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Philosophical Inquiry and the Harsh Realities of Human Need

Kobina Impraim Adentwi

University of Education-Winneba, College of Technology Education
Faculty of Education and Communication Sciences, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies

Frederick Kwaku Sarfo

Ph.D Associate Professor in Educational/Instructional Technology
University of Education-Winneba, College of Technology Education
Faculty of Education and Communication Sciences, Department of Interdisciplinary Studies

Efua Uzoamaka Amuah

Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Department of Modern Languages

Abstract:

This paper discusses the issue of relevance of philosophy as an instrument for dealing with the harsh realities of human need. It demonstrates that there is a gap in the methods employed by professional philosophers and the lay public in dealing with the problems of everyday living. Philosophers tend to approach issues from a logical, consistent and systematic point of view with the aim of reaching conclusions that are sound, coherent and consistent. On the other hand, the ordinary man is rather casual in his approach. The paper argues that the ordinary man has so much to gain from philosophical inquiry in his attempt to solve the problems of everyday living in his personal, social and professional capacities.

Keywords: *Philosophical inquiry, Human need, Relevance*

1. Introduction

There seems to be a deeply entrenched belief in the population that in the 21st Century, there should be a focus on education and technology since these constitute the most appropriate means of solving problems in this modern and technological world. Thus there is much neglect of the role and contribution of philosophy in solving the problems of everyday living.

Many question the relevance of philosophy to the problems of everyday living. This is because philosophers are known to approach everyday issues from a rather abstract and technical point of view. Professional philosophers tend to be concerned with finding out the true meaning and nature of things by engaging in deep and skeptical philosophical reflection. On the other hand, ordinary men are often preoccupied with finding quick fix solutions to the problems of life.

It appears that although all human beings (philosophers and non-philosophers alike) philosophise in that they ponder problems of reality, human existence, justice and fair play, etc, there is a wide gap in the methods that philosophers and non-philosophers use in grappling with such problems. Many writers including Garforth (1971) and Miller (1991), attempt to explain the general relevance of philosophy as an intellectual discipline and how philosophers deal with issues. However, their discussions, to a large extent, are silent on the specific question of how the ordinary man may be aided to solve the problems of everyday living (personal, social, professional or otherwise) through the use of philosophical inquiry. This paper attempts to bridge the gap between the way in which philosophers and the lay people deal with the harsh realities of human need. There is also an attempt to point out how philosophy could prove instrumental to the ordinary man in his effort to better his lot.

In outline, the paper addresses the following questions:

- What is philosophy?
- What kinds of questions engage the attention of philosophers and how do they resolve them?
- How do ordinary men deal with the problems of life?
- How relevant is philosophy as an instrument for dealing with human needs and what can the ordinary man learn from the professional philosopher in dealing with human needs?

2. Meaning of Philosophy

The word philosophy comes from two Greek words, which when combined means 'Love of wisdom', (philosophia), or more correctly, 'love of knowledge'. From this early usage, the word has passed into common usage, and different people have come to mean different things by it. For example, Soltis (1979) has identified two separate senses in which the word philosophy is used: the popular sense and the technical sense.

In the popular sense, philosophy is used to describe a person's or group's attitude to life. By attitude here is meant the general pattern or the habitual way of response of the person to events. In this vein, also but in a somewhat more abstract sense, it is often used to describe a person's expressed or observed world-view. This world – view may have resulted from his assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and prejudices which may be partly inherited and partly acquired through the influence of the agencies of socialisation (such as the home or family, the religious group, the mass media of communication, the school, the peer group, etc) on the person. It is to either or both of these two senses that we sometimes refer when we claim to have a personal philosophy of life.

In the technical or professional sense, philosophy is viewed as an academic discipline to which scholars devote their time and energy. It is characterised by logical, consistent and systematic thinking aimed at reaching conclusions that are sound, coherent and consistent in all their parts. To some, these theoretical conclusions or speculations are what philosophy is all about. Others, however, believe that such conclusions need not be reached before a person is said to be engaged in philosophy: it is still philosophic if the aim is to clarify and explain the language with which we express our ideas.

Titus (1964) and Miller (1996) have identified several other approaches to defining philosophy. For example, Miller discusses the etymological, the rational or critical, the logical, the speculative, the analytical, the existential and the phenomenological approaches. He also provides his own working definition of philosophy, as the attempt to think rationally and critically about the most important questions.

3. Philosophical Questions and the Philosophical Attitude

One significant method by which philosophers do their work is by posing questions and finding answers to certain perennial problems which interest mankind. Philosophers ask questions about deeper problems of human existence beyond what we see and hear, ponder over issues relating to reality, truth, beauty, right and wrong, what constitutes worthwhile knowledge and so on. Such questions aim at a critical analysis and assessment of conceptions and meanings. Through questioning, philosophers take a hard look at issues that are sometimes taken for granted in other fields of study. They thus make the meanings of certain concepts more explicit, determine the limits of their application and ascertain the grounds on which they may be justified.

The questions philosophers ask can be grouped under the four main areas of philosophical inquiry; namely, metaphysics, epistemology, axiology and logic (Ornstein and Levine, 2000; Ryan and Cooper, 2003; Parkay, Stanford & Gougeon, 1996). Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of ultimate reality and human existence. It addresses such questions as what is the ultimate reality that lies behind appearances of things that we encounter? What is the basic and permanent stuff out of which everything is composed? Is there a spiritual realm of existence separate from the material world? Do things operate by chance or through sheer mechanism, or are there some plans or purposes or intelligence at the heart of the things? What is life and what is the purpose of life? Can ultimate reality be grasped by the five senses or is it supernatural or transcendent?

Epistemology deals with questions regarding the nature of knowledge and knowing. Epistemology raises such questions as what is knowledge? What knowledge is true? What does it mean to know something? How does knowing take place? How do we know we know? Can we really be certain about anything? What do our senses contribute to knowledge? What does reason contribute? What knowledge is of most worth?

Axiology is the study of values. Values are objects or ideas which we cherish, appreciate, want, desire or need. As humans we naturally search for the most abiding principles by which to govern our life and conduct in society. Axiology has two branches: ethics and aesthetics. Ethics examines moral values and the rules of moral conduct; aesthetics deals with our sense of beauty and art. Axiological questions include what are the genuine values of life and how can they be attained? Is there a distinction between right or wrong, or is it a matter of opinion? What is justice? What is the good society? What is beauty? Is beauty absolute or does it lie in the eyes of the beholder? Does the end always justify the means?

Logic is the formation of the principles of right reasoning. It focuses on reasoning and modes of thinking and argument that bring us to valid conclusions. It is an attempt to think clearly and avoid vagueness and contradictions. There are two branches of logic: deductive and inductive thinking. The deductive approach requires the thinker to move from a general principle or proposition to a specific conclusion that is valid. Inductive logic, on the other hand, moves from the particular to the general. Logical questions check whether a particular conclusion can be supported or is flawed by looking at the internal consistency and validity of an argument.

The four areas of philosophical enquiry described above are the mental tools that philosophers use for thinking about the world and its phenomena. The questions that philosophers ask are thus basic or fundamental. According to Bailey (2002) philosophical questions have three major features. As he puts it,

philosophical questions fit three major characteristics: (1) They are of deep and lasting interest to human beings; (2) They have answers, but the answers have not yet been settled on; (3) The answers cannot be decided by science, faith or common sense.

The first characteristic stated by Bailey expresses the profound, fundamental or basic nature of questions philosophers ask. Philosophers are not interested in quick fix solutions to the trivial and transient material desires and needs of human beings. They rather concentrate on central ideas or concerns aimed at making the world a better place.

The second characteristic relates to the philosophical attitude of skepticism. Philosophy is more of an attitude or mode of approaching problems than it is a specifiable set of beliefs and doctrines. Essential ingredients in this attitude are: curiosity, imagination and a capacity to see through the immediate and the familiar to underlying complexities. Garforth (1971) is of the opinion that 'to philosophise is to engage in a strenuous activity of thought and to pursue it with no other aim than to satisfy the importunate questioning of the human mind'.

When philosophers engage in skepticism, they rely absolutely on the use of logical reasoning. By reasoning is meant examining every evidence in favour or against any claim, from a dispassionate and impartial point of view, exposing prejudices in claims that are put forward, and in general giving to every bit of evidence as much weight as it actually deserves.

Pondering over the sober reflective approach of philosophy, Garforth (1971) says that there belongs to the very nature of philosophy a refusal to take for granted, an attitude of skepticism which regards no conclusion as final, and every matter, however apparently closed, is open to further questioning. Logical reasoning and healthy skepticism are therefore hallmarks of the philosophical attitude.

The third characteristic also expresses the difference in the methodology used in philosophy from that used in other disciplines. For example, while the sciences rely heavily on empirical verification of issues, philosophy employs second order questions. Such questions rely so much on rational and logical analysis rather than verification of sense experience. However, there is a sense in which the methodology of philosophy is similar to that of the sciences. This is the fact that for philosophy, as for the sciences, whatever conclusions that are made are considered to be tentative. Thus no conclusions are as absolute and certain as to be immune to further correction through the use of new evidence

4. How Ordinary Men (Non-Philosophers) Perceive and Deal with the Harsh Realities of Human Need

Like the professional philosopher, the ordinary man also asks a lot of questions. People ask questions about puzzling events in the course of their lives. Some of the questions are asked to help get a better grip on life affairs that seem difficult to explain. For example, children use the method of questioning in an attempt to understand their world. Sometimes their questions, asked out of curiosity, tend to be profoundly philosophical except that they seem to shed off such philosophical attitudes because they are “socialised” out of it by adults who think they are inquisitive. The questioning attitude of children perhaps demonstrates that it is in the very nature of human beings to philosophise.

Again, the ordinary man regularly engages in reflective thinking when pressed by the harsh realities of human need or when subjected to untold hardship or stressful conditions. For example, appalled by the sense of loss of a loved one, the ordinary man may start to question the purpose of life and why nature sometimes seems to be so wicked or capricious. Also, under hardship, people ponder the very existence of God, his divine love as the father of all mankind. Some people even question, whether God is actually just and merciful and why he (God) seems to discriminate towards his own “children” in the distribution of wealth, goodly looks and the like. Furthermore, the ordinary man sometimes engages in purposeful reflection in trying to solve problems such as choice of a career, making an investment out of his meager resources in a productive venture, etc.

The difference in the questioning behavior of professional philosophers and the ordinary man is that the philosopher takes his task more seriously, more persistently, and more skillfully than the ordinary man. Also, the ordinary man appears to be preoccupied with finding solutions to the material requisites of well being and pays little attention to the more fundamental questions of life. Faced with the harsh realities of human need such as poverty, ignorance, disease, discrimination and other vicissitudes of life, the ordinary man appears not to have the time and leisure to engage in rigorous reflection and logical thinking of the kind associated with the professional philosopher. The ordinary man appears to be more practical or “pragmatic” in his approach to problem-solving. That is to say that he tends to look for quick solutions or whatever idea appears to be handy enough to apply under the circumstances in which he finds himself.

It can be argued then that in spite of the fact that both the ordinary man and the philosopher ask questions on the basic subjects that the philosopher investigates, the deliberations upon these subjects by a non-philosopher usually fall short of the philosopher’s meticulous concern for clarity, logical soundness and consistency. Commenting on the philosopher’s concern for thoroughness, Henry D. Aikan had this to say:

... the clarification of ideals and clarification of the terms by means of which they are articulated is a single process, and ... in a humble way, every attempt to determine what sort of life one really wants to live involves essentially the same painful process of analysing and clarifying the meanings and uses of words to which the analytical philosopher devotes himself professionally. The difference between them is not so much a difference in methods as a difference in the thoroughness and sensitivity with which it is applied.

5. The Relevance of Philosophy to the Problems of Everyday Living

Given the apparent difference in the way philosophers and ordinary men perceive reality and how they try to solve the problems of life, the logical question to address is how relevant is philosophy in the attempt to deal with the harsh reality of human need?

The answer to this question is that philosophy has a lot to offer in the attempt to solve the many problems facing humanity. Philosophy helps us to think clearly about whatever we do in our individual and social lives. Reflective thinking about life and the human condition is the surest way of bringing a better life into existence. The study of philosophy does not guarantee that individuals will be better thinkers and actors, but it does provide a valuable base to help us think more clearly. Philosophy does not provide solutions to all problems. However, it offers an avenue for serious inquiry into ideas, traditions and all our endeavors. Philosophers have been acute observers of the human condition and have articulated their observations in ways that are instructive. The ordinary man is not only aided by a careful and systematic approach to ideas that philosophers have fostered, but also he can gain inspiration from philosophy and develop new insights into ways of dealing with human problems. While the ordinary man can choose to disregard the philosophical approach to problems, in doing so, he ignores a vital and important body of knowledge or thought.

Philosophy can reveal principles that may be used as a guide for effective action or conduct. Every individual, whether he recognises it or not, has a personal philosophy – a set of beliefs about how human beings should live and what they should do to live the good life (Titus,1964). Some people have realised the importance of consciously formulating and pursuing a personal

philosophy. Such people have a better approach to life and the problems of life than those who have not carefully articulated their personal philosophies. Titus reminds us that "...we are really free only when we rely upon inner control or self-chosen ends". He goes on to say that, "If a man acts out of mere custom or tradition or the law, he is not genuinely free".

For the ordinary man, ethics as a branch of philosophy helps to exercise judgment about what constitutes rightful conduct and helps to decide on issues of morality, beauty and what is worthwhile. If we are to decide wisely and to act consistently, we need to have a high sense of values and the meaning of things. Now and again, we have to make choices and to act on the basis of some scale of values. Without such values, human beings will be no different from the beasts of the forest who act with no sense of direction, except perhaps by instincts. Such an approach to life will be meaningless.

Also, as a branch of philosophy, logic shapes the views of people concerning what constitutes "correct thinking" and helps to avoid falling into the realm of absurdities. By applying the rules of inference and consistency, philosophy helps humans to think straight about issues, to avoid muddled and illogical reasoning that will lead to biased conclusions. It makes people come to believe that intuition and reliance on customs, traditions and superstitions that are not supported by evidence may not be the appropriate means of dealing with issues. Philosophy therefore, equips people to better analyse and understand divergent viewpoints about the many different problems of life. It helps to uncover the "improvable" assumptions people make about issues. Armed with such perceptive understanding, philosophical reasoning helps to critically evaluate issues in terms of one's own beliefs and values and to support, resist or replace them with alternative viewpoints.

As a corollary of the foregoing, philosophy prepares people for effective citizenship in a democratic society. It equips them with the mental ability to weigh both sides of an issue and to make informed decisions. It also creates in the citizenry the democratic spirit of temper-tolerance, i.e., the capacity to listen and to respect other people's views even if one is very much convinced about his or her own opinion about an issue. This helps to avoid conflicts due to differences in opinions over issues of governance and how to move the nation forward. In other words, as Titus (1964) puts it, 'philosophy trains man to think freely and prepares him for constructive citizenship in a free and growing society'.

From the metaphysical point of view, philosophy helps people to gain a wider, deeper and more balanced perspective on issues of human existence and the world around us. Quite often, as human beings, we come face to face with many wonderful things about the nature of the universe which set us thinking without ever being able to find the right answers. At other times, we are appalled by the sense of loss and despair when we are struck by such calamities as a devastating earthquake, rainstorm and flooding, and even the death of a loved one. Under such circumstances, the idea of the spiritual and of God helps to fathom the existence of a superior intelligence in control of the universe. This helps to come to terms with spiritual phenomenon – the idea of an unseen force(s) in control of all things. The metaphysical idea of the existence of an all powerful, all loving, merciful, transcendent, omnipotent, ubiquitous God/Allah, for example, can prove to be a reliable source of consolation to man under stressful situations. Epistemology as a branch of philosophy deals with the nature and forms of knowledge. Our knowledge and beliefs are instrumental in informing our actions in our personal and professional capacities. Philosophy involves thinking about the world of ideas and the world of practical activity; good ideas can lead to good practices and good practices can lead to good ideas. In order to behave intelligently, the ordinary man needs the things philosophy can provide; that is, an understanding of thinking processes and the nature of ideas, the language we use to describe issues of concern, and how these may interact with practical affairs (Garforth, 1971).

Again, at a personal level, philosophy serves as a tool for motivating the individual to aspire for and actually put in the required sustained effort to achieve. This is because as individuals ponder deeply problems and perceived solutions to such problems, they become very much convinced about the efficacy of their ideas and this motivates them to act decisively to achieve. Informed by this observation, there is a proliferation of inspirational speakers and writers, especially priests, who inspire us day by day with messages that motivate us to rise above the obstacles, problems and vicissitudes of life and to strive to actualise ourselves in whatever we do.

For those who pursue formal systematic study of philosophy, the training acquired helps them to think, read and write, and possibly speak more critically, carefully and cogently than those who do not (Brook & Bruder, 1990). To quote Brook and Bruder (1990) specifically, they opined that

...students who have learned their philosophical lessons well are not likely as those who haven't to become trapped by dogmatism. Such students have learned the value of keeping an open mind and seeking solutions to problems that meet standards of coherence and reasonableness.

The relevance of philosophy to good human relations cannot be overemphasised. Philosophy helps people to appreciate differences among individuals and groups of diverse ethnic, religious, political, cultural, and socio-economic status backgrounds and orientations which make them behave in different ways. An understanding of such differences helps to open lines of communication with others. This helps to avoid unnecessary oppositions and conflicts over many issues of life. An appreciation of such differences and sensitivity to them can lead to compromises and cooperation over issues which make for societal stability and progress. Also, the establishment of a system of laws, rules and regulations is based on our philosophical appreciation of the problems we face in relating to others in society and the need to set standard rules to ensure peaceful co-existence.

Schon (1983) underscores the importance of reflective thinking in adapting existing knowledge and competencies to novel situations. He points out that to be able to deal competently with the affairs of life, one needs to be a reflective problem solver who can adapt existing knowledge to unique situations with consistency and integrity. Schon, who has studied the nature of professional practice in many fields found that "the most effective practitioners are generally individuals who are able to analyse the never-ending flow of unique situations that confront them and to adapt their knowledge to particular situations".

Finally, the relevance of philosophy to the problems of everyday living is seen in its application in organisational life and in many branches of human activity, including the political or governance systems of nations. To give a sense of direction and to make for

an organised and coordinated effort, many organisations clearly articulate and formulate their vision and mission statements which provide them with the *raison d'être*. Such vision and mission statements, serve to steer the affairs of such organisations toward successful accomplishment.

In the governance systems of nations, philosophy provides guiding principles for conduct by way of the political ideology that the people espouse, and this, produces widespread practical consequences. For example, the philosophical writings of the English gentleman, John Locke, significantly influenced the development of liberal democracy in the western world with its emphasis on capitalism and individual liberties and freedoms. On the other hand, the philosophical writings of Karl Max brought into being, a radically new approach to governance - namely, socialism and communism, with their emphasis on ownership of property by the state and the subordination of individual liberties and freedoms to the commonweal.

Notwithstanding the many ways in which philosophy is relevant to the problems of everyday living discussed above, it appears philosophy does not appeal to many because philosophers themselves disagree over many issues and there are no clear-cut answers to philosophical questions. Indeed, one can find philosophers disagreeing on practically every issue. It may be that those who look upon such disagreements as a negative factor and prefer ready or clear-cut answers are mistaken. This is because they overlook the fact that, perhaps, without disagreement about ideas, purposes, and methods we probably would still be in the Stone Age. It is often from the disagreements that new ideas and more effective solutions to the harsh realities of human need have developed.

An awareness of philosophy and effective application of its tools, therefore, is an important means of controlling events in human life. The unfortunate thing is that too often human beings have been found to have engaged in much philosophising after events have run their capricious course. Philosophy can prove instrumental to the ordinary man in planning ahead of time to prevent or effectively deal with foreseeable problems.

Indeed, the value of philosophy in dealing with the problems of humanity cannot be overemphasised. The ordinary man who does not have any impression of philosophy will be unable to solve his problems in an analytical and critical manner; he will live through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age and unproductive customs and traditions of his forebears. Such a man would not dare to probe the unfamiliar and will therefore forever lack the capacity to be inventive and creative. The philosophical attitude of skepticism is perhaps what the human race needs to push back the frontiers of ignorance. Philosophical thinking enables man to free himself from ignorance, poverty, superstition, disease and the many other problems that afflict humanity.

The ordinary man, therefore, has so much to learn from the logical consistent and systematic way in which philosophers ask and answer questions in the quest to provide solutions to the harsh realities of human need. This might as well apply to the solution of problems in his professional capacity where there is even more need for sober analysis of complex problems in order to arrive at sustainable solutions. The implications of the foregoing is that instead of jettisoning the study of philosophy in formal educational curriculum and instruction, there is perhaps a strong case for making formal systematic study of philosophy an important aspect of every discipline or subject.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be clear that philosophy has serious contributions to make to the ordinary man as a problem-solving tool. The methods of philosophy; namely asking fundamental questions and the logical and critical analysis of problems, although not immediately targeted at the material needs of man, are instrumental in creating a better life for all. This is because it permits a more thorough analysis of the pros and cons of issues, thereby helping to make the best decisions in all situations. The ordinary man, therefore, has so much to learn from the logical, consistent and systematic way in which philosophers ask and answer questions in the quest to provide solutions to the harsh realities of human need.

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