



A CRITICAL CONSIDERATION OF INTERVIEWS AS AN ESSENTIAL PHILOSOPHICAL TOOL

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Abstract

Philosophy has been presented as a critical inquiry into the deepest meaning of reality. This approach to reality has led to the adoption of diverse methods and tools of philosophical inquiry. Therefore, this paper critically examined why interviews constitute one of the above tools. Specifically, it examined the philosophical status of interviews as a data collection instrument, how philosophical methods serve as knowledge extractors, and what integrating interviews into contemporary philosophical research portends for philosophy. Drawing on the Socratic method, Hegelian dialectics, Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, and Gadamer's hermeneutics, among others, this paper argues that interviews constitute a powerful tool of philosophical inquiry, especially in contemporary society, where empirical research is given much emphasis. So, leveraging the above methodological approaches and data from the extant literature, this paper found that interviews are not merely a data-collection instrument, but an access to lived experiences, necessary for understanding and interpreting reality. Hence, interviews offer a matrix for philosophical reflections. Therefore, this paper concluded that, for philosophy to address the criticism that it is conceived as an abstract discipline and the challenges posed by empirical sciences, it must integrate interviews as a rational inquiry tool, without compromising its methodological and disciplinary integrity.

Keywords: Data, Interviews, Matrix, Philosophical Method, Instrument

Introduction

It is no longer news that some people question the value of philosophy, especially given advances in the natural sciences. For thinkers with the above mindset, while natural sciences are busy with issues concerning the scientific and technological advancement of man, philosophy is engrossed in arguments and counterarguments, one system destroying another, without a concrete, constructive societal impact (Nnaemedo, 2023). Added to this, according to this group, is their accusation that philosophy is esoteric and abstract. Given the above perception of philosophy, this paper considered it apposite to examine why philosophy should integrate interviews into its contemporary research approaches without losing or compromising its avowed methodological approach and its other unique features. Hence, this paper argues that interviews are a significant philosophical data-collection tool, offering philosophy a platform for data extraction in tandem with philosophical methods and objectives.

This paper is not ignorant of the efforts made in the past in the above direction, as exemplified in the Socratic dialogical method - Socratic method or *elenchus* (Plato, 1992), Edmund Husserl's philosophical phenomenology (Husserl, 2012), Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics (Gadamer, 2004), and Naess' (1973 & 1989) deep ecology - which underpinned that being have intrinsic values apart from their usefulness to human beings. These efforts also embody Mitroff's (1974) critique of some armchair philosophers' abstractness and social scientists' storybook methodology for their lack of existentiality or existential approach, Richard Rorty's pragmatism (Rorty, 1979), and Paul-Michel



Foucault's postmodernism (Foucault, 1978). Added to the above are Henry Odera Oruka's sage philosophy (Oruka, 1981), Pierre Bourdieu's reflexive interviewing (Bourdieu, 1999), and Osbeck et al's (2024) reaffirmation of Mitroff's study, among others. Though some of these philosophers did not directly use the interview method in their research, their works indirectly support and inspire it, thereby serving as its rational foundations. Hence, their works influenced Vandermause & Fleming's (2011) philosophical hermeneutic interviewing, Mortari et al's (2023) empirical phenomenological method (EPM), Dhobi's (2023) adoption of constructivism, positivism, interpretivism, post-positivism, and critical theory as theoretical grounds for interviews method, and Daruhadi's (2024) application of phenomenology as a rational foundation for qualitative research, among others.

In the African context, Oruka (1981) stands out as a direct validation and use of interviews in philosophical engagements, particularly in his defence of philosophic sagacity as a trend in the study of African philosophy. His other trends in the study of African philosophy are ethno-philosophy, nationalistic-ideological philosophy, and professional philosophy. So, it is noteworthy that his discovery of the four trends was a product of deep philosophical reflection, not of interviews. He relied solely on interviews to justify his approach to philosophic sagacity.

Despite the noteworthy contributions of previous studies, as already indicated, one area that has remained underexplored is the philosophical justification of interviews as an essential data-collection method in philosophy. Therefore, to address this gap, this paper investigated the philosophical status of interview data and its relationship with philosophy. Additionally, it examined the prospects of using interviews as a data-collection tool in philosophy. Nonetheless, before delving into the above, it is crucial to clarify some concepts.

Conceptual clarification

Interview

The word interview means viewing together. It is a process in which two groups of people work together to examine and exchange views on a particular issue. Hence, Seidman (2019) described it as an I-Thou relationship. The two classes can be two individuals or two groups. It means that interviews can be between two people, between a person and a group, or between two groups. In the above consideration, the person or persons conducting the interview is the interviewer, while the person being interviewed is the interviewee or the respondent. Plato's dialogues offer a glimpse into the nature of interviews in the classical era (Plato, 1997). In these dialogues, Plato presented Socrates as the interviewer, with the interlocutors as the interviewees. The interviewer's role was to elicit knowledge from the interviewees, which Socrates described as midwifery or as playing the role of a midwife. It means that interviews, beyond being a data-collection tool, underpin a lived experience, which is why phenomenologists emphasise the importance of lived experience in philosophical inquiry (Husserl, 2012). Following this phenomenological trend, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Amedeo Giorgi deployed an interview approach in some of their research (Merleau-Ponty, 2016; Giorgi, 2009; Coyle, 2020). Giorgi, however, applied it to psychology within his descriptive phenomenological method.

Besides, from a hermeneutical perspective, interviews are viewed as more than just data collection; they entail dialogue. This mode of thought was inspired by Gadamer, who argued that dialogue is basic to proper understanding, fusion of horizons, and shared meaning (Gadamer, 2004). Likewise, the view that knowledge is socially constructed is another perspective favouring the use of the interview method. This frame of thought is evident in the work of feminist philosophers such as Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, and Nancy Hartsock. For instance, Hartsock (1983) argued that women are engrossed in the world of use - in concrete, many-qualified, changing material processes; their work is typically repetitive, often collective and occurs outside the realm of commodity



exchange, in ways that gender-appropriate work for men does not. Harding (1987) argued that studying women based on their lived experiences as enumerated above enables them to understand themselves. Collins (1989) said that black women drew on real-life experience and wisdom to survive domination.

The works of Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre are among the works that inspired the interview method of data collection. For instance, Taylor (1971) argued that to understand human actions, one must be able to interpret the meaning people accord to their actions. Hence, he affirms; “We make sense of action when there is a coherence between the actions of the agent and the meaning of his situation for him” (p.13). This requires asking people directly, not through observation. Likewise, MacIntyre (2007) argued for narrative unity, insisting that “man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a storytelling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth” (p.216). According to MacIntyre, it is through this story that one comes to understand oneself, others, and society. Hence, he argued that “there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources” (p.216). By implication, the works of Taylor and MacIntyre endorse the interview method of research, which requires direct access to people to elicit responses. However, the interviewer does not need to conduct the interview personally. What matters is that the knowledge is obtained directly from the interviewee, either by the researchers or their research assistants.

Rawls (1972) also presented a method of data collection similar to the interview method through his process of arriving at the original position. However, unlike the interview method, in the search for original position, there is no demarcation between interviewer and interviewee. All are engaged in the same issue: evolving an original position for a smooth, uninfluenced takeoff and subsequent operation of the society or organisation in view.

In contrast, experimental philosophers, such as Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols, criticised the use of personal reflection (armchair philosophy) and the interview method for philosophising, arguing that these methods are unreliable. Instead, they opted for a methodical, quantitative, and controlled psychological experiment (Knobe & Nichols, 2008). However, while acknowledging that the interview method has limitations, this paper robustly argues that it subsists as a viable data collection tool for philosophy, given its potential for in-depth access to lived experiences.

Therefore, in philosophical parlance, interviews are a method of data collection through which a philosopher, following a philosophical trajectory, collects lived-experience data that constitute raw material for subsequent philosophical inquiry by asking interviewees questions to which they respond. It implies that data collection is not merely the gathering of raw materials for philosophical analysis. Nonetheless, it should emanate from the lived experiences of interviewees, thereby posing a caveat against data manipulation. As in other disciplines, data collection in philosophical inquiry can be in person, by telephone, or by email, among other methods.

Types of interviews

Interviews come in two kinds: structured and qualitative. The latter comprises unstructured and semi-structured interviews (Ihejirika & Omeogo, 2013; Oguonu, 2014). Qualitative interviews, also called in-depth interviews, comprise individual-focused interviews and focus group interviews (Ihejirika & Omeogo, 2013). The above categorisation of interviews into structured and qualitative interviews is broad and does not specify the nature of the people involved in the interview process. Hence, one can also group interviews into five: ethnographic, informant, respondent, narrative, and focused group (W.C. Ihejirika, personal communication, March 25, 2022).



Ethnographic interviews are informal, conversational interviews or situational observations undertaken in the field, prompted by something the researcher discovers during their fieldwork. One unique attribute of it is that it explores the moment. An informant interview involves interviewing people knowledgeable about the topic under consideration. It is also called key informant interviews (KII). The respondent interview aims to elicit a response. Unlike a key informant interview, in which interviewees are expected to comment on the world around them, a respondent interview is used for a standalone purpose. In narrative interviews, an interviewee is expected to tell the whole story, as in a biographical study of a person or an institution. Focused group interviews (FGIs) involve interviewing 6 to 10 people at once to explore the group effect. It entails testing how people and ideas are influenced by other people's views (W.C Ihejirika, personal communication, March 25, 2022). It could be to test whether their ideas influence others to be complementary, argumentative, or in misalignment, among others.

Therefore, this paper adopts a two-tier grouping of interviews: structure-based and interviewee-based. The former could refer to an interview process that follows a definite set of questions (structured interviews), or to one that relies on adjustable questions (unstructured or semi-structured interviews). The latter rests its grouping on the nature of the interviewees involved in the interview process, whether they are key informants, uninformed, etc.

Interviews as a philosophical tool

The consideration of interviews as a philosophical tool in this context focused on three areas: data from interviews as philosophy's matrix, the relationship between philosophical methods and interview data, and interviews and the future of philosophical inquiry.

Data from interviews as philosophy's matrix

As already stated, interviews are a data-collection tool. Data is a raw material for a given study. In the realm of philosophy, data are materials for philosophical inquiry. They are the essential material for every philosophical reflection and analysis, as philosophical reflection is always on given data, for to think is to think of and on something through something. So, they are theatres of philosophical investigation, offering philosophy the much-needed materials for its reflective activities. Data are, therefore, means to an end. Thus, it should not be mistaken for an end. In the same way, avenues of this data acquisition are only a means to an end. This explains why Okere (1983) called culture *philosophemes*: philosophical non-philosophy of philosophy, given that it is a means of generating philosophy's data. The same holds for worldview. Subsequently, Okere notes: "...In black Africa, there exists a reservoir of *philosophemes* from which any future philosopher can inspire himself... In such a culture, a philosopher can plant his roots and, from inside it, and as forming part of it, develop a philosophy with his culture as non- philosophical background" (p.120). Likewise, Hontundji (1983) critiqued Tempels, Kagame and their successors for mistaking the African worldview for African philosophy. Subsequently, he accused them of enmeshing themselves in the tiresome net of dogmatic naivety, an exercise in mythologisation, a *philosophology*.

Therefore, data collected through interviews in the course of philosophical research are means to an end. Like culture and worldview, they are philosophy's raw material for reflection and analysis. Plato realised the philosophical importance of raw interview data and used the dialogical data-collection method extensively, particularly where Socrates claimed to be carrying out the work of a midwife. So, the thrust of the above argument is that the interview data collection method applies to philosophical inquiry as well as to other disciplines. However, in philosophy, it is utilised alongside the discipline's rigour. Thus, in philosophy, interview data serve as malleable tools in a philosopher's hands. It is the work of a philosophical inquirer to utilise them as needed.



Philosophical methods and interview data

There is a relationship between philosophical methods and interview data. This relationship is understood in four stages: extractive, procession, analysis, and application. At the extractive stage, using philosophical methods, the inquirer engages in fieldwork, which enables him to obtain basic data for his subsequent philosophical inquiry. At the second stage, the processing stage, he uses an appropriate philosophical method to process the basic data. Here, he extracts relevant, specific data from the fieldwork data already collected, considering his research objectives. This second stage, also known as the data selection process, involves separating and grouping data according to the researcher's objectives. The third stage, the analysis, entails breaking down the data and using the decomposition results to interpret and evaluate the research objectives. The last stage, application, involves utilising the analysis outcome to solve a particular problem. This stage is important as it translates philosophy from mere abstract thinking to something concrete. So, it portrays a practical dimension of philosophy against critics who accuse it of esotericism and abstractness, that is, of lacking concrete bearing on human life. Thus, philosophy involves data extraction during fieldwork, data processing from fieldwork, data analysis from the processed data, and the application of basic information from the data to solve concrete human problems.

The above dialogical or interview-like process is apparent in Plato's dialogues, such as Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Gorgias, Republic, Protagoras, Meno, Laches, Charmides, Symposium, Paedo, Euthydemus, Theaetetus, and Hippias Major and Minor. In the above dialogues, Plato depicted how Socrates, under the veil of ignorance, engaged his interlocutors on ethical, moral, political, epistemological, religious, educational, anthropological, and logical matters. He aimed to critique and dislodge the obnoxious ideological positions of his time, show their superfluity, and present a superior argument as an alternative. At the extractive stage, Socrates is seen engaging his interlocutor (fieldwork) to obtain basic data. He not only extracted the data but also processed and analysed them. He likewise applied the analysis's findings to concrete situations to illustrate the futility of clinging to the previous ideological status quo. Plato's (1992) Republic offers a typical example of the above interview stages. This dialogue portrayed Socrates' critique of Thrasymachus thesis that justice is to the advantage of the stronger. On the contrary, Socrates argued that injustice leads to societal and personal disorder, while justice results in the contrast: societal and soul harmony and order (Republic, Book 1, 338c-354c; Book IV, 441c-444a). Plato's validation of innate knowledge is another instance of the application of the interview outcome (Plato, *Meno* 82b-85b).

Interestingly, a critical consideration of the above examples shows indices of the interview process. First, the example reveals that Socrates' encounter with Thrasymachus was at a definite setting, Cephalus's house (the venue for the fieldwork), involved questions on natural justice and Socrates' attempts to squeeze the answers from Thrasymachus as from an interviewee. Then followed his effort to refute Thrasymachus' answers (data processing), his analysis of those answers (data analysis), and his application of the analysis's outcome to man and society (outcome application).

Interviews and the future of philosophical inquiry

So far, this paper has demonstrated that empirical methods of data collection, such as interviews, can also be used to study philosophy, contrary to the tradition among some philosophers that favours only armchair philosophical reflection. This paper argues that data obtained through the empirical procedure are but materials for further philosophical inquiry. Hence, adopting the interview method of data generation in philosophical research never vitiates the validity of philosophical investigation. In contrast, it strengthens it by eliciting ideas from numerous sources. For instance, using the miner and traveller metaphors, Kvale (1996) explains how interviews enable a researcher to gain in-depth knowledge. Through a mining metaphor, he noted that an interviewer can delve into the depths of an issue to uncover its unadulterated version. Then, using the imagery of a traveller, he portrayed the



intersubjectivity of the interview process, in which others are involved in shaping the expected outcome. So, unlike studies, which rely solely on previous literature and a researcher's input, integrating an empirical data-collection approach enriches research. By implication, it provides researchers with a deep, robust data pool.

Integrating an interview data collection approach in the philosophical research process also makes the research existential. It links a researcher with the lived experiences of the immediate beneficiaries of the research outcome (Husserl, 2012). Ipso facto, it allows researchers to obtain firsthand information about the ideas they seek (Perez, 2025). Hence, it engenders a philosophical research outcome consistent with the feelings, aspirations, and language mode of the supposed research beneficiaries. Research outcomes coded in this linguistic mode undoubtedly improve beneficiaries' understanding, dialogue, horizon fusion, shared meaning, and social integration and cohesion (Habermas, 1984; Gadamer, 2004). The rationale for the above improvement lies in the fact that language is the house of being, as it is what makes being or reality intelligible (Heidegger, 1947). With such research in place, philosophy will be rescued from the often-negative characterisation as an abstract and esoteric discipline (Mitroff, 1974; Osbeck et al., 2024). It implies the emergence of a breed of philosophical outcomes that are theoretically and empirically grounded.

There is also the issue of contemporary research grants, which require an empirical template, thereby depriving some philosophy lecturers of the opportunity to participate actively in the process. However, with the integration of the empirical method into philosophical inquiry, philosophy lecturers will be best positioned to examine national issues most profoundly, integrating speculative and practical dimensions.

Integrating an interview-based data-collection approach into philosophical inquiry will also significantly benefit African philosophy. This is because access to the African philosophy's matrix requires the intervention of people who may not be enlightened enough to commit it to writing. Hence, obtaining this information from them would require an alternative data collection method that is convenient for them, such as interviews. Of course, Oruka (1981) had earlier envisaged this situation with his idea of philosophic sagacity, in which he argued that much philosophy is embedded in the African sage. It implies that the argument over whether Africa has philosophy arises from a forgetfulness that sage philosophy is part and parcel of African wisdom down the ages. Thus, Africa has had, and still has, philosophy, but part of it is locked in the African sages and other African realities. By integrating an interview-based data-collection method into philosophical inquiry, future philosophers can unlock the embodied philosophy of sage philosophers and the philosophy matrices embedded in African culture, worldviews, and oral stories, among others, thereby expanding and promoting the African philosophy heritage.

Conclusion

As a rational, critical, and reflective inquiry into reality, philosophy requires basic materials for its activities. Access to this material requires the use of certain data-collection instruments. This paper noted that philosophers' intuitions, reflections, and previous studies have been among the common tools they have used down the ages. However, it noted that interviews have not been accorded similar prominence as data collection tools. Thus, this paper argues that interviews should be a significant data-collection tool for philosophical inquiry, particularly in the contemporary era, where empirically supported studies are the focus. Philosophically, interviews are a method of data collection in which a researcher collects data from interviewees based on their lived experiences. This paper categorised interviews into two; structure-based and interviewee-based. It also noted that the data collected through interviews is a means to an end. Besides, it argued that philosophical methods ensure that these data reach their final destinations. This paper identified four stages through which the data



passes to reach this end: extractive, processing, analysis, and application.

Further, this paper argued that integrating an interview data-collection tool into philosophical studies holds great promise for the field. It contended that using interviews in philosophical research strengthens it by eliciting ideas from diverse sources. Also, it enables philosophers to undertake various institution-based research, as most of them are empirically based. Besides, such integration will benefit African philosophy, especially in its quest to source materials for African philosophy, most of which are domiciled in African sage, culture and worldviews. Subsequently, this paper concluded that philosophy should integrate interviews as a data collection tool, but not at the expense of its methodological and disciplinary integrity.

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