

Review of: "Does Philosophy Matter? The Urgent Need for a Philosophical Revolution"

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The question ‘does philosophy matter?’ posed by Nicholas Maxwell in his paper “Does Philosophy Matter? The Urgent Need for a philosophical Revolution” is an experience nearly every philosopher or intending philosopher has faced in one way or the other. I remember an experience during my undergraduate studies in philosophy; one of my cousins asked me the question, what are you going to do with this course you are studying? By inference he was asking me, of what use is philosophy in this age? What is the relevance of philosophy? He was really asking, does philosophy matter? This has been an age long question faced by philosophers, which they probably have continued to shy away from. In our present time, the question has intensified, considering the separation of other fields of study from philosophy. It seems as if what is known as philosophy today has become empty of content. This question goes beyond issues of the relevance of philosophy, it also include questions on the nature and scope of philosophy. It is question on what should constitute the mode and essence of philosophy. It was Martin Heidegger who posits that, the question about the nature of something awakens at those times when the thing whose nature is being questioned has become obscure and confused, when at the same time the relationship of men to what is being questioned has become uncertain or has even been shattered¹. Heidegger’s view may be seen as a reflection of the current state of philosophy.

I will like to first appreciate the thought provoking nature of the work and its obvious call for philosophy to take its rightful place in academia. For the author, philosophy had embraced abstraction and has become oblivion of realities around it for too long. He argued that philosophy has become “self-indulgent, clever play in a vacuum that is not dealing with problems of any intrinsic interest”. He argued on the need for philosophy to move from what he termed knowledge-inquiry (knowledge acquisition for the sake of acquisition) to wisdom inquiry (knowledge application). This was not the first time such a call had been made on philosophy, and probably will not be the last. The same pronouncement was made by the Logical Positivists during the Vienna Circle. When the Logical Positivists argued for a shift in philosophy and the need to eliminate metaphysical language from philosophy. The paper will be an interesting read for somebody who is interested in Logical Positivism, especially the Vienna Circle scholars. It will also be of great help to anyone who is interested in metaphysical problems. I will like to state that, if his (Maxwell) position on what should constitute philosophy can be likened to the position of the Logical Positivists, then by logical inference his position is not likely to be free from the same

pitfall of Logical Positivists. He narrowed the essence of philosophy to be that of problem solving. He argued that philosophy should be centered on helping humanity address contemporary human challenges. This line of argument opens up a lot of controversies on the nature, scope and meaning of philosophy.

I will like to point out that despite the intriguing nature of his argument, one can easily observe the presence of equivocation in his usage of the term philosophy. He made use of terms like; academic philosophy, philosophy of academic inquiry, modern academic enterprise and university to almost mean the same thing. There was no clear cut distinction in the meaning of these terms in his argument. At some point, his focus will be on academic philosophy, from academic philosophy he shifts to philosophy of academic inquiry, to modern academic enterprise and finally to university. I will like to argue that his usage of these terms constituted a major defect in his argument. Academic philosophy is different from philosophy of academic inquiry, while academic philosophy talks about the totality of what academic philosophers do, the other is about the mode of academic inquiry which is not limited to philosophy as an academic field of study. On modern academic enterprise, it is logically difficult to connect his question on philosophy, and his proposal on what should be the focus of modern academic enterprise. Equating university with academic philosophy and denying philosophy of any form of contribution to humanity was a great disservice to philosophy. There are plethora of philosophical works aimed at providing solutions to numerous problems faced by humanity. None adoption of these works by policy makers and political actors should not be blamed on philosophy.

Finally, I will like to appreciate the author for calling into attention what should be the place of philosophy in the society. The author should be specific and apply clarity to the following positions of his: 'Academic philosophy in recent time has not succeeded in making a single contribution to thought that would be generally acknowledged to be valid and significant'. This assertion is hasty conclusion. 'The absolute basic aim of academia is to help promote human welfare as against the practice of knowledge acquisition'. Academia in this context lacks clarity, was he referring to philosophers or the entire academia? 'The job of the university is to put forward proposals to the public, making suggestions, engage in argument and debate'. This shift creates a whole lot of confusion in the entire argument. The argument started with philosophy and coming up with a proposal for the university and not philosophy creates the impression that philosophy is the same as university.

¹ Martin Heidegger, What is Philosophy? Trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde (Albany: NCUP, 1956) 43