

ESTABLISHING A NEXUS BETWEEN HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Rev. Dr. J.O. Ayeni

Abstract

This is a philosophical paper that seeks to establish a nexus between the study of History and Philosophy in the attempt to educate for wisdom and self-development. This paper is based on the observation of the dwindling enthusiasm for the study of history in the schools, coupled with the aversion that seems to accompany the study of philosophy. The paper examined related characteristics of the two disciplines and submits that history supplies facts on educational issues while philosophy acts on the facts to make sense of the education enterprise. It revisits the approach of history in the study of philosophy and appraises the method for its chronological thought development. The paper enumerates three unifying features of history and philosophy methodology. It concludes on the need to intensify the study of history at primary and secondary school levels as an asset to developing interest in the study of philosophy at the tertiary level.

Preamble

This topic comes of interest in view of the commonly observed attitude of people to the study of humanities with particular attention to history and philosophy. It is not uncommon to notice a dwindling population in these departments of study in our universities. Other disciplines that attract studentship make epistemic connection with these two disciplines. One would notice the existence of colleges and universities for the study of science and technology, law, agriculture, among others. These are in addition to the polytechnics that are set up to offer courses in science, commerce and other disciplines, except the humanities. Even in cases of the establishment of colleges of arts and sciences, within the scope of the study of arts, history and philosophy rarely, if at all, have a place, yet both subjects are ingrained in every subject. Each school subject treats some elements of history within its study and has a philosophical base since knowledge acquisition requires the use of rational thinking. Such thinking makes use of past experiences to generate new ones.

Another observation is that philosophy has not been a subject of study in the lower institutions, that-is at the primary and secondary school. The need for the use of philosophy in learning cannot be denied at these levels. History had for ages been taught at all levels of education. The development nowadays has resulted in the drastic fall in the number of students offering it. This is believed to stem from the attenuation it receives at the lower levels by according it an optional status through the introduction of social studies, an interdisciplinary subject, as a more robust alternative. Ayeni (2003:220) critically commented on the danger of the development as follows:

It is a pity that history has been relegated to the background not only by the government through its curricular policies that did not favour the learning and teaching of history but also by the public in general,.. A nation that lacks clear self identity in terms of historical background and which is structurally incoherent cannot be strong, politically and economically, whatever its wealth. P. 220

This remark is purely from the utilitarian viewpoint and serves to establish the study of history as a pillar for social and national development. Apart from this, the paper intends to examine history's contextual value for knowledge, bringing about its comparable link with philosophy, since philosophy focuses on the study of knowledge among other things.

The body of disciplines often referred to as the 'Humanities' train the human mind in active

construction of ideas often built upon data from sensation and reason. To develop a person on this line would require exposing his mind to facts of life and varying developments through time. A person is believed to reason more aptly if he is equipped with the history of the issue at stake. While it is plausible to uphold that the study of history is essentially a sequential and logical presentation of ideas about human experiences, philosophy seeks to trace to a meaningful root of the development of human ideas. This paper would attempt to examine the meeting point of the two disciplines and spell out their essential involvement with in other disciplines. This is with a view to calling attention of the government and scholars to see the two disciplines as -crucial to learning for self and national development.

Osuntokun (2004) remarked that historians in Nigeria played considerable roles in the affairs of the nation, particularly as administrators and in providing academic leadership for our universities. He stressed that the study of history is the best preparation for understanding international relations. To this, one would add that it is not only the study of international relations that require a foundation of history, but any aspect of learning is believed to require some knowledge of history as a useful prerequisite for an understanding of the basis for the study of such a discipline.

Education, like any human activity has its history. It dates back to the beginning of man when man learnt to observe through the agency of the sense media and conserve thoughts as ideas. The ideas were again preserved through whatever means adjudged as suitable for retrieval at the time of need. This ranged from the use of stone tablets, scrolls and lately, papers, films and metals, amongst others. The ideas thus preserved were transmitted "from one people or generation to another for self-development. Education consists in the process and end result of the transmission of Ideas. This broad perspective to education posits it as an endowment of nature. It is epistemic and is at the heart of human responses to the promptings of nature, since the search for wisdom and understanding is endemic in human nature. Here lies a meeting point of philosophy and education because the search for wisdom and understanding is the prerogative of both philosophy and education. Both disciplines reliably make use of the knowledge of history for a foundation experience.

Actually it is difficult to pin philosophical thinking to a certain point in history since, like education, it is an experience that dates to the beginning of humanity. Philosophy is historical and has a history, in as much as it is a process and product of man's intellectual activity through times.

Interrelationship of History Philosophy and Education

The term 'history' can be understood from two perspectives, viz: the ontological and the scientific. In the ontological sense, history is an attribute of human existence since it is man who exists to assemble and comprehend stories about himself, and the world phenomena. Man makes history and it is to him that historical records make sense. Even when an attempt is made on history of animals, machines, or other things, it is supposedly made in relevance to the human context. The spatio-temporal realities of the world are conceived and understood in relation to man. The understanding of history in this sense goes with existence in time and space. Man is at the center of existence and he is one capable of comprehending within the limits of time and space.

A second understanding of history is in its scientific sense. This is seeing it as an activity of study and explanation of facts and figures as organized, in their chronological relationships. This considers their antecedents and consequences as well as their impacts on man and society. Since the goal of philosophy is acquisition of knowledge, knowledge achieved through history becomes veridically unchangeable and timeless. Even though facts of history are scoped to time duration, a truth of knowledge remains valid and attains a perennial status. History feeds the mind with facts from which to derive the truth of knowledge. Philosophy as knowledge-oriented activity identifies with the temporal flux of the mind's formation offered by history in its gradual pursuit of truth.

However history as a school subject differs from philosophy in method and focus. Unlike philosophy, history is not concerned with abstract and universal essences but with concrete facts and with particular and real events. It investigates and reports how and why matters occur. But philosophy calls for speculative and analytical thinking on how and why matters occur with a view to making relevant prescriptions to guide future occurrences. The common methodology employed in the study of history and philosophy essentially embraces two main functions, namely, the heuristic and the hermeneutical (Wallace, 1977).

The heuristic function aims at investigating the facts and reconstructing them as actually happened. This is done by studying the works of historians and philosophers and reconstructing their thought products.

This leads to classification of thinkers into schools according to their systems of thought and locating each thinker within the era to which their thought products belong. The hermeneutical function however, goes beyond recognition of facts and their interpretation. It involves probing into the reasons behind the facts and seeing how some facts could be used to explain and justify other facts.

In philosophy of education, for instance, it may be argued which of the two functions produces a philosopher of education. The heuristic function as explained exhibits the tendency to produce a historian of education rather than a philosopher, but the hermeneutical function better disposes the scholar for rational thinking and evaluation of ideas. However one may see the two functions as complementary rather than distinct. In studying philosophy there is a need to possess clarity of other people's ideas in relations the, trend of time as well as a need to make rational connections of thought products of philosophers. This brings the two functions to a meeting point. Education as a subject of study cannot be divorced from its history and philosophy. The history of education is among other things concerned about truth of ideas of educationists within a specific period of time. The ideas could serve no purpose unless they are subjected to rational examination in terms of authenticity and relevance. Philosophy of education is the activity and end result of rational investigation into educational issues and problems. To put more succinctly, history supplies facts on educational issues and problems while philosophy acts on the facts to make sense of the education enterprise.

Marwick (1976) asserted that history is functional in the sense of responding to the yearning of the society, for knowledge and understanding of people and cultures as well as relationship between them. He remarked that it is difficult to conceive of a situation where one would not require the use of history. Similarly on philosophy, Wiredu (1980) claimed that not everybody needs to become a professional philosopher, but to a certain degree everybody is a philosopher. He said: "In truth, no one has a choice whether to have some philosophy or none at all". To this Oladipo (2002:52) commented:

For Wiredu, human beings cannot live without philosophy. And given the nature of modern society in which the impact of science is becoming more and more felt in various areas of life, philosophy has to become a more self-conscious, individualistic and critical activity, p.52

Both Wiredu and Oladipo say one thing in common with Marwick that to live well in a society requires the understanding of oneself, the people as well as make sense of the events around. History and philosophy come together at this point in the sense that history provides experiential materials for philosophical process, while philosophy in turn guide the meaning and interpretations of historical experiences.

Historical Approach to Philosophy Re-visited

One traditional approach to the study of philosophy is history. This approach often assumes a chronological recall and examination of ideas, norms, principles, and other facts about life to make meaning and build up systems of thought. History makes use of records. But records may exhibit deficiency in reliability in view of possible bias and inaccuracy created by individual differences and interests. It is through philosophical scrutiny that the objective truth of historical experiences can be established. Yet philosophy itself subsists in history since it is indexed on the development of human minds and their contents through times. Wallace (1977) lends credence to this in his words: "Philosophy is historical and has a history since it is a product of man's intellectual activity elaborated in the course of time".

Both the historian and the philosopher could engage in the history of philosophy. It all depends on the matter of focus, since history of philosophy is a composite discipline of history and philosophy. Both of them dwell on knowledge of man and realities. The historian of philosophy aligns some thought products along a defined chronological spectrum. He monitors these thought products through time and changing circumstances. Emphasis is placed on evolution of new ideas from the already acclaimed old ones. The protagonists of new thoughts are conserved on record as referential sources. For the historian, certain ideas may become obsolete, depending on the impact of the newly evolved ideas on man's intellectual and social development. An idea is rated as obsolete when it has outlived its impact on self development, particularly when new ideas emerge to replace it.

However the philosopher perennially adopts acclaimed truths irrespective of the era to which they belong. The truth of an idea is maintained as objective reality to the time and circumstances it was proclaimed. Such a truth could be revisited within changing circumstances in view its apodictic value. The essential tool for doing philosophy is the apt use of logic.

Both history and philosophy could share the same subject matter. The sciences, anthropology, sociology, religion, and psychology, amongst others, lend materials for historical and philosophical studies. In the approach of history to study philosophy therefore care needs to be taken to focus on the search for the truth of knowledge unbiased to time and circumstances. Again, Wallace contended; "Since the goal of philosophy

is true and certain knowledge, philosophical knowledge once achieved is unchangeable and timeless and to this extent stands outside of history". To this one would remark that philosophy establishes the truth of realities while history conserves these realities to time and circumstances.

One may ask: Does the method of studying history blend with the method of studying philosophy? Unlike philosophy, which takes its cognitive activity from speculative thinking, history is not concerned with generalized abstract essences, which are often postulated as possibilities, rather it dwells on facts and realities of events. It relies on empirical data to organize same for preservation and recall as at the time of need. But philosophy acts rationally on experiential data which arrives the mind through empirical or rational sources to establish the truth of knowledge. Philosophical activity often culminates in meaningful prescriptions but historical activity is accomplished when it investigates and reports facts.

In view of this disparity therefore history and philosophy may not require the same method of study. However, there are certain features that cut across the two intellectual activities. These, amongst others, include the heuristic function, which seeks to make findings through assumptions based on past experiences. Others are the hermeneutical function which dwells on explanation and interpretation of facts. The etiological function makes a chronological layout of events from the perspective of cause and effect. These are unifying features of history and philosophy methodology.

Conclusion

The relevance of the study of history to the development of prowess for philosophy, particularly at the lower levels of the school system is obvious. A situation whereby the study of history is relegated to the background, particularly in the primary and secondary schools becomes lamentable. Ayeni (2003) again subscribed to this in his remark:

It is a pity that history has been relegated to the background not only by the government through its curriculum policies that did not favour the learning and teaching of history but also by the public in general.

Apart from providing knowledge about man and his immediate as well as proximate environment, history furnishes man with materials for philosophical exercise as well as streamline the thought of the philosopher along trends which eventually classify into schools of thought. Again, since philosophy entails higher-order thinking which is adjudged to be beyond the capabilities of learners at the primary and secondary schools, history is one subject that could imbue the students into the art of logical reasoning through inferences made out of reported facts and events. Introducing to the students the art of logical thinking early in life could build in them the capability for studying philosophy. This, perhaps, would bring down the feeling of aversion that may pervade the academic atmosphere about the study of philosophy at the tertiary level. Besides, as argued earlier one requires the use of philosophy for survival in the intellectual society, since ability to reason for knowledge and wisdom is a hallmark of an intellectual. It is therefore expected that the growing learner is groomed early in life in ways to reason and make sense of life experiences. History is believed to serve as a reliable weapon for this.

References

- Ayeni, M.A. (2003). A Rationale for the Teaching of History in the Primary and Secondary Schools in Nigeria, *Unad Journal of Education*, 3 (220). Pp. 218.-226
- Marwick, A. (1976). *The Nature of History*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- Oladipo, O. (2002). (Ed) *The Third Way in African Philosophy, Essays in Honour of Kwasi Wiredu*. Ibadan: Hope Publications,
- Osuntokun, A. (2004). Teaching History and International Relations in the University of Lagos, Text of a Lecture Delivered in the University of Lagos Main Auditorium, in *The Comet*, Tuesday, Nov. 9th.
- Wallace, W.A. (1977). *The Elements of Philosophy*. New York: St Paul Books.
- Wiredu, K. (1980), *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.