

STUDY SESSION 1

CONCEPTION, NATURE, SCOPE AND PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY

1.1 Introduction

In this study session, you will be introduced to the subject matter of philosophy. Our concern here will be to understand what philosophy is, the basic conception of philosophy, and the problems which the study seeks to unravel and concerns itself with. The study session will expose you to the various conceptions of philosophy and its basic subject matters. In turn, you will become acquainted with the basic understanding of the branches, nature, scope and problems of philosophy.

1.1.1 Learning Outcomes for Study Session 1

At the end of this study session, you should be able to:

1. Give at least three (3) definitions of Philosophy;
2. State the various branches of philosophy;
3. Define philosophy based on the branches identified;
4. State the nature of philosophy; and
5. List and explain at least two (2) problems of philosophy.

1.2 Conception and Nature of Philosophy

The first thing that most probably embarrasses an initiate into philosophy as a discipline of study in the university is the general view that philosophy has no universally accepted

definition. What is surprising is how any group of intellectual practitioners can carry on for over two thousand years (at least, according to its history in the West) without an agreement on the nature of their discipline.

In defining philosophy, therefore, one may safely note variations of practices not only within its Western tradition, but also cultural variations of methodology, style and issues that receive attention in different parts of the world. However, since definitions of philosophy in the West are the ones we are most familiar with, because these have been documented in writing and have formed the basis of our school education, it may well be best to start with them. Later, we will take a look at African philosophy and some of the issues that have received attention in it in the last few decades.

(i) Philosophy as the Love of Wisdom

This perhaps is the first meaning the Greeks gave to philosophy when that word was coined from two distinct words (*Philein* – to love; *Sophia* – wisdom). To the ancient Greeks who lived about 500 years before the birth of Christ on the islands of Miletus and Ionia, seeking knowledge may be a common inherent quality of man, but there are a few who seek wisdom (which is invariably higher than mere knowledge) not just for personal gains but because they love wisdom. Wisdom, for the Greeks, consists in the ability to draw meaning from experience, to judge experience wisely; to see beyond what merely meets the eyes. In those days, philosophy included all knowledge not because philosophy means science. Wisdom needs knowledge as basis because an ignorant person, a man or woman who knows little or nothing about the facts of nature and existence can hardly be wise in relating facts to each other. Logic, mathematics, physics, medicine, cosmology were all areas in which the philosopher was involved and interested.

(ii) Philosophy as the Search for Reality

If wisdom consists of something higher than ordinary experience, that is, something that transcends mathematical and empirical knowledge, then it must have a subject-matter. What does wisdom aim at achieving, what is its goal, or what does the philosopher try to grasp? The Greek answer to these questions is that philosophy is a search for Reality. But then, what is the Reality? How does it differ from what is given in ordinary experience?

Thales tried to explain this by stating that although nature gives us various objects in experience – the air, trees, man, animals, hills and mountains, rivers and valleys, fruits and seeds etc. – they must all have been created from one basic stuff just as a potter can make a cup, a flower vase, a spoon, plates, pots, tables and chairs etc., using the same material known as clay. If we break all the products of the potter we will have only one material, one basic stuff out of which everything is made. The philosopher as a wise man wishes to know this basic stuff, this fundamental element out of which everything came into palpable existence. Thales identified this basic stuff as water; other Greek philosophers suggested *air* and *earth*. But it was the philosopher Anaximander who took Thales's search to a level which is truly beyond experience. He identified what he named the *apeiron* in Greek language. In the English language it means the *limitless* something which is neither a substance nor an empirical object. It is something beyond sensible experience.

(iii) Philosophy as the Search for Truth

This definition has a close relationship with the last. The important distinction is that we can speak of Reality in the sense of being something substantial, something to be described or at least grasped by way of identifying some inherent qualities, i.e. some characteristics it possesses by its own nature. Reality is thus generally regarded as something that has its own independent existence. This means that those who regard matter as Reality believe that its existence does not depend on the prior existence of any other thing.

The truth that the philosopher seeks also has to do with the comparison of truths arrived at through different processes – Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Medicine, Social Sciences, Religion etc. In short there is a sense in which philosophy as the search for truth tries to establish a *Truth* or even the *Truth* which is supposed to supersede all other truths in different spheres of man's rational endeavour. In fact some will go as far as saying that the search for this truth is the same thing as the search for Reality. This is because what is taken to be Reality is also regarded as *the Truth*.

(iv) Philosophy as the Formulation of Metaphysical Systems or Cosmologies

If man can explain nature in rational terms it means that man can understand not only the nature of every distinct object in the world but their relationship to one another. We are not now talking of the relationships among states, countries, continents, oceans or mountains etc. What philosophy deals with is much more fundamental than that. What is physics, for example; how is it related to Chemistry etc.? Again, how are the laws in each related or unrelated to the laws of Biology, Psychology etc.? Do these different laws constitute members of the same type/group, a universe of natural laws?

Philosophy, for a long time, was seen as attempts to formulate speculative theories in which every aspect of nature falls into its appropriate place within one grand design. Later on speculative axioms were replaced by what were regarded as theoretical postulates – axioms from which deductive systems dealing with or explaining different aspects of human experience can be built, as Jacob Bronowski once put it. However, the whole exercise turned out to be more of speculation than of scientific discovery.

(v) Philosophy as the Rational Explanation of Nature

When Thales and other Ionian philosophers tried to find the basic stuff out of which objects in the world were made (not in the sense of Biblical sense of creation, mind you) we are told these philosophers used human reason and relied mainly on the facts of experience. Before them, Homer and other Greek poets relied on their intuition and supernatural notions to explain nature. The idea of gods and goddesses, spirits that populate the world and control human affairs formed the bases of popular myths. But Thales, Anaximanes and their associates wanted to explain nature in such a way that we need not go beyond man into the supernatural to explain experiences such as change, motion and permanence which are the most common features of human experience.

Today, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Medicine etc., at least as practised in the West, are heirs of the rationalistic approach to explaining nature. The point is not that any of these disciplines is philosophy by itself. The fact is that each of them is pursued from the metaphysical point of view that nature is completely explainable in rational terms (at least until very recently).

(vi) Philosophy as the Critical/Logical Analysis of Language

At the beginning of the twentieth century, philosophers in many countries in the West, most especially in Britain and United States of America, became disillusioned with speculations and so-called scientific *corychires* which from day to day takes man away from the realities of experience. Many came to the conclusion that philosophy has come into some sort of obscurity because the language in which its themes and theories are formulated makes use of spurious entities and expressions whose inferences and implications do not easily make sense even to the educated person.

The central task of philosophy then came to be seen as that of explaining, clarifying and marking out the logical as well as the semantic implications of our language of expression. This “Linguistic Turn”, as it is sometimes called, came to a point where Professor Noam

Chomsky, renowned grammarian, once argued that what philosophy does is nothing over and above that of marking out the deep structures of language from their “surface structure”.

Philosophy as analysis therefore lays emphasis on the clarity of terms, of consistency in arguments and hypothetical verification. The belief is that once our language of expression is clear, unambiguous and systematic, we will be in a better position to know what exactly we are talking about. This clarity greatly enhances the possibility of reaching some consensus on important matters both of everyday life and of philosophy. The popular problem of whether there is a mind apart from the physical body has been dealt with by some modern philosophers as a purely linguistic problem. But today, the feeling is that there is much more to the problem of mind and God than that of mere language. There is the inherent metaphysical problem of the nature of reality.

(vii) Philosophy as the Search for the Ideal Life

This definition of philosophy comes up late not because it is the most recent definition of philosophy from a chronological order. In fact, Socrates, the father of Western philosophy saw himself as a philosopher in this sense. According to the Greek tradition into which he was born, to know the truth, i.e. reality in matters of character or virtue, it is not enough to have theoretical postulates. To know truth, i.e. to know what is good is to be good; it is to lead a virtuous life. When the philosopher was therefore identified as the seeker of the ideal life he was also regarded as somebody who lives that type of life he identifies as good. Philosophy was therefore the “*search for the ideal Life and how to live it*”. Socrates demonstrated this when he was in jail in Athens, condemned to death for allegedly leading the youths against the State. His friends came in the night ready with plans for his escape. Socrates reply was that he has always taught that a good citizen obeys the laws of his society.

Since running away from prison (and invariably from his condemnation to death) amounts to a disobedience, to his state Socrates said he would do no such thing.

(viii) Philosophy as the Concern with Human Existence

Philosophy, after moving away from this traditional view of its enterprises for a very longtime, seems to be moving systematically toward its original conception. This is not to suggest that philosophy's central concern today is seen as the formulation of First Principles of morality which are regarded as guides to the good life. What is happening is that philosophy rather than being the concern with pure objectivity was now seen as the need to take human interest and nature into consideration. What is man? What is the goal of living? What is man's position in the scheme of things? Where does he come from and where is he going? These are some of the questions raised by existentialists like Soren Kierkegaard, Martins Buber, Albert Camus, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. They also tried to answer these questions.

Philosophy, for the existentialists, is not abstract speculations about reality or the objective world. Man as the subject, is the determinant and discoverer of truth. Human interest, his harmonious relationship with others, his experience and his reason all determine what for him constitutes truth. Man first exists of all appearances, defines himself before he then turns to understand and explain the world. Hence for the existentialist "*existence precedes essence*" – man exists first before he tries to discover the essence of life, nature and the world.

1.2.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

List at least 5 ways philosophy can be understood and conceptualized.

1.2.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

- i. Philosophy as the search for reality
- ii. Philosophy as the love of wisdom
- iii. Philosophy as the search for truth
- iv. Philosophy as the rational explanation of nature
- v. Philosophy as the search for the ideal life

1.3 The Problem of What Philosophy Is

The first problem of philosophy is philosophy itself. The nature and definition of philosophy are philosophical problems. The question, “What is philosophy?” appears to be a very simple question. But it is not as simple as it appears. It is itself a philosophical question, and problem. Philosophical questions do not have single answer nor do they have dogmatic answers that must be accepted by every philosopher. If you ask ten professional philosophers “What is philosophy?” they will not give you the same answer. In fact, you are likely to get ten different answers. But that is the beauty of philosophy. It is a critical discipline which applies its own critical tool even to itself. The first problem of philosophy is therefore the problem of the definition of philosophy. There are many ways philosophy can be defined, but none of them can be called the definition of philosophy. There is nothing like that. We can have *a* definition of philosophy but not *the* definition of philosophy. Whatever definition of philosophy you give, some philosophers will disagree with you. There is no definition that all philosophers will agree with.

1.3.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

Which of these is a possibility, having *a* definition of philosophy or having *the* definition of philosophy?

1.3.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

We can have a definition of philosophy but not *the* definition of philosophy.

1.4 Metaphysical Problem

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), the German philosopher, began his book, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, with a fundamental philosophical question (a metaphysical question): “Why is there something and not nothing?” What does this question mean? Heidegger is, in other words, asking why things exist in the world at all. He is *asking why the world itself, with everything in it, exists*. What is the purpose of its existence? Apart from this basic question, there is also the question as to *whether the world is purely material, essentially spiritual, or a combination of both material and spiritual elements*. Is man himself purely material? Is he essentially spiritual, or a combination of matter and spirit? Different schools of philosophy give different answers to these questions. Those who belong to the *materialist school of thought (known as materialism)* hold that the world is purely material, that man himself, is entirely a material being, that there are no spirits. But those who belong to the *idealist school of thought (known as idealism)* maintain that the world is essentially spiritual, that man himself is essentially a spiritual being. Those who belong to the *dualist school of thought (known as dualism)* hold that the world is made up of both spiritual and material elements, and that man himself is composed of spirit and matter. These are metaphysical questions and problems.

1.4.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

What philosophical problem arises from metaphysics?

1.4.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

The problem of what the nature of reality is, and what the world is basically composed of. Answering this, various schools have emerged giving reasons for their perspectives ranging from materialism, to idealism, dualism, and even pluralism.

1.5 Epistemological Problem

Epistemology is *the study of the nature of human knowledge*. It is a philosophical inquiry into the *nature, origin, scope, limits, reliability* or otherwise of human knowledge. What can man know? Are there things that man cannot know? How reliable is human knowledge? What are the limits of human knowledge? What are the things that are beyond human knowledge? Not all philosophers agree that certain things are beyond human knowledge. G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), for example, does not agree with Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) that certain things (which Kant calls the noumena) are beyond human knowledge. For Hegel, there is nothing either beyond human knowledge or beyond the cognitive power of human reason. Can man know anything for certain? Can human knowledge ever be absolutely certain? The sceptics deny that man can ever know anything with certainty. How can we justify our knowledge? How can we prove what we know? What is the guarantee of the certainty of what we know? What is truth? What do we mean when we say that a proposition is true? These are epistemological questions which constitute epistemological problems. The answers to these questions differ from one philosopher to another depending on the school of philosophy of the philosopher answering the questions.

1.5.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

Have philosophers been able to give satisfactory answers to every epistemological problem, thereby bringing an absolute end to the problem?

1.5.2 Text Answers (ITAs)

No. Philosophers have been able to give various answers to the problems which have in turn created various schools of thoughts. They have succeeded in giving answers to the questions, which are not univocally accepted but lead to more questions.

1.6 Ethical Problem

Ethics is the third core area of philosophy. Ethics has its fundamental questions and problems. Is there a way of living that is *noble* and a way of living that is *ignoble*? How ought we to *behave*? What is the *right way* to behave and what is the *wrong way*? How do we *decide* which way is right, and which way is wrong? What is the *moral standard*? Is it *necessary* to live a moral life? Why? Why *must I live* a moral life? Some people embezzle the country's money and become very rich, and nothing happens to them. Does it mean that one can embezzle money or steal (embezzlement is, in fact, stealing) provided one is not caught? Is it morally right to do that?

Is morality a function of the *reason* or a function of the *passions* or *senses*? Is it *reason* that is supposed to guide a person's life or the *passions*? What is the *source* of morality? Where do the *moral principles*, the *moral laws*, come from? Who *made* them? Is it *man himself*? Is it the *society*? Is it God? What happens if they are not *obeyed*? Do they have *sanctions*? What happens to those who obey them? What happens to those who do not obey them? These are philosophical problems that are domiciled in ethics.

1.6.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

How have philosophers succeeded in analyzing the philosophical problems encountered in ethics?



1.6.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Through the process of classifying ethics and further through the use of ethical theories and principles to understand events and make moral judgements.

1.7 Philosophical Problem in the Philosophy of Other Disciplines

In other branches of philosophy, i.e. the philosophy of other disciplines, there are also philosophical questions and problem. In *Philosophy of Law* (also called Jurisprudence) questions such as the following are raised: What is law? What is justice? What is the relationship between law and justice? What is legal obligation? Has morality anything to do with law? Must law be subjected to, and judged by morality? What happens if a ruler makes a law that is immoral or unjust? Should such a law be obeyed? Are there limits or restrictions to the powers of law makers? Or are they free to make any kind of law they like? What are the conditions for the validity of law? Is there any other law apart from positive laws? Is natural-law really law in the true sense of the word? Does it really exist? Is there any ideal law which serves as the standard of all laws?

The answers any philosopher gives to these questions will depend on the school of philosophy to which he belongs. For example, the answer that a philosopher in the *natural law school* would give would be different from the answer of a philosopher in the *legal positivist school* or that of a philosopher in the *legal realist school*.

In *Philosophy of Science* fundamental questions are raised about the objectivity of science, the certainty of scientific findings, and scientific principles. Is science based on absolutely certain principles or on principles of probability? How true and reliable are scientific theories? If the scientific theories of the past have been faulted by the scientists of our own time, what is the guarantee that the scientific theories of our own day will not be faulted by future scientists in the course of further research?

In *Philosophy of Education* there is the basic issue of distinguishing between educating a person and *indoctrinating* him. There is the problem of educating people without imposing one's views or opinions on them, educating people and respecting their *freedom*. There is also the issue of *morality in education*. Can morality be separated from education? Is morality not part of education? Is education complete without it?

In *Political Philosophy* the basic issue is that of *justice*. How do we organize society in such a way that there will be justice and fairness to all its members? How can we ensure equal opportunities for all members of the society? How do we ensure equitable distribution of the goods and benefits of the society to all its members without some of them being cheated? How do we ensure equal opportunities in such a way that every member of the society has the opportunity to aspire to any office or position in the society? Different political systems and different systems of government are all attempts to answer these questions.

In *Philosophy of Religion* there is the basic question as to whether there can be a religion without the concept of God. For example, *Buddha* did not believe in *God*, but he was the founder of Buddhism, Was the *Buddhism* that Buddha himself taught and practised, a religion? We know that after his death many of his followers brought in the concept of God, but was Buddha himself, who did not believe in God, a religious man? Can a person who does not believe in God be a religious man? There is also the fundamental question about the

existence of God. There are very many people in the world today who do not believe in God, for one reason or another. Does God really exist? If he does not exist how did the universe and everything in it come into existence? Can anything bring itself into existence? Could the universe have brought itself into existence? If God exists and the world was created by him, *why is there evil in the world?* Why did he allow evil to come into the world which he created? Why has he not removed evil from the world?

In *Philosophy of Mind* the basic problem is the nature of the mind and how the mind interacts with the body. The mind is spiritual (not every philosopher agrees with this) and the body is material. How can spirit and matter interact with each other? Yet we know that the mind and the body interact. What happens to one affects the other – what happens to the mind (for example, anger) affects the body, and what pertains to the body (for example, serious damage to the brain in an accident) affects the mind. How is this interaction possible?

In *African Philosophy*, first (in the 1960s, 1970s) there was the problem of whether it existed at all. Some philosophers argued that there was African Philosophy, others argued that there was none. That debate is over now. The issue now is the *Africanness* of African Philosophy. In other words, what makes African Philosophy specifically African? When you say a philosophy is African philosophy, what exactly do you mean? That it was written by an African? That it was written in Africa? What distinguishes African philosophy from other philosophies? What are the distinguishing features or characteristics of African philosophy? Another serious problem about African philosophy is that it is written in foreign (European) languages. Does the fact that African philosophy is written in foreign languages diminish the quality and the *Africanness* of African philosophy?



1.7.1

In-Text Questions (ITQs)

List three (3) disciplines that philosophical problems arise from?



1.7.2

In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Science, Philosophy of Social Science

1.8 The Problem of the Scope of Philosophy

The scope of philosophy is the area, the range that can be covered by philosophy. In other words, the question can be asked: what is within the range of philosophy, and what is outside the range of philosophy? What can we philosophize about, and what can we not philosophize about? Like all philosophical questions, the above questions have no definite answers. The answers any philosopher gives to them would depend on the school of philosophy to which he belongs. Philosophers of the materialist school of thought, for example, would say that philosophy deals only with material realities, and that all spiritual, immaterial realities (e.g. God, the soul) are outside the scope of philosophy. Philosophers of the idealist school would, of course, disagree with that position and maintain that all realities (both spiritual; immaterial as well as material) are within the scope of philosophy. Idealist philosophers philosophize about spirit, mind, soul, God, etc. In fact, they conceive reality as basically spiritual. They see matter as unreal, or at best only a manifestation of spirit. Ontologists philosophize about Being, which is the ultimate source of all beings, the source from which all things derive their being. They describe it as the Being of all beings. Surely, the scope of philosophy, for the ontologists, the idealists, and other metaphysicians, goes beyond the material dimension of reality.

1.8.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

What would the materialist school say the scope of philosophy is limited to?

1.8.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Only with material realities

1.9 Summary of Study Session 1

In this study session, you have learnt the meaning and nature of philosophy. You have been able to understand the task to which defining philosophy gives to various philosophers and even non-philosophers. You have learnt what the basic problems of philosophy are, as related to the branches of philosophy and the word philosophy too. You have equally been acquainted with the problem associated with the scope of philosophy and what various philosophers of varying schools assume this scope to be limited to.

1.9.2 References/Suggestions for Further Reading

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