality? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Nietzsche's concept of morality? These and other allied issues are the concerns of this article. Employing analytical and evaluative methods, this article examines Nietzsche's concept of morality. Nietzsche made a remarkable distinction between "master morality," a value system of vitality and strength, and "slave morality," a reactive inversion arising from resentment and weakness. Christianity, he contends, institutionalized slave morality, promoting guilt, humility, and obedience at the expense of human excellence. This article examines Nietzsche's revaluation of morality, drawing on his concepts of the will to power, the Übermensch, and eternal recurrence. This study argues that despite the problems associated with Nietzsche's idea of morality, he made significant contributions to moral philosophy, highlighting his transformative potential. Ultimately, his vision challenges individuals to transcend inherited norms and embrace a creative as well as life-affirming ethic.*

Keywords: Nietzsche, morality, master/slave, genealogy, will to power, Übermensch





Introduction

The issue of morality has always occupied a central place in philosophy, serving as one of its oldest and most enduring concerns. The branch of philosophy that is basically concerned with the examination of the morality of human actions is popularly known as 'Ethics'. Philosophers, starting from the ancient period, have preoccupied themselves with the issue of morality of human conduct. It is quite obvious that from antiquity to the contemporary period, thinkers have sought to establish the foundations of moral life, asking what constitutes the good, how one ought to live, and whether morality is grounded in divine command, rationality, or natural law. Plato, in his theory of the Good, envisioned a transcendent source of order that provided the measure of all ethical judgments. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, proposed a teleological framework in which human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) arises from the cultivation of virtue. Hence, Aristotle propounded 'Virtue Ethics'. In the modern period, Immanuel Kant grounded morality in the categorical imperative, insisting that moral law is derived from reason alone and binds universally, irrespective of circumstance. Each of the above reflects the conviction that morality has a stable, objective foundation. On his part, Jeremy Bentham came up with his theory of Utilitarianism, emphasizing the consequences of human actions. Other moral philosophers such as J. S. Mill, J. Fletcher, J. Habermas etc made unique contributions to the understanding of morality.

The emergence of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) marked a 'turning-point' in the conception of morality. Certainly, he disrupts the trajectory with a radical challenge and critique. His concept of morality differs remarkably from the traditional assumptions in the domain of morality. Hence, he criticized the idea that morality is universal. He argues consistently that morality is not universal, timeless, or divine, but a human construct shaped by contingent historical struggles, psychological drives, and relations of power. In his words: "morality is a tool, often used by those in power to maintain control or by the powerless to resist domination"¹. He maintains that moral concepts do not emerge from reason or revelation but from human needs and conflicts. His famous declaration of the "death of God" demonstrates the collapse of metaphysical foundations for morality in the modern age, confronting humanity with the reality that no transcendent order guarantees meaning or value. This cultural rupture, Nietzsche argues, leaves human beings at crossroads: either descending into nihilism or embracing the task of creating new values.

The basic questions in this study are: How does Nietzsche conceive morality? What are Nietzsche's criticisms against traditional concept of morality? How did Nietzsche distinguish between Master morality and Slave morality? What does Nietzsche mean by the 'death of God' and 'will to power'? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Nietzsche's concept of morality? In response to these and other related issues, this article examines Nietzsche's concept of morality, employing analytical and evaluative





methods of philosophical investigation. Nietzsche argues that the proper response to moral issues is not to cling desperately to decaying moral systems but to revalue all values (*Umwertung aller Werte*). This revaluation requires a radical critique of inherited norms, a genealogical unveiling of their origins, and the courage to affirm life without metaphysical consolation. His idea opens new horizon of possibilities for moral philosophy, in which morality is no longer viewed as a static set of universal truths, but as an evolving human creation. This article examines Nietzsche's radical revaluation of morality, tracing its intellectual roots, analyzing its central concepts, and offering a philosophical evaluation of its implications for both classical moral theory and contemporary ethical thought.

This article is partitioned into five Sections. Section one focuses on Nietzsche's life and intellectual formation. Section two examines Nietzsche's idea of morality as a human construction as well as his distinction between master morality and slave morality. Section three analyzes Nietzsche's genealogy of morals and the ascetic ideal, while section four examines his ideas of death of God and 'will to power'. The fifth section is the evaluation as well as conclusion of the study.

Nietzsche's Brief Life History and Intellectual Formation

This section focuses on a brief examination of Nietzsche's life as well as his intellectual formation. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was born in Rocken in 1844. His father was a Lutheran pastor, but his sudden death when Nietzsche was only five years old left the child in a household dominated by his mother and female relatives.² Hence, Nietzsche grew up in the midst and company of women. However, this seems to have no influence on his philosophy. His upbringing immersed him in Christian morality, which he would later criticize as an expression of "slave morality" in his critique of contemporary Western morality.³

As a little child, Nietzsche was very brilliant. He excelled in academics. Nietzsche attended the elite boarding school in Schulpforta, where he was trained in philology, classical languages, and music.⁴ He later studied at the Universities of Bonn and Leipzig under the tutelage of Friedrich Wilhelm Ritschl. This deepened significantly his engagement with Greek and Roman culture. It was at this point that he discovered Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. Certainly, Schopenhauer's work had a lot of influence on him. Nietzsche admired Schopenhauer's recognition of the irrational will at the core of existence but eventually rejected his pessimism in favor of a life-affirming vision.⁵

Nietzsche became a professor very early in his academic career. In 1869, at the age of twenty-four, Nietzsche was appointed professor of philology at the University of Basel. He was a prolific writer, and he wrote extensively. His first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), examines the concepts of the Apollonian and Dionysian as creative forces within Greek culture.⁶ At a point in his life, Nietzsche enjoyed friendship with Richard Wagner (composer). Such friendship with Wagner further fueled his





early cultural ambitions, though their eventual break reflected Nietzsche's rejection of Wagner's nationalism and religiosity⁶

Nietzsche suffered ill health early in his life time. As a result of Chronic ill health, he resigned from Basel in 1879. Later in his life, he lived a nomadic life in Switzerland, Italy, and France. His most influential works include: *Human, All Too Human* (1878), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1892), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887).⁸

In 1889, he suffered a mental collapse in Turin. At this stage, his intellectual productivity collapsed. He became incapacitated and unproductive until his death in 1900. It ought to be noted that Nietzsche's intellectual formation was shaped by Schopenhauer's pessimism, Wagner's art, Goethe's poetic genius, Montaigne's skepticism, and Dostoevsky's psychological depth, and this culminated in a philosophy that criticized contemporary Western morality.⁹

Morality as a Human Construction

As already demonstrated in this article, Nietzsche's concept of morality differs significantly from the traditional conception of morality. His most radical claim is that morality is not a divine law or universal truth but a human invention. Hence, there cannot be universal morality for all human beings. He rejects explicitly and completely Kantian view that moral law is grounded in reason, insisting instead that "there are no moral facts at all."¹⁰ This implies that what societies call "good" and "evil", or 'right and wrong' are not eternal realities but historical and cultural constructs born of power relations. Nietzsche's genealogical method, outlined in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, seeks to expose the psychological motives behind moral concepts. He contends that morality is often a strategy, either by the powerful to preserve dominance or by the weak to resist subjugation.¹¹ Obviously, this idea contradicts completely the traditional concept of morality. This approach transforms ethics into a critical historical inquiry. Nietzsche's idea introduced subjectivism and relativism in ethical considerations. Morality is not judged by its conformity to universal law but by the kind of human beings and societies it produces. Nietzsche's central ethical question becomes: "Who benefits from these values, and at what cost?"¹² From this perspective, morality is revealed as a cultural artifact inseparable from politics, psychology, and history. Nietzsche's idea of morality is very controversial, and there are some problems associated with it. This would be given scholarly and detailed attention in the later part of this article.

Nietzsche's Distinction between Master and Slave Morality

Among the remarkable innovations of Nietzsche in the domain of ethics is his introduction of the concepts of Master morality and Slave morality in ethical discourse. Nietzsche draws a sharp distinction between two types of moral systems: master morality and slave morality. This distinction between master morality





and slave morality challenges the traditional notion of universal morality for all human beings. It implies that there are different morality for different types or groups of people.

Master morality arises from the self-confidence of the strong, who equate “good” with nobility, vitality, and excellence, while “bad” signifies what is low, vulgar, or weak.¹³ Contrarily, Slave morality originates from the resentment of the oppressed. Unable to express their will directly, the weak redefine their condition as morally superior. Slave morality directly opposes master morality. Nietzsche observes thus: “The slave revolt in morality begins when resentment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values.”¹⁴ It could be said that slave morality is a revolutionary morality. Articulating Nietzsche’s position, Ezema, Areji and Abba state thus:

The battle between the master and slave moral codes is of long genealogy. Historically, master morality was defeated as slave morality of Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire. Initially, master morality dominated until it gradually declined while slave morality ascended. At present, slave morality is winning and evidences abound. The cultural dominance of socialists, democrats, Judeo-Christian priests, egalitarians and others are symptoms of slave morality triumphing at present. Nietzsche strongly believes that the present dominance of slave morality is a threat to the advancement of man.¹⁵

Nietzsche seems not to be comfortable with the triumph of slave morality. Christianity, for him, is the paradigmatic case of slave morality. This stems from the fact that it glorifies humility, meekness and obedience, while condemning pride, independence and strength as sinful. This inversion of values undermines the vitality of culture, and fosters a herd mentality, where mediocrity is exalted, and excellence is suppressed.¹⁶ This explains why Nietzsche completely condemned and criticized Christian morality.

Examining Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals and the Ascetic Ideal

Nietzsche elaborates further his idea of morality in his work, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. At this point, Nietzsche deploys his genealogical method to trace the historical evolution of key moral concepts. Such throws light to the origin and meaning of such moral concepts. According to him, ‘Guilt’ (*Schuld*) originally meant debt (*Schulden*), reflecting an economic transaction in which a debtor who failed to repay could be punished physically.¹⁷ Later, punishment became internalized, producing the “bad conscience” in which instincts are turned inward. Conscience, then, is not an eternal moral voice, but the result of repression and internalized aggression.¹⁸ Hence, Nietzsche questioned and challenged the traditional meaning as well as understanding of conscience. He further argued that this transformation was institutionalized by Christianity, which embedded the ‘ascetic ideal’ into Western culture. The ascetic priest, Nietzsche argues, gives ‘suffering’ meaning by interpreting it as spiritually valuable. Yet in doing so, he entrenches guilt and self-denial. Nietzsche conceives this as a dishonest moral revolution





that led to the triumph of 'slave morality'. Hence, he describes the ascetic priest as "the most dangerous parasite," who thrives by exploiting human weakness.¹⁹ This moral inversion suppresses life-affirming instincts and ensures the dominance of herd values. Certainly, Nietzsche was not comfortable with such moral inversion.

The Death of God and the Will to Power

One of the most controversial aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy is his proclamation of the 'death of God.' This elicited a lot of criticisms from many scholars. The basic question is: What actually does Nietzsche mean by 'the death of God'? The famous pronouncement of the "death of God" in *The Gay Science* marks not merely the decline of religious belief but the collapse of all transcendent foundations for morality. In section 125 of the afore-mentioned work, the figure of the madman delivers his controversial and haunting declaration: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."²⁰ It ought to be noted that Nietzsche does not mean by this simply that people have ceased to believe in God, but rather that the metaphysical and theological structures upon which Western culture once depended have lost their credibility. Hence, he insists that the foundation of Christianity as well as contemporary western culture is no longer credible, and as such, Christian belief should not be upheld. As he puts it elsewhere, the Christian God has become "unworthy of belief."²¹ This, for him, leads to the crumbling of objective or eternal standards of truth and morality. Nietzsche's idea of the loss of objective standard of morality challenges the traditional notion of morality as well as the objectivity of the norms of human conduct. This realization of the crumbling of objective of morality, according to Nietzsche, plunges modern humanity into what Nietzsche calls *nihilism*, the sense that life has no inherent meaning or value.²² However, for Nietzsche, nihilism is not simply a disaster but also an opportunity. In the vacuum left by God's "death," humanity is challenged to revalue existence and create new moral standards. There are many problems associated with Nietzsche's idea, and such would be given detailed and scholarly attention in the later part of this article.

Central to Nietzsche's moral philosophy is his conception of the 'will to power'. This aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy is at times misinterpreted. Although often misinterpreted as a simple desire for domination, Nietzsche consistently describes it as a basic principle of life itself: a drive for growth, expansion as well as self-overcoming.²³ Articulating his idea of 'will to power', he states categorically in *Beyond Good and Evil* that: "A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength, life itself is will to power."²⁴ This demonstrates that 'will to power' has deep relationship with life itself, and cannot be separated from it. The will to power, then, cannot be reduced to political conquest or personal ambition; rather, it represents the basic energy of existence, the impulse toward creativity and transformation. This vision culminates in Nietzsche's ideal of the *Übermensch* (Overman or Superman), who embodies the will to power by rejecting inherited norms and creating new values.²⁵ Hence, unlike the "last man," who





clings tenaciously to comfort, conformity as well as security, the *Übermensch* affirms life with boldness and artistry. It expresses life in its fullness without any reservation. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche presents this figure as the meaning of the earth: “Man is something that shall be overcome.”²⁶ This implies that the *Übermensch* superman is not a tyrant, but a creator of values, and at the same time, one who shapes existence through the courageous affirmation of new possibilities. Such new values and possibilities enable the superman to enjoy full expression of life.

Nietzsche’s doctrine of ‘eternal recurrence’ further buttresses his idea of ‘will to power’. He imagines the difficult possibility that one must live each moment of life again and again, infinitely. In his words, “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more.”²⁷ This implies that life is not lived only once. Hence, to affirm eternal recurrence is to embrace existence so fully that one would will its repetition endlessly. This test forces a radical “yes-saying” to life, including its suffering and chaos, and in doing so distinguishes the strong from the weak. In his reaction to this, Alexander Nehamas observes that eternal recurrence serves less as a cosmological claim than as an existential challenge: it asks us to live in such a way that we would welcome the return of our lives exactly as they are.²⁸ This is an invitation for full expression of human vitality in the course of life.

From the foregoing, it becomes obvious that Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God, the will to power, and eternal recurrence are deeply interconnected and interrelated. Their interconnectedness and interrelatedness can be illustrated thus: The collapse of transcendent values leaves humanity facing nihilism; the will to power provides the creative energy to generate new values; and eternal recurrence supplies the ultimate test of our capacity to affirm life. Together, they form Nietzsche’s audacious attempt to reimagine human existence in the absence of metaphysical certainties. Nietzsche’s moral philosophy could be described as ‘life-affirming philosophy’.

Evaluation

This article has preoccupied itself with an examination of Nietzsche’s concept of morality. It is obvious from the discourse that his idea of morality differs significantly from those of his predecessors. He questioned and challenged some of the traditional assumptions in the domain of morality. Nietzsche made some remarkable contributions in the discipline of moral philosophy and in other disciplines. His moral philosophy has a transformative impact on modern thought, reshaping both the questions philosophers ask as well as the approach they employ in response to such questions. Also, his genealogical method, which entails tracing moral concepts back to their historical and psychological origins, anticipated later intellectual movements such as psychoanalysis, critical theory as well as postmodernism. Sigmund Freud’s analysis of repression and the unconscious in his psychoanalytic theory, echoes Nietzsche’s insight into the internalization of instincts. At the same time, Michel Foucault’s historical studies of discipline and power develop Nietzsche’s suspicion that morality is inseparable from social control. In



the same direction, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of metaphysical binaries resonates with Nietzsche's rejection of absolute truths. Certainly, Nietzsche's rejection of absolute truth demonstrates that nothing is beyond criticism. Furthermore, by exposing morality as historically contingent rather than universal, Nietzsche opened philosophy to a form of critique that examines the cultural, psychological, and political functions of values rather than taking them as given. His ideas gave rise to re-evaluation of already accepted values in life. Also, Nietzsche's emphasis on life-affirmation continues to inspire existentialist and humanist calls for authenticity, creativity, and self-overcoming.²⁹ His philosophy promotes criticism as well as creativity, and rejects dogmatism as well as rigidity. It serves as an invitation to ongoing critique, self-transformation, and the creation of new as well as life-affirming values. His challenge encourages humanity to live authentically and courageously in a world without metaphysical guarantees.

Despite the above contributions or strengths of Nietzsche's moral philosophy, there are some problems associated with his ideas. This explains why his moral thoughts were subjected to severe criticisms. Certainly, Nietzsche's concept of morality is very controversial, and it remarkably differs from the ideas of other scholars. His idea of morality contradicts the theory of moral absolutism which states that moral actions are in themselves either good or bad, right or wrong, irrespective of persons or groups. With his distinction between master morality and slave morality, Nietzsche denied the idea of universal morality for all human beings. His ideas led to subjectivism in the consideration of moral issues. Many Critics contend that by rejecting universal morality, Nietzsche risks collapsing into relativism or even endorsing elitism. This leaves much to be desired as far as morality is concerned. Certainly, if there are no shared norms, what actually can prevent the strong from exploiting the weak? Scholars like Alasdair MacIntyre have argued that Nietzsche's rejection of tradition and universality leaves ethics vulnerable to fragmentation and arbitrariness.³⁰ However, some scholars maintain that Nietzsche is not advocating cruelty or domination but urging individuals to confront nihilism directly and to cultivate the strength necessary to create their own values. Alexander Nehamas, for instance, interprets Nietzsche as proposing that life itself can be approached as a work of art, requiring style, courage as well as creativity.³¹

Furthermore, Nietzsche's pronouncement of 'death of God' and his critique of Christian morality are quite unjustifiable. Nietzsche seems to be prejudiced in such critique. The values of Christian morality are very necessary for the promotion of peaceful co-existence among human beings in the world. Hence, his description of Christian morality as 'slave morality' is unacceptable. However, Nietzsche's critique of herd morality remains a powerful challenge to conformity, mediocrity, and complacency in modern culture.

Conclusion

It is obvious in this discourse that Nietzsche's concept of morality, despite its weaknesses, remains one of the most provocative contributions to modern philosophy. His demolition of traditional moral



frameworks, particularly Christianity and Enlightenment rationalism, dismantled the belief in objective or eternal moral truths. His invitation for the creation of new values grounded in the 'will to power' encourages creativity. Also, Nietzsche's concept of *Übermensch* (Superman) demonstrates humanity's potential to affirm life courageously, while the 'eternal recurrence' challenges us to live each moment as if it were to return eternally. This encourages people to approach life courageously and positively.

As was demonstrated in the earlier section of this article, Nietzsche's moral philosophy remains very controversial, and there are some problems associated with it which elicited criticisms from many scholars. His relativistic as well as revolutionary approach gave room for severe criticisms. However, despite the criticisms, his moral philosophy is still relevant. It encourages us to question inherited norms, to confront the psychological roots of morality, and to embrace the difficult task of creating life-affirming values. Nietzsche's radical revaluation is not an invitation to nihilism, but a challenge to live authentically, creatively, and courageously. In this, his philosophy continues to inspire debates on freedom, individuality, and the future of human values.

The implications of Nietzsche's moral philosophy extend beyond European continent to contexts such as contemporary Nigerian society. In a country grappling with corruption, religious dogmatism, and the tension between tradition and modernity, Nietzsche's critique of herd morality is an invitation for critical reflections. His critique of blind conformity resonates with Nigeria's struggle against uncritical adherence to imported as well as alien ideologies, and the misuse of religion for political ends. At the same time, Nietzsche's call for self-overcoming and the creation of new values can inspire and encourage Nigerian youth to overcome despair in the faces of unemployment, insecurity, and social inequality. The 'will to power', understood not as domination but as creativity and resilience, offers a framework for training leaders and citizens capable of forging life-affirming values suited to Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape. Thus, Nietzsche's philosophy offers an interesting theoretical platform through which Nigerian society may interrogate its moral assumptions and envision new paths toward authentic freedom and renewal.

Endnotes

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