

PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Basil A. Okonkwo Ph.D.

Abstract

This paper explores eight major schools of philosophy: Idealism, Realism, Rationalism, Empiricism, Existentialism, Pragmatism, Humanism, and Utilitarianism. Each school represents a distinct set of beliefs about reality, knowledge, and human existence, often practiced or advocated by specific groups. Philosophers may align with multiple schools, as seen with Sartre's ties to phenomenology, Marxism, and existentialism. The study outlines the meaning, nature, and core principles of each school, along with key philosophers who shaped them. By comparing these schools, the paper aims to deepen understanding of their influence on thought, society, and personal values.

Introduction

Philosophy has a number of well-defined schools of thought. A school of thought is a particular idea or set of ideas or doctrines held by a specific group. Any idea that a group strongly believes in, be it through practicing this idea in their everyday life or through fighting for its adoption, can be considered a school of thought. It can also be seen as the perspective of a group of people who share common characteristics of opinion or outlook of a philosophy, discipline, belief, social movement, economics, cultural movement, or art movement. It is important to be aware that a philosopher may belong to several schools. For example, Sartre is a phenomenologist, a Marxist, and an existentialist. In this work, eight important schools of philosophies idealism, Realism, rationalism, Empiricism, Existentialism, Pragmatism, Humanism ad Utilitarianism will be reviewed. This work aims at giving the meaning, nature and basic tenets of the above schools of thought, as well as some prominent philosophers of the different schools.

Idealism

Idealism is a merger of two root words 'ideal' and the suffix 'ism'. The word idea is from the Greek word "tidos" which means being independent of the senses and an essence, but it is also existence and reality.ⁱ In English, idea is a little different from what it means in Greek. In English it means concept, principle that directs the actions of people. Idealism is therefore the philosophical position which claims that ideas are the primary source of knowledge. That is, 'objects cannot be said to exist independently of the mind.'ⁱⁱ It distrust the veracity of the senses and so breaks the contact they provide with external reality, elaborating itself systematically upon combinations of ideas

In the history of western philosophy, the first race of what can be called Idealism is seen remotely in the philosophy of Anaxagoras of Clazamone who attributed to the mind (nous) the function of controlling the seeds of matter. Dario Composta writes "for the reason (Anaxagoras) provided a mind (nous) which not only imprints a rational movement on the seeds, but dominate them throughout the development as well."ⁱⁱⁱ His attempt was a remarkable shift from the materialistic view of the cosmos towards an overarching intelligent mind as the principle of the cosmos.

Idealism attained its height in the works of the founder of the Academy, Plato who gave a dualistic description of things a sensory world and the world of ideas. The world of ideas is the principle of whatever exists in the sensory world. The works of Aristotle are not bereft of Idealism. The active intellect impresses upon the possible intellect the universal Ideas of anything in the spatio-temporal realm. The works of Plato had lasting influence in the idealism-system as it was furthered through the works of John, Locke, David Hume, George Berkeley, Immanuel Kant (Although quite different from Plato's) and ultimately in the absolute idealism of George Hegel. In the contemporary era of philosophy, idealism has become not only a philosophical theme but has pervaded socio-political and cultural spheres.

There are two basic forms of idealism: Moderate Idealism and Absolute idealism.

Moderate Idealism is the view that although ideas are the most basic things but physical objects also exists.^{iv} In moderate Idealism; idea exists alongside the physical objects in the external world from which impressions about the world is made and ideas are subjectively and subsequently formed.

Absolute idealism on the other hand is championed by G.W.F Hegel. He sees every existent reality as a great manifestation of the absolute idea. That is, every particular ideas are only real as part of the whole^v. From the above descriptions of absolute idealism, it can be deduced that absolute idealism is a universal set which contains simpler sets that coherently and logical follow. Another meaning of absolute idealism is that the physical realities of the world are ideas and nothing more.

Realism

Realism is the doctrine that is associated with the study of the world we live in. It is the Philosophical or Epistemological theory that what we perceive or know are the objects as they are presented to us in experience.^{vi} The contention of Realism is that objects of our sensual perceptions are real in themselves, whether the mind perceives it or know it or not. The basic tenet of realism is that reality and knowledge of things can be acquired independent of the mind that perceives them. In other words reality is extramental and not intramental, that is, it exists outside the mind and not within the mind as ideas. In this sense, there is a demarcation between the knower and things known. It is in opposition to Berkeleyan theory of *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived) which virtually equates existence with perception such that an object cannot be said to exist if there is no body or some 'mind' to perceive it. For realism, objects exist on their own even when there is no one to know. By implication, it is not only what is known that exists; there is a huge possibility of unknown existing objects.

Realism as a philosophy is traceable to Aristotle, the famous student of Plato, (384-322 BC). He is acclaimed to be the father of realism just as Plato is believed to be the proponent of idealistic tradition in Western Philosophy. The ideas proposed by Aristotle can be classified as classical realism. Classical realism suggests that matter is real and that it is separate from our perceptions. You may not see it, hear it, or feel it, but it nevertheless exists. But the fundamental question to ask is: is there a true reality, which exists outside of human perception or is reality only what we perceive? For Realism; there is a true reality, and things exist whether humans perceive them or not. Furthermore, real ism is antithetical to Idealism, It upholds that the view that matter is real and not shadows or "copies" of the real which exist in the spiritual/immaterial world. There are different strands of realism; we have naive realism, transcendental or ultra-realism and scientific realism.

Naive realism is the most common belief about perception, probably universal in childhood. It holds that we perceive things exactly the way they are. That is, nothing exists beneath what we perceive. So, appearance for the naive realists is equal to reality, In this sense, G. E, Moore (1925) conceives perception as simply n common sense analysis of knowledge acquisition^{vii}. He claims that what we mean when we see physical things is simply of sense data. His use of the phrase "actually see" and the notion of "direct apprehension" suggest that 'sense data' are things over which there is no possibility of doubt.

Transcendental or ultra-realism is otherwise referred to as Plato's beard or forms, It is Plato's approach to understanding reality. Ozumba sees it as a theory which holds that the physical things are not real.^{viii} The physical things in Plato's view are copies of the original or real things in the world of forms, These forms are perfect, permanent, transcendental, immutable and pure. The mind only get to know them through a rigorous intellectual, process, for their knowledge will give meaning to the physical objects in the physical world. Scientific realism is 18 theory that upholds the efficacy of scientific gadgets such as microscopes and telescopes in understanding the real nature of things which goes beyond the grasp of the naked eyes. It is the view that reality is beyond what we see or that there are certain perceptual realities that are only knowable to the scientific enterprise. Hence, there is a basic difference between a casual observer and a scientist.

Rationalism

The term rationalism is from the Latin word "ratio" which means "reason". Rationalism is a school of thought in Epistemology that holds "reason" above all to be the primary and only reliable source of knowledge. Lamprecht defines rationalism as the principle that human reason is the final authority in all matters of opinion and conduct.^{ix} It is a school of thought that holds that knowledge is derived through logico-mathematical reasoning.^x Knowledge that is derived through reason is called a priori knowledge that is knowledge gotten independent of experience of any form. Over the years, many Philosophers have spoken in favour of rationalism. There were elements of rationalism in the teachings of Socrates and Plato in the ancient period but rationalisin became a full fledge epistemological theory with

the teachings of the continental rationalists. Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz.^{xi} Though their approaches differ, they still have some meeting points in their analysis and arguments. The central principles in their philosophy are as follow:

The emphasis on the doctrine of innate ideas: the doctrine of innate ideas stipulates that man possesses certain natural intellectual equipment that exists prior to experience. These principles and concepts are born in us; present in our minds at birth, as part of our natural human endowment.

The rationalists are united in the belief that genuine knowledge comes through the mental processes of intuition and deduction. Intuition refers to a direct and immediate knowledge of something while deduction is the derivation of further truths or knowledge from the intuited ones through inference. The rationalists affirm the existence of self-evident truths. This refers to axiomatic propositions that are clear, distinct and self-affirming. Rationalism as an epistemological theory has contributed to the growth of knowledge, in modern philosophy and in other disciplines through the recognition of reason as the primary and sufficient source of knowledge. As earlier mentioned, the argument calls to doubt, the reliability of perceptual evidence on the ground that such reliance is prone to mistakes or errors. But does it mean that we can in no case rely on our perceptual information, even after a thorough check? Hence the assumptions of the rationalists seem to be extreme. Reason indeed is a source of knowledge but not all knowledge can be derived through reason alone.

Empiricism

Etymologically, the word empiricism is a derivative of "empirical" which means physical or sensual. It is a view that all knowledge with the exception of logic and mathematics are derived from experience. Miller sees it as the theory that all knowledge of actual existing things is delivered through the five senses. This for him implies that the five senses (sight, sound, touch, taste and smell) are the foundation of all our knowledge. This is in opposition to the rationalists' notion of innate ideas as the 'source of our knowledge. The main proponents of this view include; John Locke, George Berkeley, David Hume etc.

Central principles of Empiricism

1. Rejection of innate ideas. The empiricists are united in rejection of the rationalists' postulation of innate ideas. They claim that there are no such things as ideas before experience. All our ideas of the past, present and future are all products of sense experience. There is nothing in the mind that was not initially in the senses.
2. The metaphor of tabula rasa or blank tablet. The empiricists as a follow up of their rejection of innate ideas described the mind as an empty slate devoid of any mark prior to experience. According to them, there was nothing inscribed on the mind from birth. That is, the mind is at birth a blank tablet, devoid of any inscription. This implies that anything written in the mind is written by the five senses.
3. The primacy of sense experience. Sense experience is, according to the empiricists, the basic of human knowledge. Whatever is not given to us in experience is not knowledge. All knowledge is a posteriori in nature, meaning derived and circumscribed by sense perception.

Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that first emerged during the mid-20th century, in the wake of World War II. The existentialists argued that our purpose and meaning in life came not from external forces such as God, government or teachers, but instead is entirely determined by ourselves. They argued that while life was absurd, irrational and uncontrollable, it was up to us to find our own individual path towards a higher purpose.

The very term existentialism is controversial. In its most specific use, it refers to the philosophy of the twentieth century French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre who used it to self-designate his own thought. However, Sartre himself thought his thinking developed the philosophy of Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, Heidegger, a twentieth century German philosopher, in turn thought his work was a further development of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology. However, Heidegger did not consider himself an existentialist philosopher. Existentialism is another historical category of philosophy, such as empiricism, rationalism, realism, or idealism. As such, it is defined by some common threads, though considerable variations may exist from one philosopher to the next. As the term itself indicates,

existentialists are primarily concerned with existence - not existence at large but with human existence. One of its fundamental ideas is that the "old" categories used in philosophy to give human existence meaning are no longer useful. Modern science is of no use either, as human existence cannot be reduced to facts. Husserl's observation that "only facts can follow from facts" exemplifies this belief. Hence, the categories of "human essence," "individuality," "body-mind," or any other category drawn from traditional philosophy cannot help understand what it means to be myself. The common themes/concepts of existentialism are authenticity, alienation, the absurd, nothingness, boredom, and angst/fear). Other key Existentialist philosophers includes; Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), Albert Camus (1913-1960)

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is a philosophical movement that includes those who claim that an ideology or proposition is true if it works satisfactorily. In the popular usage, "pragmatic" is associated with "practical" and this is seen as contrasting with the "theoretical". The pragmatic ideas arose out of dissatisfaction with all the other options in philosophy available in their day: rationalism, empiricism, Kantianism and Hegelianism. Pragmatists approached the world with a sense of openness and in the spirit of Experimentalism. Pragmatism originated in the mid-19th century. from Greek pragma, pragmat- "deed" .. Its origins are often attributed to the philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. In 1878, Peirce described it in his pragmatic maxim: "Consider the practical effects of the objects of your conception, Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object". We have five (5) **Principles of Pragmatism namely:**

Pluralism: Philosophically, the pragmatists are pluralist». According to them there are as many words as human beings. The ultimate reality is not one but many, Everyone searches truth and aim of life according to his experiences. **Utilitarianism:** Pragmatists are utility is the test of all truth and reality. A useful principle is true. Utility means fulfilment of human purposes. The results decide the good and evil of anything, idea, beliefs and acts. Utility means satisfaction of human needs.

Changing Aim and Values: The aim and values of life change in different times and climes. "The old aims and values, therefore, cannot be accepted as they are. Human life and the world is a laboratory in which the aims and values are developed.

Individualism: Pragmatists are individualists. They put maximum premium upon freedom in human life. Liberty goes with equality and fraternity. Everyone should adjust to his environment.

Experimentalism: Pragmatists are experimentalists, They give more importance to action than ideas. Activity is the means to attain the end of knowledge. Therefore, one should learn by doing constant experimentation which is required in every field of life.

Pragmatism is an approach that evaluates theories or beliefs in terms of the success of their practical application. It has significantly influenced non-philosophers, notably .in the fields of law, education, politics, sociology, psychology, and: literary criticism, but this work deals with it only as a movement within philosophy

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism promotes that an action is right if it leads to happiness. The Maxim of utilitarianism holds that an action is good if it results in the happiness of the greatest number of people in the society or a group. The utilitarian ideas can be traced back to at least to the ancient Greeks. The "hedonist" philosophy of Epicurus, for example held that pleasure is the source of happiness and pain on the other hand is the source of pain. Utilitarianism is an ethical theory based on the principle of utility, the principle of the greatest good, or the principle of the greatest happiness. According to utilitarianism, utility is the moral standard; it is the criterion or yardstick with which good actions are distinguished from bad actions. By utility, the utilitarians mean pleasure or happiness (which for them means the same thing). This means that those actions which produce or tend to produce pleasure are good while those that produce or tend to produce pain are bad. Pleasure or happiness, is the only one thing that has intrinsic value. For something to have an intrinsic value implies that it is simply good in itself.

Jeremy Bentham(1746-1832), the father of Utilitarianism in his book "Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation" claims that man is by nature a pleasure-seeking and a pain-avoiding animal, that pleasure and pain are the two guides of all human actions^{xiii}. According to him also, nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think. John Stuart Mill

(1806-1873) after reflecting on Jeremy's idea published his own work titled "Utilitarianism", in 1863 where he is of the view that the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals utility or the greatest happiness principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness xiv. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure.

Humanism

Man, even with his rational faculty cannot fully understand all that is to life. Through the history of man's existence up until now, man has been in a search for the meaning of life and how to live well with fellow men and nature. This search for the meaning of life and harmonious living has brought about so many varied ideas about existence. One of these varied ideas about life and existence is the' concept of "humanism". Throughout recorded history there have been non-religious people who have believed that this life is the only life we have, that the universe is a natural phenomenon with no supernatural side, and that we can live I ethical, meaningful, and fulfilling lives on the basis, of reason and humanity. They have trusted to the scientific method when trying to understand how the universe works, made their ethical decisions based on a concern for the welfare of human beings and other sentient animals, and sought to make a positive contribution towards building a better society. Today, people who share these beliefs and values are called humanists and this combination of attitudes is called humanism.

Humanism is a philosophy of life that considers the welfare of humankind rather than the welfare of a supposed God or gods to be of paramount importance. Humanism maintains there is no evidence a supernatural power ever needed or wanted anything from people, ever communicated to them, or ever interfered with the laws of nature to assist or harm anyone. Humanism's focus, then, is on using human efforts to meet human needs and wants in this world. History shows that those efforts are most effective when they involve both compassion and the scientific method- which includes reliance on reason, evidence, and free inquiry.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have established that a philosophical school of thought is the perspective of a group of people or philosophers who share common characteristics of opinion or outlook of a philosophy, The history of Western philosophy reveals in detail the concentrated activity of a multitude of serious and able thinkers reflecting upon, reasoning about, and considering deeply the nature of their experience, and in the process, different schools of thought emerged. The schools of' thought as explained in this work developed from previous ones as a modification or as a refuter of previous thoughts, for example Empiricism against rationalism. It is important to point out at this juncture that a philosopher may belong to. several schools. For example, Sartre is a phenomenologist, a Marxist, and an existentialist. Furthermore, we can deduce from this work that the different schools of thought reviewed have their strengths and flaws, and they still retain validity till date.

References

- Dario Composta, "History of Ancient Philosophy," (1990): p.178.
- Kyrian A Ojong and Adekunle A Ibrahim, "Fundamental Problems of Epistemology," *Calabar: Jochrisam Publishers* (2011): p.24.
- Composta, "History of Ancient Philosophy," p.78.
- Ojong and Ibrahim, "Fundamental Problems of Epistemology," p.24.
- Ojong and Ibrahim "Fundamental Problems of Epistemology," p.24. Godfrey O Ozumba, *A concise introduction to epistemology* (Jochrisam Publishers, 2001), p.91.
- George Edward Moore, "A defence of common sense," (1925). Ozumba, *A concise introduction to epistemology*, p.91.
- Sterling Power Lamprecht, "Our Philosophical Traditions a Brief History of Philosophy in Western Civilization," (1955): p.231.
- Ozumba, *A concise introduction to epistemology*, p.50.
- Ojong and Ibrahim, "Fundamental Problems of Epistemology," p.134.
- Ed L Miller, "Questions That Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy. 2d shorter ed," (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998).
- Bentham Jeremy, "An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation," *London: T* (1789)
- John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism; On Liberty; Representative Government; Edited by HB Acton;" *London: JM Dent & Sons* (1972).