

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHERS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract

Around the 5th century BC, Socrates, the great philosopher of the inward life, was accused of corrupting the minds of the youth, and consequently forced to pay the ultimate price with his life. Since then, philosophy, philosophers and students of philosophy have remained the targets of persistent diatribe by some biased scientists and ignorant members of the public. They have been tagged with such disparaging epithets as stargazers, lone-rangers, subversives, corrupters of the social order, good-for-nothing intellectualist, eccentrics, schizophrenics and even paranoids. Consequently, philosophy has been perceived as an arid, atrophied abstraction or a kind of inane thinking without content and purpose. This paper attempts a change in the narrative; hence it demonstrates how philosophic engagement is, and remains a meaningful intellectual enterprise bequeathed to humanity by the ancient Greeks. As an essay in defense of the life of philosophy (*apologia pro vita philosophia*), the work argues that philosophy is a tutor to both law, politics economy, culture and morality. That means that despite the calumny that philosophy has received in history and continues to receive, specialized philosophy has continued to spread throughout the world as an indispensable tool for social change, cultural and economic development and key to meaningful human existence. This paper is therefore significant because we are in an era where politics and morality are at par with each other; where politics has become something that needs to be detested as virile, corrupt and or better left only to the greedily ambitious. It is an era where morality has dangerously been separated from both law and politics. It is within this context that this paper becomes imperative; hence we critically revisit the value of philosophy in shaping society and bringing about social change in terms of ensuring complete socio-political, cultural and economic development and sound human flourishing.

Key words: Philosophy; Political Philosophy; Social Change; Politics; Law and Morality

Introduction

At a time when philosophers and students of philosophy are faced with disparaging epithets as star-gazers, lone-rangers, subversives, corrupters of the social order, good-for-nothing intellectualist, eccentrics, schizophrenics and even paranoids; at a time when philosophy is perceived as an arid, atrophied abstraction or a kind of inane thinking without content and purpose, it becomes too difficult to convince the public that philosophic engagement has remained a meaningful intellectual enterprise with numerous attestable practical values and usefulness. It also becomes difficult to make the public to understand that however abstract philosophic engagement may appear, that the subject matter of philosophy is always dictated by the concrete practical experiences of life. Hence philosophy is preoccupied with the factual issues of life and existence, which deals concretely with issues like human life, its nature and purpose; the nature and goal of human conduct, society; its nature and purpose, and how humans operate or ought to operate etc. It is in the context of this affirmation therefore that this work is geared towards changing the old narrative that the public has been accustomed with in relation to philosophy and philosophic engagement. Obviously, the work is aimed at demonstrating and positing a defensible role, claim and relevance of philosophy in bringing about social change and solving the numerous and varied problems confronting man and the society in which he lives. It is important to note too that philosophy lives by constant criticism; hence it is a rational explanation of all things, including social and political phenomena. Its fundamental purpose has been the critical evaluation of beliefs; the attempt to give rational grounds for accepting or rejecting certain beliefs which we normally take for granted without thinking of any grounds for their justification.

Philosophy: Where Thought Leads the Way

In his work, *The Relevance of the Philosopher*, Izu Marcel Onyeocha argues aptly that it is quite easy to dismiss the philosopher along with star-gazers and feel good about the rightness of one's insights. It is equally possible to exaggerate the role of the philosopher even in areas that bear no interest for him or her personally as an individual. It is also quite possible to give the philosopher a cautious recognition with the eyes wide open just in case he might fail to live up to the occasion. In all, the truth remains that the subject matter of philosophy is dictated by the concrete and practical experiences of life and the environment in which man lives. Philosophy simplistically is defined as love of wisdom. When we define philosophy in this sense, what is implied is that wisdom is the ability to discern inner qualities and relationships or a mark of great insight, foresight and perspicacity. Such love that is portrayed in the definition of philosophy is a unifying and unitive love which makes the lover 'one' with what is loved. To be a 'lover of wisdom' therefore, would mean to be wise, and he who is wise (philosopher) is the one who is marked with deep understanding, keen discernment, unbridled capacity for sound judgment, and ability to face life and its problems with equanimity. Philosophy is thus the search for the ultimate or underlying principles of reality. It is an investigative science understood as a natural function of the human mind. Philosophy is the quest for truth through local reasoning rather than factual observation. It is in this sense that every advance in knowledge robs philosophy of some problems which had it had.

Furthermore, philosophy is a critical evaluation and analysis of the grounds for fundamental

beliefs, and an analysis of the basic concepts employed in the expression of such beliefs. According to V.C. Aldrich cited in Akam, the job of philosophy or a philosopher is the study and statement of the logic, informal and formal, of the employment of expressions. Thus, philosophy is taken as 'a synthesis of learning' for it is the primary aim of philosophy to unify completely all departments of natural thought. Philosophy preoccupies itself mostly with the factual issues of life and existence such as human life, its nature and purpose; the nature and goal of human conduct, society; its nature and purpose, and how humans operate or ought to operate socially, culturally, politically, technologically etc. At a time when Plato was in a dilemma to change his mind from aspiring to the political trade, after witnessing what Socrates suffered in the hands of politicians and lawmakers, what started in Plato as some kind of enthusiasm for the actions of revolutionary politicians or the so-called 'new breed' ended with a great delusion in the whole character of government and law, when, with the instrument of law and politics, an innocent man – Socrates – was falsely put to trial for impiety. It was with this kind of Athenian experience that made Plato become skeptical about the whole business of politics and government. For him, as far as the kind of persons who did great injustice to Socrates are still active in politics, and the laws and the customs," the harder, Plato believes, it will be "to administer government correctly." Looking at the alarming rate at which "the written law and the customs were being corrupted," Plato gave up the idea of taking to active political life. In his own words, Plato writes:

The result was that I, who had at first been full of eagerness for a public career, as I gazed upon the whirlpool of public life and saw the incessant movement of shifting currents, at last felt dizzy, and, while I did not cease to consider means of improving this particular situation and indeed of reforming the whole constitution, yet, in regard to action, I kept waiting for favorable moments, and finally saw clearly in regard to all states now existing that without exception their system of government is bad.

What this reveals is that later Plato's disappointment in politics did not make him sit and look at the four walls. Rather he thinks something can be done to better the situation. Although he had understood philosophy as where thought leads the way, yet he believes the role of philosophy goes beyond mere sharpening the tool of the intellect. Like Freeman, Plato insists that philosophers have a responsibility to stop merely sharpening their tools and start using them to solve the human problems which confront the human society. Consequently, Plato set out, giving guidelines for instilling a better sense of law and government in public affairs, indicating that philosophy should be taught to both politics and politicians alike. He argues:

Hence I was forced to say in praise of the correct philosophy that it affords a vantage point from which we can discern in all cases what is just for communities and for individuals, and that accordingly the human race will not see better days until either the stock of those who rightly and genuinely follow philosophy acquire political authority, or else the class who have political control be led by some dispensation of providence to become real philosophers.

Plato gave out what is usually regarded as his master piece political theory. Onyeocha thinks that in a very special way, Plato is a philosopher of society. He is an excellent example of the

way in which philosophers have conceived social-political issues not only as a necessary part of the philosophical enterprise but also as closely connected with other philosophical issues.

The Philosopher's Approach

The philosopher brings up the correct sorts of issues at the correct minutes and in the correct conditions. There are in any event three manners by which he does this – the theoretical, or diagnostic, or existential – in which the person could approach their errand. The theoretical methodology raises and attempts to respond to the most entering inquiries concerning the general public. Onyeocha calls this the speculative approach which goes up against self or questioners with circumstances requiring specific sorts of activity before they really happen. Such approach investigates questions such as 'What if private properties were to be nullified?' 'Imagine a scenario in which another common war was to break out.' 'Imagine a scenario in which there were normal catastrophes.' Inquiries of this sort have an instructive incentive in that they incite the speculative philosopher to challenge their brain and endeavor a few arrangements before things really occur. On the more professional level, most people choose to speculate on the ideal society, in order to be able “to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.” Advocates of speculative philosophy insist that philosophical giants like Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant and Hegel did just that. Analytic approach shows the philosopher seeking a sharper and more precise understanding of a given by way of linguistic analysis. He or she blames the muddles, mistakes, and dead ends encountered in the articulation of societal goals and norms on linguistic confusion. For him, the proper task of the philosopher lies in unraveling and clarifying language in order to achieve a sharper and cleaner understanding of the problems of society. It was in this direction that the English philosopher and social commentator, G.E. Moore (1873-1958), cited in Onyeocha insisted that if philosophers would try to discover the question they were asking before they set about answering it...many of the difficulties and disagreements ...would disappear. The existential approach claims that the human being as a concretely existing reality becomes the philosopher's primary object of attention. The sense of urgency and crisis of contemporary human existence engages and occupies his or her reflection. Albert Camus in his *Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* focuses on the existentialists' understanding of the most fundamental question of philosophy to be whether or not life is worth living. It's obvious the subjects for the philosopher's reflection include the sphere of society, life, its components, its quality, and its goal, decisions and the behaviour affecting it. It is like the Socratic dictum that the unexamined life that is not worth living has been given a new and positive expression.

Socio-Political Philosophy

An individual is born in the society and thereafter interacts with the society throughout his life. The society is the soil where his personality is nurtured. Social philosophy is therefore the philosophy of human relations in society. Umotong avers that “social and political philosophy focus society and the politics of its existence, that it is a critical reflection about society and its politics”¹⁶ Society is a group of individuals united together with a definite end in view. Society is a web of social relationship. The nucleus of the society is man; hence society is

a dynamic organization of purposive individuals. How best philosophy can challenge the activities of man in society is the problem of social philosophy. According to Mackenzie, social philosophy seeks to explain the nature of society in the light of the principle of social solidarity.' Its aim is to interpret the society with reference to the norm of 'social unity.' F.W. Blackmar argues that social philosophy is based upon the general facts of society; making general observations on the nature of society. For Morris Ginsberg, social philosophy aims at the formulation of the general principles of human behavior through speculation on social phenomena.' Bertrand Russell sees social philosophy as one that seeks the conditions in which all the constructive tendencies of man (such as love and sympathy), social marriage and education can provide maximum possible opportunities to produce the people who can save the world from future catastrophe. In all, social philosophy deals with the ideal forms of government and social organization. Political philosophy, in its own nexus, is a rational explanation of political phenomena. Anthony de Crespigny sees it as a speculative enquiry into the assumptions of the practical activity of politics. Mathew Nwoko is of the opinion that it is a rational inquiry into all that concerns man and his life in his relationship with others in the state; hence a rational study and evaluation of the elements of the state. Political philosophy goes beyond the mere collection and descriptive explanation of political phenomena in the likes of political science or sociology. Like other branches of philosophy, it belongs to a higher level of scientific enquiry dealing with the ideals and the universal nature of the political phenomena – things as they should be. John Chrisman perceives political philosophy as focusing on individuals in social settings and, more particularly, on those norms and laws that shape citizens' lives. Its subject matter is 'people,' whether viewed as individuals or as groups, but people as they live within rule-governed social institutions. Issues in political philosophy include what is the ultimate justification of political authority? What is the most fair and just distribution of material goods and social benefits for a society? How tolerant must the state be toward dissidents and subversive groups? And to what extent should the state attempt to promote the good of its citizens, as opposed to simply protecting the liberty to pursue their own good (even if they predictably fail in doing so)?

Political Philosophers and Social Change

Man is naturally a socio-political animal; hence his socio-political nature drives him to live in a socio-political environment. In contrast with the other social animals, man does not just live in a society but produces such a society in order to live in it. The need to produce such a society that would suit both his nature and aspirations becomes the sole business of the socio-political philosopher.²⁴ But man cannot achieve that unless he develops methods and systems aimed at arriving at the ideal and desired political state. According to Nwoko, from the earliest recorded history, man has always sought and developed methods and systems of organizing himself according to what is befitting to his nature as a rational being. He remains always a political animal and can only realize himself fully in a well-organized political state. How well he can organize his political society is the problem for political philosophy, that is, the problem of the ideal state. Although the establishment of a 'perfect' or ideal political society has always eluded him, the fact remains that, in his nature, there is an unquenchable yearning for the perfect or ideal state. This yearning has led him to evolve several methods and systems aimed at arriving at the ideal political state. This is evident in the numerous

theories of the state that have flooded human history, seeking the model for the best life. In *The Republic*, Plato considers several political theories of his own time and rejects them. He rejected timocracy which is the rule by those who are primarily motivated by ambition and honour. He also rejected oligarchy or plutocracy, which, he says, is the rule of the rich or privileged elite. Again, Plato rejected democracy, which he interprets as the rule of the poor against the rich. Finally, he rejected despotism, or tyranny, or dictatorship, by which he understands as the absolute rule by a single person to the disadvantage of the many. Needless to say, the criterion of any good government is the common good and not the good or advantage of any one of the several segments over any other. Plato's preferred form of government is aristocracy, by which he means the rule of the best, that is, those who are enlightened with regard to reality, truth, and goodness. As to who should be fit to rule the state, Plato's ideal ruler was the famous philosopher-king. In his discussion with Glaucon, after examining the entire situation and considering all the options available to him he comes to the conclusion that only by philosophers becoming rulers and rulers becoming philosophers could societal harmony and happiness be ensured.

Political Philosophy in the Whirlpool of Public Life

In the whirlpool of public life, philosophy is a tutor to politics and harbinger of social change. Socio-political philosophers have a great task in the whirlpool of public life. In Africa, for instance, where politics has remained something to be detested and dreaded at, where the essence of politics has always eluded the people, and where their leaders never got it right in politics; where politics has been turned into something that needs to be detested as virile, corrupt and better left to the greedily ambitious, it becomes imperative to revisit the issues of politics in shaping the African society. No doubt, in many developing countries in Africa, political scene is flooded with many people who are not only floored by their ignorance in the trade they profess but also who, in the final analysis, have not the slightest intention to lead or represent. A socio-political philosopher cannot but watch with horror when politicians of the brand in question turn out rules or laws for the simple honest people and for the educated class of humankind. Thus, shaping our minds philosophically on the essence of politics would automatically underscore the inevitable pursuit of the common good to which politics is necessarily connected to. Unfortunately, at the mention of common good, many think it concerns the politicians alone. Many think that the realization of common good is the sole business of politicians and those in government. This is not true. The realization of the common good does not depend on the government of the state alone. It demands for 'the responsibility of all to work towards the provision and realization of the common good.' This is how philosophy serves as tutor to politics, and ensuring social change, by bringing in good and right knowledge and enlightenment and freeing our minds from erroneous mentality. The rationality of the common good calls on political office holders to engineer and organize the social mechanisms inevitable of the social good. If the common good is paramount, it underscores the fact that political positions are not meant to 'create' demigods who instead of serving the expected intentions of their offices, must wait, in reverse, to be served by their subjects. The political leaders are elected or appointed servants of the people. They constitute not only the functional brain box of the given polity but also the symbol of unity, peace and confraternity among the people. The government of any society is chosen for the entire welfare

of the community in question. The people did not choose them to enthrone dictators and oppressors over themselves, but those who through their creative leadership would establish environments for human flourishing. The common good is thus paramount in every social set-up, without which societies would be nothing but gangs of wolves, lions, tigers and vipers. Politics is not an overall egoistic profit-making adventure. Leadership, which is the art of conducting the activities of the state to their fruitful ends, is tied up with government. Thus the leader is one who tasks himself or herself to see to the fulfillment of the dreams and vision of the human association, which placed him in power. He is a mandated servant of the group. The leader is supposed to have acquired the art of governance. Politics is the art of governing a society to the attainment of its ultimate goals. Leadership is thus tied up with the moral responsibility of seeing to the total welfare of the society. The leader is expected to have developed the spirit of self-sacrifice and fore-sightedness. He is supposed to be fatherly, no discriminatory, protective and seen working assiduously for the material, moral and physical welfare of both the society and the individual.

Derailment of Common Good Politics and the Machiavellian Aberration

Many industrialized countries today boast of their educated citizenry who are knowledgeable in the art of politicking; who are conscious of its franchise and could make a responsible choice. They can boast that people who engage in politics are of the right mind and intention, with the right education and discipline to direct the affairs of their people. But in Africa, the narrative is never the same. This is because of the derailment of common good in politics that Machiavelli preached. The politics of the common good has turned apparently twisted off-track by the philosophies of Machiavelli, who in the 15th century, devalued the role of gentility and morals in politics in order to project the realization of individual interest at all costs. With Machiavelli, politics radically shifted face and focus from the virtuous pursuit of the common good to the utter attainment of the personal ambition of the politician and the means of achieving and holding on to power. In the view of Machiavelli, if a prince succeeds in establishing and maintaining his authority, the means will always be judged honorable and approved by everyone. Machiavelli's conception of the means-end relationship convinced him to insist that "the end justifies the means". For him, politics does not require being virtuous. What is important and paramount is the employment of all means possible to accomplish the purpose of the political leader in question. The political leader should adopt all means possible to remain in power – might is right and justice.

Recovering the Political Track: The Socio-Political Philosopher's Great Challenge

Philosophy as love of wisdom is indeed both the seeking of wisdom and the wisdom sought. In his conversation with Phaedrus, Socrates gives his criteria for considering anyone to be a true lover of wisdom. First, such a one must be in-depth and original in his or her production, i.e., it must be a production that is manifestly a fruit of reflection based on a thorough understanding. Second, such a one must be capable of defending the claims he or she made in the production. And third, such a one must be able to accept critical assessments of his or her work even though such assessments may not always be entirely favorable. Among those who made Socrates' list based on these criteria were certain writers of discourses like Lysias, certain poets like Homer, and certain political writers like Solon:

If the work had been done with knowledge of the truth, if they could defend their statements when challenged, and would demonstrate the interiority of his (or her) own writings out of his or her own mouth would he be called, not wise for that pertains to a god, but a lover of wisdom.

In contrast with the true lovers of wisdom, there are some writers of poetry, law writers and speech writers who have nothing really original to offer, but spend hours on phrases and ideas from other books 'twisting them this way and that, pasting them together and pulling them apart.' The task of recovering the political track therefore demands first of all a profound scrutiny evaluation and assessment of the practice at hand.

Towards the Social change that philosophy aims at

Philosophy has always got its own way of bringing about a desired social change. It first starts by engendering in the individual mind a sense of dissatisfaction with the status quo. The case of the Arab Spring is one to be emulated. Here globalization as a philosophy of a kind merged with revolution in information and communication technology ushered in a new social change. Ebo Socrates captures this event vividly when he writes:

The tumultuous and eponymous events that set-off socio-political changes in the Maghreb from November 2010 were a confirmation or, better still, manifestation of a larger process which had gradually but steadily emerged a major factor in the socio-economic formation of the globe. This factor is no other than the process of globalization; a process that was heightened by the revolutions in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the emergence of the New Media. Until the days of the social media, strong men who held authoritarian sway in the Maghreb carried on without any qualms as to the security of their political formation. But the New Media revolution changed all that.

It was obvious that since the collapse of communism in 1991, a process of paradigmatic change has been sweeping through the globe. It is a process which is shaping events in the world and is itself shaped by events in the world. The world appears to be coming together in almost every facet of existence. Values flow without borders. The walls of time and space keep lessening; local events keep acquiring global significance. The web has become the order of the day. Human activities are increasingly interwoven; trade, politics and social relations not only continue to cross borders but are often regulated by forces outside national boundaries. Some institutions emerge and direct human affairs on a global scale. Communication has conquered space and time and interpersonal interactions are universal and instantaneous. The globe has been digitalized. As the year 2010 gave way to 2011, the world witnessed a surge of activism or rather a revolution in unexpected quarters – the Maghreb. It is a region whose history has been a tale of suppression and fundamentalism; a region that has been home to long term strongmen rulers; and a region alien to the spirit and ethos of democracy. It is a region in which free thought had been held at bay by strongmen in power from Ben Ali's Tunisia to Mubarak's Egypt, from Gaddafi's Libya to Algeria and Morocco. The zeitgeist crossed into the Middle East and sprang off a challenge to the old order. From Syria to Yemen, Bahrain to Jordan, the old order of shepherding affairs of men could not suffice anymore. Change was in the air. The Arab Spring

was born. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the ending of the Cold War, the collapse of communism and the subsequent triumph of liberal democracy were to Francis Fukuyama, momentous events that have altered decisively, not just the history of the world, but also the global *modus Vivendi*. Hence, Fukuyama declared the end of history and the manifestation of the last man; that is: the manifestation of the final form of social existence. For Fukuyama, the triumph of liberal democracy was the globalization of a culture and a global order he considers the highest historical evolution. In 1992 however, in response to Francis Fukuyama's prognosis, Samuel Huntington declared that the fall of communism and the triumph of liberal democracy did not usher in *uhuru* as such in the global order but only signaled the death of ideology and ushered in a new form of conflict – the clash of civilizations. For Huntington, the end of the Cold War signaled the end of the clash of ideologies but engendered the clash of civilizations which was hitherto subdued by the clash of ideologies.

Conclusion

The key issue with social change lies with philosophy. Whether abstractly or practically, philosophy engineers change; it brings about revolution; revolution that results in social change. The highest revolution is that of the mind; revolution of ideas. It works in the mind before it is expressed outside of the mind. Like the Hegelian dialectics, the revolution that brings about process of social change starts from the mind in form of thesis, antithesis and finally to synthesis. This process is made possible because the mind is no longer satisfied with the status quo. The idea to bring about new social change is usually reflexive of the state of the mind at the time. The Arab spring demonstrated that facts line in philosophy. Philosophy is the key to socio-political change that the world needs today. Hence it remains where truth leads the way.

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