

Philosophy and the 21st Century: Reflections on Christianity and New Means of Grace in a Post-Pandemic Era in Africa¹

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I never gave serious thought to philosophy during my undergraduate years even though introductory courses in philosophy were offered. They were however introductory courses in the philosophy of religion.

My lack of interest emanated from how it was presented to us such that what came to mind when we heard the word philosophy was an impossibility, inscrutability, something you can't understand etc. We thought about it negatively thanks to the teacher who made it look difficult (I am the only educated, rational lecturer on this campus, all others are a bunch of emotional beings and so much such gibberish).

Later during my postgraduate years beginning in Edinburgh, I became curious about arriving at the campus of the University of Edinburgh as the main library was and is named after David Hume. My curiosity took me deeper as I did not only dig into knowing who he was, and his philosophical position as well as a layman's inquiry into what philosophy is all about.

When I joined the Department of Religion and Philosophy, I discovered that the philosophy component as the name entails needed to be rejuvenated. Today, the department is in the process of mounting a philosophy degree to substantiate its claim.

¹ This paper was presented by the author as a lead paper presentation.

Philosophy is so critically important because it applies to everything else, every other discipline. That is why the highest degree that you get in almost all disciplines is a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) which is the terminal degree in almost every discipline except in a few. Philosophy is not supposed to be left to a few because obtaining a PhD in any field means that you have done original thinking with a philosophical mindset about whatever your topic is – that is what a dissertation is supposed to be.

Whether it is the philosophy of the first order (pure philosophy) like epistemology or metaphysics or it is the philosophy of the second order where you apply philosophical thinking across disciplines (philosophy of science, history, religion etc), using philosophical thinking in any discipline gives you a better understanding of the discipline.

Because logic or philosophy is not taken seriously anymore, we have become lazy intellectually. Understanding concepts in whatever field will be enhanced when we learn to think philosophically. If our politicians for example knew that politics simply means discipline or the academic understanding of human relationships and order, the mess being experienced would minimize maybe. This paper is an attempt at motivating and stimulating a love for philosophy as a way forward for engaging our contemporary society.

What is philosophy?

Even though philosophy is hard to define, it cannot be avoided nor can it be ignored or trivialized. The question is not whether people are willing to do philosophy or not but how well they will do it when they must. If you have ever asked any serious question in your life then you are doing philosophy.

Philosophy is both a noun and a verb. It's an area of academic discipline but it also means to do the process. You do philosophy when you apply a particular way of thinking to whatever the issue is that's why the definition is difficult.

Simply put, philosophy means the love of wisdom – *phileo* means love while *sophia* means wisdom. So philosophy means the love of wisdom.

Philosophy can be seen as a critical examination of our fundamental beliefs concerning the nature of reality, knowledge and truth and our moral and social values. It's deciding what is real, how do you know? What is true? What is good? How are we supposed to act?

It is working systematically and effectively because there are certain tools you use to be able to answer those questions. Do you see why philosophy is so important? Why it relates to everything else and why we are so much in need of it?

Broadly speaking philosophy is the means and process by which we can examine our lives and the meaning of our lives, what's true? What's real? What's good? What's important and how do I act? If you have ever asked these or any of these questions, you have done philosophy.

Another definition says "Philosophy is an attempt to think rationally and critically about life's most important questions to attain knowledge and wisdom about them."

Reasons why Philosophy Carries a Negative Connotation

Why does philosophy have a negative connotation? Even philosophers have made cynical remarks about philosophy:

- Henry James “Philosophy is the process of providing unintelligent answers to unsolvable problems.”
- Lord Bowen – “Philosophy is a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn’t there.”
- Ambrose Pierces – “Philosophy is the route of many roads from nowhere to nothing”
- De Cart, the father of modern philosophy said “one cannot conceive of anything so strange or so unbelievable that has not been said by one philosopher or another.”

- B. Russell, the atheistic British philosopher said “The point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as to seem not worth studying and to end with something so paradoxical that no one can believe.

All these are jokes about philosophy because philosophy can be done badly. But anything that can be done badly can also be done well. This negativity has affected perceptions as referred to above.

Perception/Attitudes

1. People think wrongly that you have to be super intelligent to do philosophy – granted, like so many other disciplines there is a realm of philosophical thought that is beyond most of us but that doesn't mean that you got to be up there in the ivory tower before you can do philosophy. Anyone with reasonable intelligence and who is willing to work at it can do philosophy.
2. People have become intellectually lazy. Philosophy makes you think. Alpantinger defines philosophy as “Thinking hard about something.”
3. People have no introduction to philosophy at the grassroots level. For every other course that you take in College or most, you would have had some pre-course to it in elementary or high school eg basic Maths to calculus, basic English to composition. Philosophy is almost entirely begun at the tertiary level. Therefore, people think it must be some sort of advanced study not knowing that children are naturally philosophical, they are inquisitive, what happens when we die? Is there a God? What does a soul look like? Why are some things good and some bad? Philosophy is not something advanced, rather it's something we all do all the time.

4. People think philosophy is not practical. It is the most practical thing because it allows you to think better, to be more critically aware, and to make a correct judgment about what is true and what is not true, right and wrong, good and bad. Our culture is in a horrible mess now because no critical thinking, same-sex marriage, homosexuality, abortion etc we have lost the ability to think philosophically, to ask the right questions and to decide whether the answers we are providing are correct or not.
5. People don't know what philosophy is and how it can help them.

Importance of Philosophy

- Ideas matter - The way you think about things, and the idea that you believe largely determines what kind of person you are going to be. We all have a natural intellectual appetite. We are inquisitive creatures- culture is in a mess because of much philosophical thinking. Many philosophical premises affect how we live in society- eugenics, the killing of the weak was not what Darwin intended but his interpreter after him took that to the extreme and we had the mess we had. Eugenics was popular until the 1940s. Ideas matter, and determine what individuals and society do.
- Our Philosophy determines our worldview - What we believe about the world and our place in it. Our conceptual framework of what the world is about and our place in it. Philosophy rightly done, will give us a better worldview. Darwin and others, have a world view that if you are not a productive contributor to survival, then you are of no use. The world is better off getting rid of you. How old would you be to no longer fit into the productive age? Where do you draw the line and when? How do you decide a person is no longer needed or useful?

- Philosophy also examines our assumptions - It asks questions and seeks to clarify and analyze concepts, seeks to organize facts into rational systems for all disciplines. It applies to every other discipline. Rightly done, it is the watchdog of every other discipline. It asks hard questions and doesn't have any biases. The philosophy of science should be the thing it should be and not what some crazy philosophers have turned it into.
- Philosophy also gives us a clear understanding of our lives, and what is important in life by teaching us to examine core values and beliefs. It helps us understand our lives better- what is it that I believe and why do I believe it? Am I justified in that?
- Philosophy also makes us more human - Socrates says "an unexamined life is not worth living". By that, he did not mean to kill everybody that does not examine his/her life. He meant we need to be able to examine our lives to think critically because that is necessary at the core of what it means to humans. If we live eating and defecating and lying around, then how are we different from the pigs/animals/dogs? When we don't think critically about our lives, what is right or wrong, good or bad, or how we should act etc then we are living a less-than-human life. We are simply been an Animal. Thinking philosophically is one of the things that make us human, the highest form of creatures, and one of the ways that make us recognize that we are made in the Image of God. So we can ask ourselves this question "what should I believe and why?" No animal can ask itself this question. "what should I do and why should I do it?" those questions make us more human.

Approaches to Philosophy- How do we get into the Study of Philosophy?

- Through the historical divisions and Topical Category
- Historical Divisions
 - a. Ancient Philosophy- beginning of philosophy- western philosophy (Eastern philosophy is a whole different creature) began around 600 BC-AD 400 – beginning of established Church – Constantine 300 - Classical Greek and Roman philosophers as they looked at the universe and wondered/pondered on its origin and nature eg Socrates, Plato, Aristotle etc. Socrates was against writing believing writing made people forget.
 - b. Medieval Philosophy 400AD-1400AD- end of the dark age – the Church was the dominant force in the west and philosophy expressed a unique Christian understanding of the world. Many of the philosophies studied today come from this period eg Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Anselm of Canterbury etc
 - c. Renaissance Philosophy/ Period- 1500-1900 AD. Enlightenment began - At that point, knowledge exploded, and science came onto the scene in a big way. Science and reason became the supreme method of discovering knowledge. This is the point at which philosophy began to turn away from the Christian Faith in some ways, not universally but there was the emergence of an anti-Christian viewpoint –the seed of modern secularism got sowed. e.g Blaise Pascal- philosopher, theologian and physical scientist, developed the laws of probability that are still being used today
 - De Cart- father of modern philosophy “I think therefore I am”
 - David Hume- radical scepticism introduced in no way others have been able to refute
 - Emmanuel Kant- German Philosopher
 - Hegel – philosophy of history and history of philosophy

- Soren Kierkegaard- Danish philosopher and committed believer.
- d. Contemporary Philosophy- 1900- present day. The most diverse period, like seeds from all the other periods. Many philosophical movements most notably -plantiger.
- **Topical Category**
 - a. Metaphysics –the philosophical study of reality. What is real? Looks at the origin and purpose of reality, the nature of reality and existence, the existence and nature of God and his relationship with the rest of reality, the nature of humanity, that is, what does it mean to be human, what is real about humanity? It is the oldest and most fundamental of all philosophical studies.
 - b. Epistemology –the philosophical study of knowledge and truth claims. How do you know things? Plato said anything we know comes from some inherent or a priori – meaning coming from before, understanding that we have inside us that helps us to interpret reality –Kant in the critique of pure reason came up with a very different epistemological understanding. What can we know? How can we know it? How can we obtain knowledge, how do we verify it? What is truth? How do we justify truth claims and beliefs? Critically important
 - c. Ethics/Axiology –examination of values of all kinds. Meaning ethical values – what makes some things good and some bad? Do we have an inherent sense of what is good or bad? –boiling infants for lunch, good or bad? How do we decide that? –
 - d. Logic - Building blocks for any rational thought. The three laws of Logic are critical in any thought pattern – if they are not true then nothing else can make sense. They are inherently self-evident and must be undeniable and

require proof beyond themselves. They are themselves the essence of reason

- The Law of Identity –it says something is what it is or it can be stated that all true propositions are true and all false propositions are false. If someone says that may be true to you but not true to me - one thing cannot be both true or false. Something is either true or false - not talking about like or not like.
- The Law of non-Contradictions –it cannot be P and not P, or something cannot both be and not be at the same time in the same respect. Something cannot be both true and not true at the same time in the same respect. Two people who say the exact opposite thing at the same time in the same respect cannot both be right e.g Jesus is the son and is not
- The Law of Excluded middle –something either is or is not. A proposition is either true or false. It can't be both.

Christian Philosophy

Within the Christian context, Christian philosophy is also very important

- Philosophy aids in the process of apologetics, giving a reasoned defence of the Christian faith. Not just saying sorry. It helps in responding to Objections raised against us.
- Philosophy aids in polemics. That's the task of critically analyzing and refuting alternative, non-Christian worldviews.
- Philosophy is the central expression of the image of God in us.

- Philosophy permeates and supports systematic theology - systematic theology is influenced by philosophy.
- Philosophy encourages and facilitates the spiritual discipline of study.
- Philosophy enhances the confidence and boldness of Christian communities in general. They can respond to anti-Christian views with confidence.
- Philosophy is essential to the task of integrating our theological beliefs and other coherent, rational and intellectual perspectives. All truths are God's truth.

C.S Lewis says "to the ignorant and simple now, not to be able to meet the enemies on their ground would be to throw down our weapons and to betray our uneducated brethren who have under guard no defence against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist if for no other reason because bad philosophy needs to be answered".

Conclusion

Although we can't all be Socrates, Kant etc, we can however all be better than we are. Christians should not be weary of doing philosophy. That would be tantamount to embracing laziness rather than using our God-given faculties capable of critical thinking. We should not shy away from critical thinking because:

- Critical thinking is from God. God is the creative, intelligent creator of the universe and all that is in it, including humanity and the human ability to think. Note Genesis 1:26: "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'"

- The Christian use of critical-thinking processes does not analyze God, but rather human statements about God. This use of critical thinking is one God-ordained way for us to arrive at God's truth.
- Reasonable Christians seek to use critical-thinking skills to learn how to test their understanding of and application of God's moral truth. This is different from the secular rationalist who seeks to define moral truth through the use of reason.
- God is not subject to human limitations, but God is subject to the system of logic. Because he is the holy God, some things violate the holy character that he cannot logically do. In Hebrews 6:18 we see that God can't lie, and in James 1:13 we find that God can't be tempted.

Our institutions of learning beginning from the elementary to the tertiary levels should take philosophy as important as other courses.