

Philosophy as a Rational Inquiry

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Introduction

When we call a group of scholars professional philosophers or we say a group of students is engaged in the task of studying philosophy, what exactly do we mean? This question is important not simply because of the confusion in the minds of many students of philosophy about the practical utility of their area of intellectual engagement, but also because of the usual impression of a philosopher as a kind of intellectual generalist, whose area of knowledge has no specific focus and whose skill of critical thinking and capacity for discernment,

for example, are nothing more than general intellectual ones. It should be noted that this impression is not totally misplaced, given the preoccupation of the early philosophers for cosmological speculation or for providing guides (essentially moral) to life. It is a claim that is even given more credibility in the light of the fact that philosophers engage in inquiries, or better still reflections, on the methodological foundations of other disciplines, for instance, the natural sciences, the social sciences, history, religion, education, law and so on, and there seems to be a philosophy of every human activity, including business, sports and sex.

The point of this paper is to show that while the impressions highlighted above are true of philosophical activity in some ways, they provide a distorted picture of what we, perhaps inaccurately, call professional philosophy – that is, philosophy as practiced in the universities or the academies. Philosophy, the paper claims, is a form of rational inquiry. How or in what sense(s) is this the case? And what are the defining elements of philosophy so conceived? These are the questions that the rest of this paper addresses.

The Nature of Philosophical Inquiry

Any rational inquiry is a problem-solving activity. It is usually stimulated by doubt. And its purpose is to enable us (the inquirer and, perhaps, the society) to arrive at a state of belief. In other words, an inquiry ends as soon as we arrive at a belief; regardless of whether the belief is true or not. So we can say that the sole end of inquiry is the settlement of opinion or the articulation of what we could call considered judgements concerning the problem or phenomenon that triggered the inquiry.¹ This judgment is an answer or explanation to the problem, which while enriching our understanding is, nonetheless, tentative in the sense that it could raise fresh doubts that can lead to further inquiry. Little wonder, then, that the process of inquiry is an unending one in which there should be little room for certitude or dogma.

Generally speaking, rational inquiry is a process, which begins with doubt and terminates in the establishment of belief. In the specific case of philosophical inquiry the central motivation derives from the observation that things are not usually what they appear to be and the realisation that many of the assurances of common sense can be mistaken.² An appreciation of these facts is at the basis of the desire – without which any claim to being a philosopher will be suspect – to explore our claims or beliefs, by identifying and examining assumptions that are easily overlooked and, in the process, helping people “to recognise and appreciate alternative points of view”³. So philosophy is a quest for understanding, which begins with the recognition of a

problem or a cluster of problems arising from our positions as beings-in-the-world or the various claims or beliefs about this position that people make or hold. Among such problems are the following:

- the problem of the nature and structure of reality
- the problem of the relation between the mind and the world.
- the problem of the nature and scope of human knowledge
- the problem of induction
- the problem of the nature of the human person, particularly the referent of the first-person pronoun, “I”.
- the problem of free will
- the problem of the basis of moral obligation
- the problem of how best to organise human society for cooperative living.

The Nature of Philosophical Problems

A careful look at these problems will reveal three interrelated features. The first one is that they are general in nature. This is to say that they are not problems that can be tackled through the accumulation of facts. Rather, they involve a careful consideration of how best to describe the facts that are available, with a view to generating insights about them, which although tentative, are, nonetheless, clear and self-consistent. This is how A.J. Ayer describes this characteristic of philosophical problems. He says:

It is not further scientific information that is needed to decide such philosophical questions as whether the material world is real, whether objects continue to exist at times when they are not perceived, whether other human beings are conscious in the same sense as oneself. These are not questions that can be settled by experiment, since the way they are answered itself determines how the result of any experiment is to be interpreted. What is in dispute in such cases is not whether, in any given set of circumstances, this or that event will happen, but rather how anything at all that happens is to be described.⁴

In short, answers to philosophical questions do not give further information about their subject. Rather, they are concerned about, “the reason of things”, that is, about how best to explain how things are.

This leads us to a second feature of philosophical problems, which is not unrelated to the first. It should not be difficult to see from the examples given above that philosophical problems are fundamental problems, which should interest any reflective person, regardless of whether he or she is a philosopher or not. These problems are fundamental, first, because the answers we give to them, implicit or explicit, are at the basis of the beliefs, in terms of which

people organise their lives and social relations. In short, they influence judgments and actions in various ways. But these questions are fundamental in another sense, namely, their ramifications go beyond the purview of the concerns that immediately lead to them to touch areas of life from which they appear to be quite remote. In other words, philosophical questions are essential questions the answers to which should enable us to cope with the challenges of life.

But this connection between philosophy and life is easily missed because of the third characteristic of philosophical problems, which is that they are abstract in nature. Although the circumstances that give rise to them are familiar and, to many people, unproblematic, the answers they elicit are usually abstract, turning in many cases to be the beginning of other questions. It is this feature of philosophical problems that Kwasi Wiredu has in mind when he writes in his book, *Philosophy and an African Culture* thus:

The problematic arises, and can only arise from the unproblematic. A problem always relates to the significance of something taken as settled. In the philosophically interesting cases common facts are found to pose problems of significance the investigation of which leads us to form ideas of great abstractness, or to institute very general distinctions.⁵

In other words, issues which are ordinarily taken as settled by “the man in the street” often pose, on deep reflection, formidable problems the resolution of which generate ideas or theories of “great abstractness” .

Approaches to Philosophical Problems

It should be clear from the examples given and the characteristics discussed above that philosophical questions are essential questions the answers to which should assist us in the search for “order and meaning” in the world. But what are the activities involved in the search for these answers? Three of such activities are here identified, namely, critical thinking, conceptual analysis and the reconstruction of ideas.

Critical Thinking

This philosophical activity involves a careful examination of claims or beliefs with a view to determining whether they are sustainable or not. Its primary aim is to drag hidden assumptions “into the light of day” and scrutinize them with a view to seeing “whether they will survive”⁶, by being self-consistent and also cohering with the established body of human knowledge. In short, the activity of critical thinking is an exercise in “philosophical

detection”⁷, which has no other authority than the authority of reason itself. Hence, it is sceptical, in the sense that it is concerned with a rigorous examination of our ideas and values and general, because it beams its searchlight on all aspects of human life, including morality, religion, social and political life, law, history, and even the natural sciences. Finally, it is rational because it is primarily concerned with seeking grounds for establishing the justification for whatever is considered as a justified belief.

The description of the activity of critical thinking given above could generate the erroneous impression that it is a decidedly negative activity involving the wholesale rejection of people’s beliefs or ideas. (It is this kind of misunderstanding that cost Socrates his life in fifth-century Athens.) However, as H.S Staniland has carefully pointed out in an interesting essay, which makes the activity of criticism the centre of the philosophic enterprise, criticism does not mean negative appraisal, “but rational, impartial and articulate appraisal whether positive or negative”.⁸ The purpose of this kind of criticism is to enable us see things in a new light or from a new perspective as a means of encouraging us to “reform our beliefs and modify our values” when they are found wanting on the scale of reason. Critical thinking is thus an essential element without which no human being can live an examined or considered life or a human society regard itself as a reasonable one.

Conceptual Analysis

Human thinking is impossible without the use of concepts, which are general terms that enable us to group together things that share some essential characteristics in common. The meanings of these concepts, particularly the most general ones like knowledge, reality, mind, obligation, justice, democracy and so on, are not always clear. And experience has shown that the dictionary is not always a good guide to these meanings, particularly in those cases where common usages are inadequate as indications of the implicit distinctions they harbour. It is against this background that conceptual analysis becomes a major philosophical activity. This is in addition to the fact that it is an important activity, which is necessary for the task of critical thinking or rational evaluation of beliefs, which we have earlier discussed.

It is important to note that conceptual analysis is not simply about defining concepts carefully. It involves the establishment of a logical relationship between a concept and other concepts whose meanings are believed to be less problematic. The purpose of doing this is to make explicit the conditions of its use not only as a means of refining it, but also as a prerequisite for clear or

straight thinking and ensuring that our claims or beliefs do not rest on a confusion about the meaning of the words we use to express them.

Conceptual analysis is thus not an end in itself. On the contrary, by avoiding vagueness and “getting clearer about the structure of how we speak”, we are placed in a better position to evaluate the ideas and values we live by and to have a clearer understanding of the domains of life which the analysed concepts designate. P.H. Hirst and R.S. Peters give us a clear expression of the goal of conceptual analysis when they write that the point of doing it

is to get clearer about the types of distinction that words have been developed to designate. The point is to see through the words, to get a better grasp of the similarities and differences that it is possible to pick out. And these are important in the context of other questions which we cannot answer without such preliminary analysis.⁹

Such questions, it is important to note, include questions concerning the nature and scope of human knowledge, the extent to which individuals are free agents, or the best form of socio-political arrangement that can best promote social cohesion and justice without compromising individual autonomy.

It should be clear, then, that conceptual analysis not a trivial philosophical preoccupation. Without it we cannot have the kind of conceptual awareness that is required to ensure that hidden assumptions are exposed and scrutinised. For those societies, such as we have in Africa, in which the languages of self expression and philosophical inquiry are non-indigenous, it is a means of ensuring that the mind is not befogged by received ideas, which rather than promote self-understanding, only nurture confusion in thinking. Conceptual analysis is therefore ultimately a means of reducing error in thinking and promoting human self-understanding. It is not just a question of words, but also a question of worth.

Reconstruction of Ideas

But when all has been said and done, it has to be recognised that criticism and analysis will lose their value unless they are employed in the service of a quintessential philosophical task – that of making sense of fragmentary human experience through the generation of visions that can serve as guides to life. In other words, the philosopher’s arguments and conceptual distinctions can be significant or worthwhile only if they promote a better understanding of the human condition as a means of enhancing the human capacity to cope with the challenges of life.

Failure to take this ultimate philosophical task seriously is a major missing link in the story of contemporary African philosophy. There has been so much analysis and argumentation in this philosophy. Unfortunately, still missing is the kind of reconstructive thinking that can point the way to those principles and institutions that can generate the conditions for social reconstruction in contemporary Africa. Little wonder, then, that Africa today is still in search of the pillars of freedom and prosperity through which Africans can cope with the challenges of their physical and social environment.

A Model of the Philosopher

The issues and points raised above suggest a model of the philosopher. In this view, the philosopher is that scholar who is relentless in searching for, and daring in thinking about, those ideas and values, which can enable human beings not only to master their physical environment, but also and more importantly, improve “the quality of human relations between the people”.¹⁰ To fulfil these tasks the philosopher, no doubt, requires clarity in thinking and rigour in argumentation. However, he needs something more. This is a sense of responsibility, which is a precondition for ensuring that his/her philosophical practice moves beyond the level of “inconsequential mental flexing” to affect positively “the lives of real people” in the society.

Conclusion

It should be clear from the above that philosophical inquiry is not a trivial activity. It deals with those problems or questions to which well-reasoned answers are required as a means of promoting human self-understanding. So philosophy matters not simply because our judgements and actions are influenced by our philosophy¹¹, but more importantly, because answers to them can assist us in transcending preconceived ideas and common prejudices to live a considered or examined life, which can only be a life of reason, choice and responsibility.

Notes and References

1. For a stimulating discussion of the nature of the process of rational inquiry, see Charles Sanders Pierce’s essay entitled “The Fixation of Belief” in Kit R. Christensen (ed.), *Philosophy and Choice: Selected Readings Around the World* (California, London, Toronto, Mayfield Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 83-91.
2. This is a point admirably made by Bertrend Russell in his classic, *The Problems of Philosophy* (London, Glasgow: Oxford University Press, 1912, Eighth Impression, 1978) particularly chapter 1. Also, see chapter 1 of his book entitled, *Outline of Philosophy* (Great Britain: George Allen and Unwin, 1979).

3. A.C. Grayling, *The Reason of Things: Living with Philosophy* (London: Phoenix, 2003), p. 236
4. A.J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (England: Penguin Books, 1956), p. 7
5. Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 112
6. The words in quotation marks are those of Bertrend Russell in *Outline of Philosophy*, p. 4
7. Ayn Rand's expression in her book entitled *Philosophy: Who Needs it* (USA: Penguin Books, 1982), chapter 2.
8. H.S. Staniland, "What is Philosophy?" *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. VIII, Nos 1 & 2 Jan/July 1979, p. 4
9. P.H. Hirst and R.S. Peters, *The Logic of Education* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 8
10. A.K.C. Ottaway, *Education and Society: An Introduction to the Sociology of Education* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1962, first published, 1956), p. 210
11. See Theodare Schlick, Jr. and Lewis Vaughn, *Doing Philosophy: An Introduction through Thought Experiments* (USA: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 1998), p. 3