

## **A historical look at the quandary over the task and definition of philosophy**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper was aimed at re-examining the problem surrounding the definition of philosophy as a discipline and the attempt to eliminate the historical challenges or dilemma that often accompany its definition over the years. From the point of view of what a thing does or the role it plays, we have its function. We are of the opinion that the practical role or function of a subject at any particular period gives it its definition. From this functional point of view, a task and definition of a thing are twin brothers. In this connection, a thing is what a thing does. That is, how it behaves or functions characterizes its nature. Thus, the function of philosophy at any historical period determines its definition at that period. Put in another way, the attempt by philosophy to solve some problems both social and natural, characterizes the discipline. With this background, we arrived at the conclusion that philosophy is not only a child of wonder (problems) but that each culture or historical period has its unique problem. Thus, the expectation a culture has for a philosophy is always relative to the problem of the period. This implies that the expectation of any phenomenon is akin to its function or characteristics. In the case of philosophy, its function aims at solving its cultural related problem. It admits no contradiction, therefore, to say that since every philosophy is culture (time and place) bound, every philosophy within a period in history has its distinctive definition. In this respect, it is ambiguous to say that philosophy has no definition. Therefore, a demand for the definition of philosophy must attract a historical context. Summarily, different definitions of philosophy occur at different epochs due to the different expectations different epochs have for philosophy.*

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**Key Words: Philosophy, Definition, Quandary, Culture-Bound**

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### **Introduction**

According to Bertrand Russell(1961, 13), philosophy is a word which has been used

in many ways, some are wide and some are narrow. This could mean that it is sometimes used in a speculative manner especially when it concerns theology or dogmas; and sometimes it

is used in a definite manner when it investigates knowledge or science. This is besides its unscientific meaning as a 'way of life', a set of basic values or attitude toward life. As a discipline, there remains the controversy surrounding the definition of philosophy probably due to the fact that the lines of distinction between the various areas of knowledge are flexible and subject to change. This problem concerning the definition of philosophy is as old as the discipline itself. Perhaps, it is the need to reduce or avoid the problem that necessitates the attempt to re-examine historically the various definitions with a view to arriving at a definite one in line with the role the discipline itself plays in the history of man and the society. Talking about the role philosophy plays is understood as its function in the different historical epochs which in a way is less controversial than the general description often given to it as a phenomenon.

Our problem in this work is informed by what Udoidem (1992,1 ) calls, "One million naira question" (it is such a huge money question) in that it is often asked by both the most learned and the most untutored of our society. Ever since the question was raised thousands of years ago, it is still being asked today and the answer received have been as unsatisfactory as the ones given at the first time when it was asked. The question is what is the definition of philosophy? Our approach to this question in the first instance is investigative. This is because we shall go into history to find out the different definitions of the discipline according to different epochs. Second, we will look for the reason for such variations and third, we will pose a question whether it is correct to raise the question, "what is the definition of philosophy?"

**Historical Reflection:** We need to start our exploration of the definition of philosophy from the Egyptian period because in the words of Burns(1954, 156-157):

It is clear that the popular notion that philosophy originated from the Greeks is fallacious. Centuries earlier, the Egyptians had given much thought to the nature of the universe and to the social and ethical problems of man. The achievement of the Greeks was rather the development of philosophy in a more inclusive meaning than it had ever possessed before.

The significance of the above quotation is the justification it renders to the starting point of our definitional approach to philosophy. The philosophy of ancient Egypt was chiefly ethical, political, cosmological and anthropological. It started about the end of fourth millennium B.C. This philosophy was revived by Ikhanton about 2500 B.C. Other philosophical ideas of the ancient Egyptians include their conception of cyclic history, eternal universe and the doctrine of natural cause and effect(48). The Egyptians believed that the universe was controlled by the mind. These propositions were contained in different inscriptions such as Memphite Drama, a documentation of priests and sages.

The ethical philosophy of this ancient civilization was contained in the maxim or aphorisms of Ptahnotep. The philosophies dwelt on the advantages and implications of kindness, graciousness, tolerance, justice, righteousness, sacrifice and cheerfulness which guide any young man who is in pursuit of success. In addition to this, Ptahnotep counseled the youths about the avoidance of pride, sensuality and greed. He prescribed moderation and restraint in human behavior. These aphorisms were the expressions of first moral idealism. Because of insecurity due to constant wars; disharmony, pessimism and disillusionment crept into the thinking of the ancient Egyptians. Following this, faith in their worship broke down and people lost faith in the

immortality of their nation. For this, skepticism as a part of their philosophy crept in. This philosophy is characteristic of the “song of the Harp-player.” This is seen in the Pharaoh’s tomb-chapel of 2100 B.C. The inscription reads, “None cometh from thence that he may tell us how they fare” (Burns1954, 49). Therefore the logical course of this behavior was to follow desires and pleasure and benevolent works.

On political philosophy, khekheperresonob, a prominent priest of Heliopolis described those on top of affairs as stronger than the poor peasants who had no strength to defend themselves. Thus, the upper class was prone to indictment by their attitudes. The author declared, “The poor man has no strength to save himself from him that is stronger than he”. The author’s reflections would be appropriate for social criticisms of our time.

In about 2100 BC, Egypt returned to a semblance of order and prosperity. Political philosophy seemed to welcome such a change. The outstanding specimen of such philosophy was the “plea of the eloquent peasant”. The philosophy was put in a narrative form. It was about a peasant who was robbed of his right by an unscrupulous officer. The victim appealed to a superior authority who in turn asked the victim to expound his conception of administrative justice. The peasant put the following ingredients of administrative justice thus:

1. to act as the father of the orphan
2. to act as the husband of the widow
3. to act as the brother of the forsaken
4. to ward off the robber and protect the wretched
5. to execute punishment upon whom it is due
6. to judge impartially and to speak no falsehood

7. to promote order or harmony and prosperity so that no one should suffer from hunger or thirst or cold (Burns 1954, 48-50).

Summarizing the above, the ancient Egyptians came to conceive philosophy as a search for the meaning of the world, human life in the world and the relationship between man and his fellow man. Put briefly philosophy became a reflection on the nature of the universe and on the social and ethical problems of man (Burns 1954, 156).

**Greek Contribution:** When it fails to the lot of the Greeks to develop philosophy in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, philosophers from Thales to Democritus concerned themselves with the nature of the physical universe, the origin and the rational explanation of the same. Since there was no differentiation between philosophy and physical science then, philosophy became a systematic investigation of the problems raised by man on issues of the universe (Coffey 1914, 7). Latter in the Greek history of philosophy, Pythagoras shifted his philosophical investigation to metaphysical concepts such as Being, Truth, Divine scheme of things, etc. He therefore defined philosophy etymologically as the love of wisdom. By this, he meant that philosophy was the highest kind of knowledge. When philosophy was understood as “Love of wisdom”, it meant the curiosity to find out meanings of situations and to apply these meanings to situations of practical and social problems. The etymological definition thus means that in philosophy there is a curiosity to hit at a target. This target is the practical application of intelligence to the problems of humanity. Intelligence here was captured to mean the understanding of relationships among things.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Greek philosophers - the Sophists, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the Roman philosophers witnessed the rise of individualism. Perhaps, because of what the Greeks suffered during the

Peloponnesian war of 431-404 B.C, they occupied themselves with the solution of existential problems of man as against mere metaphysical or abstract theorization. To highlight this preoccupation, Protagoras came up with the maxim that “man is the measure of all things . . . .” (qtd in Omoregbe 2005, 86). The meaning of this is that man as a centripetal force justifies any epistemic endeavour. The Epicureans and the Stoics capitalized on the above and tried to liberate man from the claws of supernaturalism. Thus, philosophy came to be recognized as a practical art of human conduct based on rational speculation (Coffey 1914, 7).

Saint Augustine (354-430 AD) forms an essential link between the later Greeks’ thinking and medieval thought. He made use of the aspect of Greek philosophy that had an agreement with Christian faith (Curtis 1950, 13). However, the unitary and the rounded centre of attraction of the medieval period was the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas. Scholasticism is the defense of Christian doctrines through the application of Greek philosophy. Thus, philosophy between 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD came to be defined as the hand-maiden of theology (Coffey 1914, 10).

From the 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries AD; that is, from Renaissance through Reformation period, there was a new birth in some discoveries (such as the development of modern mathematics by Christopher Clavius (1537-1612) and the introduction of a method of observation through instrument as fostered by Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). It is with the influence of this period that the scientific discoveries of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were hatched (Rogers and Baird 1949, 68). With the adoption of the formal method of science and the scientific aim at practical results, there came a need to balance human values of ancient philosophy with scientific formal method. This constituted a problem for philosophy within the modern period. Thus, philosophy tried to combine the conclusions of

the sciences and the doctrines of human valuations. This is why in Kant’s synthesis; philosophy became an attempt to have a holistic view of the entire human experience (Titus 1979, 11).

Within the contemporary period; that is, about the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century AD, there was progress in the West. But at the end of 1914 there was a type of disaster (war) that had not been witnessed before. This was followed by a second world war. Many people lost their lives and belongings. Kantian synthesis collapsed. Again dichotomy between human values and scientific facts resurrected and increased. There came a question of what constitutes knowledge and its justification. A group of people agreed that to “know”, one has to master the concepts that constitute knowledge. This is why philosophers such as, Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, etc, developed logical analysis as a method to determine what objectively constitutes knowledge or non-knowledge. Philosophy thus came to be known within this century as the critical and logical analysis of the significance, scope, limitation and meaning of human knowledge. This made many philosophers of the century to concentrate on the theories of knowledge and the nature of cognitive process and the justification of its product (Titus 1979, 6).

Thus, in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries in all English speaking or English influenced worlds, philosophy virtually came to mean a logically analytic enterprise (Kaplan 1960, 53). The enterprise becomes a process and a product of a personally logical reflection and criticism of beliefs and assumptions that give rise to the various human experiences and actions with the aim of reaching a world-view within which man can make sense of his existence.

## **Conclusion**

We have taken some pains to wade through the history of philosophy. Our discovery is that philosophy is not only a child of wonder (problem) but that each culture or

historical period has its unique problem. The expectation of philosophy is always relative to the problem of the time of the philosophy since the expectation of any phenomenon is akin to its function or characteristic definition. And in the case of philosophy, its functions aims at solving its related problem, it admits no contradiction to say that since every philosophy is time and place bound every philosophy within a period in history, has its distinctive definition.

Therefore, it is ambiguous to say that philosophy has no definition. Again, it is not correct to ask for a definition of philosophy out of historical context. All these amount to the fact that different definitions of philosophy occur at different epochs because of the different expectations different periods have for philosophy. For example, following the above, we can apply our discovery to a possible definition of African philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. African philosophy is a sort of process and product of a personally logical reflection and criticism of beliefs and assumptions that give rise to various African experience and actions. Thus, philosophy coincides or produces an enlightened world-view within which an African can make sense of his existence.

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