

POSITIVISM AND NIGERIA'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined from a positivist perspective, the adequacy or otherwise of Nigeria's Philosophy of Education. We identified the educational strategies of positivism and tried to discover whether they form part of Nigeria's Philosophy of Education. We discovered that positivism adopts the empiricist – inductivist model of knowledge acquisition. We found out that the ability of the inductivist approach to draw out generalizations from particular instances appears to be an advantage. But its inability to prove the logical validity of these generalizations mars the entire effort. We argued that given the faults inherent in the empiricist methodology, the impossibility of reading the world through observation becomes obvious. Comte opined that education should lay emphasis on the possibility of using science to help solve social problems. We argued against the positivist tendency of evaluating education only at the "use" level. We condemned, in strong terms, the Nigerian case where education is given one single purpose or being an instrument for achieving the nation's objectives. We discovered that the ratio of Science to Liberal Arts students in our universities was fixed by government at 60:40. We detected that Nigeria's 6 – 3- 3 – 4 educational system is a technologically oriented system. We argued for parity of esteem between Science and Liberal Arts, as a condition for genuine development in Nigeria. Our paper maintained that it is wrong just to focus on developing the worker in the man through science and technology while undermining the humanities which develop the man in the worker.

KEYWORD: Man, Worker, Humanities, Science, Technology.

INTRODUCTION

Education's major responsibility is the transmission of knowledge regarded as worthwhile by an older to a younger generation. The knowledge in question is that gained from institutions approved for that and the content of such educational system is censured and sanctioned by the state or other relevant authorities so recognized. The state or other relevant authority provides education as a way of imparting a wide understanding of the world from whatever perspective it wants the world to be appreciated.

Knowing the world has always been knowing it from particular perspectives. No educational system brings us face to face with the naked realities of the world exactly the way they are. That is to say, education never imparts knowledge of the world in a neutral and objective way. Hence Kevin Harris opines that:

Education... is a distinctly non-neutral political mechanism or institutionalized process that largely provides and legitimizes the ways and perspectives by which and from which we shall come to know the world (2)

So what is imparted as knowledge of the world depends on what model, calls the shots. Different people build on different paradigms. Let us begin our examination of the various paradigms that educationalists build on, with a consideration of the empiricist – inductivist model.

POSITIVIST METHOD OF KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION

Positivism adopts the empiricist – inductivist model of knowledge acquisition. The empiricist – inductivist model of knowledge acquisition dates back to the days of Plato and Aristotle. In line with the Platonic tradition, the world of mutability is a poor shadow of the ideal world. Plato maintains that the soul of man existed in the ideal world prior to its union with the body – a union that made it forget what the ideal world actually is. But as it goes about and sees the poor shadows of the ideal world, it remembers the essence of things that it used to know. So here, increasing one's knowledge is just a matter of seeing more and more shadows so that one comes to remember more and more about the objective world. This is

the tradition of modern rationalists who find the foundation of true and sure knowledge in reason. On the other hand, in line with the Aristotelian tradition, gaining knowledge amounts to the individual, going about the world as it is, and coming to understand it empirically and practically. This is the tradition of modern empiricists who find the foundation of true and sure knowledge in the senses.

Within the empiricist – inductivist framework, gaining knowledge requires the empiricist to observe the world diligently, gather carefully any facts discovered and from these draw out generalities which yield the generalizations that the empiricist relies upon as guide. Most of the problems with this paradigm are noticeable even at the level of data collection.

The major problem here is that inductively derived conclusions are never logically valid. They are not empirically binding. The fact that the sun has always risen daily in the past does not, on the strength of the empiricist – inductivist paradigm, logically entail that it will rise tomorrow. Nothing is empirically binding here. Empiricists here, as a way out of the inherent difficulty, look at the whole issue from point of view of probability. The appeal to probability, however, does not remedy the situation. Given the fact that one has an infinite number of instances to draw from, appeal to just a finite set of such instances cannot prove anything. To be taken seriously, one must examine all the instances, which is impossible. So the empiricist – inductivist paradigm is simply a blind-alley.

Given the validity of the above criticisms, the empiricist-inductivist paradigm now tries to sustain empiricist arguments on the grounds of faith in the uniformity of nature—a move which does not take the paradigm a step further. The basic logical issue that quickly comes to mind is the fact that arguments from experience that try to justify the principle of induction must include arguments from induction. Here we witness a desperate move to justify induction by induction which is circular. The ability of the inductivist approach to draw out generalizations from particular instances appears to be an advantage. But its inability to prove the logical validity of these generalizations mars the entire effort. The inductivist's logic cannot assist researchers who want to know the effectiveness of a given economic policy or a researcher who wants to discover how to step up productivity among civil servants and so on. That any given strategy worked in the past within an empiricist framework does not mean that it will work exactly the same way later. Nothing logically follows from the inductivist's success of yesterday. Nothing is empirically

binding. The whole positivist paradigm of inductivism is simply a closed system.

Greater difficulties arise in connection with the empiricist methodology of data collection. The empiricist methodology gives the impression that to collect his data, the empiricist simply observes the world, discovers what is there in the world and accepts it as given. Only after all these processes have been completed that he now settles down to theorize and make generalization about the world. There is always some difference between the properties of the world as they are in themselves and what any researcher describes these properties to be. No researcher ever describes the properties of the world exactly the way they are. Knowledge of the world is always from a particular viewpoint. What the empiricist-inductivist paradigm advocates is simply not possible. There is nothing like just observing the world. Observation is always on the basis of some theory or concept of what one is looking out for. In other words, all methodologies for investigation, including the empiricist-inductivist methodology, is theory-laden. The empiricist needs to appreciate the fact that each time he observes, he has some theory at the back of his mind, on the strength of which he investigates the world. It is impossible to have pre-theory investigation.

Having criticized at length what empiricism recognizes as knowledge and the way of acquiring it, let us now discover what empiricism refuses to recognize as knowledge. Here Kevin Harris opines that,

Empiricism both provides for, and denies certain knowledge of the world... And since the empiricist's basic tool is observation (or supposedly theory-free observation) empiricism simply cannot pick out that which is not observable. What happens, then to those things that are not observable... like ethical principles, aesthetic judgements or theoretical premises? (30)

These unobservables will certainly not cease to be real entities simply because of the empiricist's attempt to expel them from the arena of knowledge. Obviously, there are more things in the world than empiricist epistemology is prepared to recognize.

Karl Popper's falsificationist theory supports the above criticisms of the empiricist-inductivist approach. According to Kevin Harris,

Falsificationism as articulated by Popper recognizes that neither the power of the intellect (rationalism) nor the evidence of the senses (empiricism) can give us certain knowledge. He begins from the point that whereas no number of corroborating instances can prove a theory to be true or correct, any single contrary instance can show a seeming universal generalization to be false. (36)

Within the falsificationist framework, a scientist who is faced with the problem of explaining some occurrence or phenomena, boldly conjectures or formulates a hypothesis, theory or generalization that can enable him explain the phenomena or occurrence in question. Such a conjectured hypothesis or theory remains in vogue for as long as it is capable of explaining phenomena, but is abandoned at the point of its falsification and replaced by a new one that is capable of explaining all that the former theory explained and more. Though falsificationism avoided most of the pitfalls of empiricism, it shared with empiricism the weakness of not being able to provide a sure foundation for its knowledge. The way no theory can be conclusively verified, is exactly the way no theory can be conclusively falsified.

POSITIVIST PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Now given the faults inherent in the empiricist methodology, the impossibility of reading the world through observation becomes obvious. It becomes clear then that education cannot put forth the world for the student to read, internalize facts so gathered and apply same to the improvement of society as Comtean positivism advocated.

Comte opined that education should lay emphasis on the possibility of using science to help solve social problems. He made great philosophical efforts to apply science to society. Education, Comte maintained, should de-emphasize 'individualism' and should rather emphasize the fact that science can be a regulative method in social life. Comte's objective, as a philosopher, was to reform society by the application of science. For him, positivism deals with both organic and inorganic aspects of society using the same methodology. According to him, while inorganic matter is dealt with by physics, chemistry and other natural sciences, organic considerations are dealt with by physiology and sociology. He maintained that though theology and metaphysics once played useful roles in helping to explain things at the fictitious and abstract stages of thought development, the rise and development of scientific or positivistic thinking has surpassed them. Comte's willingness to view social structures and relationships as capable of systematic study and control helped usher in elements of educational philosophies that are distinctly pragmatic. Like Bacon who emphasized the utility of knowledge, Comte insisted on using science to solve social and political problems.

POSITIVISM VIS-À-VIS NIGERIA'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Should we not resist the positivist tendency of evaluating education only at the "use" level? Thus in the Nigerian case where education is given one single purpose of being an instrument for achieving the nation's objectives, one wonders whether it is the morally right line of thinking to take. According to the *Federal Republic of Nigeria Policy on Education* a national policy on education is,

government's way of achieving that part of its national objectives using education as a tool. (2)

Is it right to treat the educated human beings as means to other ends rather than as ends in themselves? We recall here Kant's second formula: The formula of the end in itself:

Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end. (96)

This formula requires everyone to respect themselves and everyone else as equally persons. Certainly its actual wording leaves Kant wide open to the forceful and forthright objection urged by his younger compatriot Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer put down Kant's key concept in the above formula as simply incoherent:

But I must say frankly that, to exist as an end in oneself is an unthinkable expression... To be an end or aim means to be willed. Every aim or end in view exists only in reference to a will, and is the end of the will... Only in this relation has the concept... any meaning... (95)

Yes indeed, it cannot be denied. The above criticism is valid. Nevertheless, as in each of the other two formulae, Kant is onto something really crucial. As already indicated, this formula requires everyone to respect themselves and everyone else as equally persons. So, although it certainly makes no sense to speak of anything as being an end in itself all on its own, it is proper to ask people to recognize that all persons have their own ends – ends which are ends relative to their own wishes and plans. All persons are, as such, themselves agents, capable of forming and fulfilling purposes. This kind of concern about and respect for everyone's wishes provides another of the defining characteristics of morality. Imperatives with no such reference could scarcely count as moral. If, however, education must be used as a means of achieving other ends, must the ends be those that relate to the nation (society) rather than those that relate to the educated person himself?

The philosophical origin of this problem of the relationship of the individual and society in education derives from the problem of the origin of society. How did society originate? Is it the parent of the individual or is it the other way round? Thomas Hobbes held that the individual was the parent of society. He argued that in the state of nature – natural state of man – men were independent, self-sufficient units, and each catered for his own interests. And that it was not until they had found this state of affairs self-defeating that they surrendered their rights as individuals to a representative – the alleged communal person – Great Leviathan – who was to administer their right on their behalf. Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel and Comte, among others, held a contrary view. For them the society was the parent of the individual. Hegel held that the society could not be man's invention but rather was the parent of man's spiritual being. This concept of society as an organic whole, not simply an aggregate of individuals, was taken up and developed by Comte (Benton, 27). From this Comtean point of view, we are each of us born into one society or another and none of us is an island. What we are is largely contributed to by the environment in which we are brought up. On the other hand, as Hobbes would want to emphasize, even within society, we are still individuals. Each of us lives his own life and dies his own death. And if the individuals that make up the society walk away, there will be no society left. In Hebrew history it was King Rehoboam's failure to recognize this fact that led to the break-up of the Hebrew Kingdom.

What is perhaps true is that none of their theories can tell us precisely who is the parent of the other – the society or the individual. Perhaps no one theory can satisfactorily account for the origin of society. In education this society/individual problem finds expression in the aims that people state in education. There are usually two tendencies. One is to insist that education should aim at developing the mind of the individual and all that goes with it. The other is to maintain that education should relate to society and develop it, with little regard for the individual except in so far as he is an instrument in the enterprise of developing society. He is only a cog in the big wheel called society. In other words, this Comtean position maintains that if education does produce some goods, it should produce a good society or at least good citizens as members of society; while the Hobbesian position maintains that if education produces any good, it should produce good individuals.

But the question as Fierro, 235 put it remains: which is more important, the transformation of the individual or the transformation of society? Which comes first, the new person or the new society? Is it the transformation of people who will transform society or is it a transformed society that produces transformed individuals? Comtean positivism insists on the importance of a good society or, at least, good citizens as members of society. He, however, was strongly opposed to structural changes and reforms. He felt there was no need to promote social changes because they would come about naturally once the people adopt the right kind of attitude to the

established order. What he failed to recognize is that there can be no genuine transformation of society without structural changes and reforms.

Since people's thinking generally affects and characterizes their judgements, the educational decisions of those who adopt the Comtean theory are decisions that serve the needs of society. Their thinking in the award of scholarship and bursaries, siting of educational institutions, planning of curricular and so on are all oriented to the needs of society. Whatever fails to do this, is to them a waste of time and resources. We observe that this is a very popular view, popular in the sense that it states what people and governments like to hear. It, however, creates problems most of which are actually not philosophical, but are rather social problems. For example, some people are denied educational opportunities; some courses of study or even some disciplines are ignored and so on. All these because those who think and plan for the society do not consider that society needs those courses at the particular time.

In keeping with this line of thought, the Nigerian government in its policy on education stipulates that a greater proportion of educational expenditure will be devoted to science and technology. Furthermore, universities and other levels of our educational system were directed to pay more attention to the development of scientific orientation. The Shagari administration established many polytechnics and universities of technology in a bid to improve technological and science education. And the ratio of Science to Liberal Arts students in our universities was fixed by government at 60:40. Nigeria's 6-3-3-4 educational system is a technologically oriented system. It is geared towards the promotion of science and technological education.

Should it not be emphasized here that if we are to make genuine progress as a nation, there is need for what government refers to as Science and Liberal Arts to carry parity of esteem? Here it must be stressed that as Nash observed, the man and the worker are ultimately two roles played throughout life by the same individual, although sometimes there is greater emphasis on one role than the other. He will probably be more the man when at home with his family. He will almost be more the worker at his place of work. But in neither situation does he completely abandon the other role.

There is need for teachers to adequately clarify what they intend, through the kind of education they give, to do with the students they teach. The students themselves need a clarified and meaningful approach to the educational process to enable them discover undue indoctrination. Philosophical analysis, which includes partly the works of logical positivists is relevant here. Analysis is important here because many of the texts approved for schools are books that carefully omit critical discussions of certain political, social, and economic policies because of the offence such critical discussions, which may present policies in unfavourable light, are likely to cause in certain quarters. As articulated by Ozmon and Craver:

Marx believed that educators could make people realize how they are being exploited and give them the power to make changes in society. In order to do this, students must be exposed to new and radical points of view and encouraged to become agents for change in building a better society (262)

Marxists maintain, and correctly too, that teachers in capitalist societies like Nigeria are used by the capitalist enterprise as agents to indoctrinate their students with values inherent in the capitalist economic system. The students themselves are, more often than not, unaware of this ugly fact.

CONCLUSION

Is it not, therefore, wrong just to focus on developing the worker in the man through science and technology while undermining the humanities which develop the man in the worker? Not only does the current government policy on education lead to one-sided development, it also leads to the loss of the great contributions of great men and women who would have achieved much for the nation in the areas of their natural ability, had they been given proper recognition and encouragement – so, many argue.

This paper calls for a radical reappraisal of our educational system. Writing such a reappraisal is part of our preoccupation in this paper. However, as Kevin Harris has pointedly stated,

Writing such a reappraisal is not the important thing; what really matters is having that reappraisal made public and having it legitimated. And of these two possibilities, the former is far easier to achieve than the latter because of a contradiction within capitalism (184)

Education under Nigeria's present capitalist system produces individuals who are the victims of serious political manipulations. They bear imposed distorted perspectives and viewpoints while mistakenly thinking they are seeing the world as it really is. What are we to do? Are we to fold our hands and wait for God to turn the situation to our favour? Or are we to prepare the ground for God's intervention? Sitting around waiting for God to save us from exploitation can hardly be sufficient. Marx was opposed to such passivity. The only real possibility is to act.

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