

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PRACTICES IN AFRICA: A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper provides insights into how the disciplines of philosophy and conflict resolution offer important practices and holistic perspectives on conflict resolution. It is important to place the conflict resolution practices in the world today on a philosophical perspective. The concepts of philosophy as well as conflict resolution practices are susceptible to diverse interpretations and perspectives. This paper aims at analyzing what philosophy entails, conflict resolution practice in Africa, the necessity for philosophy in conflict resolution practices and how philosophy can be used to enhance work in conflict resolution practices. In the course of this exploration, the paper highlights the concepts of philosophy and conflict resolution practice. The paper concludes with a discussion of the relevance of the insights for improving the efficiency of conflict resolution in theory and practice.

Keywords: Assumptions, Conflict Resolution, Issues, Perspectives, Philosophy, Practices

Introduction

Practically every human activity has its own philosophical angle, thus confirming the iniquitousness of philosophy in human life. We talk of philosophy of life, philosophy of economics, philosophy of religion, and so on. On a more intellectual note, every discipline or profession also has its own philosophical aspect. Thus, we talk of philosophy of political science, philosophy of economics, philosophy of sociology and philosophy of psychology, to mention only a few. The use of the word philosophy in these two contexts is not just ceremonial: it is supposed to refer to something quite distinctive and meaningful, to some vital perspective of the practical or theoretical activity.

It is in this latter more serious sense that we talk of “Philosophy of Conflict Resolution” in this paper. Conflict resolution is a most recent addition to the family of theoretical disciplines, and professions, having existed as a helping profession for as long as human memory. There has been no society, however primitive, which did not evolve its own method of dealing with the social and individual problems that confronted its members. The perpetuation of any society depends upon the efficacy of such methods and techniques.

With the emergence of complexity in human organization leading to the evolution of division of labor, it becomes essential for the peacekeeping and human service to be institutionalized and for the profession of conflict resolution to emerge. Naturally for every profession to be so recognized, it must rest on a solid base of theoretical discipline which raises it above mere occupation. This brief is the origin of conflict resolution as both a discipline and a profession or even purely as a field of human activity. We can talk of the philosophy of conflict resolution which means something significant and something beneficial to the theory and practice of the profession. It is the way we can do this and how it can be of relevance to the conflict resolution professionals that this paper is out to explicate.

PHILOSOPHY: A CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

But first, what is philosophy? In what mode does it operate? And how is it, as a supremely theoretical and abstract activity, relevant to practical human concern? How can philosophy be made alive and relevant?

What is philosophy? It may surprise you to be told that the first problem of philosophy is that of its identity or definition. That is the problem of what it is. I am sure that your natural reaction to that statement would be that if the practitioners and scholars of philosophy do not know what exactly it is, how could they be practising or researching into the unknown. That reaction is natural but to the specialist in it, it is only a challenge and it is in the best tradition of the subject. In spite of the varied definitions that are possible, it is agreed that philosophy is mostly a matter of rational argument aimed at improving on our existing stock of knowledge on any subject whatsoever. It is a rational activity that involves critical thinking on any problem on which it is exercised.

The word philosophy comes from two Greek words namely, *philos* and *Sophia*. *Philos* means love of, while *Sophia* means wisdom. From these two Greek words, we derive the etymological or literary meaning of philosophy as “Love of Wisdom”. Invariably then, the philosopher is a “lover of wisdom.” Nakpodia points out that philosophy is the common property of all, and it is not difficult to see why philosophy is traditionally regarded as the “love of wisdom” or “the search for knowledge” (2010:32). The meaning for it is actually the search for the ultimate ground or knowledge and rounds of truth, reality, and value, which ultimately brings us to the point that philosophy is an activity in three modes or styles- the speculative, the prescriptive and the analytic. Today, many perceive philosophy as a discipline that came from the Greeks. This assertion is not true. A more ancient derivation of philosophy is the Egyptian word *sebo*, also meaning love of wisdom. The first known Egyptian philosopher was *Imhotep* (2655- 2600 B.C). He was an Egyptian who lived 2000 years prior to the rise of Greek philosophy in the 27th century B.C.

I shall pass over the popular conception of philosophy, which is the layman’s idea and go straight to the technical and professional use. Philosophy is an activity of logical reasoning and thinking over any problem that is set for it. According to Dewey, it is the rational exploration of those aspects of the problem which are theoretical and capable of being resolved or at least elucidated by rational dialogue (1916:28). Philosophy usually starts with the explication of the language of discourse on a particular topic on the premise that, if we do not agree on the meanings of the words which we use, we cannot even begin a discourse or a dialogue. Hence, the clarification of language is a pre-eminent task of philosophy to make ourselves precisely comprehensible to our listeners and vice-versa. In this task, the concepts and phrases in use are subjected to critical analysis so as to bring out the correct usage of those words and the guiding or important criteria for their correct usage.

Another important task of philosophy is the analysis and clarification of assumptions behind the statements we make. The statements we make are often inexplicit either deliberately or unwittingly. It is the task of philosophy to tease out the logical and value assumptions behind the statements we make or the ideas we express and the actions we take.

The third mode of philosophy I want to touch is the clarification of the theoretical and fundamental principles of our activities. Every rational human activity can be referred to an

underlying set of theoretical principles which serve as a reference point for such an activity. The professions particularly derive not just from some theoretical disciplines, but are also guided by certain philosophical principles. For example, teaching psychiatry, psychoanalysis and especially social welfare, one fundamental or philosophical principle behind them is that of helping; they are all “helping profession”. Philosophy helps to articulate such principles as we shall do later on for social welfare.

The fourth mode of philosophy in practical human concerns is that of identification and critical analysis of the general trends and modes of a particular practice. Trends and models do not just suddenly appear on the stage, they are more often than not products of theoretical and ideological changes. An examination of such trends is likely to reveal the underlying philosophies and ideologies which can make us better understand and appreciate the trends.

Fifthly and finally, there is the discussion of the large areas of ethics and morality which are thrown up as problems and issues, especially from the professions. The issues and problems often arise from the inter-personal relationship that most of the professions involve and most relationships between the helper and the helped which being open to abuse, often become matters of moral concern. Even, ordinarily delineating the objectives of a profession can be a matter for philosophical intervention because of possible disagreements over such objectives and the priority to accord them or whether they are even worth pursuing at all. Where such controversies exist, the illuminating light of philosophy can be found very useful.

PHILOSOPHY AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In Africa, we need ethical conflict resolution professionals with critical attitude and rational temper of mind for the social and behavioral transformation of the society. What do we mean by critical attitude and rational temper of mind? The conflict resolution professionals with this disposition are not easily carried away by emotion. They are curious to know the truth and follow the truth. They search for wisdom and truth; they denounce irrationality and always base their judgment on indisputable evidence. Professionals with critical attitude and rationality, who can effectively evaluate the purpose of human life, are needed for social and behavioral transformation. It is the task of a sound philosophy of conflict resolution to aid the young scholars to get a clear idea of the purpose and ultimate goal of conflict resolution for ethical life.

Philosophy of conflict resolution must be absorbed to enable the conflict resolution professionals to critically evaluate the right methodology, which they should adopt in their resolution and mediation processes. Professionals in the field of conflict resolution with critical attitude and rational temper of mind are not afraid to tell the truth because they are seekers of the truth; they are ready to expose falsehood and help those parties involved. If we are aiming for the real peace transformation, philosophy must be applied to conflict resolution practices to make our prospective conflict resolution professionals become good philosophers. It will be very beneficial if all our conflict resolution professionals can become philosophers. Socrates depicts the good characteristics of philosophers, which we are concerned with in this paper. In book 4 of Plato’s *Republic* Socrates presents the characteristics of philosophers thus:

Those who love knowledge and have good memory, the quick-witted and sharp and all else that goes with these qualities, character (trustworthy)...not

easily moved to fear, (In Rouse, 1956 p.301)

Socrates depicts the activities of philosophers in this fashion,

.....the real lover of knowledge by his nature strives towards real being and is not content to abide by this multitude of things which exists only in opinion, forward he always goes and he is never blunted and never ceases from that love, until he grasps the nature of what really is in each case... (In Rouse, 1956 p.288)

The point here is that philosophy is an interesting activity, which seeks after wisdom and knowledge. A philosopher is expected to be a good man or woman, who is willing to do well. All philosophers must know this fact. A philosopher must not live a careless life; he must be a good example to others. In this case, philosophy is a noble activity but whether philosophy is good or bad depends on the person who is philosophizing.

The various modes of operation of philosophy catalogued above are rather abstract but they are nevertheless given as frameworks with which I am going to deal with social welfare in this paper. We shall now take each of the perspectives and see how it operates in the field of conflict resolution and we will end the paper with a discussion of the relevance of the insights for improving the efficiency of conflict resolution in theory and practice. But before I do so, let me re-summarise the various modes in which philosophy can operate in conflict resolution. These are in the area of:

THE LANGUAGE OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict resolution as an emerging field of study and even as an institutional practice, is developing a set of concepts and terms whose technical meanings will be peculiar to that field. Every discipline and every professional understands one another and most especially to enable researches to proceed smoothly. So also, conflict resolution is developing its own core concepts which are the words frequently in use in the profession. Among the several that one can name are “Conflict skills”, “Feelings and Emotions”, and “Personality Development”. These words convey deeper meanings to practitioners and scholars in the field than they do to the laymen but it is by no means the case that all professionals are unanimous in the ways they use them. In other words, there is need for analysis and clarification of these words which will result in greater precision and consensus in their usage. This is where philosophy can contribute through the use of the analytic tool.

CLARIFICATION OF FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

There are certain philosophical and value assumptions that underlie the practice of conflict resolution which the practitioners may not care to articulate to themselves but which nonetheless influence their interests and positions. Indeed, these assumptions sometimes motivate them without their knowing. A conscious understanding of these assumptions and a conscious application of them will definitely enhance the ideal practice of the profession. Among such assumptions are the beliefs that human nature can change for the better that the party or the helped occupies an inferior position in the helping relationship and therefore open to exploitation and that the helped, possibly out of sense of shame or out of fear of loss of personal self-esteem and dignity, does not usually eagerly reach out for help or readily

accept help, until perhaps the situation is getting out of control. All these are rich assumptions which practitioners must continuously explore and whose products can enhance their perception of their tasks.

Take the first three assumptions listed above for example, if a conflict resolution professional believes that human nature is solidly stratified and cannot be changed, if she believes that external intervention in a deteriorating social relationship is of no effect, if she is pessimistic or even emotionally neutral about human nature, she must be in a wrong profession or must be in the profession of conflict resolution for the wrong reasons. In fact, she has no business being in conflict resolution which calls for optimism, commitment and missionary zeal, to improve the individual within the conflict milieu. We cannot go into each and every one of these assumptions nor can I even go into details of the three mentioned here for lack of space and time but no conflict resolution professional can neglect to confront these assumptions and take stands on the way they must influence practice.

THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION PRACTICE

Every profession rests on certain theoretical disciplines and principles which give it strength and direction. In conflict resolution, one can mention off-hand the disciplines of sustainable development, sustainable peace, humanitarian and peacekeeping as some of the disciplines on which the profession rests.

Apart from these recognized disciplines, there are some other principles which, as it were, characterize and prescribe for the profession. In conflict resolution its categorization as a “Helping Profession”-the concept of helping is more central to that of conflict resolution than to any other similar professions because conflict resolution involves in-depth interpersonal relationship and therefore a delicate case of helping.

Alan Keith-Lucas has carefully analyzed the concept of helping, which he titled “The Art and Science of Helping” because it has been cultivated systematically like science and imbued with humaneness like art (1972:252-280). Below is a ten-point summary of his excellent characterization of helping which by inference applies to conflict resolution:

- Helping takes place within a relationship, human and social relationship i.e. the helper and the helped;
- Parties rarely want to be helped because asking for help implies an admission of weakness or failure on the part of the helped, an admission of helplessness or failure;
- Those to be helped often want that help on their own terms, out of fear and mistrust of what could happen to them in their admitted helplessness;
- Help cannot be given or bestowed on the helped, it can only be offered; an environment conducive for helping must be created to enable help to be accepted;
- Help depends upon choice, the choice or decision of the parties to be helped, he must be able to choose whether to be helped or not to be and he must be allowed to choose (or even refuse to choose) to accept the help;
- In helping parties, they must be encouraged to face reality rather than be spared the negative, the ugly and the unpleasant facts of life;
- The relationship between the helper and the helped must be centered entirely on the interests and position of the parties being helped;

- The relationship must be on equality basis and not relationship of superior and inferior or the wise and the foolish: both are equally imperfect and equally fallible and hence no superiority or inferiority complex;
 - Helping must be based on trust, on trust that the relationship will not be abused or exploited; and
 - The helper needs courage, knowledge, understanding but above all humility, to empathise.
- All these principles Keith-Lucas summarized in three inter-related technical terms- Reality, Empathy, and Support (1984:267-280). The conflict resolution professionals not only need to know these principles but also to understand the way they operate in their daily work.

GENERAL TRENDS AND MODELS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

These general trends and models could be described as the philosophies of conflict resolution and are usually theoretically distinct even if none of them can be said to exist in its pure, unadulterated state. The models of conflict resolution are themselves usually based on ideological interests and positions in society. Take for example two contrastive models of conflict resolution, - the “control model” and the “adversary models”. The control model assumes that in a society, the ruling classes (always few in number), whom Paulo Freire calls the oppressors, will always try to manipulate the society’s values to coincide with their own, systems (1972:64). In other words, conflict resolution is to aim at re-educating their parties or clients and socializing them to adjust to the resolution order as arranged by the resolution or reconciliation classes.

In contract is the adversary model which ideological based is that conflict resolution is in the interest of the working and oppressed masses and therefore, is a tool for their reconciliation. The conflict resolution professionals should be on the side of the underclass and champion their cause against the oppression of the ruling classes. Also, in the perennial conflict between the interests of the society and of the individual, the conflict resolution professional must always defend the individual against the “oppressive” social working order. Finally, conflict resolution should go beyond ameliorating or reconciliation the conditions of individual and groups within concrete situations, to the source of social injustice which is seen to be the inequitable social structure in the society itself.

In between these two contrastive and apparently ideational models of conflict resolution is the integration model which sees conflict resolution not as a tool of partial interests but rather of the larger whole. Conflict resolution must be in the interest of parties and groups reconciled within those of the society. Peter Leonard pointed out that “the focus of social welfare within this model is the resolution of conflict and tension, the mutual adjustment of the individual and his environment within certain limits and the reconciliation of conflict parties and groups into the common value system” (1976:252-266). Suffice to say that this meditational model is the most common in actual practice; it is supposed to serve the interests of all parties to produce a harmonious and sustainable peace in the society.

Every conflict resolution professional needs to be familiar with these and other models and philosophies existing in the profession and must be sensitive enough to see that he is not unwittingly made the tool of any of the parties. He must also, of course, watch out that justice and equity prevail in the society.

ISSUES AND PROBLEMS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The last mode of intervention of philosophy of conflict resolution is the consideration of the issues and problems that inevitably arise in the practice of conflict resolution. These may be in two dimensions- the practical and empirical one. For example, finding the material resources to accomplish agreed tasks and perhaps the more fundamental ones of ethics and morality. Ethical issues and problems are endemic in all helping professions but most especially humanitarian service, peacekeeping and reconciliation because these are professions in which attempts are made to change personalities with the intention of improving their abilities to cope and the interventions are person to person inter-communications.

They are, therefore, fraught with serious ethical issues such as the right and freedom of individuals, the conflict in the interests of the individual and the community, respect for persons, equality and fraternity, justice and fairness and a host of others. Each of these is a large and serious issue which the conflict resolution professionals cannot afford to sweep under the carpet on the excuse that conflict resolution is a humanitarian service, a practical matter, not an academic or theoretical issue. Theory and practice must exist in a symbiotic relationship within any profession, with one informing the other, only to be informed in turn. That is the essence of professionalism and conflict resolution cannot be an exception.

WHY PHILOSOPHY IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION?

From what has been written up to this point, it must be fairly obvious that philosophy has something to offer conflict resolution and what I have done so far is to sketch areas of contact and mutual influences. This concluding section of my paper will try to draw the reins together by focusing attention on the key points and then make appropriate recommendations.

The emphasis of conflict resolution practice is in a deepening understanding of human conditions, the causes of such conditions, and translating such understanding of how parties function into principles for problem resolution. Like medical doctors, the work of conflict resolution professionals involves: diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. “Diagnosis” involves finding out what the problem is, “prognosis” requires a critical investigation of where the problem is now and where it is likely to degenerate to later, and “treatment” is the application of the right kind of medication. Conflict resolution professionals use four main approaches in coming to terms with the problems faced by the parties they seek to help: first, the psychosocial approach; second, the problem-solving approach; third, the social provision and structural approach; and fourth, the systems approach.

First, the psychosocial approach to conflict resolution practice emphasizes the importance of personal pathology in the etiology of social problems. The main argument in the psychosocial approach to conflict resolution practice is that human conditions are shaped by the unique past histories of the specific group and the internal dynamic generated by those histories. The psychosocial approach posits that the social group and the community impact heavily on social functioning and so breakdown in social adjustment of individuals can translate into a community-wide problem. Psychosocial therapy can help people shape their destiny.

The second problem-solving approach, assumes that past experiences, present perception of one’s situation and reaction to the problem, and also future aspirations combine

to define the person with a problem. Today's reality is, however, the most important thing to take into consideration in evaluating the person and assessing what reform is necessary. The goal of this problem-solving approach is to provide interpersonal resources to deal with present problem-ridden situations (Devore & Schlesinger, 1981:110).

The third social provision and structural approach emphasizes the role of structural inequity as a source of social conflict tension. Social problems are perceived as a function of social disorganization rather than as individual pathology. Social problems emerge in a context of social institutional sources of conflicts. Conflict resolution professionals must therefore understand individualized institutional membership (Siporin, 1975:34) and improve the relationships between people and their environments (Germain, 1979:42).

The three approaches mentioned above inform interventive procedures. The systems approach, which is the fourth, sees social problems in systemic terms: one part affects the other. The approach avoids the efforts made in the earlier three approaches at dichotomizing between person/environment, clinical practice/social action, and microsystem/ macrosystem; it argues rather that the strength of conflict resolution practice should lie in working with the interconnectedness between these elements (Pincus and Minahan, 1973:24). This approach calls the attention of conflict resolution professionals to five important social issues that could serve as sources of social tensions. They are: First, the absence of resources needed to achieve goals, solve problems, alleviate distress, accomplish life tasks, or realize aspirations and values (Devore and Schlesinger, 1981:125). Second, the absence of linkages between people and resource systems or between resource systems. Third, problematic interaction between people within the same resource system. Fourth, problematic interaction between resource systems. Fifth, problematic individual internal problem solving or coping resources.

The role of philosophy is to secure understanding through knowledge. The understanding is not only in terms of communication and the language in use but also in terms of understanding the fundamental principles and the conflict resolution issues and problems in the profession that we practice. This will enable the professional to operate not in the darkness of ignorance or by intuition but in the light of knowledge. Sensitivity to the language we use and to the critical issues and problems will enhance the mastery of the techniques of conflict resolution and instil confidence in the conflict resolution professionals. It will also deepen the intellectual foundations of the profession and make it readily acceptable in the palladium of professions. An articulate and analytical consideration of the issues and problems arising from the profession of conflict resolution will pave the way for necessary changes in the conception, objectives, strategies, methods and techniques and evaluation which will make the profession situational relevant at all times.

In order to achieve these advantages, it is hereby suggested that in every programme of training of conflict resolution professionals at every level, an element of the philosophy of conflict resolution should be made a compulsory course.

It is also being suggested that at periodic intervals, symposia and seminars be held solely on the theoretical and deeply philosophical issues and problems that conflict resolution professionals confront in the field. Such conflict resolution education schemes should not be confined solely to the techniques and methods of efficient service delivery. Human issues transcend mere "scientific" and technical approaches and this is what makes conflict resolution not just a science but also an art, the art of human interaction.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that this paper on philosophy and conflict resolution practice in Africa cannot be seriously addressed in the absence of the knowledge of what the field is all about; what are its premises, its principles and philosophy; its forms and modes, the professional in the field, how they relate with one another, and their relationship with the African community. I have tried to suggest the formation of an association, call it the Professional Association for Conflict Resolution in Africa or where all those problems are to be tackled. The practice of conflict resolution in African community will continue to fail to perform up to expectation until such an association takes the development of the profession firmly in hand.

Philosophy itself is an intelligent enquiry into the fundamental issues of life, which enables a person to gain natural or divine wisdom to live a good life. The task of philosophy is to teach the good life which is the primary role of conflict resolution practices. Philosophy can help us to modify our beliefs. There are many beliefs that some people hold dogmatically and most of these beliefs are false. These beliefs may be detrimental to the proper aim of conflict resolution practices. It is the function of philosophy to shape our beliefs to be in line with reality. Application of philosophy to conflict resolution practices is very useful. Philosophy can emancipate us from arbitrary practices. For example, our beliefs about reality will definitely affect our action.

One of the benefits that can be derived from the exploitation of the philosophical basis of conflict resolution practices is the sensitization of the practitioners or field conflict resolution professionals to the values behind their daily chores which, perhaps, they have always carried out as a matter of routine. Next, it will create a state of quiet confidence in the practitioners because to be assured of the theoretical soundness of one's action is to positively reinforce that action and commend it to others. Finally, as a discipline and relatively young profession; it has benefitted from being systematically developed through periodical training, seminars and workshop. It can also benefit from systematic philosophical exploration of its foundational values and assumptions.

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