**THE RELEVANCE OF METAPHYSICS TO CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

**BY**

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**Abstract**

The objective of this paper is to examine the relevance of metaphysics to contemporary society. It opines that, contrary to some people’s opinions that “metaphysics does not bake bread nor build bridges”, metaphysics serves as the foundation upon which all other disciplines are built. It is in fact, the foundation of all other sciences. To say metaphysics has no place in our contemporary world, is an aberration and a calculated attempt to destroy the structure of the universe because the universe itself encompasses both the physical and the spiritual. This paper, particularly, examines the relevance of metaphysics to man, the world, science and technology. It so important to say that science cannot thrive without metaphysics. Even the scientific enterprise has its being from metaphysics. The paper argues that there is no justifiable reason for science in discriminating against non-empirical studies like metaphysics owing to their non-empirical characters. The paper further showed that science should not be the sole criterion or parameter for determining the significance or relevance of other disciplines in human affairs. The method of critical-conceptual analysis is employed while existing literatures on the subject provide the background to the paper. The paper concludes that metaphysics is so important to human development because no man can exist without going beyond his physical level in order to reflect on both the seen and the unseen realities and it is by moving beyond the physical that man discovers

new things for himself such as new ideas, innovations, discoveries, inventions etc.

**Introduction**

This paper examines the relevance of metaphysics to our contemporary society. It particularly talks about the importance of metaphysics like its rival discipline, science. Part of the objectives of this paper, is to argue that some scientific claims, assumptions and activities have metaphysical presuppositions. Though, the major focus is to show case the relevance of metaphysics to man and his society but not notwithstanding, science which is believed by many people in the world to have the power of development, cannot do without metaphysics because it derived its origin from it. Science goes beyond itself before it can bring about breakthroughs and inventions. Scientists go beyond this empirical world to reflect and critically reason our solutions to problems which will eventually bring about new discoveries.

Certainly, metaphysics has been an important part of the history of philosophy and has engaged the minds of philosophers since the time of the Greeks. The Greeks developed overtime a massive and complex mythology that explained in animistic, anthropomorphic terms many of the natural phenomena seen in the world around them. The issue is whether it is possible to construct metaphysics as an accomplishing discipline of thought, meaning metaphysics that would be more than a mental and philosophical exercise and that would instead serve to offer a real framework for living

and for understanding the world in which we live. Metaphysics is a branch of philosophy that examines the nature of reality and the relationships between such elements as mind and matter, substance and attribute. It includes both ontology and cosmology. Metaphysics is the most abstract division of philosophy and addresses issues of ultimate reality. Metaphysics is concerned with what really exists and what it is that makes reality possible. The exact nature of metaphysics has long been argued, which brings into question its validity and usefulness.1

**The Meaning and Nature of Metaphysics**

This session examines the nature of metaphysics with the objective of showing that the various attacks on metaphysics have arisen owing to the gross misunderstanding of its nature. This session also shows that metaphysics does not only deal with matters that are beyond physical reality but is also concerned with the whole of reality (both empirical and non-empirical). Indeed, the discriminatory tendency against metaphysics rests majorly on the inability to identify the main nature and scope of metaphysics. However, the world of science cannot even be restricted to objects actually existing but also some of its possible functions and arrangements are implicitly metaphysical.

**What is Metaphysics?**

Metaphysics is one of the core areas of philosophy. The word metaphysics’ is derived from two Greek words, ‘meta’ which means “after” and “physika” which means “physics” (or nature). Thus the word

metaphysics, literally means “after physics”, “metaphysics”; and it was first used by Andronicus of Rhodes, the editor of Aristotle’s works, around 70B.C. Aristotle had some treatises on physics which bore that title physics. He also had some other treatises dealing with non-physical matters, but without a title. In his arrangement of Aristotle’s works while editing them for publication, Andronicus placed the treatises dealing with non-physical matters after those dealing with physics. He did not know what to call them, so he simply called them after physics- “metaphysical,” that is the treatises that come next after those dealing with physics. This was the origin of this word.2

As a branch of philosophy, it is the study of the totality of being, that is, the nature and structure of reality as a whole. What metaphysicians have been trying to do down through the ages is to give a comprehensive account of the whole of reality, its nature, its structures, and the place of man in the universe as well as in the totality of reality. Hence, Alfred North White head, one of the outstanding metaphysicians of this century, defines metaphysics as the Endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.3

While Aristotle called metaphysics “First philosophy”, Plato called it “Dialectics” and it is the core of Plato’s philosophy. For Plato, metaphysics is the study of reality as distinct from appearance. Reality, for him, lies beyond the material world which is only an imperfect reflection or shadow, and it is

metaphysics (dialectics which takes us beyond this reflection or shadow brings us to reality itself). Where is reality itself? It is in the world of forms (otherwise known as the world of ideas) which is accessible only to philosophers who make use of dialectics (metaphysics) to get there.4

For Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), a pupil of Plato and the teacher of Alexander the Great, and one of the most influential philosophers of all times, metaphysics is the science which studies Being qua Being, and the properties inherent in it in virtue of its own nature. It arises from wonder and is a search for the first principles and ultimate causes of everything which is and that which is substance. The Aristotelian view of metaphysics continues to exert an influence till today.5

According to M.J. Kerlin in his paper titled “Nature of Metaphysics”, metaphysics has been an important part of philosophy as well as human history. For him, to reveal the true nature of reality, its contents and structure is to place man within the cosmos in his relation to other kinds of things and to his creator, to determine man’s duty to himself and to God, and the true route to happiness- these are also exhibited in the works of Plato, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Bradley and so on. No wonder, its advocates have exalted the metaphysical pursuit! Of course, to exalt the metaphysical pursuit is not the same as to exalt metaphysics as a discipline-the search for answers to these questions may in itself be notified while one might downgrade metaphysics itself because it never provides final answers. In truth, in the modern world, we most often compare the supposed

uncertainties of metaphysics with the supposed certainties of science, the first being about the cause of the natural world itself, which can be explained in terms of operation without recourse to a first cause. Through, the question of why things are as they are will persist, and we need a methodology for addressing such questions. Metaphysics provides this even if the method cannot reach a final stage.6

Henri Bergson in his book “Introduction to metaphysics” explains that in the Eighteeth century, a follower of Leibniz Christian Wolff (1679-1754), a rationalist and an extremely influential pedagogue, divides the subject matter of speculative philosophy into general metaphysics (or ontology)-a transcendental science of all Being, real or possible-and special metaphysics, composed of theodicy (or natural theology), which deals with man’s natural knowledge of God, cosmology (or the philosophy of nature), which deals with animate beings especially man in so far as he is rational. The division of metaphysics, though once widely accepted and still referred to, is no longer generally followed. In the contemporary period, even the distinction between metaphysics and ontology is not usually sharply drawn in Anglo-American philosophy, although it continues to be employed on the continent. There ontology refers to an analysis of structure, whereas metaphysics deals with existential propositions, that is, with propositions concerning the existence of what is.7

Michael Esfeld, a specialist in the metaphysics of science asserts that metaphysics depends upon science when it is illustrated by considering the

examples of global supervenience, the tenseless versus the tensed theory of time and existence, events versus substances, and relations versus intrinsic properties. An argument is sketched out for a metaphysics of a four-dimensioned block universe whose contents are events and their sequences, events consisting in physical properties instantiated at space-time points, these properties being relations rather than intrinsic properties. Esfeld also explains that metaphysics…is about what there is and what it is like. But of course, it is concerned not with any old shopping list of what there is and what it is like. Metaphysicians seek a comprehensive account of some subject matter-the mind, the semantic, or, most ambitiously, everything –in terms of a limited number of more or less basic notions. In doing this, they are following the good example of physicists. The methodology is not that of letting a thousand flowers bloom but that of making do with as a meager a diet as possible.8

To this end, since metaphysics, in its widest sense, is concerned with the nature and structure of all reality, its concerns are basic and general, thus historically it has been used by systematic philosophers as a basis for such other philosophical disciplines such as ethics, aesthetics, the philosophy of history and philosophical anthropology. Although metaphysics is taken by some to be the heart of philosophy, it has not been without its critics. There have been many attacks on metaphysics most recently by the logical positivists for its being “other worldly” imaginative unfounded speculation, or utterly meaningless.9

**Man and Metaphysics**

In exemplifying metaphysics as the basic of life contrary to the views of the scientists and other scholars in other fields, Baidyanath construes that in our today world no longer can one describe earth and life in terms of mere laws of physics and chemistry that life just happened by chance on earth. He argues that there is more to nature than the physics. That is, the understanding of the nature itself is beyond human cognition. No human being on earth, be it scientists or any other can offer a rational justification for all the happenings in the world.10

Furthermore, metaphysics has been with man right from inception. Man did not know that he was doing metaphysics. It should be noted that neither Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, nor any of the founding fathers of Western Philosophy used the word “metaphysics” even though they were metaphysicians. This word as earlier said, came into use by accident as the title of a collection of treatises of Aristotle, indicating the position of these treatises in the arrangement of Aristotle’s works. The concept was however central to their philosophies. They were doing metaphysics but without using the word metaphysics”. They attempted to give a comprehensive account of the nature and structure of reality as a whole. For, instance while Aristotle called metaphysics “First philosophy”, Plato called it “Dialectics” and it is the core of Plato’s philosophy. For him (Plato), metaphysics is the study of reality as distinct from appearance. Reality, for him, lies beyond the natural world which is only an imperfect reflection or shadow, and it is metaphysics (dialectics) which takes us beyond this reflection or shadow and brings us to

reality itself. Where is reality itself? It is in the world of forms which is accessible only to philosophers who make use of dialectics (metaphysics) to get there.11

In its origin says Copleston, “metaphysics arises simply out of natural desire to understand the world”.12 Metaphysics springs naturally from our innate instinct of curiosity. Man has a natural curiosity to know, he wants to understand and be able to explain what he sees and experience in the world around him. This natural curiosity to understand and explain what he sees leads him beyond what he sees, and leads him into metaphysics. For things point beyond themselves and you cannot understand or explain them without going beyond them. Thus, starting from the world of our empirical experience, we are gradually led beyond it in our attempt to understand it 13 , and we are led into metaphysics. Our horizon becomes broadened beyond the facts of immediate experience, the world of empirical experience. It awakens in us the realization that there is more to things than we can perceive in them with our senses. We become aware that there is more to reality than is empirically perceptible. This was how Kant was gradually led from things as they appear to us to things as they are in themselves, from the phenomenal world to the noumenal world. Before Kant, Plato had been led in a similar way gradually from the world empirical experience into the world of forms. It was his attempt to explain motion in the world that Aristotle was led to discover the unmoved mover and the Uncaused cause. It was the attempt to explain the things in the world of empirical experience that led John Locke to discover substance, that led Leibniz to discover monads, that led Hegel to discover absolute spirit, and Schopenhauer to discover the Will to live etc.14

To this end, metaphysics has been with man from inception and man has been making use of it to discover new things in this world of experience and the world that is beyond our world.

**The Relationship Between Metaphysics and Science**

This session aims at arguing for the symbiotic relationship that exists between metaphysics and science contrary to the view that the former has no relevance to life and that is of no value and importance to humanity. Having examined and defined metaphysics, what then is science? The Latin word of science is ‘Scire’ (scientia) which means knowledge. This makes science conterminous with knowledge. But a proper historical ordering will place knowledge as prior to science.15 Notable philosophers from antiquity including Aristotle and the Medieval philosophers to the modern period (period of renaissance) made valuable contributions to the growth of science on all fronts. We cannot forget key players like Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, Kepler, Tycho Brahe, Copernicus, Newton Isaac. John Locke, Albert Einstein, George Berkeley, Gottfried Leibniz, who provided added impetus to the philosophical examination of science in the modern period.16

The development of science still needs the launching pad provided by Ernest Mach and Charles Sanders Pierce, and in fact, the role of phenomenalism, and logical positivism to the growth of science. Ernest mach was concerned with phenomenalism, for him, science was built out of phenomena, that is, reality as presented to us through the senses. This

made appearance synonymous with reality. Scientific fact became known as conterminous with appearance since we are dealing with the observable. For Pierce, science should be seen from the point of view of ability to derive facts from objective observations, and what is observable should be testable. Science was then seen from the point of view of instrumentalism. The danger here is that science became reduced to an instrumentation enterprise, which determines its own standard and as such above the critique offered by philosophy.17

To Mickley, science and metaphysics have had a changing relationship with time. The philosophy of the ancient Greece made little distinction between topics that we would now assign the label of science and those that we would assign the label of metaphysics. The term metaphysics actually is due to Aristotle and refers to the book he wrote after the book on physics, entitled metaphysics or after physics’. It dealt with topics other than physical science topics. Before Aristotle, there was debate about the nature of physical things and change. Some philosophers maintained that everything is in a state of flux. On the other hand some argued against this in saying that everything is what it is and cannot change into what it is not. Mickley explains further that, in the 5th century B.C. Democritus proposed a way out of this dilemma. He maintains that all matter is made up of small indestructible units, which he called atoms. The atoms themselves remained unchanged, having fixed properties. However, they could move and combine in various ways so that macroscopic bodies that they made up might seem to change. This explanation provided for both permanence and flux. This gives rise to the doctrine of materialism.18 The above further establishes the relationship between philosophy and science right from the world go.

Moreso, several scientific activities and works are underlined by metaphysical presuppositions. Science begins from the conception stage (i.e belief stage which is metaphysical in nature) before breakthroughs come. For example, interpreting natural phenomena is a complex process because contributions come from observation, logic and a variety of methodological, ontological and religious beliefs. Also, complementing this, is the fact that the reversability of materialism requires that one believes the non-material realm.

Furthermore, to see how science interrelates with metaphysics is to examine the metaphysical nature of matter. Matter which has been thought to be inert but now we know that it is endowed with motion. As Engels tells us, there is conflict, contradictions, dialectic going on inside matter.19 Also, the Jesuit scientist and paleontologist, Teihard Chadin tells us that matter is endowed with consciousness (though a very low level of consciousness).20

All these further corroborate our position that science is swimming in the ocean of metaphysics. Is modern science not becoming more and more metaphysical? There is another area of interest which borders on the question that, do scientists have any reason to believe that current scientific theories are true when all the scientific theories of the past have turned out to be false? How can scientists take a scientific theory that is about entities

and processes no one can observe? This question raised by some scholars represents the kind of question that philosophers usually ask about science. The response to this question and curiosity-that go with it constitutes philosophy of science.21

To this end, the aforementioned facts have shown or established the nexus between science and metaphysics, and have equally shown that scientific activities are underlined by metaphysical presuppositions.

**The Relevance of Metaphysics to Society.**

The relevance of metaphysics to the development of the society cannot be quantified. Before the relevance of metaphysics is construed on, little explanation is given below.

As we have earlier pointed out, modern science is marked out from other disciplines by the procedural method of observation, experimentation and generalization. By virtue of this method, science has come to be regarded as the surest and most reliable means at man’s disposal for exploring and discovering the secrets of nature, the hard –facts of nature and the laws which govern natural events. But the question is, are we living in the Age of science alone? If we are to answer this question with another question, why do so many pseudoscientific and no-scientific traditions abound in our society? Religion, myths, superstitions, mysticisms, witchcraft cults, New Age benefits, and nonsense of all sorts have penetrated every nook and cranny of both popular and high culture. One may rationalize that

compared to the magical thinking of the middle Ages things are not so bad. But statistically speaking, pseudoscientific beliefs are experiencing a revival in the late 20th century. A 1990 Gallup poll of 1,236 adult Americans shows percentages of belief in the paranormal that are alarming:

Astrology: 52%

* Extra sensory perception (ESP) (i.e ability to know things without using the senses of sight, hearing etc): 46%
* Witches: 19%
* Aliens have landed on Earth: 22%
* The lost continent of Atlantis:33%
* Dinosaurs and Humans lived simultaneously: 41%
* Noah’s flood: 65%
* Communication with the dead: 42%
* Ghost: 35%
* Actuality had a psychi Experience: 67%.

Other poplar beliefs of our time that little or no veracity in evidence include: Dowsing, the Bermuda triangle, Poltergeists, biorhythms, creationism,

psychokinetic, astrology, ghosts, psychi detectives, unidentified flying objects (UFOs) (e.g a strange object that some people claim to have seen in the sky and believe is a space craft from another planet), remote viewing, kirlian auras, emotions in plants, life and death, monster, graphology, crypto-zzoology, clairvoyance, medium, pyramid power, faith healing, big foot, psychi prospecting, halted houses, perpetual motion machines,

antigravity locations, and amusingly, astrological birth control. Other polls show that these phenomena are not the quirky beliefs of a handful on the lunatic fringe.23

From the above, this research has further established the relevance and efficacy of metaphysics in unraveling the secrets of nature that science is incapable of uncovering. This has further shown the importance and relevance of metaphysics to the society, without which the society could not have been acquainted with the aforementioned spiritual entities existing in the society.

Also, where the scientific thinking/work is dwindling is within the social realm. Individuals, groups, and nations have been trying to solve such social problems as war, crime and poverty for millennia, and yet these social ills still abound. For example, ‘Boko Haram’ insurgency has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerian History, and nothing has been done to stop it by the so-called scientists. The recommendation of this paper is that metaphysicians should be consulted in terms of nipping in the bud the menace. Metaphysicians such as pastors, Herbalists, prophets, clairvoyants, philosophers etc who see beyond this physical world and who use dialectic to get to the intelligible world should be consulted for solutions to this cankerworm.

To further buttress the above relevance of metaphysics, the following are to be considered:

**(a).** **Metaphysics and Practical Life**

It is generally believed that metaphysics is pure abstract speculation about theories that have no bearing on practical life. Consequently, metaphysics is generally considered as irrelevant to practical life. Metaphysics, according to this view, is a kind of intellectual hobby or an intellectual game which the philosophers play with abstract theories. If this view were correct then metaphysics could have no role in nation-building, and could make no contribution to national or social development. The history of Western philosophy, however, shows that this view is false, for metaphysics (philosophy) has been one of the forces that have shaped the structures of western society. Metaphysics (one of the core branches of philosophy) has had much to do with influencing men’s attitude to life and bringing about changes in societies. The philosophies of Socrates, Hegel, Spinoza, Dewey, Aristotle were certainly not pure abstraction that had nothing to do with the practical lives of men. Nor was the philosophy of a metaphysician called Plato irrelevant to practical life. On the contrary, it gave generations of men a definite world view which influence their life-style. This world-view changed their attitudes towards life and led to the renunciation of material possessions, for through the influence of Plato’s philosophy the things of this world came to be seen in a new light. They are seen as unreal and as shadows of the real things in another world.

**(b). Philosophy and Human Development.**

To talk of national Development is to talk primarily of the development of human persons. Metaphysics (one of the core branches of philosophy) has a vital contribution to make to the development of human person. Metaphysics deals with both the physical and spiritual aspects of man. Man is a composite of spirit and matter, metaphysics then helps man to synthesise these elements together in him. Man is such a complex being that has always been to himself a mystery and an insoluble problem. Hence, the French Philosopher, Gabriel Marcel describes man as a problematic being.24 and Jean-paul Sartre describes him as a being who is not what he is and who is what he is not, a being who puts his own very being into question.25 This further shows the importance of metaphysics in human affairs.

To this end, philosophy generally (metaphysics inclusive) helps to shape man’s moral development. A very important aspect of the development of human personality is moral development. Moral development and maturity on the part of the citizen of a country are pre-requisites for the development of that country. Indeed, moral development is the most important aspect of national development, for there can be no development of a country if its citizens are morally undeveloped and immature. Moral development on the part of the citizens is therefore a condition sine-qua-non for the development of any nation.

From the above, one would see that metaphysics is not about nothing but about some things that have bearing on human lives.

**Conclusion**

We have seen that far from being irrelevant to practical life, metaphysics (philosophy) is on the contrary one of the powerful forces shaping man’s attitude and the structures of societies. Philosophy, of which metaphysics is a branch, has to do with the development of the society. The development of the society, in turn leads to the development of the nation. Development of any society or country starts from the conception stage which is metaphysical. We must believe, conceive and rationally think about ideas before nurturing such ideas to bring about the development of a society or country. It is a serious error to see national development only in terms of economic development this, we have said, is not the primary aspect of national development, for national development is primarily the intellectual and moral development of people. unless priority is given to this, the outcome of the developmental process would be a disaster.

To this end, it is the view of this paper that metaphysics, which is the foundation of all sciences, should be given a pride of place in our society, particularly, it should be incorporated into the curricular of primary, secondary and tertiary institutions of learning globally until then, people would know the relevance of the discipline.

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