

Teaching Applied Philosophy Courses without Knowledge of First Principles of Philosophy and Laws of Thought

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Abstract

The teaching of applied philosophy courses in some institutions has become a trivialised issue on the ground that many people claim the ability to teach such courses at the detriment of those they teach. This is in clear sign of lacuna at both the policy and individual levels of different institutions. There is need to be aware of the subtleties involved, embedded and fundamentally inextricable from the being and nature of philosophy. As a result, the products from such institutions are people hardly with any ability for rigorous logical and critical thinking. This paper believes that in the teaching of any applied philosophy course, there is need for professionalism. Philosophy, and indeed, all human endeavours, have principles that guide them. This paper thus recommends a grasp of the first principles of philosophy and laws of thought for a successful teaching of applied philosophy courses.

Keywords: philosophy, first principles, laws of thought, education

Introduction

It is a general truism that one cannot give that which one does not have. However, that axiom seems not to be the case in the contemporary Nigerian landscape (including academics). Many universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, colleges of medicines/nursing, business schools, etc. offer applied philosophy courses but do not have trained philosophers handling such courses. This downplays the critical role and importance of philosophy in the academic and educational settings (especially, in Nigeria). It is unfortunate, that the prominence of philosophy in the scheme of knowledge dispensation is being compromised.

In most encounters, one discovers that most of these personnel handling such applied philosophy courses have no clear understanding of the first principles and laws of human reasoning. Where such is obtainable, not all can figure out easily how such are applied. The major crux and gravamen here is that such people are not aware of the subtleties in philosophic thought and its discourses. These, however, make the students to lack adequate critical awareness to certain issues within such fields. Unfortunately, the fields

where such courses are obtainable are involved in matters that affect life and living which needs enough critical appreciation of issues. For example, the challenges of climate change, genetically modified organisms, business ethics, medical issues of life and death, etc. need the knowledge of applied philosophy to make sanguine decisions for the survival and sustenance of humanity.

Philosophy is about thinking and thought. Heidegger (1968) described philosophers as thinkers per excellence. How can one handle a course that is inside-in, inside-out, and from all dimensions, is all about thinking, without a proper and adequate understanding, appreciation of the first principles and laws of human reasoning? This seems quite absurd. Knowing these laws of thought and the first principles are not the major issues but being able to identify when such are violated is the gravamen.

When students are trained under such personnel, the society should expect nothing but uncritical appreciation of the principles guiding many life issues, the ethics of their professions, how to reason in contentious issues surrounding their special fields, and so on. In the Nigerian setting, for example, we have cases of online scam. The major reasons why the criminals succeed in their operations is because the victims are uncritical. We also witness often, how Nigerian political leaders, make national broadcasts based on fake information from newspapers instead of consulting relevant organisations for proper verifications and authentication. Unfortunately, policy makers habitually avoid focusing on such an important area of the societal life as this. And that is one of the albatrosses in the way of proper education for Nigerian future leaders.

How can one talk about medical ethics, business ethics, bioethics, technological ethics, environmental/climate ethics, etc. without knowledge of pure (theoretical) and applied ethics? Under what clear understanding of ethical principles can one teach such? Even knowledge of philosophical anthropology cannot be waved aside. Also, how can one teach philosophy of education that involves the complexity of the human project without critical appraisal which philosophy entails? Human being is seen as an 'unfinished project', so how can one successfully complete such a project without the knowledge of the epistemological, metaphysical and ontological constitutions of a human being? No profession or specialisation is in a better position to appreciate and understand man holistically than philosophy. Man is the subject-matter of philosophy and philosophy remains ultimate in matters concerning humans and their thinking. So, the contention is to the effect that no area of knowledge can proceed and succeed without the principles and laws of human reasoning, if objectivity and clear understanding of issues and

facts are to be achieved. It ensures that human knowledge is based on a clear footing or foundation.

The cogency for this exposition is that many institutions of learning do not offer introductory philosophy courses that would expose the students to the nature of philosophical thinking. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in its research studies, has noted that African higher educational institutions are averse to philosophy programmes (Goucha, 2007). This diminishes the opportunity for appreciating the laws of thought and the first principles of philosophy. The situation is aggravated by the fact that 'Introduction to Philosophy and Logic' course is not being properly handled by the institutions. This is because it is clear that outside trained and professional philosophers, no person, no matter how intelligent in his or her profession, can successfully venture into such an area. The outcome of the UNESCO's research, therefore, implies that lack of interest in philosophy by some African higher institutions has created a lacuna, which the educational establishments to engage non-professional philosophers to teach applied philosophy courses in such institutions.

In view of the fact that critical thinking is one of the major routes and strategies to survival in the present millennium, the admonition of this paper is to the effect that for the sake of better growth and development of human knowledge, the laws of thought and the first principles of philosophy should be incorporated and appreciated by all handling applied philosophy courses in the higher institutions.

First Principles of Philosophy and Laws of Thought

The first principles of philosophy and laws of thought are seen as self-evident truths and are the truths on which correct human reasoning is based. They provide strong foundations for knowledge. They guide human reasoning in all human endeavours. The first principles and laws of thought provide the foundations for thinking to thrive. They are the necessary conditions for thought.

A principle is something, a fundamental assumption that helps and is used in explaining an event or phenomena. It can be any reasoned out guide that constitutes a starting point for a valid reasoning and argumentation. First principles are seen as 'indemonstrable' proofs which other demonstrations rely on. In essence it can be demonstrated indirectly, by showing that if you accept the opposite, the result is a total contradiction. Thus their denials lead to contradictions. According to Carmack (2013), "first principles are self-evident truths. They are certain fundamental truths that need no proof, cannot have proof, for they are their own proof."

Let us look at the laws of thought and some of the first principles of philosophy.

The Laws of Thought

i. The law of contradiction/non-contradiction

Aristotle is credited with discovering this law. Aristotle (1991) states the principle thus: "For the same thing to be present and not be present at the same time in the same subject, and according to the same sense, is impossible." This principle implies that a being or thing cannot be and not be at the same time and in the same manner and respect. Thus a proposition can never be both true and false at the same time. Many philosophers believe that this is the first of all the laws and principles, especially Aristotle. According to Aristotle, this is the strongest of all the first principles and laws of thought. He said that without the law of non-contradiction, we could not know anything that we do know (Gottlieb, 2013). This position has been corroborated by the methodic doubt of Descartes. The 'methodic doubt' is a Cartesian method and process of arriving at the truth, 'what is', by the removal of the 'untruth', the 'what is not'. In essence, to arrive at 'what is' we have to deal with and sieve 'what is not'.

Gottlieb (2013) further posits that without the knowledge of the law of non-contradiction:

Presumably, we could not demarcate the subject matter of any of the special sciences, for example, biology or mathematics, and we would not be able to distinguish between what something is, for example a human being or a rabbit, and what it is like, for example pale or white. Aristotle's own distinction between essence and accident would be impossible to draw, and the inability to draw distinctions in general would make rational discussion impossible. According to Aristotle, the principle of non-contradiction is a principle of scientific inquiry, reasoning and communication that we cannot do without.

Garrigou-Lagrange (1934) points out some of the implications of denying, not acknowledging and applying the principle of non-contradiction. They are as follows:

1. To deny this necessity and this validity would be to deprive words of their fixed meaning and to render speech useless.
2. It would mean the destruction of all truth, for truth follows being;
3. It would destroy all thought, even all opinion; for its very affirmation would be a negation.

4. It would no longer be possible to distinguish degrees of error; everything would be equally false and true at the same time.
5. It would put an end to the very notion of becoming; between the beginning and the end of a movement; the first would already be the second, and any transition from one state to another would be impossible.

Ignorance of the knowledge and application of the law of non-contradiction can lead to many fallacies in one's arguments. Such fallacies include: *non sequitur* and *ignoratio elenchi*.

In applied ethics courses such as business ethics, medical ethics, nursing ethics, jurisprudence, etc, an act or action cannot be justified in one circumstance and becomes unjustifiable in another that involves exact circumstances. This becomes a contradiction. Such situations lead to injustice, discriminations and other vices.

The law of non-contradiction is a good and strong tool which can be used to checkmate the political gimmicks and manoeuvrings of politicians. These are the bulk that can twist words to suit their tight situations. They can only rattle the unwary who are not philosophically minded. In the Nigerian social setting, we see a plethora of the fallacy of non-contradiction. Today, a government claims to have done this and that, tomorrow the same government denies ever doing or saying so.

ii. The law of identity

This principle states that every being is one in itself, i.e. it remains that which it is. Each being is separated in its existence from other beings. It is a law and principle of autonomy. This is also related to the law of non-contradiction. Locke defines it as 'what is, is.' Leibniz sees this as "everything is what it is." He sees this as the first law of thought and principle of all principles. He argues that the law of contradiction is the first in negative truths whereas that of identity is the first of all laws of thought and principles because it is a law and principle of affirmative truth. He sees the law of identity as the first of the two because one has to talk of what is before talking of what is not (which is the focus of contradiction), Reacting to Aristotle he is not sanguine in holding the view that the first principle of all principles should be a negative one. Thus 'what is' should be first distinguished before 'what is not.'

This law helps us in developing the ability to distinguish issues and facts. In most cases when students are told or asked to identify issues they prefer joining issues which are unrelated. In most cases, questions that demand that we identify are definitely hinged on the law of identity.

The law of identity ensures that we keep to our positions on issues and matters of argumentations, maintaining our definition of terms, ensuring they

have the same meaning throughout the course. We should not be ambiguous. As one of the laws of thought, it guides us in sticking to our definitions and propositional statements.

iii. The law of excluded Middle

This law states that either a thing is or is not, there is no third option or possibility. This is also known by some as the law of *Tertium non datur*: a third option is not given or obtainable. It is also seen as *principium tertii exclusi*—principle of excluded third. This means, in all contradictions, there are no in-betweens or intermediaries. This implies that there is no middle point between ‘is’ and ‘is not’, ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’. A middle point is excluded - hence excluded middle. So either a statement is true or its negation is. A statement cannot be both. Aristotle is credited to have first formulated this principle in one of his works, *On Interpretations*. This principle is not the same with the principle that every proposition is either true or false. This one is a semantic principle of bivalence.

Let’s take an example here. ‘Socrates is a philosopher’. Thus this statement implies that Socrates cannot be a philosopher and at the same time a non-philosopher. Either he is a philosopher or he is not a philosopher. There is no third option. This law is related to the law of non-contradiction.

The First Principles

The principle of intelligibility: this principle states that being or reality is intelligible to the human intellect, and as an object of intellection, it can be explained. Every being that exists or that is, is definitely intelligible. Everything that is, can explain itself to the intellect in answering questions about it. Thus reality provides answers to itself. Our ability to survive from our natural condition from birth is purely based on this principle. It helps us explore nature.

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (2013) appreciates this principle thus:

An immediate and necessary judgment or law, commonly enumerated among the first principles, asserting that everything that is, in so far as it is, is intelligible; or that every being is capable of justifying itself, of explaining itself to the intellect, of answering the question “Why?” The conviction that there is an answer to be known inspires the attempt to know. When, for example, one asks why stones sink while logs float, the asking implies that reality provides a knowable answer, even though this is not yet known. Such a conviction is an implicit acknowledgment of the principle of intelligibility.

That wonder and curiosity led the first humans into philosophy is part

of the explanation of this principle. This spurs researches and scientific investigations. Explanations must be appreciated and apprehensible to the intellect. Thus students should not be prevented from asking probing questions. There should be open inquiries in the classrooms. This paper believes that questions are more important than answers. This principle holds that reality provides answers to itself. What marks humans out is the ability to find answers.

The principle of sufficient reason: this is related to the principle of causality. It states that every being in existence has a reason for its existence either in itself or in something else. According to Melamed and Lin (2013), this is a powerful and controversial philosophical principle stipulating that everything must have a reason or cause. In essence nothing exists in vain. They maintain that the Principle is formally stated thus: For every fact F , there must be an explanation why F is the case. They further hold that the principle is closely related, if not fully identical, to the principle "*ex nihilo, nihil fit*" - "From nothing, nothing comes". The term and principle was coined by Leibniz but was pre-empted by Spinoza. This principle pushes us to demand explanations for things, actions and events. It summarily posits that nothing happens without a reason.

Those in environmental ethics and those defending the cause of sustainability as a result of climate change can appreciate the principle of sufficient reason. It is used to defend other ecospheres outside that of humans. Everything in the planet earth must be respected and accorded its own rights. They should not only be used as a means to human ends.

The principle of causality: this principle states that every effect has a cause. This is a principle of cause and effect. This principle is very prominent in the natural sciences. It is the guiding principle of scientific research and experimentations.

The philosopher, David Hume dwells extensively on the issue of causality. He goes to the extent of trying to eliminate the idea of causality as unverifiable. However, to eliminate the idea of cause and effect would amount to sending the sciences to oblivion.

This gives students an idea of argumentation and the principles of valid logic. Sometimes there are certain questions that demand explanations of 'why' something happens or is the case. Here, the principle of causality comes to the rescue. Almost all questions demanding 'why' are talking about 'causes'. Thus in answering such questions, one needs to provide the effects as the necessary answers. One may have the correct answers to issues but the presentations are what separate philosophic reasoning from any other. A trained philosopher does not only score correct answers but goes a mile

in appreciating logically sound presentations from students. This is what encourages critical and systematic thinking in students. Providing answers to a 'why' question without the ability to provide the reasons for the 'effects' is equally a lack of appreciation of this principle.

The principle of causality can rattle any uncritical mind. Many commit fallacies in trying to use the logic and principle of causality in justifying certain issues. The fallacy most committed here is the fallacy of *non causa pro causa*. This fallacy has two versions the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* and accidental co-relation. The summary of the fallacy of *non causa pro causa* is when a non cause of an event is used or projected for as the real cause of that event. That something happened immediately after a particular event does not mean in all cases that it caused it. It could be accidental. Also, two unrelated events can happen simultaneously, it does not mean that one caused the other.

The principle of finality: Every agent acts for an end, the purpose for which it exists, this it must fulfil. Thus living things have a purpose, an end. Every action performed voluntarily is done for an end. This is a teleological principle. Aquinas (1955) describes this principle thus: that every agent/being acts for an end. This particular principle is very important and crucial in philosophy of education and education in general. Why do human beings pursue education? The aims and goals of education, how do they contribute meaningfully to human and social development? Do humans have the same goal in education or does education provide the same goals for humans. Can we find people who have no purpose in life, in education? These are issues that can be addressed with this principle in mind. This principle can be used to propagate respect for the environment with regard to the biosphere especially the challenges of extinction of species.

Humans and all beings in existence have purposes, goals towards which they all tend. Can someone come to school without a purpose? Can one pursue education without a purpose? When these are in the negative, something is wrong with the individual agent. This principle is very relevant and crucial in the teaching of such courses as philosophy of science, philosophy of technology, medical ethics, etc. Practitioners in such fields should properly understand and be able to defend the justifiable purpose of the outcome of their researches. Will such be against the essence or goal of humanity? This principle helps in addressing such issues.

Critical Evaluation

The knowledge of philosophy goes with certain versatility. That some philosophers point out that philosophy sometimes thinks of what thought could not think, means that they have the character of asking questions

in various subjects which the subject may not have thought of within its jurisdiction. Many questions philosophy poses are equally subtle and intricate that only people who are logically and analytically oriented can address them successfully.

Where a philosopher is differentiated is when it comes to the idea of possible refutations of such principles and laws of thought. How would someone not trained in philosophical subtleties handle such? The case of principle of excluded middle can rattle a non-philosopher when he/she is confronted by a deconstructionist philosopher. Also, the principle of causality remains subtle for no- critical minds.

Philosophy in almost all its discourses deal with issues of the laws of thought directly and indirectly. It is all about thinking and the conceptual operations of the mind. It is the investigation of the patterns of reason and reasoning. When it comes to conceptual analyses, philosophy remains the ultimate. First principles of philosophy and laws of thought are the laws and principles guiding the conceptual order of humanity. It is not limited to any particular field or science. This is part of the reason why philosophy is seen as a meta-science.

The first principles and laws of thought help us to guide against unnecessary paralogisms. Many people do not know when they involve themselves in paralogisms. This can mar social progress and relationships especially when people begin to contradict themselves. This brings and breeds distrust. They can help us to be critically wary. They help teachers and lecturers guide their thinking and offer clear explanations of issues to their students.

Conclusion

Philosophy is a complex discipline. Many of its branches are so interconnected that it can never be successfully fragmented. There is no way the knowledge of one of its branches can be bracketed off from other branches. That is why any untrained personnel can never successfully handle any of its branches, whether core or applied. The summary here is that whatever must be done must be done not only rightly, but based on rationally defensible procedures. There is only one way to truth. There should be no politics in truth. This is the only way for a successful education policy geared towards human development.

Pedagogy demands a constructive mind. It also demands a critical mind, a mind that does not take issues and established facts for granted or on the face value. Whatever is the case must be authenticated. Aristotle makes us to understand in his *Physics* that we cannot claim to have understood a thing

until we can give account of its *modus operandi*. How can one claim to know philosophy without a clear understanding of its *modus operandi*, *a la* Aristotle?

One can decide to educate oneself in philosophy on one's own without any formal certified training. This is equally good. However, this does not suffice nor qualify one to successfully engage in the rubrics of philosophical studies which are so complex and vast that one may not meet up when encountering a trained philosopher. Let us take for example, someone, who decides to study political philosophy on one's own. After studying Aristotle's *Politics* comes out to claim to have known Aristotle without knowing Aristotle's method of philosophy. Nobody can successfully understand and interpret Aristotle's *Politics* without reading and understanding his work on ethics, *Nicomachean Ethics*. This is the same with John Rawls theory. Even political scientists do not find it easy to dissect John Rawls *Theory of Justice*. Since the situation and circumstances unduly warrants that people from other specialisations outside philosophy handle the teaching of such applied philosophy courses, there is need to acquaint one with these principles of philosophy and laws of thought for the sake of real and authentic academic growth and excellence. These are the first principles of understanding which should guide all intelligent beings in their daily life experiences. The knowledge of these helps one to become a critical thinker.

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