

The Role of Philosophy in Contemporary Society: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract: The burden of this paper is the examination of the role of philosophy in the contemporary Nigerian society. Philosophy is viewed by some people as an irrelevant discipline; a discipline that lacks human touch. It is also viewed as an abstract enterprise only. Some people are of the view that philosophy was only relevant in the past and no longer relevant in our era of ever-growing science and technology. The pertinent questions now are: Is philosophy actually irrelevant to the contemporary society? What role does philosophy play or should play in our society? Therefore, employing the philosophical methods of analysis and phenomenology, this paper maintains that philosophy plays a vital role in our contemporary Nigerian society. The paper submits that philosophy is essential for an integral human development. It recommends for at least a little dosage of philosophical training for all, especially in all levels of our educational sector. This is premised on the fact that philosophy trains the human mind to reason correctly and rationally. And the proper training of the human mind, in the view of the researcher, translates to human and societal development.

Key words: Philosophy • Rationality • Critical inquiry • Fundamental belief and development

INTRODUCTION

There is no discipline that is generally misunderstood and misconceived as being irrelevant to human society as philosophy. Some people erroneously see philosophy as a discipline that is concerned only with abstract realities. For such people, philosophy has nothing to do with the real world. It is seen as mere speculations that have no practical significance. Some said that philosophy is a study in futility. Others are of the opinion that the study of philosophy, especially in our tertiary institutions has no significant value.

Oftentimes, people think that students of philosophy are wasting their precious time in studying philosophy. Some non-students of philosophy do not understand what philosophy students do in their philosophy classes. Some people have rejected philosophy on the ground that it plays no important role to human life and the development of human society. In discussing how some people regard philosophy [1] observed that “many men, under the influence of science or practical affairs, are inclined to doubt whether philosophy is anything better than innocent but useless trifling, hairsplitting distinction and controversies on matters concerning which knowledge is impossible”. The implication is that some people see philosophy as practically useless. It has been observed that some people think of philosophy as a subject that solely deals with matters out of the world [2]. One thing that is very important to note is that all the views about philosophy as stated above do not state what philosophy actually is. They only succeed in stating what philosophy is not. The above views are misconceptions of the true nature of philosophy as we shall discover below.

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On several occasions, young students of philosophy and other non-students of philosophy have posed some questions to me: What is the value of philosophy? What role does philosophy play in our contemporary world? Why must I study philosophy? What do I stand to gain by studying philosophy? Can philosophy actually put food on my table? The questions are too numerous to mention. Therefore, the thesis of this paper is simple: Philosophy has a significant role to play in human society in general and in Nigeria in particular. But before we go further, let us briefly look at the etymological understanding and nature of philosophy.

Etymological Understanding of Philosophy: From its etymological understanding, philosophy is a derivation of two Greek words, *philein* which means ‘to love’ and *sophia* which means ‘wisdom’. Philosophy from its etymology simply means love of wisdom. We must recall that it was Pythagoras who first coined the word philosophy when he called himself a lover of wisdom. When people called him the wise one, he refused to answer the name and told them that he was not a wise one. For him, he had not attained wisdom, rather he loved wisdom; he sought for wisdom. This is why a philosopher can be said to be a lover of wisdom or a seeker of wisdom. Philosophy is therefore seen as an inquiry. It does not claim to know everything but it makes critical and objective effort to acquire wisdom. A philosopher is not a person with ‘I-too-know’ mentality; he is the one who knows that he does not know and makes effort to know. This is the central message of Socrates. [3] Said that “Socrates would let us know that the wisest man is one who is constantly aware of his foolishness”. The person who does not know and is aware that he does not know and also makes effort to know is a seeker of wisdom. Such a person is a philosopher. In the words of [4], “wisdom is an affair of value and judgment; it involves the intelligent conduct of human affairs and interpretation of experience”. Wisdom has to do with the proper application of human reason to human experience. Philosophy as love of wisdom is geared towards proper understanding of human experiences and the world. Therefore, having looked at the etymological understanding of philosophy, we shall beam our searchlight briefly on the nature of philosophy.

Nature of Philosophy: It is pertinent to note that a discussion on the nature of philosophy is problematic. This is because of the varied views of philosophers concerning the nature of philosophy. One important thing to note is that a philosopher’s notion of philosophy is highly dependent on the philosophical camp that the particular philosopher belongs to. In this sense, there is no generally accepted view among philosophers concerning the nature of philosophy. This notwithstanding, there is one essential element that cuts across the views of varied camps of philosophers: Philosophy is essentially a rational activity. So what characterizes the nature of philosophy is rationality. In this sense, we can say that every human person that possesses rationality is a philosopher. So for the fact that one is a rational being is enough for one to be called a philosopher. We can say without mincing words that philosophy is a prerogative of human beings.

The concept, philosophy, is understood both as a First Order activity and also as a Second Order activity. As a First Order activity philosophy is seen as the property of all rational beings. This is what is also known as the loose sense of philosophy. In this sense philosophy is seen as a worldview or a principle that guides people’s life. It is a way through which individuals or group of individuals try to make sense out of human experience. This is why somebody can say: “My philosophy is this or that.” For instance the philosophy of Msgr. Prof. J. B. Akam is summed in the Latin expression, *Age Quod Agis*, which is understood to mean, ‘that which is good, that which is noble, that which is opportune, you must do in season and out of season’. Also the philosophy of Tansian University is stated thus: *Scientia Potestas et Virtus* (Knowledge is power and virtue). This is also what is known as motto, that is, the driving force or the focal lens through which the individual or the group of individuals interpret the world. This understanding of philosophy captures the values and beliefs of the individual or the group of individuals concerned. Philosophy understood in this sense, that is, as a First Order activity, is the informal meaning of the term. This is not the strict understanding of the nature of philosophy.

As a Second Order activity, philosophy is seen as the activity of professionals. Here philosophy is seen as an organized activity. This is what [2] referred to as academic philosophy. He argued that this type of philosophy is an organized study pursued in universities and other tertiary institutions of learning as something more serious, organized and purposeful [2]. Philosophy as a Second Order activity is what we mean by philosophy *qua tale*, that is, philosophy in the true sense of the word. The understanding of the nature of philosophy is captured by [5]:

Philosophy in its academic or professional meaning is a critical enterprise, sometime dynamic, a quest, a search, indeed; one would even define it as a spirit of evaluative exploration or inquiry into all areas of human experience, of the world in which we live, man himself and his place in the universe ... In its widest range, so to speak, philosophy tries to give a coherent and systematic account of the multifaceted universe of being and knowledge; of what is and how man knows. In short, philosophy carries out a critique of daily experience in quest of truth of all experience as is rationally possible for man.

One important thing to note from the views of [5] above is that philosophy is a rational enterprise. It is a systematic search for the truth of all realities. In fact, philosophy is an inquiry into the nature of truth about the human person and the world around him. [6], summed up our understanding of the nature of philosophy when he said that it is a “rational search for answers to the basic questions about the ultimate meaning of reality as a whole and of human life in particular”. Philosophy is essentially a rational inquiry into whatever is insofar as it is. This understanding is in the same line of thought with [7] who relates that philosophy is an activity in criticality. Philosophy is an unbiased inquiry into whatever is insofar as it is. The implication of this understanding is that there is no no-go-area for philosophy. So whatever is within the ‘jurisdiction’ of philosophical investigation. In the views of [8], philosophy encompassed nearly everything that counted as human knowledge. This understanding accounts for the reason it is said that every discipline can be situated in one branch of philosophy or the other.

Philosophy as understood by [9] is an activity that seeks logical clarifications of thoughts and the elucidation of propositions. In this sense, philosophy tries to bring out sense from nonsense that oftentimes beclouds our thoughts. The character of philosophy is to bring about knowledge and understanding. [10] conceives philosophy as the body of natural knowledge, critically and methodically acquired and ordered which undertakes an investigation of the fundamental problems concerning knowledge, being, nature, values and endeavors to attain the fundamental explanation of things. Philosophy attempts to provide a rational explanation to the fundamental questions that trouble the human person. This is why this paper argues that philosophy has a positive place in the society. Worthy to note is that philosophy is purely a rational enterprise. What it implies is that philosophy excludes supernatural revelation and dogmatism in its approach to knowledge acquisition. So for one to engage in philosophical activity, one must have been properly trained or must have undergone some level of philosophical training. Therefore, philosophy as a Second Order activity is not coeval with the human person. It has to be properly learnt. This is what students and teachers of philosophy do in our tertiary institutions and other designated schools. We wish to conclude this section with the words of Odera Orika, “Philosophy is a rational and critical reflection on man, society and nature” [11]

The Role of Philosophy: a General Overview: The truth that stares everybody in the face is that philosophy plays a vital role in human society. The value of philosophy is so significant that one can say that without philosophy and philosophers, our society will be in a serious trouble. Azenabor is of the strong view that philosophy has a vital role to play in human society [12]. In fact the human person cannot do without philosophy. [13] argues that “the relevance of philosophy is unquestionable in the face of the multifarious problems it enables man to solve in his life. Even when it does not actually solve the problems, it guides man on the best approach to adopt to avoid being weighed down when faced with such problems”. One thing that is clear is that philosophy does not claim to provide answers to all human problems but most importantly it makes effort to rationally address human problems. The glaring fact is that the human person and the

human society cannot but need philosophy. Philosophy, in the view of [14], is a human need. He argues: "Philosophy is a human need as real as the need of food. It is a need of the mind, without which man cannot obtain his food or anything else his life requires. We have stated earlier that philosophy is a rational activity. Therefore, as a rational activity, the human person cannot but need philosophy. Without mincing words, we wish to state categorically that philosophy plays important role in our society.

Philosophy enables the human person to change some fundamental beliefs [15]. It is an existential fact that most of the things we do or even the way we interpret our experiences are based on our fundamental beliefs. It is therefore the task of philosophy to question those beliefs that are not in agreement with the rationality of the human person. And any belief that is found guilty before the 'Court of Reason' is bound to be discarded. Philosophy therefore helps to shape and sharpen our mental faculty.

Another major role of philosophy is that it frees the human person from dogmatism. It disposes us not to accept anything without rational justification. In this sense, it "frees man from the imprisonment of the prejudices derived from common sense, from habitual beliefs of our age and our environment, from culture and from our spontaneous convictions" [3]. One important aspect of philosophy is that it makes us to stand out in the midst of the crowd. It provides us with intellectual independence. Concerning the person who has no knowledge of philosophy, Bertrand Russell laments thus:

The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason [1].

In fact, philosophy helps us to reason correctly. It is not enough to say that something is the case. No, it has to be established with evidence. So philosophy is not just interested in one making claims but in the justification of the claims made. The study of philosophy helps the individual to be critical in his dealings and also to avoid errors in speech and in writing. This is the message of [11] when he maintained that "Philosophy furnishes strong foundation for critical thought and enables professionals to be coherent in their speech and writing. It is this character of criticality of philosophy that makes us question everything before accepting it as true knowledge. In this regard, philosophy helps to remove ambiguity, thereby bringing out the clarifications of thought.

Philosophy and its Role in the Contemporary Nigeria: So far, we have been able to highlight the nature of philosophy. We have also given a general overview of the role of philosophy. One thing that should be noted is that the role of philosophy is immeasurable; it is highly unquantifiable. In this section, therefore, we shall attempt to highlight the role of philosophy in our contemporary Nigerian society under the following subheadings:

Philosophy and Ethnic Relation in Nigeria: Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation. Nigeria today has more than 250 ethnic groups. Each of the ethnic groups has a distinct language that characterizes the particular group. Ethnic relation in Nigeria is such that it is characterized by division, hatred and rancor. Nigeria is a place where the Hausa person feels at home only with a fellow Hausa person. The same thing is applicable to other ethnic groups. There is a kind of natural hatred of one ethnic group against another. This is where the study of philosophy plays a major role. Our knowledge of substance and accidents in metaphysics (a branch of philosophy) shows that every human person shares one substance – the humanity of the human person. The humanness of the Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik or Ijaw is not lesser or higher than the humanness of the Fulani, Tiv, Idoma, Esan or Egede as the case may be. We all share one humanity. The fact that one is an Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa is simply accidental to the being of the individual person. In this regard therefore, the study of philosophy will certainly play a vital role to unite Nigeria together. It will help Nigerians to realize the existential fact that there is no essential difference among all the ethnic groups in Nigeria. This is a significant role that philosophy plays in or should play in our contemporary Nigerian society. This understanding will bring about good relationship among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. [13], has this to say in this regard:

Philosophy, by its very nature, therefore, enables man to fit in well in interpersonal, inter-ethnic and international relationships. It makes for order in the society and for world peace. The idea of human nature and rights from where the declaration of human rights came originated from philosophies of such people as St. Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jacque Rousseau and others.

The point being made here is that the study of philosophy provides us with the necessary ingredients for good and authentic human relation that is devoid of tribal sentiments. It provides for an unbiased assessment of human behavior irrespective of one's ethnic affiliation.

Philosophy and the Political Sphere in Nigeria: As a nation, Nigeria has experienced different political dispensations. It is true that the human person is a political animal but it is also true that politics as it is being practiced in Nigeria cannot grow or even develop without the aid of philosophy. Our politicians need at least a little dose of philosophy in order to be truly rational in all their dealings. [4], affirmed that "In the political sphere, a dose of philosophy, especially, is necessary to enable us to appreciate our political heritage. The fact that ideas rule the world points to the practical role philosophy plays or should play in Nigerian politics. It takes a good dose of philosophy for one to understand and evaluate the essential needs of one's people.

The role of philosophy in the political sphere in Nigeria will be much more appreciated in the area of policy-making. Philosophers or rather those who have had some training in philosophy are better equipped to help Nigerian government to articulate good policies that will touch the lives of the people positively. This is in the line of thought of [4] when he argued: "With their concern for values, goals, ends of human society, human activity and the means of achieving these, the philosophers are better qualified to play the role of helping to determine societal values, development and progress. Philosophy will go a long way towards helping Nigerian Politicians to desist from the politics of acrimony and bitterness. Since philosophy upholds the dignity of human nature, Nigerian politicians will certainly benefit from it given that it will dispose them to be fair in all their dealings. Philosophy certainly will help all Nigerians to be true citizens and to have regard for the constituted authority. This singular role of philosophy in the political sphere is further described by [1]. "[Philosophy] makes us citizens of the universe, not only of one walled city at war with all the rest. In this citizenship of the universe consists man's true freedom and his liberation from the thralldom of narrow hopes and fears".

Philosophy and the Religious Sphere in Nigeria: Philosophy has a major role to play in the way and manner religion is understood and practiced in Nigeria. From our knowledge of metaphysics, we learnt that everything that is, derived its being from the being that is by necessity. This being that is by necessity is what religious people call God. This is a simple philosophical knowledge. The implication of this understanding is that there is only one Supreme Being that is approached differently. The knowledge of philosophy will help the contemporary Nigerians to appreciate the fact that each of us is unique and as such every religion is unique. It is philosophy that should help us to respect the views of others, be it religious views or otherwise. Basic philosophical knowledge will make Christians, Moslems and Traditional Worshipers in Nigeria to tolerate each other without any form of violence or hatred. So because of the fact that philosophy is love of wisdom, it will dispose Nigerians to appreciate the good aspects of each religious group in Nigeria. In this regard, Christians and Moslems are to see themselves as collaborators and not as enemies. This is the 'magic' of philosophy.

Philosophy will help us to quench the incessant religious violence that is often experienced in our country. This means that our youth will no longer be pushed to cause violence and mayhem in the society in the name of religion. Philosophy will provide Nigerian youths with the stamina to question certain commands / orders of the so-called religious leaders that are not in consonance with human rationality. Philosophy, as stated above, tries to find out reason for accepting anything. In this sense, it has a very important role to play in our contemporary society that is bedeviled with many rogues and charlatans in the name of religious leaders. Today many families are divided because of one prophecy or the other from one 'man of God' or the other. Many people have been deceived in the name of religion. Many Nigerians today are at the mercy of the so-called religious leaders. Come to think of it, when a pastor tells a young lady that she needs prayer and went

further to undress her, then something else is fishing. The important role of philosophy in the religious sphere is that it helps us not to accept anything in the name of religion without some basic rational justification. Philosophy frees us from dogmatism and the imprisonment of irrational religious beliefs.

Philosophy and Economic Development: In a general parlance, economic development has to do with the production and distribution of goods and services for the good of human society. Philosophy has what it takes to develop Nigerian economy. Philosophy, we must recall, is a reflective activity. And it takes only a reflective mind to bring about economic growth and development. It will not be an overstatement to say that Nigerian economic problem is hinged on the lack of philosophical training. It is clear that when the mind is developed, it will certainly affect other aspect of human endeavor. [4], has this to say:

Philosophy may not be a practical study or of immediate practical utility, but it contains what is finest and noblest in human life, because it is concerned not with the production of material wealth, but with the advancement of the wealth of the mind.

One thing that is clear is that a developed mind translates to developed economy. There is a close relationship between a philosopher and an entrepreneur. A good philosopher is a good entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship has to do with the process of generating ideas and venturing into business risks for the purpose of making profits [10]. It takes only a reflective mind to generate ideas; and it also takes a reflective mind to actualize these ideas. Philosophy has to do with creativity. And this is what Nigeria needs. We need philosophy to sharpen our creative mind for the purpose of economic growth and development in Nigeria. It is clear that all developed economies of the world have basic philosophical foundation. There is no doubt that an average Nigerian needs some level of philosophical training in order to bring about national economic development. Truly ideas rule the world. We know that there is a branch of philosophy called Philosophy of Economics which has to do with inquiries concerning rational choice, appraisal of economic outcomes, institutions and processes and the ontology of economic phenomena [15]. This branch of philosophy has a significant role to play towards the growth and development of Nigerian economy.

Philosophy and Social Change: By a simple definition, social change means any form of alteration in the social order of the society. It is a kind of paradigm shift. The basis of social change is the transformation in the thought processes of the human person. The study of philosophy can bring about social change in Nigeria. This is possible because philosophy sharpens our minds and liberates us from the shackles of prejudices of our age. With this sharpened and correct state of mind, Nigerians can now question certain cultures and traditions that contradict human rationality. Such practices that do not fall in line with reason are to be discarded or modified. This is where the radiant light of philosophy shines that brings about social change. Philosophy provides us with the intellectual disposition and stamina to jettison varied superstitious beliefs in our locality. [4] is of the strong view that a “Philosopher can preserve the status quo or change it. By his training, a philosopher is in a position to expound the values of the society more clearly. He can provide the system or the *status quo* with the theoretical and intellectual justification it requires”. The point here is that philosophy is foundational to social change. Such traditions that discriminate people as caste system, racism/tribalism, child marriage, autocracy, man’s inhumanity to man, gender discrimination, etc are not in consonance with philosophical reasoning. Philosophy can provide Nigerians with mental disposition to reason correctly and to reject harmful and irrational practices in the name of culture and tradition.

CONCLUSION

The attempt of this paper so far has been to justify the important role of philosophy in our contemporary society. We have tried to do justice to it. However, the claim of the researcher is not that the aforementioned is all there is about the role of philosophy in our contemporary Nigerian society. The value of philosophy cannot be overemphasized. The

point here is that Nigeria as a people need philosophy. We cannot do without it. Any attempt to run away from philosophy will certainly portend doom for the nation. One thing we must note is that philosophy helps to develop human mind to reason correctly and rationally. When the mind is properly developed rationally, it will translate to human and societal development. This is a simple logic! The Roman Catholic Church, in her wisdom, recognized the important role of philosophy. This is why it is obligatory for a person training for Catholic priesthood to study philosophy at least for two years. This is to enable the would-be priest to develop his mental faculty and to be rationally disposed, as a leader, to respond to the needs of the people of God. In fact, philosophy is essential not only for seminarians and priests, but also for proper human development in general.

The problem with Nigeria (as with some other underdeveloped nations of the world) is the relegation of philosophy to the background. For sure, philosophy brings about authentic human relationship which is needed for national development. We strongly wish to state with Stace as cited in [4] that “whether we like it or not, we cannot escape philosophy; because on whatever road of knowledge we travel, philosophy lies in wait for us”. This is an existential fact that must not elude Nigerians. Let us quickly conclude by saying that the study of philosophy disposes one to fit in very well in the labor market. It is needless to say that a philosopher is a good administrator and a good manager of persons and objects. This paper, therefore, recommends for at least a little dosage of philosophical training for all, especially in our elementary, secondary and tertiary institutions.

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