

## STUDY SESSION 15

### PHILOSOPHY AND ITS RELEVANCE TO SOCIETY



#### 15.1 Introduction

Generally in life things are often connected in some ways. Sometimes these interconnections are direct and obvious; at other times, they are hidden and obscure. For the average observer, it takes only a little effort to point out the obvious connections between things. It, however, takes a trained mind and a keen observer to uncover connections that are obscure. The intent of this study session is to expose you to the connection between philosophy and society. We shall ponder over such questions as: How does philosophy intersect with the social world? How does philosophical thinking shape the evolution of ideas that governs the world? What is the contribution of philosophy to practical human concerns? How does philosophy affect the society, on the one hand, and how society influences philosophy, on the other hand? Are there branches of philosophy which by their nature are eminently oriented towards praxis?

These questions have become salient and germane because there is a tendency among non-philosophers such as you and, interestingly, among some philosophers as well to see philosophy as an academic discipline that deals solely with metaphysical and abstract ideas that have little or no relevance to practical concerns or concrete human problems. By showing you how philosophy and society are interrelated, we clarify some of these mistaken kinds of thinking.



#### 15.1.1 Learning outcomes for Study Session 15

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

1. State the conception of philosophy by some philosophers;
2. Define society and distinguish between the objective and subjective conditions essential for the existence of society;
3. Enumerate ways in which society influences philosophy; and
4. Highlight ways in which philosophy influences society.

## **15.2 Meaning of Philosophy**

The name, “philosophy” is derived from two Greek words “philo” (love) and “Sophia” (wisdom). “Philo-sophia” etymologically, therefore, means “love or pursuit of wisdom”. It suggests an attempt to acquire knowledge and satisfy curiosity through the pursuit of mental excellence. In the Greek application and understanding of the term, philosophy involves the attempt by man to know the world around him in order to act rationally and consistently; to take wise decisions based on certain scales of values as they affect matters of truth and falsity, of beauty and ugliness and of right and wrong. Philosophy became for the Greeks a way of trying to make coherent meaning out of man’s complex universe; to achieve order in disorder; to achieve unity in a disjointed world and to understand human existence. As a field of inquiry, philosophy deals with the systematic body of principles and assumptions underlying any particular field of experience.

The above conceptions suggest that philosophy is an attempt to understand the world, its meaning, its laws and values and, as such, it includes and covers every field of human endeavour. An exact definition of philosophy appears very illusive because there are misconceptions, prejudices and assumptions of what philosophy is or should be. The best way to put it is that philosophy is better seen from schools of thought rather than definitions offered by practitioners. In some cases, non-professional philosophers rush for definitions that do not capture the essence of philosophy as an academic discipline.

## Some Conceptions of Philosophy

The conceptions of philosophy under examinations depict the orientation of a philosopher in question. For example, Allen Wood<sup>1</sup> sees philosophy as a self-reflective activity and hence cannot take its own nature for granted without losing itself. He suggests that philosophers might free their discipline from a certain amount of self-imposed shallowness if they stop taking the nature of their enterprise for granted. He calls for a renewal of the question, “What is philosophy?” Philosophical reflection gains its importance more from what it discovers about the object of its reflection (about the nature of knowledge, goodness, beauty and so forth) than from its own nature simply as philosophical reflection. He also observes that the nature of philosophy is not a preeminent philosophical question, and philosophers can be great without writing essays on meta-philosophy. This conception of philosophy is Socratic because reflection is the core of Socrates’ understanding of philosophy. Jim Unah<sup>2</sup> stipulates that Socrates, the Greek legend sees philosophy as a reflective attitude, which elevates act of contemplation and the search for universally valid knowledge. Philosophy is a reflection of the mind in the form of conceptual thought. Quoting Dilthey “the conduct of the warrior, the statesman, the poet, or the religionist can be perfected only when knowledge of this conduct guides practice”<sup>3</sup>. Knowledge for Socrates is virtue and ignorance is the root of moral evil. Knowledge becomes an instrument of empowerment and liberation and directs the mind for rational decision. The position of Socrates appears indefensible because in terms of wrong doing, one may not differentiate wrong doing and the right conduct. Humans are prone to error, so whether we have knowledge or not does not add up.

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Wood, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Vail-Ballou Press, 2001) p.2

<sup>2</sup> Jim Unah, “Philosophy and Society” in *Philosophy, Society and Anthropology*, (Lagos: Fadec Publishers, 2002) p.3

<sup>3</sup> William, Dilthey, *Essence of Philosophy*, (New York: University of North Carolina Press, 1969) p.10

Plato's understanding of philosophy appears to be based on the task of thinking. Thinking is akin to contemplation where the mind transcends to the world of forms and grapples with the ideas of things or the essences of things. The essences of things depict the true nature or the meaning of things in general. Getting to the true nature of things is the zenith of philosophical reflection. Among other things, the highest attainment of the true nature of things is the good which is a source of illumination. At this stage the essence of philosophy is intellectual progress. Intellectual progress has to do with critical exposition and diagnosis of philosophical problems. Plato also makes a distinction between knowledge and opinion. Opinion (*doxa*) is hearsay and can be expressed by anybody while knowledge becomes critical, evidential anchored on the idea and not everybody has genuine knowledge<sup>4</sup>. Like his master Socrates, Plato places premium on knowledge especially on reality as against mere appearance. The way things appear is different from the true nature of things. To this end, Plato can rightly be described as an objective idealist. Objective idealism is the philosophical position that reality is located in the ideal world and has independent existence.

Aristotle's conception of philosophy is located in the realm of praxis, the hallmark of science. He places philosophy on the doorstep of theoretical orientation which circumscribes all kinds of human knowledge. Philosophy grounds scientific activity through metaphysical paradigm. This is echoed in his view that metaphysics is first philosophy. As first philosophy, it studies being qua being<sup>5</sup>. Aristotle's metaphysics throws up the ontological dimension, depicting the true nature of things in general. It is not targeting specific beings. Aristotle's metaphysics by laying the foundation for ontology piloted the emergence of science which has undergone series of transformation. In a sense, according to Aristotle, all science studies being in certain ways, but the departmental sciences study it under some specified conditions. The study of

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<sup>4</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, translated with notes, an interpretative essay, and new introduction by Allan Bloom, (New York: Basic Books, 1968) p.193

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, translated with an introduction by Hugh Lawson-Tancred, (London: Penguin Books, 1998) p.xlv

metaphysics is the study of all things that are just in regard to those aspects of them which pertain to their being merely by virtue of their having being.

Bertrand Russell sees philosophy as an attempt to answer ultimate questions, not uncritically and dogmatically as we do in ordinary life and even in the sciences, but critically after exploring all that makes such questions puzzling, and after realizing all the vagueness and confusion that underlie our ordinary ideas<sup>6</sup>. Russell further places philosophy between theology and science:

Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable, but like science, it appeals to human reasoning rather than authority, whether that of tradition, or that of revelation... Almost all questions of interest to speculative minds are such as science cannot answer... The study of such questions is the business of philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

Russell's position appears to be anchored on the scope of philosophy as a discipline that is encompassing, comprehensive and encyclopedic as far as human knowledge is concerned. It acts as a regulator in the synthesis of human knowledge and also an art. For A.J. Ayer, philosophy is an activity of analysis<sup>8</sup>. The position that philosophy is an art is given credence by Walter, Odajnyk in these words

True philosophy is an art, and... a great philosopher is a creative person, an artist and not only an intellectual involved with dull analyses—induction and deduction.

Like the artist, the philosopher describes life and the world and unveils new

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<sup>6</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, (New York: Routledge, 2000)p.1

<sup>8</sup> A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974) p.37.

vistas of thought and experience through his own insight and vision. Only a matter of technique separates the artist from the philosopher.<sup>9</sup>

Fundamentally, techniques have become the tool of differentiation between philosophy and the other sciences. Some philosophers, especially those of the existentialist school, are reacting against the gulf created by these techniques which tend to give the impression that one discipline is superior to the other. For the existentialist, the purpose of philosophy is not the exaggeration of reason or analysis of proposition but that of finding the meaning and purpose of life.

J.I. Omoregbe<sup>10</sup> looks at the conception of philosophy from the early Greek cosmologists or nature philosophers in the city of Ephesus. The Ionians, as they were called, focused their attention on the cosmos, trying to understand the universe, particularly in terms of the unity and diversity of reality, the permanence and impermanence of the things in the cosmos. In their search for the common elements that hold things together, they were amazed at the basic unity in the midst of amazing diversity, the continuity in the midst of ceaseless changes in the physical universe. These formed the basis of their philosophical reflection identifying water, air, the infinite, fire as the fundamental stuff of reality. As cosmologists, to unravel the cosmic principle of reality was their pre-occupation.

Albert Camus<sup>11</sup>, a French existentialist philosopher, examines philosophy from the point of view of the meaning of life. For him, there is only one truly serious philosophical question; is human life meaningful or meaningless? According to him, there is but one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. In his view, all the rest whether or not the world has

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<sup>9</sup> Walter, Odajnyk quoted in *Marxism and Existentialism* by Jean-Paul-Sartre, translated by John Matthews, (London: Verso Publishers, 1969) p.157

<sup>10</sup> J.I. Omoregbe, *The Human Predicament: Has Human Life On Earth any ultimate purpose, Any ultimate meaning? An Existential Inquiry*, University of Lagos Inaugural Lecture Series, 2001) p.4

<sup>11</sup> Albert, Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975) p.11

three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – come afterwards. This is where one’s philosophical position dovetails into experience. Earlier in this work we have cited the notion that philosophy is a reflection of human experience which comes in different patterns and forms. They are disjointed until the human mind is able to analyze them for meaningful interpretation and application. Albert Camus is seen as a philosopher of absurdity, because the world and life in general are meaningless. When one is unable to cope with life as a result of frustration, suicide seems to be the shortest route of exit. Camus, however, admonishes that one should show courage in the midst of such meaninglessness.

Another French philosopher who examines philosophy from the meaning of life is Jean-Paul Sartre, who describes man as a being who is not what he is and who is what he is not, a being who carries a vacuum, an emptiness within him at the heart of being. He says, man is empty inside him, he feels this emptiness at the heart of his being and this makes him always dissatisfied, restless and unhappy<sup>12</sup>. He further maintains that man’s whole life and activities are aimed at filling this emptiness inside him. But it is a waste of time as every effort to fill this vacuum is futile because it is part of the ontological structure of man’s being. This emptiness, he continues, has its origin in nothingness which is the ontological foundation of man’s being. It is this nothingness which separates man from himself and manifests itself as an emptiness at the heart of his being. This accounts for why man by his nature is a restless being and a dissatisfied being. Nothing can satisfy him as long as he carries that vacuum inside him at the heart of his being. All man’s efforts to satisfy his deepest yearnings and aspirations are futile. “Man is a useless passion”.

The nature of man and his restless desire to achieve things that are near impossibility show the emptiness in man. Man is a bundle of contradiction, great at the same time miserable. He

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul-Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (New York: Dever Publications, 1969) pp. 78-79

is the greatest being in the universe, but at the same time fragile. He is the only being that asks radical questions about his own being.

Galina Kirilenko and Lydia Korshunova<sup>13</sup> raise some fundamental questions about the world, projecting the essence of philosophy. These questions among, others are: Is the world's foreseeable future a matter of concern for everyone no matter how far removed he is from scientific work, political struggle, or revolutionary movement? What is in store for man: the holocaust of war, or a peaceful life? What will the earth be like? Will nature survive? Or will it be annihilated as a result of scientific and technical progress? Will oppression and social injustice disappear from the world or will they persist forever? They expect philosophy to renew these questions so as to make our thinking dynamic. For them philosophy is able to provide answers to these fundamental questions. They re-echoed the words of Cicero, a Roman thinker and orator in this dictum, "Thou we are turning to, thou we are asking for help. On philosophy, the loadstar of life, neither we nor human life itself, could exist without you"<sup>14</sup>. Cicero's conception of philosophy appears to reflect the etymological definition as the love of wisdom. In dealing with our fellow men and women, we need wisdom, otherwise the world will come to an end. Philosophy embodies man's striving to engage in a constant search in order to cognize the infinite, the root causes of all things that exist and to call to question everything there is. This makes philosophy an exercise in wonder.

Jacques Maritain defines philosophy as the science that studies the highest principle of all things<sup>15</sup>. While for Martin Heidegger, philosophy is the search for the true meaning of Being<sup>16</sup>. Heidegger sees the problem as the fundamental question of philosophy because nearly everyone has forgotten what it means "to be." This hardened forgetfulness portends

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<sup>13</sup> Galina Kirilenko and Lydia Korshunova *What is Philosophy?* (Moscow: Progress Publishers) p.6

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.7

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Maritain, *An introduction to Philosophy*, (New York: Sheed and Ward Inc, 1965) p.132.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?* In John Stone (ed), *What is Philosophy?* (London: Macmillan, 1965) p.115

danger for our current civilization and humanism. There is the need therefore, to radically entertain the question of being as a basis for rehabilitating our banalized, and vulgarized humanism. What is nothing can become a real force in a nation's historical development and supersede it.

### 15.2.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

Which philosopher defines philosophy as the science that studies the highest principle of all things?

### 15.2.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

Jacques Maritain

## 15.3 Meaning of Society

It was Aristotle, the famous ancient Greek philosopher who asserted in his book *Politics* that man is a political animal.<sup>17</sup> Among other things this suggested that man is gregarious being who has to live in social settings. From Aristotle's perspective, man cannot achieve happiness, the ultimate goal of human life, by living in isolation. Man who, by nature, is a moral and rational being can only attain happiness in interaction with others in the polis or the political society. Aristotle probably focused on the city-state society because that was the most common political community of his day. The world has since changed in terms of the forms and levels of societies which now exist. We for instance now speak of local, national,

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<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, Trans by C. Lord, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984)

continental, global or even virtual societies. But what are we to understand by the term society? Given the diverse forms of societies which abound in the contemporary world, this task may not be as simple as it appears.

In the main, there are two major senses of the word “society”. In the first sense and broadest form, society may refer to the totality of all human relationships. On this reading, society is the "system of interrelationships and structures that connect individuals around the world "<sup>18</sup>. This understanding of society is ontologically defined in the phrase “being-with-others” which again goes to show that no man is an island or stand-alone being<sup>19</sup>. Jim Unah explains further that to be born into the world is equally original with our interacting with other beings<sup>20</sup>. In essence society is a complex of interrelationships which may cut across boundaries, cultures and nationalities. Marx and Nicolaus sum up the idea of society in these lines: “Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand”<sup>21</sup>.

The second, rather narrower sense is the conventional understanding of society. From this perspective, society refers to a group of people who share a common culture, occupy a particular territorial space and feel themselves to constitute a unified and distinct identity.<sup>22</sup> A careful analysis of the above definition of society will reveal that society is constituted by both objective and subjective elements. It will also show that taken apart, each element in the definition may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for the existence of society. The objective conditions for the existence of society, for instance, will include: (1.) group of people, (2.) sharing a common culture, and (3.) occupying a common territorial space. All

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<sup>18</sup> James W. McAuley, *An Introduction to Politics, State and Society*,(London: Sage,2003) p.4

<sup>19</sup> Heidegger quoted in Jim Unah, *Philosophy, Society and Anthropology*, (Lagos: Fadec Publishers, 2002) p.10

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.10 .

<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx and Martin Nicolaus, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*,(London: Penguin,1993)p. 265.

<sup>22</sup>Gordon Marshall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*,(Oxford: Oxford University Press,1996)

these taken individually are objective conditions because they are material conditions which can be objectively verified. It can be ascertained, for instance, whether a group of people share the same culture but even where this condition is satisfied, it does not follow that we have a society. There is a condition in the definition which suggests that the people must "feel themselves to constitute a unified and distinct entity". This is the subjective condition. It follows, therefore, that if a group of people share the same territory and do not feel that they form a unified and distinct entity, we cannot refer to them as a society. The sufficient condition for society to exist, it would appear, is the presence of both the objective and subjective elements of our definition.



### 15.3.1 **In-Text Questions (ITQs)**

1. Name the philosopher that describes humans as political animals.
2. State three objective conditions for the existence of society,



### 15.3.2 **In-Text Answers (ITAs)**

1. Aristotle
2. Group of people, sharing a common culture, and occupying a common territorial space

## 15.4 The Nexus between Philosophy and Society

Now with what we have on the meaning of society, we may now proceed to some general observations about the relationship between philosophy and society. But we must dispose of an old controversy that philosophy has lost its relevance in the present dispensation of the world order; that it does not bake bread and butter neither does it put food on a common

man's table. As a theoretical activity, the logical positivist school of philosophy contends that the major task of philosophy is analysis of scientific terms or concepts. This position gives a very narrow conception of philosophy as regards what it is and what it should be. J.I. Omoregbe observes that the Anglo-Saxon analytic tradition lends credence to the misconception that philosophy is only analysis and no more, no less. According to him, analysis is indeed part and parcel of philosophy, but it is only a means to an end.

The view that philosophy is not a theory but an activity of synthesis as presented by Logical Positivism is not only false but shows lack of an in-depth knowledge of what philosophy should be. J. I. Omoregbe hints at the impact of philosophical theories on society when he asserts the historical fact that the philosophies of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, Baron Montesquieu, Jean-Jacque Rousseau, Hegel and Karl Marx were forces that shaped western civilization. For Omoregbe, it is an illusion, indeed a dangerous illusion to think that philosophy has no practical influence on society<sup>23</sup>. Philosophical theories are dynamites and powerful agents of change, transformation and development. We agree with Omoregbe that the image of philosophy projected by 20<sup>th</sup> century analytic philosophy is rather narrow. Philosophers do not engage in analysis for its own sake. It is ultimately a means to an end, a prelude to dealing with the substantive disagreements that characterize most philosophical debate. Perhaps the most powerful argument against the idea that philosophy is no more than ordinary language analysis is to show how philosophy has affected society beyond the four walls of the university

It is important to reiterate, however, that the connection between philosophy and society is not a straightforward, direct causal one. Rather, it is an extremely complicated connection whereby philosophy and society both shape and influence each other. For a start, philosophy

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<sup>23</sup> J. I. Omoregbe, "The Human Predicament: Has human life on earth any ultimate purpose, any ultimate meaning? An existential inquiry", University of Lagos Press, Inaugural Lecture Series, 2001) p.1

as an activity does not happen in a vacuum; it takes place within space and time. For this reason, philosophy tends to reflect the peculiar concerns and the problems of the climes and times within which it is developed. Western philosophy, for an example, was reputed to have originated from the commercially prosperous city of Miletus in the Ionian region of Ancient Greece. The material condition in the city was quite congenial to the emergence of philosophy and it is no surprise that the philosophers of this era were primarily concerned with speculative cosmology<sup>24</sup>. Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* illustrates the role of historical context plays in motivating philosophy. Machiavelli lived at a time when the Italian peninsula was a scene of intense political instability and conflict involving city-states such as Florence, Milan, Venice and Naples. Machiavelli's concern was how stability can be restored in the Italian peninsula<sup>25</sup>. It is against this background that one must understand the political realism that informs *The Prince*. While it is possible to cite more cases of how historical context shapes philosophy, the examples already examined suffices to establish the thesis that philosophy is often a product of its context. It is in the light of this realization that Kyle Cupp declares that:

All philosophy is contextual. So every philosopher must be read in context. To understand a philosopher you can just look at what he said. Philosophers have specific agendas, task, desires and motivations<sup>26</sup>.

If the immediately preceding discussion shed some light on how societal context might shape philosophy, we are left with the question "how does philosophy affect or influence society? The answer to this question requires a discussion of those branches or sub-branches of

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<sup>24</sup>Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, (New York: Routledge, 2000)

<sup>25</sup>Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. by G. Bull, (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1956)

<sup>26</sup>Kyle cupp, "All Philosophy is Contextual" retrieved from [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com) on 18<sup>th</sup>feb. 2017.

philosophy that easily connects with one or other area of human endeavour as well as ideologies / philosophical ideas that has shaped the course of human history. These branches of philosophy will include ethics, political philosophy, existentialism, feminist philosophy bioethics, including some of the relevant philosophical ideas like Marxism, positivism, etc.

## **Ethics**

Ethics or moral philosophy plays a variety of vital roles in society. Ethics helps to critically examine our moral beliefs and social practices in order to determine if they are in consonance with the dictates of reason. Peter Singer, it was, who made the distinction between intuitive, everyday morality and the critical level of morality.<sup>27</sup> At this first intuitive, pre-philosophical level of morality, we simply act based on a generally accepted set of moral principles which are deemed right. At the second, critical level, we subject our moral beliefs to evaluative scrutiny, which sometimes reveal that we have been acting on wrong moral principles and we are consequently able to adjust our beliefs accordingly. An example of such reconsideration of value relates to the practice of slavery. In the ancient past, slavery was generally accepted as morally permissible in many societies. Even highly respected philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle supported the institution of slavery. But as many philosophers began to reflect upon the practice, it became increasingly clear that slavery lacks any moral justification. Today slavery is a morally objectionable and universally outlawed practice. Any person or society practising slavery is regarded as morally bankrupt or uncivilized. In passing the slavery and other barbaric practices through the crucible of rational scrutiny, philosophy contributes to moral progress by helping to eliminate such barbaric practices from human societies.

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Singer, *One World: the Ethics of Globalization*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002) p.168.

A similar contribution of ethics to moral progress is seen in the role it played in the grounding of natural rights. Philosophers such as the Stoics, Thomas Aquinas, and most notably, John Locke have demonstrated how man is imbued with certain natural inalienable and inviolable rights which are made known through human reason. Today, not only do these rights constitute the core of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), they are also enshrined in the constitution of virtually all the countries in the world.<sup>28</sup>

### **Political Philosophy**

Political Philosophy is another branch of philosophy which has eminently contributed to the progress of the human society. As a veritable instrument of social change, socio-political philosophers paint visions of the ideal state to which currently existing states could aspire. It is no accident that the United States is one of the greatest democracies upon the face of the earth today. The founding fathers of the American nation drew largely from the ideas of philosophers in designing their system of government.<sup>29</sup> It is an uncontestable fact that the most influential organizing principles adopted by governments all over the world today are the products of philosophical thinking. These principles include separation of powers, federalism, checks and balances, representative government, civil rights and popular sovereignty.

The effects of socio-political philosophy on society, in the main, are positive, but there are some socio-political ideas which have negatively impacted society. There are examples of philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Darwin and Friedrich Hegel whose doctrines provided the motivation and legitimation for totalitarian rulers like Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. Although these philosophers may not have envisaged that their

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<sup>28</sup> Jan Oster, *Media freedom as a Fundamental Right*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015 ) p.7.

<sup>29</sup> Tom Lansford, *Democracy: Political Systems of the World*, (London: Cavendish Publishing, 2007).

ideas will lead to the emergence of fascist regimes, it is very clear that aspects of German philosophy which emphasized the supremacy of the Aryan race led the rise of Adolf Hitler.<sup>30</sup>

## **Existentialism**

After the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War, optimism was at its lowest ebb and a sense of despair pervaded many European societies. It was in this context that existentialism, a general term for the group of philosophies that takes the human condition as the primary philosophical focus, flourished. Rejecting the grandiose abstraction that ran through the history of philosophy and which became most pronounced in German idealism, existentialism drew attention to the fundamental concerns of human existence, which according to Richard Tarnas includes the issues of “loneliness and death, conflict, spiritual emptiness, ontological insecurity, the void of absolute values, the sense of cosmic absurdity, the frailty of human reason and the tragic impasse of the human condition”<sup>31</sup>. The contribution of existentialism lies in the fact that while it recognizes that the human condition is defined by the challenges listed above, it counsels us not despair but to define ourselves and the meaning of life, through the exercise of free choice and personal responsibility.

## **Marxism**

Arguably, of all the philosophical ideologies, Marxism is one of the most significant in terms of the level of impact it has had on society. Karl Marx once quipped that “philosophers have so far interpreted the world. The point, however, is to change it”<sup>32</sup>. In opposition to mere philosophical theorizing and abstraction, Marxism was aimed at creating the necessary

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Schumaker, Dwight Kid and Thomas Heilke, *Political Ideologies in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, (New York: McGraw-Hill ) p.217.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Tarnas , *The Passion of the Western Mind*, (New York: Ballantine Books,1991) p.389.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, quoted in Unah, 2002.p.15.

changes that will eliminate capitalist exploitation. After the Russian revolution of 1917, the rise of Mao Tse-tung in China and the spread of communism in Eastern Europe close to two billion people came under the influence of centrally planned economies, an arrangement inspired by Marxist thought.

Today, Marxism remains a major rallying ideology on the basis of which workers around the world are mobilized against their capitalist oppressors. Within the academia, the impact of Marxism is seen in the attempt of major intellectual movement to incorporate the Marxian perspective into their respective body of thought. Thus we hear of Socialist Feminism, Marxist criticism, Marxist jurisprudence, African Socialism, etc.

The idea of African socialism leads to another significant contribution of Marxism to the emergence of the free world. Many an African nationalist waged the anti-imperialist struggle in the 20<sup>th</sup> century armed with Marxian ideas which demonstrated the connection between colonial expansion and economic exploitation. Thus Marxist thought became the philosophy of decolonization upon which many African societies mobilized against the imperialist and gained their political independence.



#### 15.4.1 **In-Text Questions (ITQs)**

1. Itemise two ways in which society influences philosophy.
2. State how ethics, as a branch of philosophy, influences society.



#### 15.4.2 **In-Text Answers (ITAs)**

1. (i) Material condition of the society usually impact on philosophy's content and, (ii) historical condition of the society usually influences the content of philosophy.

2. It helps to critically examine our moral beliefs and social practices in order to determine if they are in consonance with the dictates of reason



## 15.5 Summary of Study Session 15

Having gone through this study session you are now able to identify the critical roles that philosophy has played and continues to play in different epochs of society. You can now clearly see that the position that philosophy has no practical relevance in society is not only a misconception and lack of understanding but an oversight that can drag society into chaos. Every societal development is shaped by a particular philosophical theory knowingly or unknowingly. For example, the American Constitution, the British Constitution and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man were all influenced by philosophical theories. To understand the ideology that underpins the policy thrust of every developmental agenda of any society and to understand the culture and lives of a people, you and I first must understand their philosophy as philosophy and society are structurally interconnected. Plato had admonished that until philosophers become kings or those that are charged with the responsibility of governance of men and materials become philosophers, there will be no respite for humanity. Thus, philosophy becomes a principal agent of social transformation.

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