

# THE SIGNIFICANT ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY TO HUMAN SOCIETY

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## Abstract

*Philosophy is regarded by some people as a discipline that has no relevance to the human society. In contrast, it is believed in the contemporary time that science and technology have contributed more significantly to the growth and development of the society. For instance, progress in the medical, transportation, communication, manufacturing, economic, education sectors and reduced mortality rates are attributed to science and technology. On the other hand, Philosophy is considered as a waste of time and an exercise in futility which is worthless, useless and has no application to the society. Philosophy however plays significant roles in human society as it deals with particular and concrete issues of life. It has been observed that the study of Philosophy enhances the development of the human mind. In other words, it helps human beings to have a reflective mind. It also facilitates rational and correct reasoning. When the human mind is properly developed, individuals explore innovative ideas that positively affect the social, economic and political aspects of the society; new discoveries are made which lead to advancement of nations and the world at large. The paper adopts analytical research method in explaining the significant role of Philosophy to human society.*

**Keywords:** Philosophy, Society, Individuals, Common good, Social Institutions

## 1.0 Introduction

Philosophy is a system of thought which attempts to answer fundamental questions about human existence, the nature of the universe and meaning of life. It seeks to understand the nature of reality and the laws governing it. Philosophy also helps us to understand our own values and morals and how we ought to act in order to live a meaningful life. On a societal level, philosophy has a major role to play in helping to shape our thoughts and actions. The study of philosophy has been useful in the formation of our political systems, legal codes and educational systems. It has helped provide the foundation for ethical and moral decision-making in government and other social institutions.

Philosophy has been a part of human society since antiquity and continues to be an influential force in today's world. Philosophy is essential to the growth of knowledge, as it offers an alternative method of inquiry to empirical forms of inquiry in science. Despite the fact that technology has changed the way people live and work, philosophy is still of great importance in modern society. Philosophers continue to provide valuable insights

into complex issues of life. In fact, the development of new technologies requires an understanding of moral and ethical issues and philosophers are equipped to provide such understanding. This work examines various aspects of Philosophy in the context of society. It looks into the following concepts: Philosophy, Society, Individual and the Common good and Social Institutions. It further reveals that man and society are interdependent. It also examines the nature of human society and the rules and principles that guide people's conducts as they relate with others in the society.

## 2.0 What Is Philosophy?

Philosophy is described as “an unusual subject in that its practitioners don't agree on what it's about” (Edmonds and Warburton, 2010). In other words, there is no generally accepted view among Philosophers concerning the nature of Philosophy (Abakare and Okeke, 2016). It has been defined by various Philosophers from different perspectives depending on the school of thought to which the Philosopher belongs. Dewey sees it as “criticism of criticism.” Staniland (2000) claims that Philosophy is the criticism of the ideas we live by. According to him, the criticism is not an act of rejecting ideas rather it consists of asking oneself whether the idea in question should be reformed, modified or conserved, and in applying one's entire intellectual and imaginative intelligence to the search for an answer. This shows that criticisms are not necessarily negative appraisals but rational, impartial and articulate evaluation of ideas. In other words, it also involves assessment of ideas from a constructive perspective. Lawhead (2015) defines Philosophy as the attempt to systematically study the most fundamental structures of our entire experience in order to arrive at beliefs that are as conceptually clear, experientially confirmed and rationally coherent as possible. Kenny (2010) holds that Philosophy is thinking as clearly as possible about the most fundamental concepts that reach through all the disciplines. Grayling (2010) claims that it is an enquiry into all those things which we do not yet properly and fully understand. Savulescu (2010) states that Philosophy involves gaining knowledge through the use of reason and conceptual tools, a priori reason and by reflecting about oneself and the state of the world. For Socrates, it is an academic subject that exercises reason and logic in an attempt to understand reality and answer fundamental questions about knowledge, life, morality, virtue and human nature (“What is Philosophy according to Socrates Essay”, 2023). One important thing to note from the definitions above is that Philosophy is a rational activity. It employs reason and logic as essential tools in analysing and examining all issues. It also encompasses various aspects of human life.

Etymologically, Philosophy is derived from two Greek words: *Philo* and *Sophia*. “*Philo*” means love and “*Sophia*” means wisdom. Hence, Philosophy literally means “love of wisdom”. A Philosopher can be described as a lover of wisdom. Pythagoras was the first to call himself a Philosopher - “lover of wisdom”. In doing this, he was not claiming to be wise, rather, he meant that he was someone who appreciates and treasures wisdom. Philosophy covers knowledge in all areas of life. It is a discipline that examines everything. It critically analyses and investigates other disciplines, courses (such as Law, Economics, Literature, Music, Pharmacy and Medicine), careers and the society as a whole.

The major branches of Philosophy are ethics, metaphysics, epistemology and logic. The word “ethics” comes from the Greek word, *ethos*. The *ethos* of a society or culture deals with its foundational philosophy and its concept of values. Ethics is concerned with deciding the general principles on which such terms as good, bad, right and duty which are to be applied to anything and with defining precisely what these terms mean (Ewing, 1976). It also refers to a code or set of principles by which people live (Popkin and Stroll, 1993). In this sense, one can talk of administrative ethics, military ethics, medical ethics, etc. For instance, by administrative ethics, it means the principles that guide administration in any organisation. Ethics prescribes how men ought to behave and what is good for man in a society.

Metaphysics is a branch of Philosophy that addresses issues of ultimate reality. It is concerned with what exists and what it is that makes reality possible. It is significant as the comprehensive study of reality. Thus, it grounds every other branch of learning (Ogugua, 2015). Epistemology is the study of knowledge acquisition (Danahy, 2023). The term is derived from the Greek, “episteme”, meaning knowledge, and “logos”, meaning reason (Ogundare and Oloidi, 2017). Hence, it is known as the “theory of knowledge”. It is a branch of Philosophy that concerns itself with the nature and scope of knowledge and justification (Danahy, 2023). Epistemology is needed in order to distinguish between truth and falsehood as we obtain knowledge from the world around us (Martinich and Stroll 2023). Logic is the science of reasoning. It is the study of the principles and methods of correct reasoning (Adeniyi and Ayedero, 2017). It influences our everyday decision and helps us to distinguish between correct and incorrect reasoning.

### 3.0 Society

Society can be defined as the permanent union of men who are united by modes of behaviour that are demanded by some common end, value or interest (Society: Philosophical Analysis, 2023). It consists of a large group of people who share the same geographical territory, a common culture and social structure. Such people are expected to abide by the same law. Fagothey (2000) holds that a society is an enduring union of a number of persons morally bound under authority to cooperate for a common good. He further noted that the following are necessary for the existence of a society:

- i. At least two persons must be involved otherwise there can be no togetherness or commonness of interests and activity.
- ii. The members must be united in a stable or enduring way.
- iii. The members must cooperate or work together for the attainment of some end. This end will be some common good that all the members will share in and that no member could accomplish singly.
- iv. Society is held together by bonds, moral bonds of means and end.
- v. Society must be equipped with that moral power called authority. Authority is the right to determine the means and direct the members in their use (Fagothey, 2000).

This reveals that societies are guided by moral principles. Thus, for a society to develop, the individual members that constitute it must adopt and cultivate a certain basic moral disposition (Omogbe, 1993). In other words, unethical behaviour on the part of the members of any society will be a barrier to the advancement of such a society. On the other hand, good moral character of individuals promote peace, unity, progress and the attainment of common good in the society.

### **3.1 Society and the Individual**

Aristotle holds that human beings are social animals. It is a characteristic nature of human beings to live in a society. Thus, man cannot live without a society. There is a close relationship between man and the society. Human beings constantly interact with the society. In fact, characters, languages, customs and traditions of individuals are formed and acquired within a society. Man also depends on the society for his welfare, security and survival. An individual cannot live in isolation. He or she must have relationship with other individuals to enjoy the necessities of life. In view of this, man and the society are interdependent and interconnected. According to Mondal (2000), man needs society as matter of nature, necessity and well-being. Man's nature is such that he cannot afford to live alone. It will be very difficult for an individual to normally develop when he or she is isolated from other human beings. Human needs cannot be met without the support and assistance of others. For instance, the basic necessities of life such as food, clothing and shelter can only be obtained through interactions with fellow human beings. Children depend on the family for love and care. The family also depend on the government for peace and security.

The society helps man to develop mentally and intellectually. It gives us the opportunity to be trained and educated by other members of the society. Customs, traditions, beliefs and cultural heritage are preserved and passed down to subsequent generations through the society. Thus, the society provides man with the social, economic and political structures which helps individuals to properly perform their daily responsibilities. Therefore, the society plays a very important role in the growth, development and survival of human beings. However, individuals are also expected to perform certain duties in the society. For instance, an individual has a responsibility to make positive contributions to the common good of the society that has educated him or her. The individual is expected to use such education to the benefit of his or her fellow citizens and not to their disadvantage. Individuals are to be good citizens of the society.

### **3.2 Society and the Common Good**

The common good refers to those facilities whether material, cultural or institutional that the members of a community provide to all members in order to fulfil a relational obligation they all have to care for certain interests that they have in common (Dzurgba, 2000). It denotes those goods that serve all members of a given community and its institutions and it involves both good that serve no identifiable particular group as well as those that serve members of generations not yet born (Hussain, 2018). It can also be

defined actions or policies put into place in order to benefit not only a certain group of individuals but the society as a whole. It is described as the total wealth of the State that is shared in order to provide satisfaction to all the individuals (Etzioni, 2015). It can be simply put as the good that is common to all in the society (Dzuriba, 2000). Examples include affordable healthcare, good roads, electricity, water system, public transportation, security, national defence and free public education. The common good entails policies that give room for improving the quality of citizens' lives.

#### **4.0 Philosophy and Social Institutions**

Institutions involve structure and mechanism of social order and cooperation governing the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given community (Ogugua, 2015). They are humanly devised structure of rules and norms that shape and constrain individual behaviour. They are put in place for maintenance of peace and order. Social Institutions are established patterns of beliefs, behaviours and relationships that organise social life. They can be described as a persistent constellation of roles, status, values and norms that respond to important societal needs. In other words, they are structures that help in meeting the social needs of people. Philosophy examines questions about the foundations of social institutions and social behaviour in terms of ethical values. Examples include: Educational Institutions, Health Institutions, Families, Government Institutions, Judicial Institutions, Political Institutions, Market Institutions and Religious Organisations.

**Educational Institutions** – An educational institution is a place where people of different age groups get an education. It is a place where skills and knowledge are acquired e.g. Primary Schools, Secondary Schools, Polytechnics, Colleges, Trade Centres and Universities. Educational institutions provide the learning space and the learning environment for people. Philosophy contributes in an indispensable way to learning. It instils habits of critical thinking in students; enhancing their reading, writing and public speaking skills. It transmits cultural heritages to them and also stimulates them to engage in fundamental questions about reality, knowledge and value.

**Families** – A family is a social institution that provides emotional and practical support to its members. It is a social unit which consists of people related by blood. It can be broken down into two: nuclear and extended family. The nuclear family comprises of father, mother and the children. An extended family is a social organisation with several generations or several nuclear family groups (Lee, 2023). The family provides a foundation for children because it is where socialisation initially takes place (United Way, NCA, 2023). Philosophy helps us in avoiding discrimination among children, For instance, we don't have to value one gender above the other. It helps parents to give all children equal rights and support.

**Government Institutions**—Government institutions are responsible for forming and enforcing laws and ordinances that govern society. The government's primary role is to maintain order and provide public services. The Government institution organises other forms of institutions. For instance, it directs and controls the economic systems, educational institutions, police and military organisations. Philosophy gives room for a critical examination of decision and policies of government institutions. Examples include the Executive, Legislature, Judiciary, Independent National Electoral Commission, National Assembly, National Planning Commission, Code of Conduct Bureau, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, Nigeria Custom Service, Central Bank of Nigeria, Nigerian Stock of Exchange, Standard Organization of Nigeria, National Pension Commission, Nigerian Electricity Regulatory Commission, Air Force, Army and Navy.

**Health Institutions:** Health Institutions are organisations that provide health care and related services to the provision of in-patients and out-patients care, such as diagnostic or therapeutic services, laboratory services, medicinal drugs and other health related services. Examples of health institutions include: hospitals, medical and health centres and clinics. Philosophy analyses and critically examines the methods and procedures employed by medical personnel in the treatment of patients

**Judicial Systems**—The judicial system refers to the system of courts that adjudicates legal disputes or disagreements and interprets, defends and applies the law in legal cases. Philosophy calls into question which laws are truly just and what justice means. Examples in Nigeria include: The Supreme Court of Nigeria, the Courts of Appeal, the High Courts and other trial courts such as the Magistrates, Customary, Sharia and other specialised courts.

**Market Institutions**—They are influential actors of markets such as socio-economies of consumer, consumer profile, cultural and religious actors and regulative actors. Examples include: Banks, Cooperative unions, Insurance companies and Stock markets. The knowledge of Philosophy encourages this institution to offer the best possible customer services to people in the society.

**Mass Media Institutions**—This involves the diverse arrays of media that reach a large audience through mass communication. Examples are: Internet, Television, Radio, Mobile phones, Magazines and Newspapers. Philosophy helps in clarifying the meaning and appropriate usage of key concepts in communication.

**Political Institutions**—Political institutions according to Boddy-Evans(2020) are the organisations in a government that create, enforce and apply laws. They often mediate conflict, make policy on the economy and social systems and otherwise provide representation for the population. They control the activities of

government. Examples include trade unions, the (legal) courts and political parties. The knowledge of Philosophy helps political institutions with the appropriate application of laws.

**Religious Organisations:** These are organisations whose identity and mission are derived from a religious or spiritual tradition and which operate as registered or unregistered, non-profit, voluntary entities (Berger, 2016). Examples include: Churches, Mosques, Buddhist Organisation, Hindu Organisations and other places of worship and institutions that exist to support and manage the practice of a specific set of religious beliefs. The knowledge of Philosophy will reduce religious crisis and promote tolerance among religious organizations.

### 5.0 Importance of Philosophy to the Society

Philosophy helps to instil peace and order in the society. Ethics which is a branch of Philosophy teaches us the rules and principles that guide human conduct. It prescribes how individuals ought to behave in the society. It exposes the government and the various social institutions to their moral responsibilities to the members of the society and helps individuals to know their obligations to the society. It also helps people to obey laws and orders. It prevents people from self-centredness and corruption. Philosophy helps our reasoning ability. One is able to distinguish between good and bad reasoning. This helps us in making correct choices. It develops our minds and makes us creative and innovative. We are able to generate new ideas that can transform the society.

Philosophy brings about change in the society: It helps us to critically examine, analyse and review the situations in the society. For instance, we can review our customs and traditions and discard beliefs that seem not to be socially constructive while we retain those that are beneficial to the society. It liberates human beings from dogmatism by preventing them from accepting anything without rational justification (Ndubisi, 2015). It offers us knowledge about various aspects of the society and the world as a whole.

### 6.0 Conclusion

The paper discussed the relevance of Philosophy to human society. It noted that Philosophy plays an essential role in improving the lives of people. It is a powerful tool that can be used to answer fundamental questions about life and the universe. It shapes our actions and beliefs and helps us to live meaningful and productive lives. It is a rational activity that facilitates logical and correct reasoning in human beings. Philosophy plays an important role in the education system. It can help people to develop critical and reflective thinking skills which are important for forming opinions and making decisions. It provides us with opportunity to explore the social aspects of our lives as it examines issues from different sectors such as education, politics, economics, health and religion. It also brings about innovation and creativity in individuals. This helps human beings to generate new ideas and discoveries which lead to the growth and development of the

society. Philosophy is essential to our understanding of the society because it provides us with rules and principles that guide human conduct in the society and it helps individuals in the society to recognise their responsibilities and obligations towards one another.

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