The Role of Philosophy in Socio-Cultural Development

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Abstract: Socio-cultural development is the overarching centrepiece. Socio-cultural development necessarily involves human development from the intellectual, moral, social and environmental perspectives. The paper considers development as: 1) a process by which an inner principle that is at first hidden comes to light; 2) It may be a slow, step by step transformation; 3) It may be a transformation that is guided in a definite direction. 4) It can be a transformation that leads from the unformed and less determined to the formed and fully determined; 5) it can be a transformation from one form or species to another, and this is either slowly or by leaps. From a philosophical standpoint, the papers establishes that Philosophy recognises at least three modes of development—evolutionary, revolutionary, and dialectical. The paper is basic expository and it is focused on exposing the relationship between philosophy and socio-cultural development.

Key words: Philosophy, development, socio-cultural development, human development

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to give an account of the defining features of philosophy. The reason for the difficulty in answering the question of what philosophy is paradoxically provides an answer of sorts. An essential part of philosophy is the extent to which it reassesses its own nature. Philosophy tends to ask extremely broad and fundamental questions, and it raises problems that people do not normally consider as problems at all in most other areas of human inquiry. A feature that helps us to understand the nature of philosophy, and is one of the chief attractions of the subject, is its freedom of thought: in philosophy no question is, on the face of it, unaskable.

Philosophy does not have to be especially defensive about its nature or existence. It is sometimes that the subject matter of philosophy is far removed from anything that could have practical importance in life. Even if this were true, it would not follow that philosophy is not worth bothering with, for it might well be intrinsically interesting. In any case, philosophy does examine ideas in ethics and politics that have immediate practical consequences. Moreover, one of the reasons why philosophy is important is that more than any other subject it freely examines presuppositions and assumptions that people have that might otherwise go unquestioned. Many of these basic beliefs that people may take for granted, lead to, and underpin, other beliefs that have immediate practical consequences in that they determine what people believe and how they act. Whenever and wherever we live we absorb a worldview that can be so familiar that it can, through going unnoticed, go unexamined. So long as people are not dogmatically locked into, or wedded to, a fixed system of ideas and beliefs there will always be philosophy.

Philosophy is not a luxury, indeed it becomes a necessity just as soon as people are able and willing to think freely about their beliefs. The terrible consequences that have followed from dogmatically held beliefs throughout human history bear sufficient testimony to the need to philosophise. Anyone that open-mindedly and critically examines, rather than simply accepts, fundamental ideas, has started doing philosophy. Those that are interested to follow the path of philosophical inquiry embark on perhaps the greatest adventure of ideas of all. Philosophy is an important part of what Bertrand Russell called all the noonday brightness of human genius[1]

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[1] John Shand, *Philosophy and Philosophers*, Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill Queen's University Press, 1993, p. x.

destined though it may be to ultimate annihilation. It is by such activities that, for the time being, human beings dignify themselves in the face of a universe that may seem at best indifferent to human concerns.

Development

Development can mean at least three things 1) a process by which an inner principle that is at first hidden comes to light, e.g., the development of an idea by a speaker or a writer. 2) It may be a slow, step by step transformation (which is not necessarily directed to one definite goal, e.g., many historical developments. 3) It may be a transformation that is guided in a definite direction. 4) It can be a transformation that leads from the unformed and less determined to the formed and fully determined, e.g., the development of the foetus. Finally, it can be a transformation from one form or species to another, and this is either slowly or by leaps. These abstract meanings of the word 'development' are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Several of them can be realised together in the concrete processes that we call 'development'. Everything changeable can, in some sense, be subject to development. In the case under review, socio-cultural development is the overarching centrepiece. Socio-cultural development necessarily involves human development from the intellectual, moral and social perspective; environmental development.

Socio-Cultural Development

The first step in socio-cultural development is bringing order out of chaos. When humans want to set up a structure they first clear the bush, remove the stumps, and level the terrain. Then they take their bearing and start digging the foundation. It is a way of bringing order out of chaos. The environment has to be suitable before any meaningful activity could be carried out on it. The blueprint could be seen in the biblical narrative of creation in Genesis 1:1. It reads:

When God began creating the heavens and the earth, the earth was a shapeless, chaotic mass, with the Spirit of God brooding over the dark vapours. Then God said, 'Let there be light;' and light appeared. And God was pleased with it, and divided the light from the darkness. He called the light daytime, and the darkness he called nighttime. . Together they formed the first day.

- Separating the waters and the sky formed the second day.
- Separating land and water and creating vegetation constituted the third day.
- Creating sun and moon, and the seasons was the job of the fourth day.
- Creating birds and sea beasts constituted the task of the fifth day.
- The sixth day was the day of the land animals—cattle, reptiles and wildlife and eventually the human species.

Overcoming the State of Nature

In concrete terms, socio-cultural development must involve a departure from primitivism that, in the philosophy of John Locke, was referred to as the state of nature. If one looks around there is ample evidence of the state of nature being operational. The entire rundown environment, the lack of functional social organisation, the incessant inter communal, inter ethnic, intertribal, and interreligious unrest all bespeak the state of nature. There is the crude jungle justice system that leads to lynching, mugging, and arsons that occurs all over the place. A further sign of the state of nature is the scramble for power and the proliferation of empty posts that lead to the siphoning of money. There is the patent difficulty in conducting free and fair elections. Much more worrying is the low quality of political discourse as a result of the low quality of political actors and aspirants. Ask any Nigerian what politicians do and the prompt reply would be that the show off, flaunt power and wealth, and chorus amen to every whim of the person on top.

Ask them what the leader does and they will tell you that he runs a serfdom, wields the big stick, favours his cronies and deals with free minds who dare to differ from his prescriptions. Ask again the qualities of the good executive at the local, state and federal levels. You will learn that he or she ensures that all his friends and relatives are comfortable in terms of positions, jobs

and amenities and have taken the chunk of the commonweal and saved up for the rainy day. Ask finally, the meaning of accountability and you will be dazzled with a barrage of fictitious statistics of job creations, countless contracts awarded. You will be wasting your time trying to verify in real terms the claims made about development. There can be no meaningful development in the state of nature. While Nigeria remains fixated to the state of nature, there can be no meaningful development. Is anyone surprised that in spite of Nigeria's vast human, mineral and socio-cultural resources, she still ranks among the twenty poorest countries in the world? Nigeria is caught up in the self-fulfilling prophecy that **TO FAIL TO PLAN IS TO PLAN TO FAIL**.

Clearing the Rubble

The next step in socio-cultural development is overcome the state of nature. Among the rubbles to clear in Nigeria are the non-democratic or even anti-democratic systems of party arrangement. The *status quo* is that a few heavy weights hijack the party machinery and thereafter control and manipulate every process and outcome. Their 'anointed' or pre-designated candidates inevitably 'win' regardless of how the people vote. The result is that those intent on getting political positions spend their time and resources trying to get into the good books of the overlord. Once in, they become incurable amen choristers to the overlord's every whim if they wish to continue in office. As to methodology, many Nigerians will point to our neighbouring state of Ghana that seemed to have cleared its own rubble with a clean sweep against the military and those that precipitated the state of nature.

A more rational approach would be better even though it is more difficult. It is not necessary to shoot or hang anyone, but it should be possible for people to be called to account for their activities *vis-à-vis* the country's constitution and laws. There are clear alternatives. Let Nigeria put its house in order by ensuring that elections are free and fair. Then the elected officers will work by the people's mandate rather than at the behest of some paymaster. Then they will strengthen the judiciary that will be guided by the constitution rather than become a poodle to some overlord. With the judiciary strong and independent, it would be possible to interpret the laws such that those found wanting in the observance of the constitution will be made to face the prescriptions of the law.

Until date, it is doubtful how many occupants of elective positions in Nigeria can truthfully claim that they have the people's mandate. It is no wonder that their roles and activities are a far cry from the people's wishes. The executive tends to be a tyrant with no mandate but the fruit of lobby and settlement. An executive with the people's mandate is in a position to insist on due process in elections and in everything. The people's mandate is everything. It is quite possible that one could continue to have the mandate for a long time. So long as one that has it one is free to continue and make politics a life-time career. If people give the mandate, it is a sign that the people approve of one's candidacy. This means that rotation is not necessarily the best form of arrangement because it could compulsorily put an end to the possibilities of one that could have brought about the required development.

Develop the Environment

One clear sign of overcoming the state of nature is a well thought out mode of social living. Traditional institutions did sufficiently serve their purpose in primitive traditional society. In a traditional setting one lived among kith and kin, knew all the neighbours, spoke the local language, used the local market, rivers and streams, observed the traditional mores, practised the religion of the community, and married from the neighbouring village. Now thanks to rapid urbanisation, rural to urban migration is now widespread and society has become more complex. People live not necessarily with kith and kin but where their work or skill takes them. They need not be indigenous or be able to speak the local language. They might have a different religious background. They observe conventional laws and may not be interested in traditional mores.

That is already development in its own right. Unfortunately, the prevailing mind-set is still traditional and primitive. In some places, local people attempt to convert 'tenants' or 'non-indigenes' into proselytes of their traditional ways. They impose levies and restrictions as well as new prescriptions of conduct. Yet there is indiscriminate dumping of refuse. Gutters are often used as refuse dumps. The traditional practice of street sweeping and refuse disposal has all but disappeared as people are now mired in squalor. Those that build new homes and businesses indiscriminately fell all the trees, scrape the grass and cement the yard. The advent of the graders that are meant to clear the roads has backfired as they notoriously cause erosion instead. On the other hand there is total chaos as rival religious groups spring up everywhere and try to outdo each other in noise pollution. Some hijack the daytime while others take the nighttime blaring out ear-splitting blasts from huge public address systems everywhere including gutters.

Human Development
Fifty to sixty years ago, people used nearby bushes and hidden corners to defecate. The result was that certain corners and roadsides were infested with flies that perched on the faeces because some people used them also at night when they would not be detected. Today, all that is gone and people provide toiled facilities in their homes as a necessary aspect of their accommodation arrangement. What has not changed much is that there are no public toilets provided in case one is pressed in the midst of their daily activities. Most people still urinate anywhere without qualm. They litter the environment with plastic water bags, tins and cans as well as polythene shopping carry bags. They still throw thrash out of cars, doors and windows into the streets and gutters. There is work to be done in those areas if environment must be developed.

The most obvious aspect of human development is education in all its ramifications. It is true that many have learnt to read and write, but the proportion is still too low for comfort. Furthermore, of those that could read or write, the overwhelming percentage seems not to have fully mastered the art and the level of language skills remains low. The handwriting of most students in the school system at all levels is atrocious. The power of expression is weak at best and miserable at worst. The quality of teaching and learning is poor, and the overall outcome of most educational programmes leave a lot to be desired. The power of self-expression and effective written and oral communication is poor. Even the media houses that are supposed to lead the way commit and even condone some unpardonable grammatical and diction errors. The vernacular itself is in danger of extinction as parents and teachers prohibit its use in the bid to encourage profiency in English language. Overall, students learn and pass subjects, often through cheating and forgery, but remain half-baked.

Most of the time, even without aptitude, parents and peers urge candidates to study some subject area like medicine, engineering, law, business, etc. In such areas, they are like fish out of water, for they lack requisite ability in science and art. They seem incapable of producing anything original—artistic, agricultural, scientific, or cultural. Their orientation is money and they cut corners to make it. They plagiarise music and make CDs for money. Instead of mastering the art and science of music following the scientific rigour of mastering the use of instrument, they would prefer improvisations in singsongs. They perfect the art of adulteration—of foods and drugs, gadgets and consumables. They forge documents—certificates, signatures, car documents, passports and other official papers. They do not take the time to master computer programming, but rapidly master the art of cyber fraud.

National Development
National development involves the totality of the areas—physical, mental, spiritual, structural, psychological, and socio-political—conducive to the emergence of a nation from the primitive state. These factors are clearly multifarious and cannot be rightly limited to the physical alone. What achieves national development is philosophy and not the work done by masons, artisan,

and construction outfits. Every successive government in Nigeria touts some flamboyant national development plan based on the physical exertions of artisans—roads, rails, bridges, airports, schools and hospitals. In the execution of these plans, the long term goals in terms of legacies are eclipsed in preference to temporary, short-term gratifications based on self-interest. In effect, most of the eventual outcome is shoddy and haphazard and fail to serve any long-term purpose. A house with roofs that leak, and walls and floors that are cracked, fails to provide comfort and shelter has failed. Similarly roads, rails, bridges and airports that fail to serve their original purpose are sources not of development but of frustration. As a result, any claims made about them in connection to development become unsustainable.

The country remains underdeveloped and unserious. National development would begin with the systematic development of infrastructure to facilitate movement for persons and haulage of goods—roads, railway lines, waterways, airports. Then there is the massive and systematic development of housing requiring a different form of infrastructure—power supply, water supply, gas pipelines, fuel stations, shopping centres, banks, post offices, places of worship, educational institutions, hospitals, telephone, television, and now internet connections. All these are to be designed and consciously positioned around population centres to provide optimal services to the people in all spheres to the people. The trend in Nigeria is that money is lavished in projects that in their conception and execution fail the test of meeting the needs of the people. Many housing programmes have failed because people have refused to move into them, as they would instead take them away from other vital services like school for the children and the job places of their spouses and other family members.

Philosophy and Development

In human affairs, including governance and national development, philosophy is concerned not with ways and means, modes and methods, but strictly with causes and consequences. It is concerned with questions of why and wherefore. Philosophy recognises at least three modes of development—evolutionary, revolutionary, and dialectical. Evolutionary change or development covering the areas cosmic, biological, and human is a dominant category of contemporary thinking.

Evolutionary Development: Evolutionary development concerns the emergence of the human species from the more primitive and basic forms to the more refined forms. Human activities evolve from the primitive—rural, traditional, preliterate level to the modern—urban, conventional, and literate level. The process of evolutionary development is gentle, gradual and almost imperceptible. For example, in a democracy, the power of governance transits peacefully from the incumbent to a successor that may not necessarily be related to him or even in political agreement with him. As far as society is involved, there are far more educated and urbanised people today in Nigeria than there were fifty years ago. There are more professionals, more firms, more buildings, roads, cars, and other gadgets. But the entire process has been gradual.

The term is sometimes restricted to development at the organic or biological sphere as covered in the claims of Darwin's theory. The other two—cosmic and human—actually preceded Darwinism in history. Christopher Dawson and some other historians hold that the idea of progress (evolution of human societies) came to fruition only in Western culture because Christianity is, among the great religions in the world, most explicitly history conscious. Eastern cultures were either dominated by the idea of the eternal return (as in reincarnation) or by myths combining evolutionist and non-evolutionist view. The cosmology of the Vishnu Purana is an example of the latter. Here the universe is presumed to exactly repeat itself in cycles of 311,040 billion years[2] It is therefore probably not an accident that the idea of human progress grew and developed in the Judaeo-Christian cultural background, although largely in secular rather than in religious contexts.

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[2] Marilyn Stanton, "Evolutionism" *Philosophical Dictionary*, Ed. Walter Brugger and Kenneth Baker, Spokane Washington: Gonzaga University Press, 1972, p. 121

The Encyclopaedists generally believed in the total mass of the human race moving always slowly forward. Voltaire thought that man advances from the barbarous rusticity to the politeness of our era. The age of Enlightenment closes with the first full-fledged theory of progressive evolution of humankind, that of Condorcet. On a different philosophical basis the evolutionary ideas of Herder, Kant and Fichte led to Hegel's system, in which history is understood as progressive manifestation of the Spirit. Marx put Production and Economics in the place of the Spirit, and substituted Socialism and Communism for the Kingdom of God. Marx discovered his evolution of society at about the same time as Darwin published his account of biological evolution. Marx recognised in Darwin a fellow evolutionist, but Darwin was reluctant to accept such an affiliation. Soon thereafter, Spencer, Tylor, Morgan and others founded evolutionary social anthropology, expressly built on Darwinian theoretical premises.

Revolutionary Development: The revolutionary form of development is more rapid and sometimes even drastic and disruptive. When members of the armed forces take over government, they take over the reins of power and turn things upside down. Then they declare themselves revolutionaries in the Marxist sense. For the purpose of clearer understanding, it is necessary to point out that revolutionary development is not always drastic and disruptive. It is simply quick. For example, only twenty years ago, telecommunications was at level zero. If you needed to send a message to Lagos or Abuja, you must have to physically travel for hours. Sometimes you would arrive unannounced only to find out that the person you went to meet is on a journey. You either have to wait somewhere or return home without accomplishing your task. Today the GSM has revolutionised communication without physically hurting or disrupting anybody's agenda. Similarly instantaneous messaging has overtaking postal letter writing. That is revolution at its best.

Revolutionary development most of the time takes the texture of the violent overthrow of governments and the installation of new ones. The French Revolution was a landmark issue of history. The workers' revolt in Russia was another cardinal issue in social change. There was Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba in 1959. In the middle 1960s, Africa was awash with the revolutionary instinct that saw the string of overthrows of governments. Nigeria's own happened in January of 1966. In his *Ahiara Declaration* of 1969, Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu of the Biafran fame evocatively defined revolution in messianic terms as 'a change, a quick change, a change for the better.. .' To all intents and purposes, the attempted violent overthrows were altogether a failure. First it was a failure in that the revolutionaries failed to meet their desired goal of arresting and replacing the corrupt politicians across the board. Some escaped arrest and this led to the wrong suspicion that those that escaped might somehow or other might have masterminded the fate of those that fell. What resulted from it was an impasse and a total rupture of the delicate social fabric.

Much of the attraction of the conflict theory of change is the belief (often messianic in the extreme, and as unrealistic as a good many eschatologies) that conflict, par excellence, means revolution—a radical and total change in the social structure. Revolutions actually occur less frequently than they are expected, and they frequently do not result in the changes that would have been predicted in advance by those that either support or fear them most. Plato said that all revolutions lead to reactions. He was possibly expressing a fervent wish. But there is much truth in this idea. Revolutions provoke repression and counter-revolution. And if these last are overcome, they leave an aftermath of disorder and a reduced sense of legitimacy. Post-revolutionary leaders are faced with three problems: to govern, to create order, and to discourage the enthusiasm for illegitimate opposition and even violence.

Dialectical Development: Finally, there is the dialectical mode that involves the systematic replacement of one situation by its contrary situation with the result that a third new situation arises creating the opportunity of itself being replaced by its contrary. Dialectic comes from the Greek *dialegesai* dialegesthai literally meaning the art of conversation or dialogue. Even though it was in use before Socrates, he gave it its classic form. By means of dialectic Socrates

wanted to bring humans to the true essence of things by a gradual clarification of concepts. Plato's *Dialogues* carry on this effort, for they attempt to dig out the essence of things through a process of statement and contradiction and so prepare for the ascent to the primordial reality, that is, the Ideas. Thus, for Plato dialectic is the method of metaphysics. The scholastic method used in medieval metaphysics was somewhat similar. The disputations were conducted as colloquies or dialogues. The same character determined the structure of the scholastic *Quaestio* or question. In each case the dynamism of the *sic et non* (yes and no) propel thought forward. The aspect of dialectic that is relevant to this piece is the essential meaning as dialogue, or discussion, or debate, as conveyed in both Socrates and Plato. Parliaments are characterised by debates whereby issues are vigorously and sometimes spiritedly debated from various, sometimes opposing angles.

Concluding Reflections: The way forward

Development is when the issues are narrowed to one view by a process of voting. The outcome decides the policy of development. Similarly, in families and other organisations, dialogue is a vital ingredient in decision-making. Where it is absent or neglected, then there is dictatorship or even a total lack of progress. Nigeria's problems, including the lack of development, have been created and compounded by unwillingness on the part of the ruling part to dialogue. The result is a long-standing situation of cultural, religious, and regional tension. The stalemate will continue so long as dialogue has not been given a chance. The extent to which dialogue characterises humans in that which is proper to them is expressed by these words of Hölderlin: "We have existed since the first conversation."

In reality, we are always conversing, if not with others then at least with ourselves. Even the spiritual progress of humankind is an on-going conversation between the different epochs. In this way the complete truth is only gradually revealed in the encounter of statement and contradiction. In this way the complete truth is only gradually revealed in the encounter of statement and contradiction. Thus, human history is caught up in the dialectic of the spirit. From this perspective it is not difficult to elevate dialectic to a basic principle of existence. Heraclitus already saw in war, i.e., in the conflict of opposites, the father of all things or the innermost essence of reality. German idealism, and especially Hegel, developed this idea further: According to Hegel, the real is essentially becoming, which moves on from stage to stage in the triple pace of thesis–antithesis–synthesis. Therefore, our thinking too must proceed in the same way. There is something very true about this insight, bit it becomes mixed up with pantheism to the extent that God is also subjected to the dialectic or to becoming.

Moreover, the fact is usually overlooked that the dialectic proceeds not according to a contradictory but according to a contrary opposition. When Nicolas of Cusa, at the beginning of the modern age, characterised God as *the 'conincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites) he did not mean that in a pantheistic sense. – Under the influence of Hegel, dialectical materialism has applied dialectic to the world of matter and to economics. This is philosophy at work. It is a matter of planning every step of the way and reckoning with the possible consequences of every move. It is a way of foreseeing every possible scenario–the ideal situation, the medium case scenario, and the worst-case scenario–and proposing the appropriate response to it. It is, in other words, the multiplication of options such that if one fails, another could quickly be mobilised.