

## OF THEORIA AND PRAXIS: PHILOSOPHY IN THE SERVICE OF HUMANITY

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### **Abstract**

*The paper rejects any attempt to construe philosophy as a theoretical discipline to the extent that philosophers are excluded, or ought to be excluded, from day-to-day practical happenings in the society. It is argued that much as it is not contended that philosophy may be seen as a second-order enterprise, one branch of philosophy that cannot but be seen as practical is ethics, which is also called moral philosophy. The paper then argues that, as members of the society, philosophers must, or ought to, serve as the conscience of the people, rather than turning their back to practical issues (problems) in the name of intellectual purity. It is submitted that linguistic (or whatever) analysis is not enough contribution expected of a philosopher to the development of both humanity and society. Philosophy and philosophers are not to be seen as problem – creators, they should also be seen as people who are intellectually equipped to solve some human problems.*

*Philosophers owe it as a duty to humanity to shun both the under-labourer conception of philosophy and the escapist habit of pushing human problems to those they believe are non-theoreticians simply for the preservation of the autonomy of their (philosophers) profession.*

**Key words:** Double tragedy, Ethical neutrality, Intellectual purity, Linguistic analysis, Moral insensitivity.

### **Introduction**

It is a common belief (almost a consensus) among philosophers of all hues that philosophy as an academic discipline is a second-order enterprise (biological and the physical sciences being the first-order disciplines) The classification of academic disciplines into first –order and second-order, as the case may be, has some unhealthy implication for philosophy and philosopher.

Over the years, and especially since the emergence of so-called logical positivists of the Vienna Circle in the first half of the nineteen thirties (1930s). Philosophy in particular has been under siege. From their analysis of what philosophy is (or ought to be), the logical positivists in general, and the emotivists in particular, have attempted to show the importance or non-importance, the relevance or non-relevance of philosophy, in a world dominated by certain advances in science and technology.

This paper seeks to assert and defend the relevance of philosophy and philosophers in practical (societal) matters inspite of the construal of philosophy as a second-order discipline. The paper argues that in whichever way its theoretical nature may be viewed, one branch of philosophy that cannot be seen as theoretical (at least in the sense in which many philosophers use this word) is ethics, sometimes called moral philosophy. It is the contention of the paper that what gives credence to the bifurcation of philosophy as a theoretical enterprise is the erroneous belief that philosophy, unlike the science, has no practical relevance in the day-to-day life of the people or society.

The thesis of the paper therefore may be seen as both negative and positive. It is negative in the sense that it tries to refute the argument of those who, seeing philosophy as a second-order discipline, conclude there

from that moral philosophy is nothing but analysis of the language of morals. The positive aspect of our thesis tries to highlight the important contributions which the study of ethics can make to the practical life of the philosopher in particular and the society in general.

In what follows, the argument of those who believe that philosophy is a theoretical discipline from where it is argued that it has no direct impact on what individual or society “ought to do” is examined and criticized. In the second part, we bring forth the positive aspect of our thesis, namely, that more than ever before, philosophy and the philosophers are very much needed in the contemporary, morally decadent societies of the world. It is then argued that the age-long construal of philosophy as a second-order discipline may no longer be necessary, especially as it relates to ethics or moral philosophy. To buttress this last point, reference is made to the Nigerian situation to show that philosophers cannot but be practical.

### **Philosophy and Science: The Theoretical versus the Practical.**

The attack on the practical nature of philosophy may be viewed from two perspectives. The first by those we may consider to be ignorant of what “Philosophy” is or means. The other group consists of those who are “knowledgeable”; the trained or professional philosophers. It should be noted that it is this second group and because of their “knowledge” of philosophy, that classified philosophy as both theoretical and second-order, while they see science as a practical and first-order discipline.

Recently, a former president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was quoted as saying that it is a tragedy for anyone to go to the university to study and graduate in philosophy. However, when he was quickly reminded that one of his daughters graduated in philosophy and psychology (combined honours), his response was: ‘well, that is a double tragedy’. This fellow’s belief (if not ignorance) is not at all surprising. Here is a country (Nigeria) where too much noise is made and heard on the need to accord priority to the study of the sciences especially in the tertiary institutions, while government policies are geared towards discouraging the youths from studying Arts courses.

In order to realise its objectives, the government of the day has put in place various incentives in form of scholarships, research grants and the rest, to assist science students. Perhaps the “tragedy” here lies in the fact that philosophers themselves believe that they have little or no role to play in the day-to-day affairs of their respective communities and societies since philosophy is a second-order discipline and since, in the common parlance. “Philosophy bakes no bread”. In addition, the real tragedy appears to be the latest development within philosophy itself, something coming from the stable of the analytic philosophers, a development that ties philosophy to linguistic analysis and nothing more.

The under-labourer conception of philosophy, and of philosophers, cannot but be seen as a tragedy if, in actual fact, it is not a double tragedy. If our discussion under the present subheading thus far appears hypothetical, or that we are trying to destroy the straw man, then we will consider the views of some philosophers, dead and alive, so as to show that the alleged non-relevance of philosophy to everyday life is not a view held by some “ignoramus”. Despite the fact that Bodunrin (1990:8-9) quoted with approval A.M. Armstrong (1970:5) to the effect that philosophy to the medieval was not a mere academic discipline. It was an all embracing activity concerned with everything relevant to the ultimate purpose of life, yet, the “wiser” and “analytic” Bodunrin went on to say “all philosophers are not like Marx, Locke or activist Russell” (P.9) as if one is to believe that there is something wrong in being a “practical” Marx, Locke or Russell.

Why, for instance, must a philosopher shun public or active life? Is he no longer a member of his society or community? Agreed that philosophy is a rational enterprise, is practical life non-rational or even irrational? Bodunrin (p.10) argued thus: “The masses continued and have continued with the business of living regardless

of what philosopher say". The question which moral philosophy and the moral philosopher is interested in asking is: are the people living the way they ought to live, or, are the people living a moral or non-moral life? If the professionalisation of philosophy is something likely to incapacitate the philosopher in speaking and acting on matters that affect his immediate environment, then the worse for professionalism.

Bodunrin may be right in seeing philosophy as abstract thinking. But the point being made here is that the value or usefulness of abstract (philosophical) thinking or reflection may be measured in respect to the extent to which such activity can go in addressing concrete human problems that come to stare the philosopher in the face. Bodunrin's thesis appears to be that philosophers cannot formulate national ideology either because they cannot do this (since they are theoreticians) or, if they can, it is nonetheless none of their business. Or, what could he have meant when he wrote (p.11):

*...However, if it is thought a philosopher qua philosopher has certain competences which can make him solve our Present societal, moral, religious and economic problems, then I think that would be a mistake.*

He went on to say (p.14) that:

*We must as philosophers continue to defend the relevance of philosophy as a theoretical subject and above any claims to practical utility.*

But this is exactly what this paper contends we must not do, or we cannot sensibly do. Perhaps we should note here that Bodunrin's views as discussed in the above few lines are in conformity with the analytic tradition in philosophy. This is to say Bodunrin is not alone in his construal of philosophy as a theoretical, non-practical enterprise. A careful reading of Ayer's *Languages, Truth and Logic* especially the sixth chapter of this "Bible" of the emotivists will convince the reader that Bodunrin was, in the above paper, merely amplifying the thesis of emotivism. For Ayer, Stevenson and other emotivists, any statement which has meaning must fall into one of two categories. Either it must be analytic, that is, necessarily true but not concerned with empirical matter of facts; or it must be empirical. If empirical, it can never be more than probable; it is, in fact, a hypothesis (Warnock, 1966:56) and these two categories, as far as the emotivists are concerned, are exhaustible. We cannot here discuss in detail the presuppositions of emotivism. It will suffice to say a word or two on the emotivist's view on ethics which is our primary concern in this section of the paper.

Ayer sees the task of the moral philosopher, properly so-called, as that of showing first, that the propositions of morals are not scientific, that is, that they do not equate empirical facts, and also do not analyze the terms, which they do contain (Warnock 1966: 64) And when this has been done, the moral philosopher has completed his task. If this is truly the main, or even the only, task expected of a moral philosopher as his contribution to our understand of moral philosophy, then we will all the be wrong in accusing him not to have either commended or condemned such acts as stealing, violation of human rights, unjust wars, child abuse, unrighteousness, child soldering, genocide, infanticide, abortion, and the rest. On the other hand, and for the emotivist, moral philosophy may be divided into two categories. The first is normative ethics which stipulates what ought or ought not to be done, said e.t.c and the second is meta-ethics which discusses how certain word or concepts are used in moral discourse.

What the emotivist is saying is that the moral philosopher possess no special knowledge or competences as to "what ought to be done" since he (the philosopher) is not a moral legislator or a preacher (moralist). His area of competences is restricted to the analysis of the language of how certain words and concepts are used in ethical discourse, nothing about how man ought to act or conduct himself follows. This is another way of saying that ethical discourse yields meta-ethical neutrality.

Some analytic philosophers are however more "sympathetic" on what could likely be the role of philosophers in practical matters. Here, it is argued that the philosopher may offer practical advice on what

goes on in his community or society, on what ought to constitute acceptable norms of behaviours or conduct. It is however argued that whenever the philosopher does this, he is not necessarily acting qua philosopher. One implication of this is that the philosopher can neither be a social reformer nor a moral educator. The philosopher must first of all announce his divorce from philosophy anytime he wants to contribute to what goes on around him. He must let the people know that his training as “a professional philosopher has no bearing on whatever contributions he intends to make, or whatever solutions he may proffer to certain social, moral, economic and practical problems!

One cannot but agree with Brand Blanshard (1968:7) that the emotivist trend in ethics which some observers have called a revolution is more than a revolution. He sees this trend as the annihilation of traditional ethics. Philosophy, we may argue, should be seen as a dynamic phenomenon which cannot possibly be impervious to the changes that are taking place in the world with the pretence to preserve the purity of an academic discipline. If the study of philosophy would not allow its practitioners to respond to changing social and political circumstances (Bodunrin, op. cit: 8), then two suggestions seem to follow. Firstly, there is the need to broaden the scope of our study of philosophy. Secondly, it may be urged that all departments of philosophy in the tertiary institutions be scrapped since even its method of analysis cannot be put into use by philosophers in addressing concrete issues.

It may be true, as Bodunrin argues (p.9), that science dictates the trend of modern life and that if philosophy is to help us live in the modern world, it must come to terms with the sciences. But we need to know how “philosophy can come to term with the science”? Surely, It cannot possibly be the mere analysis of the language of science. How can this be? Won't the philosopher be seen as dabbling into a discipline where his competence may be called into question? And in the process of analyzing the language of science, it may be expected, some problems might crop up. It is not clear whether the philosopher (or the analyst) may be allowed to suggest possible solutions. This is very unlikely since, again, the philosopher is not a “scientific legislator”.

The belief that philosophers in ancient times constituted a minority and that their views were known to themselves and not to the outside world, if true, can only point to the non- relevance of philosophy, something that is not worth devoting one's time and resources to studying, a view that would corroborate that of the executive president referred to in the opening pages of the paper. Before we move to the second section of the paper, one more quotation from Bodunrin is apposite, if only to show the “tragedy” that lies in studying philosophy and in being a philosopher.

He wrote (op.cit:12):

*... I have even heard it said that philosophers must help with the necessary repairs in the nation's morality. Many things are wrong with our country no doubt. However, abstract thinking has never improved the morality of a nation*

Bodunrin therefore urged us not to confuse the moral philosopher with the moralist or with the preacher. What this means is that philosophy is not a problem-solving subject, but an abstract thinking something which, again, can “bake no bread”

### **A Plea for Philosophy of Praxis**

In his naturalist ethical theory, Blanshard (1968:15) conceives the human race as an “unweeded garden” in which flowers and weeds of every variety are struggling to bring to bloom what is potentially within them .....*Morality is the gardener. It tilts and waters and weeds its sprawling collection in the hope of a maximum crop of human good.*

It is to be emphasized here that in this garden are found the sunflower in its aspiring way, the violet in a more modest way, the crabgrass in so destructive a way that it must be held in check if it is not to choke the others.

On Wednesday, October 20, 2004, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) carried the news of the “promotion” of Nigeria from the second to the third most corrupt nation of the world. Bangladesh was said to be the most corrupt nation while Haiti took over the second position from Nigeria. Although three cabinet ministers came on air to “refute” the indices used by Transparency International (IT), yet no sane Nigerian will deny the obvious fact that the nation is corrupt, whatever may be its ranking in the world. It is not being argued here that Nigeria has a monopoly of corrupt practices. However, the real problem with the Nigerian situation is that the cause of such moral malady is either being attributed to the Nigerian youths and successive military regimes, or corruption is simply seen as a part of the Nigerian culture!

We may cite two examples of the institutionalization of corruption in Nigeria. The nation’s leadership has failed to query the shameful display of ill-gotten wealth by our politicians. These same (known) treasury looters are the one now joggling for the highest political offices of the land. Since politics has become a big business in Nigeria, only the millionaires and multi-millionaires can either play it, or sponsor political activities.

Secondly, how about the recent issues of god-fatherism in the Nigerian polity in which a single rich politician may cause a stand-still in the entire state not minding the people’s mandate.

However, it may be asked: What is the relevance of all these to philosophy and the philosopher? Perhaps one is no longer speaking as a philosopher, but now as an anthropologist, historian, sociologist, political activist, as the case may be. But a more relevant question would be: is the philosopher qua philosopher still a member of the society and is he or is he not directly or indirectly affected by the actions of the politicians? Again those (philosophers and non-philosophers alike) who have argued that Nigeria is not a poor country and hence does not deserve debt forgiveness by her international creditors may be seen as dabbling into what they know little or nothing about (i.e debt servicing or management). Such comments on public issues should be left to experts! In Nigeria in particular, the seed of corruption was sown through the systematic impoverishment of the masses by the elite political class, and yet the philosopher, nay moral philosopher, has no reason to criticize or comment on national issues which he believes “ought not to be the case”. The philosopher who reflects on the happenings around him and who comes to the conclusion that the bottom line of corruption in Nigeria, and indeed in Africa and the so-called third world countries, is traceable to poverty, cannot but urge government to act fast in eradicating poverty. He may as well suggest ways of alleviating the suffering of the masses. For instance, the struggle for survival coupled with the suffocating socio-politico-economic superstructure in Nigeria precipitates the sale of conscience especially among the restive unemployed youths.

Again, a concrete Nigeria example will suffice. For some time now the Ijaw (Izon) youths of the Niger Delta regions have come to be seen as trouble makers. Governments at the various levels have hitherto applied the wrong panacea by clamping these youth into detention. The solution to this nagging problem is to make these articulate, highly educated, and socially mobile youths to be gainfully employed. This will be in addition to equitable distribution of national resource. I do not know however that in saying all these, I am still speaking as a philosopher. It is not equally clear whether “practical” men and women of the sciences would be deemed fit to pass judgements on public matters as highlighted above. Only heaven knows for how long the ghost of logical positivism will continue to haunt a good number of philosophers to the extent of making them deaf to the over-all well-being of their fellow men and women. Rather than doing philosophy, we are compelled to talking (analyzing) it.

In this context, we are to distinguish between moral philosophy as an applied enterprise and ethics as a dialogued enterprise. The philosopher is then urged to keep to the motto of his professional discipline which is “Dialogue, publish, get promoted, but say or write nothing about practical issues in the society”! The fact that, in a particular society, such moral concepts as good, bad, right or wrong have become class or status concepts should be of no concern to philosophers there. Philosophers have become so “technical” in their approach to the study of the subject in order to be seen as doing something lofty and rigorous irrespective of whether or not their immediate communities or societies (and indeed the world at large) gain something worthwhile from their works. What matters most is the need to ensure the intellectual purity of philosophy.

If this is indeed what philosophy is and what the philosopher must do, then reading philosophy is not worth it. There is no doubt that philosophers (like their counterparts in other fields of human endeavour) say, write and publish deviant views in books and learned journals which nonetheless boost their popularity and enhance their promotion, but in the particular branch of philosophy known as ethics, care must be taken not to promote moral disintegration of the society through the glorification of ethical neutrality or moral insensitivity. If the study of philosophy (especially moral philosophy) incapacitates its practitioners, then professional philosophers themselves must re-examine the nature and scope of philosophy as an academic discipline.

### **Conclusion**

Philosophers all over the world must continue to speak out for the voiceless people of the world. Africa, for example, cannot continue to complain of neglect by Western developed nations when African problems are mostly self-imposed and inflicted. As a professional philosopher, I prefer to “dabble” into any field of human endeavour if I believe my action will relieve human suffering or distress rather than not acting in the hope of maintaining the dignity and purity of philosophy. As philosopher, our methodological (intellectual) tool (i.e. critical analysis) is expected to enable us to understand certain concepts as well as develop in us that analytic mind, one which does not address issues and problems superficially. Such a mind is not expected to merely identify and analyze problems, rather, it is expected to suggest and proffer solutions to problems confronting humanity no matter how tentative such solutions may turn out to be.

The “I don’t care,” does it matter”, “What difference does it make” attitude of the emotivist in particular and the linguistic philosophers in general, poses a great threat to the moral life of the society. Imagine the ranking of Nigeria as now the third most corrupt nation in the world, it will amount to social irresponsibility for Nigerian Philosophers to pretend not to be bothered by such negative development. A trained philosopher is not merely a bundle of philosophical ideas. He is also a social as well as a political being. Philosophers, more than any other professionals (as a result of their study of moral philosophy), should be able to admonish those who are responsible for the present state of moral decadence in Nigeria, as well as in any part of the world. We must not wait till the time the analyst will proclaim the “significance” or “verifiability” of our moral judgements before we can either commend or condemn the actions, decisions, policies or utterances of certain individuals and governments.

The misappropriation of public funds, a phenomenon that is responsible for the intolerable high level of poverty which, in turn, is a forerunner of corruption and criminal tendencies especially among the youths, should not escape the attention of the analytically minded philosopher. If in spite of his knowledge of what is going on in his society (and in the world) and his dissatisfaction with such, the philosopher cannot speak his mind, then, truly, philosophy is an irrelevant discipline and it may be a “tragedy” for anyone to read and graduate in it

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