

## The Making and Demands of Philosophical Thought

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**Abstract:** Philosophy is one of those disciplines that suffer two extreme perceptions. On the one hand are those who know nothing about what it is all about and the other extreme are those who pretend to know and talk about philosophy. For those who do not know, philosophy appears to be something esoteric, mystical, or something that belongs to the enlightened few. On the other hand, there are those who claim to know and unfortunately everything is presented and pursued as a philosophical piece of thought available to the educated and non educated. Here also is included various types of beliefs, patterns of thought, theories and systems paraded as a piece of philosophical thought. The first makes philosophy unattractive while the second banalizes philosophy for if everything is philosophy then nothing is philosophy. the task of this article is to rescue philosophy from these excesses and to ascertain that there is a core discipline called philosophy and there are ways philosophers think which can be clearly distinguished from non philosophy hence we tend to articulate the distinguishing marks that characterize a piece of philosophical thought. An understanding of these will surely make philosophy once more an interesting piece of knowing or knowledge.

**Keywords:** Philosophical discipline, Reflection, method, truth, analysis, logical, speculative

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### I. INTRODUCTION

It was Immanuel Kant who said that he did not teach anyone philosophy but how to philosophize. What is then to philosophize? What are the demands and mental attitudes, characteristic of philosophical thinking, distinguishing when a thought is philosophical or not. We may have philosophical systems and orientations but are there characteristics by which they are identified as belonging to the philosophical genre or philosophical discipline? Are there ingredients or qualities which ideally are associated with the philosophical thought? Our answer in this paper will be an emphatic yes. There are surely characteristic features of philosophical thinking that distinguishes it from other modes of knowledge scientific or otherwise.

It is to be noted that all the philosophical systems may not embody all of them in the same degree but may meet the threshold to be recognized as a piece of philosophical thought. It is however our position that the elements are eminently found in the traditional philosophical orientation.

We will use two descriptions of the philosophical enterprise to bring out or identify the characteristic elements or basic mental attitudes of the philosophical activity and then go on to explain and clarify them.

The first description is that of Pope John Paul II, a philosopher Pope, in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. He writes “through philosophical work, the ability to speculate which is proper to human intellect produces a rigorous mode of thought and then in turn through logical coherence of the affirmations made and the organic unity of their contents, it produces a systematic body of knowledge”<sup>1</sup>

The second description presents philosophy as the persistent attempt, to see life critically, evaluatively, appreciatively and wholly, looking for the total view or total understanding of reality.

From the above descriptions among others, certain key mental attitudes, qualities and characters of the philosophical activity could be identified; namely:

1. Rationality/reflexivity
2. Criticality
3. Speculative/synthetic character
4. Analycity
5. Logicality
6. Systematicity
7. Veracity

#### 1.1 RATIONALITY/REFLEXIVITY

This expresses the fact that reason is the tool of philosophy, and philosophy a product of the rational activity or a form of rational enquiry. Philosophy seeks to think and think hard about things. Hence some say that philosophy is reason that has become conscious of itself and involves profound thinking. Thus in contrast to mere myths, beliefs, or things accepted on mere faith, revelations, customs and traditional authority,

philosophical activity subjects or summons everything to the tribunal of reason in order to validate and adjudicate or authenticate or even negate, as it seeks to offer fundamental explanation of things. So philosophy seeks to discover the rational basis of our affirmations, and to be rational is to be guided by legitimate reasoning that is well conceived and well evidenced. It interprets things in the light of evidence. It seeks justification.

Science and philosophy began when ideas about the origins and nature of the universe were decoupled from myth and religion and were treated as theories to be argued about, that is compared with (and perhaps supplanted by) competing theories.

These are possible because of the reflective activity of the human reason, the capacity to mentally turn over things and ideas, seeking their inner or hidden meanings, uncover their multiple dimensions and significations, their limits and extension. The rational ingredients will also imply that philosophy seeks to summon everything to the determination or tribunal of reason, accepts nothing on mere faith alone. This does not mean that philosophy accepts nothing that agrees with or issues or comes from faith or tradition, but tries to subject them to proper rational examination in order to determine their sustainability. For as Pope John Paul II in his *Fides et Ratio* observed, from knowledge conferred by faith could emerge certain truths which reason from its own independent enquiry can discover. Faith can stir reason to explore paths which of itself it would not even have suspected it could take. Faith can offer reason, new data or phenomena to work with, with reason obeying its rules and employing its proper powers alone.<sup>2</sup> Hence the statement attributed to St Augustine "...faith is the pioneer of reason and discovers the territory which reason explains". This rational and reflective quality of philosophy manifests itself in three important directions: **a**, the critical, **b**, the speculative and **c**, the analytic.

## 1.2 CRITICALITY

The critical element is very important character of a philosophical reflection. The word *critique* etymologically comes from the Greek word "*krinein*", meaning to judge, to discriminate or more simply to discover, to be able to tell the difference, soliciting us to practice certain mindfulness'. Thus Alexjandro says "etymologically speaking to criticize is to choose, to elect and therefore to judge, to judge the value of a thing in function of a value or an ideal... it has a meaning close to 'criterion' 'discernment or analysis'".<sup>3</sup> Thus the critical element of the philosophical temper, implies the activity of philosophy as a judge, by which it evaluates and examines things or issues for their justifiability, by which it demands for the supporting grounds, or to establish standards of evidence and criteria for knowledge or right conduct. It takes the propositions and beliefs which we unquestionably assume in science and daily life, and subject them and their presuppositions to criticism. Hence an author will define philosophy as precisely that intellectual enquiry in which anything is open to critical challenge and scrutiny. It is prepared to challenge things which everybody else takes for granted or whose rejection most people do not countenance.<sup>4</sup> Peter Singer explains that philosophizing ought to question the basic assumptions of the age, thinking through critically and carefully, what most people take for granted. It is in his opinion the chief task of philosophy and what makes it a worthwhile activity.

Socrates is said to be the pioneer of the critical orientation (method) of philosophy, hence his famous statement "*the unexamined life is not worth living.*" He took it as his unique task to interrogate his fellow citizens to see whether or not their opinions could stand up to close scrutiny. Wherever he found people holding opinions or making truth claims, there he went to work. "this picture of Socrates going about questioning the men of Athens to test the soundness of their opinions represents what we call the critical side of philosophical enterprise".<sup>5</sup>

In the dialogue, *Apology*, Socrates in the image of a philosopher likened himself to the gadfly which unceasingly stings and disturbs and challenges the citizenry. He said "god has specially appointed me to this city as though it were a large rough bred horse which because of its great size is inclined to be lazy and needs stimulation of some stinging fly. It seems to me that god has attached me to this city to perform the function of such a fly. All the day long, I never cease to settle here and everywhere raising, persuading, reproving every one of you..."<sup>6</sup>

Thus in the original setting, the philosophical activity amounted to the willingness to pursue an argument to its conclusion, challenging it at every stage and leaving the conclusion open to further refutation. We can say that the critical attitude or quality of philosophy involves a double commitment.

1. Commitment to the truth: This is the readiness to reject conclusions that seem to be false.
2. Commitment to certain moral virtues implicit in the philosophical activity and in accordance with the philosophical spirit: such as honesty and impartiality. We note here that this critical attitude of philosophy must not be construed that philosophy is endless criticism that recognizes no certain reality or the truth, a type of intellectual anarchism or sophism (inclination to sophistry) as is held in some quarters.<sup>7</sup> This would amount to the self-destruction of philosophy itself. This exaggerated notion of critique is against the traditional orientation which is still the right understanding of critique. This consists in holding that there are creative and constructive interventions, which do not deny the possibility of reaching certain knowledge or truths or reality at

times, and yet holds that there is need to submit all our claims to knowledge of reality to rigorous examination trying to rid our philosophical enquiry of all unfounded assumptions and prejudices.

However, in this process it recognizes that there some self-evident truths which are the basis of thought itself and also that our reason can attain certain certainties which all fair minded enquirers can accept. Though improvement is always possible and our knowledge is perfectible and perfectibility is always possible in what we know. Positive critique knows that we must start our investigations from something not nothing, based perhaps on the principle of undeniability, that is recognizing basic self evident truths. Otherwise our enquiries will end up in infinite regress and nihilism becomes the rule and critique itself becomes a meaningless enterprise.<sup>8</sup>

### **1.3 SPECULATIVE CHARACTER**

It is normally said that philosophy does not deal with mere facts meaning here with the physical observable and experimental world or reality but with reality expressed conceptually in the order of reason. In fact philosophy started as metaphysics in the attempt to understand the ultimate principle of things, later developments notwithstanding. This highlights the speculative dimension or character of philosophy. Here philosophy seen in its quest for universal knowledge and truth, can soar, through its creative intellect to reality impossible for the special or natural sciences. The attempt to unify reality in a set of principles or mental schemes through which reality is said to be grasped, to try to provide a total picture of reality and establish the interconnectedness of things.<sup>9</sup>

Thus Gusmano would point out that the desire to fill the gaps, to present a total picture of what the universe may be like is a natural desire on the part of reason and constitute a long tradition of philosophical speculation. From the early Greeks of 600bc to the grand metaphysical systems developed by the philosophers of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

Aristotle, Plato in ancient philosophy, Thomas Aquinas in the medieval, modern rationalist like Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, the idealist like Hegel and Whitehead in contemporary times. The speculative attitude tries to reduce experience to a mere comprehensive general and universal explanations and anchored on the conviction that the universe itself is lawful and rational and can be grasped. So the goal of speculative attitude of philosophy is to achieve a system of thought which shows what reality really is and must be and shows as well how reality forms a system. Although it is based upon what we think we do know, it goes beyond what we can demonstrate at the moment.

Aristotle said that the philosophic reason is contemplative existence. The contemplator is engrossed in a universal consistent world.<sup>11</sup> Hence the speculative attitude of philosophy is equally contemplative and equally constructive in the sense that “philosophers are responsible for creating new ideas, systems of thought, pictures of the world and its features.”<sup>12</sup> While the critical role of philosophy could give the impression that philosophy is all about knocking down things, the speculative character is also about building and establishing body of beliefs.

William H. Halverson observed “... a careful scrutiny of the work of many generations of practicing philosophers suggests that the principal aim of the philosopher is to construct a picture of the whole of reality in which every element of man’s knowledge and every aspect of man’s experience will find its proper place. Philosophy in short is man’s quest for the unity of knowledge, a perpetual struggle to create the concepts that allow the universe to be seen as unified rather than fragmented. The history of philosophy is the history of this attempt. The problems of philosophy are the problems that arise when one attempts to grasp this total unity.”<sup>13</sup>

This brings out the synthetic character of philosophy. Hence philosophy goes beyond analysis to synthesis; to picking up the pieces and weaving together interconnected threads by which we understood ourselves, our society and our universe. Aristotle is said to be the first synoptic or synthetic philosopher (within the western philosophical tradition). He weaved vast areas of knowledge into a coherent philosophical system that served as the framework for man’s thinking until the beginning of the scientific revolution. Because of the speculative character of philosophy Bertrand Russell placed philosophy between theology and science. He claimed: “philosophy...is something intermediate between theology and science. Like theology it consists of speculation on matters as to which definite knowledge has so far not been ascertainable, but like science it appeals to human reason rather than authority or that of revelation...”<sup>14</sup>

We must emphasize that the speculative and critical dimensions are not antithetical to each other but require each other even though philosophers may give one more dominating influence than the other in their philosophy. However as an author said the two forces that must cooperate in philosophy are the militant attitude that provides courage for the adventure of reason and a contemplative attitude that broadens and controls.

In all the rational speculative attitude of philosophy involves:

- a. having a profound insight into things: that is looking hard at things; to find the deeper meaning of things.
- b. engaging in profound interrogation to grasp the underlying causes: that is to look for the unifying principles.

c. seeking for the deeper connections in reality or the interconnectedness of things: that is discarding the atomistic view of things for the wholistic.

#### **1.4 ANALYTICITY (ANALYTIC DIMENSION)**

The rational reflective character of philosophy could also take the analytic direction which indeed contrasts with her speculative synthetic character and yet both are arsenals in hand of philosophy. It is said that reason engages in two basic tasks: taking apart i.e. analyzing ideas to discover if we truly know what we think we know; putting together that is synthesizing all our knowledge to find if we can attain a larger and better view of life that we can.

*Analysis* comes from the Greek etymology meaning to break up, to reveal the nature by breaking up something. Like chemical compounds, the more complex concepts can be broken down into simpler ideas that compose them. We cannot analyze all our concepts at once “the best we can do is to use the better understood concepts to help us understand those we find more perplexing.” Philosophical or conceptual analysis is a process of clarifying and explaining a concept, belief, theory, questions by drawing attention to constituent parts and presuppositions; an attempt to break up problems into manageable parts. From its beginning, one of the central concerns of western philosophy has been the analysis of ideas. There has been the pre-occupation with problems of clear thinking right from Socrates, the chief spokesman in the Platonic *Dialogues*, spending time about words, about ideas, beliefs and discovering the fallacies which make-up a large part of our thinking. Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics* contains his analysis of the syllogism while his *Posterior analytics* contains his analysis of the conditions of scientific or demonstrative knowledge.

Later in the history of philosophy, *analysis* will become the main role of philosophy and the means by which philosophical questions are answered or shown to be confused or incoherent. Inspired by the works of G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russell and the influence of Frege and Ludwig Wittgenstein in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, *analysis* became a way of clarifying meaning rather than seeking new truths about reality, seeking clarity for the use of words, phrases and sentences, concepts and argumentations; as a way of removing philosophical puzzlement.<sup>15</sup> *Analysis* becomes a rigorous way of throwing light on the nature and implications of our concepts characteristically revealed by the way we employ them in discourse.

#### **1.5 LOGICALITY**

When one says that philosophy or the philosophical activity is guided by legitimate reasoning, one hints at the logical dimension of philosophy and logic as a tool of philosophy. Hence we hear that the philosopher can no more do without logic as the physicist can do without mathematics. Logic is the key to philosophy.<sup>16</sup> In fact, philosophy developed *pari-passu* with logic. Philosophical reasoning and discourse cannot happen anyhow. It obeys the rules of right reasoning, proceeding according to the rules of logic. Thus philosophy sought to identify the procedural norms of our thinking and discourse.

Aristotle more than 25 centuries ago, discovered the rules of thought, for right ordering of our reasons in a scientific fashion, in a set of books called the *Organon*. The Greeks constructed a solid method of reasoning by consistently developing the seeds of logic inherent in their speech towards a definite goal.<sup>17</sup> Aristotle, developed the laws of thought, the process in which our reasoning must follow in order to be regarded as legitimate and valid or guide us with safety through our intellectual project. These include the *principle of non-contradiction* which specifies that something cannot be and be at the same time, in the same manner and in the same circumstance. Secondly, there is the *principle of identity* namely- one is who he is. Thirdly, *the law of excluded middle*: between being and non-being, there is no middle term.

Philosophical thought is constrained by and should be guided by the basic laws of thought and its principles. Socrates stressed on the importance of *the principle non contradiction*, the recognition that the first principles cannot be proven, they are self-evident and *apriori* (independent of experience). Philosophy asks fundamental questions which could only be answered by hard thought, laying the foundation of logic, of correct reasoning in which any contradiction between one proposition and another means that one of them is false. Through the illustration and confirmation of their theories, the theories themselves were built upon a coherent and consistent form or system of argument, from a sound and accepted beginnings. Thus Bruno Schnell would say that the philosophers of the classical period tended to accept only those data of experience controlled by thought which satisfies the tests of receptability, of identification, of comprehension, of non contradiction.<sup>18</sup> Of course these are logical indices and virtues. And still the logical characters of consistency, coherence and clarity are indispensable for philosophical thinking, discourse and articulation of ideas. Philosophy needs precise coherent and clear thinking. A good philosophical or scientific statement is one that is orderly, coherent, consistent, well stated and persuasive. So logic is intrinsic in the philosophical enterprise without being the whole philosophical activity which some people came to hold at certain moments in the history of philosophy like the philosophical analysts of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century like Frege and Russell in which philosophy becomes a form of logic which seeks to uncover the logical structures to what reality is reducible.

## 1.6 SYSTEMATICITY

Logical thinking is linked with orderly and disciplined procedure ie systematic process. Coherent and ordered or systematic thinking is crucial in the attainment of truth in any field of learning or research whatsoever, and philosophy in particular. To say that philosophy is systematic is to highlight the fact that philosophy is scientific as already discussed in chapter one. The original meaning of science is different from the modern understanding which limits science primarily to the natural experimental sciences like biology, chemistry and physics. In this original understanding, it means a methodic, organized, systematic and disciplined discourse. Pointing to the systematicity of philosophy, highlights its scientific character, as something carried in an ordered, organized way, following a rigorous procedure in order to reach its conclusions. It is not haphazard or chancy. Philosophy does not handle its subject matter anyway or anyhow but follow a disciplined process where every step is carefully argued to avoid contradictions and inconsistencies. It follows an ordered pattern observing the necessary rules of argument so its process is not accidental but follows a logical sequence to its conclusions.

## 1.7 VERACITY

This highlights the fact that philosophy is truth oriented ie the goal of philosophical reflection is the truth. In principle, philosophy is oriented towards a known that must be in essence absolute and unconditioned. This is why the Greek Philosophers saw the goal of their philosophy as the ultimate explanation; seeking reality as it is beyond its purely empirical appearances whether it is attained or not. The Greek word for truth is *aletheia* meaning to un-conceal, untie, reveal. A thing reveals itself when it shows its proper being. Hence philosophy was seen as an activity that in which man seeks to know things in their concealment ie in their proper reality- in their true nature. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and most mainstream and traditional philosophers were clear in their quest for truth and wisdom and they believed that some measure of truth about things is attainable. Thus William Desmond observed that philosophy is built on reason's confidence in its own power to know the truth, confidence in the fundamental intelligibility and goodness of being. This confidence energizes reason in all its process.<sup>19</sup> it is purely this search for the truth that motivated Socrates to play the role of the gadfly stinging his countrymen in order to seek the truth, to make them reflect on their existence properly. He is the gadfly that tried to sting his contemporaries out of the prejudices, preconceptions, spontaneous affirmations in order to seek the truth.

In spite of the fact some brands of modern and contemporary philosophies have tended to see philosophy in some pragmatic or functionalistic terms, yet in its originality and mainstream orientation, it was a disinterested activity. Aristotle saw it as knowledge for the sake of knowledge devoid of utilitarian, emotional or sentimental attachments. They were aware that utility or personal interests destroy the truth and objectivity. Hence, philosophy is openness to the truth for the sake of the truth and offers the courage to question and pursue knowledge. Hence in his metaphysics, Book III Aristotle said "All men by nature desire to know." This highlights the importance of truth over mere opinion or authority or personal attachment in the philosophical enquiry. This is portrayed in the saying "*amicus Plato, amicus Aristoteles magis amica veritas*" (*Plato is my friend, Aristotle is my friend, my greater friend is the truth*) "*Magna est veritas*" (*truth is great*). For Aquinas the fact of philosophy does not consist in knowing what men have said but in knowing how things are in themselves. This means being able to grasp the being of things and that which makes a thing what it is. This is ontological truth. Thus, Aristotle would say that to say that what is that it is, and what is not, that it is not is to say the truth. This is moral truth. In this pursuit for the truth, philosophers have given certain criteria to evaluate our various truth claims at various levels.

1. **Undeniability test** ie one cannot deny the truth claim or the existence of what is claimed without falling into a contradiction eg I cannot deny my own existence without affirming it at the same time.
2. **Logical consistency**-here, a truth claim should be a necessary consequence of an already accepted truth claim or principle. For as it is said "*verum vero consonant*- truth must cohere with truth.
3. **Empirical Adequacy**- if the truth claims is at the empirical level, one could ask if there is an empirical adequacy where it could be tested, so could be verified in experience.
4. **Experiential Relevance**- here one could ask whether the truth claim can be applied meaningfully to life.
5. **Unaffirmability test**- this is the negative way, the test for falsehood. It states that just because something can be stated, does not necessarily follow that the statement is true, eg, if i say I cannot speak a word in English- this is unaffirmable since I am already speaking English.<sup>20</sup>

There is no doubt that any of the above criteria can be contested according to ones philosophical position. Yet they go to show the belief among most philosophers that the philosophical quest is the quest for the truth even though the test for attaining the truth is always controversial. As it will later be shown in this book, some philosophers are not convinced that the truth is attainable nor do they think that philosophy should go in that direction. Eg Later Wittgenstein, Derrida, Richard Rorty seem to convert philosophy to a play of

language and interesting conversation. For them it is not a truth seeking activity. However, this is a position of only a radical minority. Any philosophical position which holds that philosophy is not truth seeking is self-refuting; because it is thereby asserting that its position is untenable. Truth in the traditional understanding remains *adequatio rei intellectus*- the correspondence of the mind with reality which remains the proper object of the intellect, So philosophy travels in the hope of the truth, whether it arrives there or not is another problem. We must conclude here with Kant who said “*you will not learn from me philosophy but how to philosophize, not thought to repeat but how to think, yet all in search of the truth.*”

## II. CONCLUSION

Most of the prejudices against philosophy arises from the attempts to make philosophy what it is not or to make philosophy everything. Making philosophy what it is not leads to false comparisons and making philosophy everything makes philosophy inconsequential, a bogus meaningless adventure. In both cases, philosophy suffers both the crises of identity, the crises of relevance and the crises of survival. Hence the need to bring clarifications to the subject matter of philosophy, and to establish its true identity. This is why it is necessary to articulate the true nature and demand of a philosophical thought as a model and a form of knowledge *sui generis*.

## ENDNOTES

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- [2]. Pope John Paul II *Fides et Ratio*, chapter 6, No73&75
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