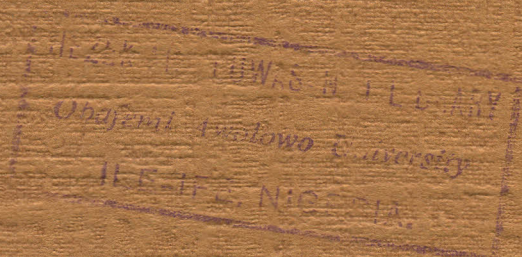


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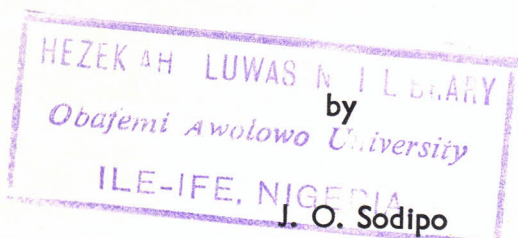
# PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE

by J. O. Sodipo



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WHEN ancient Pythagoras was asked by Leon, King of Phlius, to what profession he belonged, he is said to have replied that he belonged to no profession but was only a philosopher. To Leon's request that he should explain what exactly he meant, Pythagoras is reported to have said: Life is like the gathering at the Olympic festival to which people flock from three different motives: firstly to compete for the glory of a crown, i.e. to win prizes of victory at the races, secondly, to buy and sell or, thirdly, simply to watch or observe the games as spectators. So in life some enter the service to win honour and high reputation; others to make monetary gain and profit, and some others to contemplate nature (observers of nature). These last are the lovers of wisdom, that is, the philosophers, and their choice, Pythagoras concluded not surprisingly, is the best.

The world, and philosophy along with it, has changed a lot since the days of Pythagoras. Philosophers nowadays enter the service to earn their living and, if possible, gain scholarly reputation. Many people will certainly deny that the philosopher's choice is the best as they would prefer a life of action in politics and the professions to that of the apparently useless visionaries who give their whole life to a discipline which probably deserves a little attention for the sake of general culture. What is worse, it might be said that philosophy's title to being an observation of nature has been pre-empted by Natural Science.

Certainly the claims of philosophy are less ambitious now than they used to be. It no longer claims to be the queen of the Sciences, and in the tradition to which I belong it is no longer the construction of imposing theories about the nature of the universe or the attempt to reveal the true reality behind a veil of misleading appearances. On the other hand, the old lady who tried to console her husband with the words "Take it philosophically, dear, don't think about it" had a wrong conception of philosophy, and the student who expects the professor or lecturer in philosophy to accept a badly written and shoddy essay with a calm resignation, erroneously believed philosophical, will be disappointed. For throughout the changes it has undergone over the centuries, philosophy has maintained its critical and theoretic concern. My intention here is to show the relevance of this theoretic concern called philosophy for our cultural and intellectual development. In the course of this main task, I hope to show in what sense the Natural Sciences have not preempted the title of philosophy to being an observation of nature.

Philosophy is reflective and critical thinking about the concepts and principles we use to organise our experience in morals, in religion, in social and political life, in law, in psychology, in history and in the Natural Sciences. Few I think will deny that the man who succeeds in identifying the structure and components of his concep-



tual system is thereby released from bondage to it. We see the lack of this ability to *abstract* or to *stand aside and observe* and we smile when we are told the story of the boy who was asked by his father how many fingers he (the father) has and who replied "I don't know: I can only count my own fingers" or the story about the mathematics teacher who when he asked the class 'How many oranges would Johnnie have if Mary and Jane gave him so and so many', received the indignant reply "Please sir, don't speak of oranges, we have only learned to count in applies". We smile, but our situation is not much different from that of the small boy or that interesting mathematics class when for failure to ask questions about the conceptual system to which we are committed in our disciplines we remain in bondage to them under all circumstances. I am not of course recommending that all lawyers should be legal philosophers, or all historians philosophers of history or that all scientists should be philosophers of science—*Ars longa, vita brevis*—these men are busy enough with specific practical objectives. The point I am making is that be it history or law or the Social Sciences, an important advantage accrues to a discipline when its practitioners know explicitly what assumptions are involved in the language and model it uses. For if the assumptions are known they can be changed systematically, explicitly and controllably, and no amount of experimental or practical work alone can determine what concepts or paradigms are best to use. Anything therefore that would promote conversation between the practitioners and those who are committed to the analysis and criticism of the conceptual framework of those practices is to be encouraged. This is the rationale for the institutionalized forum for discussion which a worthwhile department of philosophy should be.

## **Philosophy and the Natural Sciences**

Philosophic and scientific thinking were born together in ancient Greece. And through many centuries, especially from the 17th century in Europe, philosophic reflection has been revitalized by fresh contact with the concepts, methods and standards of scientific inquiry. On the other hand, the history and development of science has shown that the greatest contribution to science has been made by those scientists who possessed what is rightly called philosophic insight. As T. H. Huxley puts it: "Those who refuse to go beyond fact to theory rarely get as far as fact; and anyone who has studied the history of science knows almost every step therein has been made by . . . the invention of a hypothesis which, though verifiable, often had little foundation to start with".

Again Sir Lawrence Bragg, a physicist who shared a Nobel Prize with his own father—for their joint work on analysing crystal



structures by means of X-rays—said in his *History of Science* that the essence of science “lies not in discovering facts, but in discovering other ways of thinking about them”. To say all this is not of course to ignore the importance of collecting facts. For only a fool would now want to belittle the importance of observation and experiment—or wish to revert to Aristotelian physics which was almost all speculation and no experiment. But in view of the prestige of the scientific method and the havoc that its wrong conception does in the humanities and the social sciences, the point needs to be made that true scientific work is as much a work of the imagination as it is work at the laboratory bench. Butterfield puts it excellently when he said in his *History of the Scientific Revolution* “We shall find that in both celestial and terrestrial physics, change is brought about, not by new observations or additional evidence in the first instance, but by transpositions that were taking place inside the minds of the scientists themselves. Of all forms of mental activity the most difficult to induce even in the minds of the young, who may be presumed not to have lost their flexibility, is the art of handling the same bundle of data as before, but placing them in a new system of relations with one another by giving them a different framework, all of which virtually means putting on a different kind of thinking cap for the moment. It is easy to teach anybody a new historical fact about Richelieu, but it needs light from heaven to enable a teacher to break the old framework in which the student has been accustomed to seeing his Richelieu”.

All this is apart from the important fact that in recent years some of the conceptual problems of philosophy have moved into the foreground of science. Discussions of problems about the concept of causality and the concept of thinghood have appeared in physics, particularly in the attempts to interpret quantum mechanics in a useful and consistent way. Conceptual problems about space and time have cropped up in the relativity theories. Problems as to what are the limits of the concept of an individual have cropped up in biology, particularly in discussions of the attempts to specify the unit of evolution i.e. the attempts to answer the question as to *what* it is actually that evolves. And recent dissatisfactions in psychology partly revolve around doubts as to the content of concepts such as that of *a person* and *an action*.

Many of us learnt the scientific fact that the stars are at such enormous distances from the earth that despite the great speed of light, the appearance which we see when we look at, say, the Pole Star one night, is the appearance of the Pole Star not as it is at the time of our seeing it but as it was some 400 years before. The philosopher however is sufficiently inquisitive to ask, in the light of this fact, what the relation is between what we are immediately aware of



when we look up into the sky and the Pole Star itself. For if the Pole Star were to be extinguished suddenly now, we should still be seeing what we call the Pole Star in the next 400 years. And the philosophical problem can be raised not only about objects at such great distances from the earth but also about those that are so near that the passage of light from them to us is for practical purposes instantaneous. This is of course the problem of appearance and reality in the theory of knowledge.

Perhaps something might therefore be gained if science is presented as an imaginative adventure of the mind and if in the course of an ever more crammed syllabus of factual information some time is given to introducing the student to the elementary logic and philosophy of science. Maybe too something might be gained of that imaginative flexibility which a professional engineer must need to harness water power in an underdeveloped country, or which a chemist must require who is called upon to manage men as well as processes in an oil plant.

### **Philosophy and the Humanities**

While a close relationship between the sciences and philosophy is mutually beneficial, philosophy has always had an intimate relationship with the Humanities. If philosophy is not called the queen of the Humanities, it is at least continuous with the Humanities and within this continuous world of the Humanities, the more general, persistent and difficult questions count as 'philosophy'. By this statement I should not be taken to mean that a historian puzzled by the concept of historical causation, or a lawyer puzzled by the concept of justice or criminal responsibility, or a literary critic or artist puzzled by the concept of beauty should ring up a philosopher to ask for the answer. For obvious reasons they don't, and rightly so. But the truth remains that systematic attempts to deal with these persistent questions constitute 'philosophy'; and I believe that while the ideal of the university as an assemblage of learned men intellectually curious to adjust the claims and relations of their respective disciplines, remain valid, there would be need for the interdisciplinary conversation and enlightenment which is the aim of the philosophy seminars run by the Philosophy section of the department. For if we choose to live, each of us in his own scholarly fox-hole, Henry Newman's description of the less desirable type of university teacher would fit us more and more.

"There are men" says Newman, "who embrace in their minds a vast multitude of ideas but with little sensibility about their real relations towards each other. They be annalists or naturalists; they may be learned in the law; they may be versed in statistics; they are

most useful in their place; I should shrink from speaking disrespectfully of them; still there is nothing in such attainments to guarantee the absence of a narrowness of mind. If they are nothing more than men of information, they have not what specially deserves the name of culture of mind”.

It is by virtue of this continuity of philosophy with all the Humanities and the critical role it plays within them that a special marriage between Philosophy and Religious Studies must appear forced and purely arbitrary.

### **Philosophy and the Social Sciences**

Karl Marx's famous statement that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world while the point is to change it” is sometimes taken to mean that the attempt to interpret and analyse is irrelevant to the effort to effect a change. If that statement is taken like this, Karl Marx would proved himself dramatically wrong by his own achievement and influence. For much of the value of Marx lies in the fact that by his philosophical genius he forced men to a conceptual revision of the facts of social life; he set up new standards for the explanation of social life and thus changed our whole idea of what it is that we are trying to explain. Indeed the Marxian ideal of the “unity of theory and practice”, of the futility of proclaiming ideals in abstraction depends very much for its materialization on a philosophic understanding of the true relation between theory and practice, i.e. on the ability to change one's thinking cap, which Butterfield spoke of. For, as I said earlier, it is the man who cannot isolate the conceptual framework embedded in his practice who is kept in greatest bondage to it, and who attempts to impose it on materials that are entirely unsuitable. The historian who has never been exercised by the nature of historical explanation can hardly be expected to give reasoned arguments as to why oral evidence has claims to admission in historical writing. The more imaginative social scientist is of course aware that the application of the methods and the conceptual categories of the natural sciences, the employment of their ideas of causation, measurement etc. to the study of society is problematic, and he is exercised by that problem. He therefore realizes that there are social situations where what is needed for understanding is not a sophisticated and very complicated mathematical model but a conceptual framework in which sympathetic intuition and imaginative insight would play a crucial role. This was in fact the theme of one of our philosophy seminars led by Dr. King of the Department of Agricultural Economics. It was also, from a slightly different point of view, the theme of another seminar led by Dr. Osoba under the auspices of the Faculty of Education



with the thought provoking, some would say provocative, title of "factors militating against creative and socially relevant intellectual activity in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria". It seems to me also to be the point which Professor P. L. Berger, a distinguished sociologist, makes in his book *Invitation to Sociology* when he said "Statistical data by themselves do not make sociology. They become sociology when they are sociologically interpreted i.e. put within a theoretical frame of reference that is sociological. Simple counting or even correlating different items that one counts is not sociology . . . there is much that passes today under the heading of sociology that is justly called barbarian, if that word is intended to denote ignorance of history and philosophy, narrow expertise without wider horizons, a pre-occupation with technical skill and total insensitivity to the uses of language. A humanistic understanding of sociology leads to an almost symbiotic relationship with history. As to philosophical literacy, it would not only prevent the methodological naivete of some sociologists, but would also be more conducive to a more adequate grasp of the phenomena themselves that the sociologist wishes to investigate".

As social scientists therefore we need occasionally to ask ourselves whether we are just, as the saying goes, blinding the layman with science, i.e. dressing up our lack of imagination in pseudo-scientific language and taking advantage of the generally held, but certainly erroneous, belief that any argument couched in scientific or mathematical terms must be right and that any person using mathematical terms in his explanation must be intelligent; we must ask whether that is what we are doing or whether we are making a conscientious and imaginative effort to understand the crucial problems of our society. Fortunately both the university authorities and our Faculty of Social sciences are favourably disposed to a close relationship between the Social Sciences and Philosophy. It is my hope that this relationship will contribute to an awareness among our students of problems such as I have raised here.

## **The Two Cultures**

In his 1959 Rede Lecture, later much publicised in a book form with the title of *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, Sir C. P. Snow (now Lord Snow) spoke of a great cultural division and distance between the Sciences and the Humanities. The Snow thesis is summarised in the following quotation from his book *The Two Cultures and a Second Look*: "The non-scientists have a rooted impression that the scientists are shallowly optimistic, unaware of man's condition. On the other hand, the scientists believe that the literary intellectuals are totally lacking in foresight, peculiarly unconcerned with their



brother men, in a deep sense anti-intellectual, anxious to restrict art and thought to tradition and the existing moment". It has been argued that C. P. Snow actually exaggerated the cultural gap by misrepresenting the two positions, but few will deny that there is a difference in the cultural outlook of scholars in the Humanities and those in the Sciences. Now, because philosophy cannot but be interested in the human condition, its hopes and fears, its laws of thought, its norm of conduct, its criteria of artistic creation and judgement, while at the same time 'observing' that adventure of the human mind called Science, it is in a position to make a substantial contribution towards bridging this gap. It is easy for the scholar in the Humanities to say that a man who is ignorant of history, of the arts, of the role of religion and language in society, of the values transmitted in literature, oral and written, hardly justifies being called cultured or civilized. Yet the philosopher sees that it is becoming more and more essential for the humanist to realize that the exploration of the natural order called science has important human value and significance, and that the scientific edifice of the natural world is, in its intellectual depth, complexity and articulation one of the most beautiful and wonderful works of the mind of man. The artist or the creative humanistic writer therefore needs to include the scientific world in the world which he imaginatively depicts and creates. As Ernest Gellner puts it in his *Thought and Change* "We cannot recover those balmy days when our knowledge of the world was so feeble that the objectivity of the world could be prostituted for our edification, when theories could be held true basically because they made sense of our lives and social arrangements. In fact the world is what it is, and notably, it is not a morality play for our benefit. But conversely, we cannot adopt a kind of total apartheid between that which we really think of the world (i.e. science), and that which we think for moral and human purposes. The latter must take place within the context of the former".

The foregoing view of philosophy has important implications for our undergraduate programme. We believe that outside those jobs to perform for which one requires expertise in specific languages a graduate in philosophy will be at least as effective as other graduates in the Humanities. For his training in philosophy, if properly organised and conducted, should give him first, a broad historical knowledge even if without the technical expertise of the history graduate; second, considerable sensitiveness to language, its meanings and its significance as a medium for communicating ideas—even if again without an aesthetic sensitiveness of the 'literary' type which the training in language and literature is meant to develop. Thirdly, the student should also acquire an intellectual curiosity through his



close acquaintance with the fundamental questions discussed in philosophy; fourthly, an intellectual toughness and independence of mind, i.e. an unwillingness to take things on trust, and a determination to seek the justification of views and theories and search for valid reasons and proofs. Finally, it will provide the undergraduate with great analytical powers, i.e. an ability to handle abstract ideas—a sensitivity to implications and a feeling for meanings and shades of meaning.

It is therefore very encouraging to note that the West African Examinations Council is currently engaged in preparing an Ordinary Level Syllabus in Logic for schools. I believe that most professional philosophers and many enlightened educationists would see this as a step very much in the right direction. The course will be taken at the later years of the secondary school career, and if a proper balance is maintained between formal and informal or practical logic, it should prove extremely valuable to the student not only in his pursuit of other disciplines but in his daily contact and communication with his fellow students. For it should develop clarity in expression and discipline and order in argument.

Again, philosophy has always sought to make its impact by crossing and sometimes by breaking down the rigid barriers between disciplines. It has therefore always encouraged an alliance between itself and some other discipline, for example Philosophy and History, Philosophy and the Social Sciences, Philosophy and the Natural Sciences, etc. This is why we particularly encourage our students to take the combined honours options in our programme. For this programme, we believe, is mutually beneficial to philosophy and the other discipline. The latter provides the student with useful raw material in a context he understands either in form of empirical evidence about human behaviour, or history, language, or natural science, while philosophy improves the analytical powers which the student brings to the other discipline.

It is with the aim of promoting the objectives explained above that our journal called *Second Order. An African Journal of Philosophy* was launched. We believe that philosophical thinking is an intellectual expression of the process of cultural change; it is the intellectual phase of the process by which conflicts within a culture are analysed and clarified and, if possible, resolved and composed. The aim therefore to effect the transition from underdevelopment to modernity, to adapt the scientific world-view to the traditional one is by no means irrelevant to philosophy. I very much hope that faculty members throughout the university will see the journal as a medium for promoting the inter-disciplinary conversation and enlightenment of which I spoke above.

Finally let me end this lecture with a quotation from that, in my view, most stimulating of philosophers, David Hume:

“Man is a reasonable being, and as such, receives from science his proper food and nourishment . . . Man is a sociable, no less than a reasonable being. He is also an active being; and from that disposition, as well as from the various necessities of human life, must submit to business and occupation. But the mind requires some relaxation, and cannot always support its bent to care and industry. It seems then, that nature has pointed out a mixed kind of life as most suitable to the human race, and secretly admonished them to allow none of these biases to draw too much, so as to incapacitate them for other occupations and entertainments. Indulge your passion for science, she says but let your science be human, and such as may have a direct reference to action and society . . .

Besides, we may observe, in every art or profession, even those which most concern life or action, that a spirit of accuracy, however acquired, carries all of them nearer their perfection, and renders them more subservient to the interests of society. And though a philosopher may live remote from business, the genius of philosophy, if carefully cultivated by several, must gradually diffuse itself throughout the whole society, and bestow a similar correctness on every art and calling. The politician will acquire greater foresight and subtlety in the sub-dividing and balancing of power; the lawyer more method and finer principles in his reasonings; and the general more regularity in his discipline, and more caution in his plans and operations”.

These are very large claims for philosophy but they are not in my view unfounded. For the application of the deep criticism and analysis called philosophy to our traditional systems of thought is no luxury but a necessity not only with a view to rejecting that which is outmoded but also with a view to discovering and retaining that which is of value in African culture. Philosophy thus deserves the status not of a luxury to be postponed till more prosperous times but of an essential ingredient in the kind of education which the African situation demands. If we decide to postpone it until our societies are more materially and technologically developed, I think we would be missing an opportunity of introducing the leaven of culture and understanding at the level where it is most likely to influence that development beneficially. It is my fervent hope that the “genius of philosophy” will be cultivated and will flourish here at Ife.