

RETHINKING PHILOSOPHY FOR EDUCATION, SOCIETY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

PERSPECTIVES FROM SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



Editors: Stephen Azubuike Oguji and Kingsley Ekene Amaechi



Rethinking Philosophy for Education, Society and Human Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction: The Value and Place of Philosophy in Education, Society, and Human Development in Sub-Saharan Africa

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African ... philosophy permeate all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate them.¹

The above quote from J.S. Mbiti's seminal work on religion and philosophy (African religions and philosophy), underscores this book's understanding of the value and place of philosophy (conceptualized as religion by Mbiti) in the African continent. In his writings, the Kenyan philosopher argues that African philosophy is deeply embedded in the cultural, spiritual, and communal practices of African societies.² He rejects the notion that philosophy is confined to academic discourse or written texts; and instead insists that philosophy exists in African proverbs, myths, rituals, and social institutions, through which the African people express their worldview, their ethics, and their understanding of existence. This means, philosophy is not an "isolated activity," but rather a lived reality, integral to how Africans relate to their world, their communities, and their notion of divine. It is inseparable from African man's everyday life and decision-making.³

In an age increasingly dominated by the demand for rapid solutions, immediate outcomes and increasing sidelining of philosophy in the academia, social, and

¹J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1969), 1.

²Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.

³Innocent Onyewuenyi, "Is There an African Philosophy?" *Journal of African Studies* 3, no. 4 (1976): 513.

political institutions,⁴ Mbiti's reflection on the nature and role philosophy in the African society has become relevant. The corresponding increasing shift toward utilitarian models (focusing on technical proficiency and workforce readiness)⁵ forces us in this book to reassert philosophy's ubiquitous nature and indispensable relevance in the shaping of not only the educational outcomes of the society but also the broader trajectory of societal development within the Sub-Saharan Africa.⁶ The aim is to demonstrate that far from being a dispensable intellectual luxury, philosophy is a foundational discipline that underpins critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and reflective inquiry, which are important elements for addressing the complex and interconnected challenges of education, society, and human development in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁷

Philosophy in Education

The book is prefaced with three well-presented discussions of the role of philosophy in education. These discussions are largely drawn from ideas from previous African philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu,⁸ John S. Mbiti,⁹ and Henry Odera Oruka,¹⁰ who have long conceptualized philosophy as a major promoter of education in Sub-Saharan Africa. In separate discussions, Wiredu's (1980) and Mbiti's (1969) works had emphasized how African education transcend beyond the transmission of information, to cultivate the ability to think critically and reflectively question and challenge societal norms and traditional wisdom, where necessary. Accordingly, Africa education's ability to do this is owed to its deep root in indigenous African philosophy within its education system. Henry Odera Oruka (1991), who championed the idea of sage philosophy, had also similarly highlighted how the indigenous African thinkers (the sage) engage with society's problems through critical and reflective thoughts. By engaging in rational, ethical,

⁴Stephen Azubuike Oguji and Kingsley Ekene Amaechi, "Indispensable Place of Philosophy in the Curriculum of South African University Degree Education: A Reflection," *International Journal of Social and Educational Innovation (IJSEIro)* 11, no. 21 (2024): 86–106.

⁵Zama Mabel Mthombeni, "A Quantitative Analysis of Public Attitudes Towards the Fourth Industrial Revolution: An Integrated Technology Adoption Model in South Africa." PhD dissertation, School of Built Environment and Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa, 2024.

⁶Stephen Azubuike Oguji and Kingsley Ekene Amaechi. 2024. "The Indispensable Place of Philosophy in the Curriculum of South African University Degree Education: A Reflection," *International Journal of Social and Educational Innovation (IJSEIro)* (2024): 86–106.

⁷J. O. Ejikemeuwa Ndubisi, "The Role of Philosophy in Contemporary Society: The Nigerian Experience," *Humanity & Social Sciences Journal* 10, no. 1 (2015): 40–46.

⁸K. Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁹J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1969).

¹⁰H. O. Oruka, *Sage Philosophy: Indigenous Thinkers and Modern Debate on African Philosophy* (Acton Publishers, 1991).

and reflective dialogue on issues affecting their communities, he argues, indigenous sages provide the frameworks for shaping moral values, governance systems, and social cohesion within their communities.

The above conceptualization of the relationship between education and philosophy suggests that the education system, when integrated into the indigenous philosophical thoughts of Sub-Saharan African societies, can provide the intellectual tools needed to navigate contemporary challenges. At the same time, philosophy can also foster an educational framework that is both relevant and deeply connected to African cultural traditions.

More so, the conceptualization of philosophy as a critical enabler of education demonstrates that education is not merely a tool for the transfer of knowledge or the acquisition of skills¹¹ but also an element, which fundamentally shapes the minds and characters of individuals. Education can fundamentally foster critical thinking, nurture the ability to question, analyze, and synthesize information, as well as provide pathways for economic and social development¹² within the Sub-Saharan African region.

The above argument is exemplified in the first chapter, “Philosophy as the Foundation of Education,” where Okewu Michael Peter provides the basic foundation for philosophy’s role in education. Through an analysis of philosophy’s ability to produce core beliefs and knowledge systems of significant educational theories in African university system, the chapter demonstrates that philosophy can play a central role in shaping and guiding educational paradigms and theories, hence underscoring its essential influence on the development of educational systems and practices within the Sub-Saharan African region. By shaping education’s main assumptions and knowledge systems within the African university system, philosophy serves as the bedrock upon which the education disciplines are built.

Similarly, “The Role of Virtue Ethics in Society and Human (Development) Education,” by Ibe Anthony Chiwuba, deepens the understanding of the role of philosophy in education by conceptualizing virtue-based education systems, as a fundamental pillar in the pursuit of a flourishing and progressive society. Drawing on a reconceptualized framing of virtue-based ethics, the chapter argues that the character of citizens in any given society is important for the realization of the much-desired good society, especially as virtue ethics plays a crucial role in human development and in fostering a life of happiness and societal progress. Hence, virtue ethics should be part of progressive minded education system of a every society. In contrast, the absence of a virtue-based education in contemporary academic curricula can allow individuals to attain academic qualifications, yet fall short of characters that benefit an educated person. Implicitly, true human

¹¹Oguji and Amaechi, “Indispensable Place of Philosophy.”

¹²F. R. Aluko, M. F. Omidire, and M. R. Mampane, “Reconceptualising Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Realising Equity and Social Justice,” *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning* 6, no. 2 (2022): 79–95.

and education progress require a transformation of mindset and disposition, possible only through a virtue-based education.

Additionally, a conscious and engaged inclusion of the core and applied subjects of philosophy into the education curriculum of all university degree programs benefits the Sub-Saharan African society. This was the case made by Amaechi Kingsley Ekene in the next chapter, “The Hidden Potentials of Philosophy in the Curriculum of Nigeria University Education: a Reflection.” Philosophy’s core contents enhance students’ ability to think critically and engage in scholarly rigorous argumentation, he argues. By enhancing students’ ability for critical analysis, scholarly inquisitiveness and disposal to seek knowledge excellence, philosophy modules in the university education curriculum of Nigerian universities can foster intellectual curiosity, moral reflection, and the ability to approach complex issues from multiple perspectives. This in the long run also improves the quality of graduates in the Nigerian university education system.

Philosophy in Society

Moving beyond the classroom, philosophy’s relevance in the society is equally presented in the next six chapters. In “Philosophy in Africa and The Crisis of Relevance: Lessons From German Idealism,” Stanly Ekwugha boldly confronts one of the most contemporary critical questions of African philosophy: “Does African philosophy truly exist as a distinct intellectual tradition?” And if it does “what does its essential principles imply?” To start with, he demonstrated that such epistemological uncertainties are not peculiar to African thought alone; indeed, the very nature of philosophy is to dwell more in questions than in final answers. What sets the African philosophical landscape apart, he further argues, is the acute crisis of relevance – a deep existential questioning of the philosopher’s place in the African society. Often misconstrued as encroaching on the domains of the poet, the linguist, or the lawyer. Within such contexts, the philosopher is rendered vulnerable to marginalization in a utilitarian age. The best way to address this question therefore is to reassert philosophy’s primordial status as the wellspring of all disciplines. Within this primordial status, it is not philosophy’s task to merely produce tools, but rather to shape the very frameworks by which tools are understood and applied. The case of 18th-century German idealism, once criticized for its obscurity but later recognized for its profound societal impact, offers a compelling analogy. So too must African philosophy reclaim its space – not as an ornamental pursuit but as a vital force in shaping discourse across politics, religion, business, art, and technology. This is not merely an academic exercise; it is an urgent philosophical duty to unveil the discipline’s omnipresence and vindicate the philosopher as a master of thought in a world increasingly forgetful of its foundations.

From a more practical and personal perspective, Bobby J. Moroe’s chapter, “Revisiting the Role of Philosophy in Diplomacy and International Relations,” addresses the practical relationship between philosophy and international diplomacy. He debunked the false narrative that philosophy is an elitist and arcane

pursuit that should be reserved only for a selected intellectual few, who wield influence within society's higher echelons. Instead, he provides a pragmatic exposition of philosophy's substantive contributions to diplomacy and international relations. At the heart of the argument is the claim that insights cultivated through philosophical inquiry are not merely confined to abstract speculations but also universally applicable in nearly every dimension of human enterprise, including in the noble art of diplomacy.

Similarly, Celestine Edozie Anyaorah's chapter draws on Ronald Dworkin's work on legal reasoning to provide a foundational framework for understanding the relationship between individual rights and collective goals. In conceptualizing legal reasoning, he makes a distinction between principles (that which judges should base their reasoning) and policies (that which judges should draw from or should avoid in making their judgment). While principles have to do with individual rights, which the judiciary is often concerned with, policies have to do with achieving the societal goals, which is the concern of the elected members of the legislature, he argues. Both elements should work together. They should be complementary, rather than contradictory, when incorporated in the building up of a good African legal system.

More precisely, Wilson Anosike explores the deep interconnection between legal theory and philosophy, particularly social and political philosophy, arguing that philosophy not only underpins but also actively shapes legal reasoning. In the next chapter, "Philosophy and Legal Reasoning," he positions the authority of law as a rational mechanism for managing social relations through criminal law, torts, and contracts, while highlighting the enduring challenge of legal integrity. Philosophy, especially through its branch of logic, supports the law by clarifying terms and guiding reasoned argumentation based on precedent. Through historical and textual analysis, this chapter illustrates how philosophy both forms and informs legal reasoning, offering insights valuable to students of both disciplines and emphasizing the broader societal importance of philosophical thought.

Somadina C. Nkemakolam in "Philosophy and Contemporary Social Challenges in Nigeria" critically traces the contributions of philosophy as a transformative force in addressing contemporary social challenges. Her worry in this chapter is the unfair label of philosophy as an abstract discipline. While she acknowledges that philosophy fundamentally deals with abstract questions of existence, ethics, governance, and human nature, yet it serves as a vital tool for rethinking societal norms and structures. This chapter, engaging with the works of different philosophers, clearly argues that philosophy holds profound potential to inspire social change, particularly in the context of pressing issues like economic inequality, political instability, and technological advancement. The point of this chapter is that philosophical inquiry can inform and reshape our understanding of socio-political issues like justice, power, and ethics in modern society.

In the ninth chapter, "While God May No Longer Have Grandchildren, People Do: The Crisis of Secularism/Atheism Among Middle-Class Youths of Sub-Saharan Africa," Dominic Umoh critically engages with the philosophical implications of the waning belief in the Absolute, understood as God in the wake of scientific and technological modernity. Through a critical and explorative methodology,

the scholar analyzes how contemporary secularism and its cultural offshoots – humanism and atheism – have redefined spirituality for a generation increasingly detached from metaphysical transcendence. In response, he therefore proposes a model of Christian philosophy that strategically appropriates the conceptual tools of secular modernity to reassert the relevance of the transcendent – God or the Absolute. Ultimately, faith and reason are not antagonistic but mutually illuminating and integral in shaping a coherent account of human existence.

Obviously, the arguments in these six chapters further reinforces the ubiquity of philosophy in the Sub-Saharan African society. Every aspect of social life is influenced by philosophical ideas: international relations and diplomacy, the legal system, politics and ethics, and other social issues. Philosophy has always provided the fundamental concepts upon which realities and interactions surrounding these aspects of human life in the society are based. In a rapidly globalized world, where cultures and ideas are constantly interacting and sometimes clashing, philosophy will be useful to offer tools for dialogue and understanding. It will also be useful to provide a framework for exploring differences, finding common ground and building a more inclusive and harmonious global community.

Philosophy and Human Development

The next two chapters explore philosophy's relevance in human development, both at the collective and individual levels. While on the collective level, philosophy can provide conceptual tools to question traditional assumptions, evaluate values, and articulate visions of the common good,¹³ thereby shaping public policy, legal frameworks, and educational systems that promote sustainable and human-centered development; on the individual level, it provides the ethical compass with which people navigate not only the complexities of life but also to understand themselves and their place in the world. In times of uncertainty and change, philosophical thinking can provide solace and direction. It can also offer ways to cope with existential questions and challenges, fostering resilience and inner peace. By engaging with philosophical ideas, individuals can cultivate a sense of purpose and meaning that goes beyond material success and external achievements.

Specifically, "Philosophy and National Development: The Nigerian Experience" by Donald Uchenna Omenukor examines the relevance of philosophy to Nigerian national development. Through a textual exposition of philosophical abstractions in the Nigerian policy on education and development, this chapter demonstrates philosophy's (both as a discipline and as an enterprise) relevance and criticality in the Nigerian national development. By providing the conceptual frameworks and the radical platforms required to interrogate the fundamental questions of human existence in the pursuit of societal growth and national development, philosophy serves as one of the most crucial mediums of national development. Within this context, the recent sidelining and seeming marginalization of philosophy in the

¹³Orika, *Sage Philosophy*.

Nigerian society, particularly in the education sector, is both shortsighted and detrimental to the holistic development of individuals and societies.

Continuing the same line of argument as Omenukor in “Ayn Rand’s Objectivism, as the Philosophy for Human Development,” Francis Chigozie Ofoegbu draws from Ayn Rand’s objectivism, to appraise philosophy as an imperative vehicle of human development. In other words, to live is to develop. People cannot but develop as long as they live. They need to develop so as to navigate the common challenges that confront their society. Philosophy, in this light, has an urgent practical importance for Sub-Saharan African development. As an imperative vehicle of human development, it can be used to rewrite the African story, which previously was filled with negative narratives of stagnation and backwardness.

The final chapter, “Philosophy in Education, Society, and Human Development” by Stephen Azubuike Oguji, again reiterates the main thesis of this book. Coming from a more practical perspective, and against the background of the marginalization of philosophy in contemporary Sub-Saharan African society, it carefully traces the importance, the value, or relevance of philosophy in education, society, and human development. Step by step, this chapter showcases how a philosophically based education system can nurture creativity, civic engagement, and philosophical inquiry to address complex societal challenges. From the definition of the aims of education to the intricacies of curriculum design and teacher training this chapter argues, philosophy can influence every facet of educational theory and practice. Its absence in the both public and public spheres, for example, can contribute to political polarization, social inequality, and a weakening of democratic institutions, which holds the society together.

The ubiquity of philosophy is evident in its application across various fields. In science, philosophical questions about the nature of reality and the limits of human knowledge drive inquiry and innovation. In the arts, philosophy inspires creativity and deepens our appreciation of beauty and expression. In business, ethical considerations and philosophical principles guide corporate governance and social responsibility. Even in the daily lives, philosophical dilemmas are evident. It is there to help people make choices about careers, relationships, or personal values. It is woven into the fabric of human existence, influencing thoughts, actions, and interactions in ways that are often subtle but profoundly impactful.

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