CAUGHT IN THE WEB: THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PHILOSOPHER AND THE ADVANCEMENT OF HUMAN INTERESTS THROUGH BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL [1]

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Introduction

This reflection is occasioned by the growing clamour for graduates in the humanities, especially philosophy, to continue to justify the relevance of their training and skills to the pursuit of human interests and the common good in the face of their dwindling fortunes when compared to their counterparts in science and technology-related disciplines. After due reflection, I decided to anchor the discourse on three very important provinces that must interface in our pursuit of human interests, described here as those experiences, dispositions and conditions that promote the happiness, goodness and well-being of individuals, and to which other humans can relate. These important domains are Philosophy, Social environment and Values. The issue of a web that has entrapped modern philosophy graduates in Nigeria in their quest to employ their philosophical training and skills in pursuit of human interests is occasioned partly by (1) the challenges posed by evidential successes recorded by contemporary science, which many have mistaken to be the measure of human happiness and well-being; (2) the denigration of the humanistic disciplines, of which Philosophy is champion, by major stakeholders of society and (3) the challenge of being a philosophy graduate trained within the Nigerian socio-cultural space, with a curriculum that reflects mainly, the values and idiosyncrasies of other cultures. These triads are some of the strands in the web that has entrapped the modern philosophy graduate in

Nigeria. This however does not suggest that our educational training in philosophy is vain and worthless, for there is an established relationship between education and human/social development.

Education and Development

Many countries in the world admit in principle that education is a major instrument for facilitating growth and development and for promoting human interests. Unfortunately, most developing countries, especially in Africa only pay lip service to this truism. In the specific case of Nigeria, only minimal attention is given to education, and even within education, the humanistic disciplines have been the most denigrated. Among the humanities, philosophy has been relegated to the status of an orphan, with only very few people willing to speak in her favour. This is due to the erroneous assumption that the humanities, most especially Philosophy, have little or nothing to contribute to the promotion of human goodness and well-being and to national development, as science is taken to be the only discipline best suited to deliver these promises. The planners of Nigeria's educational curriculum have over the years bought into this assumption by placing high premium on academic subjects and courses in the area of science. Today, we see high level proliferation of universities of Science and Technology and of Agriculture, without a corresponding increase in University of Liberal Arts.

Consequent upon the above, the sciences and even some other humanistic disciplines that philosophy birthed at a time in the history of western scholarly tradition have now entered into conspiracy with our policy makers to ensure that Philosophy is not only thrown out from the concert of intellectual disciplines, but that they only, occupy the front row in the comity of disciplines best suited to pursue human interests. The question however is, how far has science fared in its alleged pursuit of human interests?

Science and the Pursuit of Human Interests

In the last few decades of human history, humanity has come to hold an exalted view of science as the best intellectual apparatus so far devised for advancing human interests and for resolving most, if not

all of humanity's problems. For Ernst Cassirer, there is no second power in our modern world which may be compared to that of science. For him, science is the summit and consummation of all our human activities, in fact, the last chapter in the history of mankind. It would appear, therefore, that if there are areas of human endeavour in which science cannot superintend, then such areas transcend the scope of human knowledge.

True to some of these claims, science has indeed been beneficial to mankind in many imaginable ways – like in the areas of improved food production and preservation, health care delivery, energy, security and information communication - the list can go on! But the question is whether these so-called benefits have actually, genuinely promoted human interests? Science no doubt has opened to man the possibility of control over nature, but just the same way it has conferred on man the power to destroy himself and the environment in which he lives. Today, the world lives in perpetual fear of annihilation, all thanks to science! It is not only its destructive potentials that have turned science into threat and nuisance but also the fact that even its well-intended uses have been found to have unintended consequences that have perplexed or even frustrated the very people that initiated them. Science has today become a tool in humanity's possession, who like a man without experience, manipulates it at random but instead of making progress at work, ends up injuring himself with the tool. Albert Einstein and Huxley would, therefore, appear to be correct when they insisted that "our science has exceeded our humanity", and that "scientific progress has merely provided us with more efficient means for going backwards". How could such a discipline be said to promote human interests?

The reason for this query is because despite the so-called evidential successes recorded in science, the existential conditions under which many societies in the south have been operating have been most horrendous! What we have in our part of the world are societies characterised strictly by high-level decadence in values, economic and social indiscipline, political lawlessness, widespread official corruption, massive electoral fraud, insecurity, political

violence, armed robbery and cultism. These conditions have made our quest for the kind of social environment requisite for the pursuit of human interests, a *will-o-the-wisp.*

Given, therefore, the undue frolicking with science by all and sundry, despite its inability to promote human interests in the real sense of the word, and given also the unwarranted disdain and apathy shown to the humanities by major stakeholders of society, the modern philosophy graduate is being cowed into thinking that the reflective and critical skills of philosophy are no longer relevant to the promotion of human interests. Let me recast this challenge in a questionnaire manner: How can a Nigerian philosophy graduate employ the reflective and critical tools of philosophy in promoting human interests in Nigeria given (1) the ascendancy of science and other disciplines in laying claim to such a role; (2) the palpable suspicion and mistrust for philosophy by society's major stakeholders and (3) the dilemma of being produced within a given locale using a curriculum develop within the ambience of another cultural milieu? These are three main strands in the web that has entrapped the Philosophy graduate trained within the Nigerian cultural space but with a curriculum that is deeply reflective of the values and idiosyncrasies of foreign cultures! How then do we make our philosophical training relevant to the pursuit of human interests within the Nigerian socio-cultural environment?

Philosophy and the Pursuit of Human Interests

Documented evidences in the Holy Books of the world's major religions clearly indicate that everything in the physical and material world came into existence at some point, prior to which nothing existed. In Genesis 1:1-3, the Bible records that God created the Heavens and the Earth out of a formless and void space through spoken words. This suggests that the world around us is a product of God's spoken words, which themselves are products of thought. The African sage-philosopher and philanthropist, Emmanuel Onyechere Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe corroborates this point when he says:

> Thoughts are things. Yes, good thoughts are things. Bad thoughts…positive thoughts, negative thoughts, thoughts of life and thoughts of deaths, thoughts of peace and thoughts of war… all… are things (cited in Lawuyi, 2009: 36).

The import of Anyiam-Osigwe's assertion is that the world around us is the product of man's internal thinking processes. It follows therefore that philosophy has a responsibility, as a foremost critical venture, to engage the world, since everything in it are products of man's internal thinking processes. A little familiarity with world history would show that there could not have been human civilisation without the intellectual foundation provided by great philosophers. Indeed, philosophy has been instrumental in promoting human goodness and well-being and in shaping the destiny of most societies. It is just unfortunate that the excitement about the material benefits of science and other disciplines has made many to disregard intellectual endeavours like philosophy that do not seem to have readily visible utilitarian value, and consequently conclude that it cannot promote human interest. By so doing, however, such people err for measuring human interests solely in terms physical infrastructures and material acquisition.

What Then Should the Philosophy Graduate Do?

Human interests as stated earlier, is used to describe those experiences, dispositions and conditions that promote the happiness, goodness and well-being of individuals, and to which other humans can relate. The human person is made up of both the physical and the spiritual components and the spiritual component exerts a more controlling influence on the physical. While the physical and material infrastructures acquired through scientific ingenuity may cater for the physical aspect of man, human happiness, goodness and well-being pertain more to the spiritual component which is better nourished through values. This task, I think, is the main challenge the university education was originally designed to take on, which is, the propagation of values that will help create the appropriate conditions,

experience and dispositions for the promotion of human happiness, goodness and well-being. But then, what are values and how are they related to the setting of these appropriate conditions?

Values

At the general level, values can be used to describe pursuits or engagements that are perceived by persons or groups to be worthwhile. This understanding accommodates both the Instrumental and Terminal conceptions of value. Terminal values are the desired end-states a person strongly wants to achieve while Instrumental values are those that help us to achieve our terminal values. This general conception accommodates even the pursuit of negative values. For this reason, Immanuel Kant soberly warns that in the pursuit of values, we should learn never to treat humanity as a means to an end but always as an end in itself.

However, our understanding of value in this presentation has a positive, moral connotation. It refers to those desirable qualities, standards, beliefs, principles or ideals which not only represent a person's or group's driving force but also influence the person's or group's actions, reactions, decisions and choices. In other words, values are deeply-held beliefs that guide human behaviour and decision and are tightly integrated into the fabric of everyday living. This positive moral conception of value is aptly expressed in the words of Kluchkhohn when he said *inter alia*:

> Values encapsulate the socially sanctioned attitudes typical of a certain culture, which is interiorised by their society's members and helps them make choices, it directs them to their goals and points to means of action: It also strengthens action in the frame of the same socio-cultural domain in which it is rooted. (cited in Udefi, 2009:156)

The above excerpt from Kluchkhohn means that values are structurally interconnected with behaviour because they influence or direct behaviour. Behaviour in turn affects the type of order that exists

in an environment, which subsequently makes room for the promotion of human goodness and well-being. A wrong value system will therefore, result in a wrong pattern of behavior and a wrong pattern of behavior by persons or groups will result in negative unfolding of events in the society. What this means is that the nature of events in society is a reflection of the character of humans in it and the character of humans is a reflection of the norms and value system man has subjected himself to.

The point of the foregoing is to show that our emphasis on values in the pursuit of human interests is right on point, given the centrality of values to the attainment of the kind of social environment needed for human development and transformation. As the late African sage-philosopher Emmanuel Onyechere Anyiam-Osigwe (1921-1998) once remarked, and rightly too:

> Values hold the solution to the many and varied challenges in all spheres of human existence and have through the ages provided man with the inventiveness, knowledge and understanding with which to conquer, subdue and establish dominion over our world.

Indeed, values serve as the foundation upon which every society firmly stands. For without values, humans in society would be merely driven by the vicissitudes of life or compelled to actions by their urges and passions. The Nigerian state is not bereft of positive values that can be employed in promoting human interest, but the Nigerian philosophy graduate, who by the nature of his/her training should be best suited for his task, is caught in the web of how to appropriate, employ and apply these values to local situations, given that the curricula that produced them have their footing in other culture! Put differently, a philosophy graduate trained within the Nigerian socio-cultural space, using a culturally sensitive curriculum reflective of values and idiosyncrasies of other milieus gets caught in the web. How would such a philosopher address the question of human interests in an environment hostile to the value-contents of educational curricula that produced him or her? This for me is a major

strand in the web that has entrapped the philosophy graduate trained in Nigeria using educational curriculum that is reflective of other cultural values.

Reflecting on a similar dilemma relating to the predominantly Eurocentric content in the Philosophy curriculum (this time around) in African universities, scholars like Adeshina Afolayan (2018), Kwasi Wiredu (2004), Ope Akoleowo (2022), Anselm Jimoh (2022) and Jonathan Chimakonam (2016) have theorised on the urgent need to revamp the curriculum contents of Philosophy Departments in Africa to capture reflections on the African realities. Their argument is that Philosophy Departments in Africa currently operate with curricula that do not only retain colonial vestiges but overtly espouse Western philosophical tradition as the standard to which all others must conform. This leads to a situation where we have first-degree graduates of philosophy whose philosophical knowledge remain predominantly anchored in Eurocentric epistemes. The Nigerian philosopher trained with curriculum developed in the west is, therefore, caught in a western epistemological trap, as he or she would have to struggle with how to employ foreign knowledge paradigms, theories and ideas which ideally usually do not fit local realities in resolving local challenges. By the nature of their training, the Nigerian philosophy graduate is alienated from his or her indigenous epistemes, and so faces an uphill task in utilising the knowledge paradigms in such epistemes to address local challenges. Hence, the need to decolonise the African Philosophy curriculum by way of deconstructing the embedded Eurocentric hegemony and reconstructing a viable curriculum that will place Africa and African concerns at the hard core of philosophising, and so make philosophy relevant to the immediate environment.

Following this suggestion creates yet another strand in the web that further entraps the philosopher, as it would run contrary to the idea of university education. The university, from its original inception has been a forum or an institution devoted to the study of general or universal knowledge. In examining the morphological constitution of the word ‘University’, Niyi Osundare looked at the

two constituent Latin words: 'Uni' (meaning 'whole', 'entire') and 'versus' (which means 'to turn'). 'Uni' + 'versus' therefore gives the meaning "turned into one" or "made into whole". With this kind of etymological pedigree, it becomes clear what the university education originally stands for: that is, a center for the pursuit of knowledge that is inclusive, whole and comprehensive. Other advocates of the idea of a university like Wilhelm Von Humboldt and John Henry Newman emphasised this original mandate of cohesiveness, wholeness and inclusiveness in the pursuit and inculcation of knowledge by the University. It follows, therefore, that the objective of the University anywhere in the world is to achieve one singular aim, which is the pursuit of skills, behavioural attitudes and values that are of universal applicability. How then does the Nigerian philosophy graduate trained with educational curriculum developed elsewhere get out of this trap, untie the many strands and exit the web that has entrapped him of her, so as to contribute meaningfully to the promotion of human goodness and well-being, otherwise known as human interests?

Exiting the Web: Bridging Social Capital and the Pursuit of Human Interests

We have insisted that physical infrastructures acquired through scientific feats cannot alone guarantee human goodness and well-being, except perhaps, they are complemented by human competencies, skills, knowledge, creativity and experience. And even then, these competencies, skills and knowledge are actually made possible by the human environment, which itself is a product of the operating moral values and social norms. Moral values and social norms are very critical to providing the enabling environment where individuals can put their competencies and skills into promoting human interests and the overall well-being of society. We consider norms and values instrumental to the pursuit of human interests, because no form of social life can endure unless certain appropriate conditions are secured. These appropriate conditions themselves depend on the functioning of the basic institutions of society, which in turn depend on the social environment in which they operate. And the

social environment itself is a function of the prevailing social norms, moral rules and values in society. It is these values and norms that have been described by scholars using the phrase 'social capital'.

The idea of "Capital" had occupied a central place in the discourse about development, though the term was originally employed with the qualifiers 'Physical capital' and 'Human capital'. Physical capital refers to tangible assets like land, buildings, equipment and machinery that can be put into production for further creation of wealth or development, while Human capital refers among other things, to the ingenuity and the managerial and technical skills of the people like their competencies, knowledge, creativity, level of education and experience. What is however missing from the foregoing analysis of capital is the neglect of those values and norms that are critical to providing the appropriate environment for the development of these competencies, skills, and experience, and this is filled by the concept of social capital.

What may be insinuated from the foregoing is that the social realm has implication for other realms in a polity and that the quality of values and norms operational in the social realm determines the quality of what is experienced in other realms of society. One of the advocates of social capital in term of the role that values and social norms play in the society is Francis Fukuyama (1997), who postulates the idea of social capital that recognises the challenges that lack of a moral environment has for the operation of physical and human capital. Social capital, for him, refers to sets of norms that ought to guide a collective and the benefit accruing to all when everyone abides by those norms.

Nigeria is a plural society with segmented cleavages. According to Robert Dahl (1982), a plural country as one in which there is a plurality of relatively autonomous sub-systems within the domain of the state, and segmented cleavages is said to exist in a society where there are organisations, sub-systems or communities that are relatively independent and deeply divided. Such cleavages are based, not only on political preferences and ideology but on cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic characteristics of the people. This

description fits perfectly, the Nigerian situation. Given, therefore, the peculiarity of the Nigerian state as a plural society with segmental cleavages, the only way the philosopher can employ his or her skills in contributing meaningfully to society is to promote aspects of social capital resources that would help bridge relations and create the enabling environment for citizens to develop those skills, knowledge and competences for promoting human goodness and well-being. In other words, to address the question of human interests in a society like ours would require the promotion of norms, ideals and values that would help shrink these cleavages and bridge what Schuller (2007) describes as the "links a community has with others that are different, to whatever degree". These values are described using the phrase 'Bridging Social Capital'.

Bridging Social Capital is important because it extends the circle of connectedness by building bridges that enable members of other societies to cooperate and co-exist harmoniously. We need, therefore, a reenactment of those shared norms and values encapsulated in the social capital resources of trust, tolerance, cooperation, mutual respect and so on - values capable of creating the kind of environment conducive to the promotion of human interests in any society. These are the values that should engage the attention of contemporary Nigerian philosophy graduates if they must make any meaningful contribution to the promotion of human interests in a society like ours. But this task would require the total commitment of our entire being; our intellect, our passions, our energies, our all! As Anyiam-Osigwe rightly remarks:

> What makes socio-economic and political development possible is the intertwining of the spiritual, physical and moral fibres of individuals who are driven by passion to affect the world or add value to it in an uplifting and positive manner.

And we all know that outside of the spiritual, the physical and the moral fibers of individuals, there is nothing left that can be committed to any cause. It behoves therefore on graduates in the humanities,

most especially philosophy, to take their profession as a vocation, a calling that requires their all - body, soul and spirit, for this is the only way they can bring about the much desired improvements in our society and so make Nigeria country great again.

Notes

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