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PHILOSOPHY IN AN AGE OF CRISIS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS¹

ABSTRACT

Crisis means “decisive moment,” a dangerous time when action must be taken to avoid a complete disaster. In the digital age, the influx of information is extremely rapid. Many people lack the wisdom and prudence to process data correctly and to take timely moral decisions. Too much information is driving people crazy as increase in knowledge goes with an upsurge in crime rate, particularly cybercrime. This historic period is an era of multiple crises, especially crisis of human values, particularly moral ones. What is so special about the crisis of this age? Why does increase in knowledge not correspond to a rise in civility and economic power for all? Is knowledge no longer empowering? Can humans co-exist in tranquility without moral values? This paper will critically reflect on the concerns raised, the challenges and prospects of the digital age, ask seminal questions and proffer invaluable solutions. And also assert the functional role of philosophy, which is needed in order to stem the moral and social crises of the information age.

Keywords: Digital age, information technology, cybercrime, crisis, human values, philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

Moral values are indispensable for peaceful coexistence and to avert a state of anomie. Human beings are social animals who must of necessity live together in families, communities, states or countries and continents. In the absence of human values, crises are germane. Peaceful coexistence demands virtues such as justice, tolerance, compassion, patience, thoughtfulness or care, wisdom and

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understanding. At times, politicians overlook the fact that “a nation is a moral entity separable from its populace only by abstraction.”² A country is peopled by human persons endowed with inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms, which should be respected by all. Thus, when two heads of state flex muscle over an issue, locked in a conflict of power tussle, what concerns their subjects? And why should they be made to suffer the effects of sanctions, and perhaps war, die, wiped off the face of the earth for no fault of theirs? This is inequity. An attack on natural justice is, in itself, crisis. As rightly said, when two elephants are fighting it is the grass under them that suffers. Unjust punishment is a structural injustice that marks sanctions and wars. If triggered, World War III, for instance, will affect the 7.6 billion people that populate the world. Was there a consensus to give heads of state of the technologically advanced nations the mandate to negotiate our universe of discourse and to take decision on behalf of the rest of the world? Sequel to their incendiaryism, the Supreme Leader of North Korea said: I have the (detonating hydrogen bomb) button on my table; and the US President responded “I have a bigger button.” When vainglory and the vaulting impulse to exhibit power get the better of chieftains, innocent people pay the price for the callous consequences that follow. Thank God these two leaders are dialoguing at last. Somehow scientists are to take responsibility for the crises because if there were no sophisticated arms, politicians would not have the temptations to show off the military might of their countries.

WHAT MAKES THE INFORMATION ERA AN AGE OF CRISIS?

While ages course along, every epoch has its distresses; it is never a smooth sail. The era of slave trade was a watershed for the people who were captured and trafficked. The era of colonialism and imperialism was disastrous. Cultural imperialism and mental colonization still constitute intricate enmeshing problems for many African countries which have no lingua franca due to their pluralistic nature. The time of the Hundred Years War was devastating for England and France. World War I and World War II periods were cataclysmic, etc. What is so special then about the crisis of this age? What role should philosophy play to quell the said crises?³

Truly, the digital age is in crisis. World War III looms large. Atomic bombs with all their matchless deadliness are said to be outdated; hydrogen bombs have superseded them. In addition, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is groomed to fight wars. What is more, AI is embodied and made to compete with man and outclass human beings in competence and output. Humans get tired and sleep but machines never sleep; they can only break down when overworked. But

² Eboh, M. P. 1990. “Archeology and Development: A Theoretical Approach.” *Ogun Journal of Arts*, 3, 111–117.

then they get repaired or replaced. Jobs are therefore very insecure. How will workers cope when greedy businessmen make robots replacing humans in workplaces? For instance, when cars and airplanes begin to operate without drivers and pilots and other types of drones do other jobs, how will displaced persons earn a living and maintain their families? Hackers have gone nuclear in the act of defrauding people; credit cards are unsafe; computers are hacked into and attacked even from afar. Cybercrimes are increasing astronomically. Children and youths, especially in Africa, no longer value education because education does not pay; degrees no longer fetch them jobs and a high social status. Education has ceased to be a means of upward mobility. To make money youths would rather become politicians with little or no learning, yet the digital age is knowledge driven and African politicians are known to recycle themselves in office.

With terrorism alone, the world has reached a “decisive moment,” a precarious time in which things are very uncertain, painful, and challenging, a time when action must be taken to avert a total catastrophe. Ours indeed is an age of crisis, a terrifying era. Some world powers are about to trigger the dreaded World War III, a war capable of annihilating the Earth itself, a senseless war to be fought and lost by all. In addition to secondary sources of fire like cooking gas in homes and fuel in petrol stations which are incendiaries that will help engulf nations in a sea of fire once an atomic bomb is thrown, many nations possess highly lethal weapons of mass destruction: biological and chemical weapons, atomic and hydrogen bombs, unstoppable killer robots or autonomous weapons, etc. Following the faceoff between North Korea and US, President Vladimir Putin warned that pushing North Korea to the wall with more UN sanctions could be “an invitation to the cemetery.” This establishes the fact that this is an age of very dangerous crises.

Thus, it is not in doubt that this age is truly crisis-ridden, a very perilous era in which a sense of uncertainty tends to pervade and envelop the world. As mentioned earlier, World War history is about to repeat itself, but with more severe consequences as some world powers are itching to showcase their arsenal of highly lethal weapons and perhaps attract market for their hydrogen bomb and latest inventions: unstoppable killer robots or autonomous weapons, etc. Those countries that bought atomic bomb from them may consider buying the latest and more sophisticated weapons. Yet what the world needs is love and synergy, not threats and intimidation.

There is too much scientific knowledge in circulation with too little philosophic wisdom to utilize it properly. Scientists often hit new discoveries by chance; it behoves philosophy of science to weigh the pros and cons of such unforeseen feats. In this age where machines are embodied with artificial intelligence and are made not only to surpass and beat humans in competitions but also to displace workmen in their various workplaces, there is great need for discretion and discernment because a man who lives in two houses will one day sleep outside.

To think through the disturbing issues of the digital age, the world needs philosophy. According to Charles H. Spurgeon, “Wisdom is the right use of knowledge. To know is not to be wise. Many men know a great deal, and are all the greater fools for it. There is no fool so great a fool as a knowing fool. But to know how to use knowledge is to have wisdom.”⁴ Therefore, the philosophy of science should be well up with recent developments in the field because scientists eschew values in their quest for objectivity. It took ethical questions to awaken scientists, e.g., human cloners to the stark implications of their dangerous experiments. When Jerry Hall and Robert Stillman multiplied 17 human embryos and got 48 identical children, their colleagues lauded it as nice job. The ethical implications of doing away with those babies did not occur to them until non-scientists raised the issues involved. In the words of the Shakespearean Lady Macbeth, “The thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now? What will these hands never be clean? No more of that, my lord, no more of that: you mar all with this starting.”⁵ Jerry Hall got 48 identical babies in the Lab. Where are they now?⁶ Human embryo researches are still going on secretly.

THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF THE DIGITAL AGE

The world is perching on the edge of nuclear precipice. Marginal errors can make it slip off. The awareness that we are sitting on a keg of gunpowder, which could explode unexpectedly, makes us live in constant fear. Fear paralyzes and makes it difficult for people to feel safe, to relax and to enjoy life, love, liberty, and leisure, arrays of security gadgets notwithstanding. With everyone suspecting everyone else, friendliness is eroded.

Advancement in information technology and the globalization of trade have brought the people of the world closer making it a global village, but not a global family. The family spirit and organic synergy are seriously lacking, hence the ideals of global peace and security continues to be a mirage. In pharmacies, medicines for colds abound, but not for cold hearts. In kitchens, we melt the frozen and warm the chilled, but cold hearts are not microwavable. Increase in knowledge devoid of altruism, right thinking and attitudinal change cannot make the world a happy home. There are lacunae which only moral values can fill.

Some seminal questions remain to be asked: With all our arsenal of mass destruction weapons: nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and now nitrogen nukes, unstoppable autonomous weapons, etc., which are tantamount to sophis-

⁴ Abiodun Kumuyi. 2017. *Christian Women Mirror: The Magazine That Builds up Godly Women*, 25 (11), 9.

⁵ Shakespeare, W. 1975. *Macbeth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 72–73.

⁶ Eboh, M. P. 2010. *History and Philosophy of Science and Technology: Prolegomenal Overview* Port Harcourt: Pearl Publishers, 137.

ticated barbarism, is our world progressing or regressing? With all our science devoid of morality and natural wisdom, where is our world headed? Human progress without morality is a sham. Modernity saturated with viciousness can only be retrogressive and inhuman. Or has our world been classically conditioned to respond positively to savagery? Even so, that would be corruption of the first order, yet when people talk of corruption, the mind runs straight to the authorised coloured pieces of paper called money/currency. Human being and money, which is prior? Which of the two is higher in the hierarchy of being and values? Killing someone affects him directly but stealing his purse touches him tangentially. Thus, the most corrupt nations of the world are not those that embezzle money but the assassin-nations that embezzle or misuse human lives. In the Decalogue, thou shalt not kill preceded thou shalt not steal, even though both are bad and the nations that kill also steal in grand style. Both vices are very prominent in the digital age, curtesy of technological breakthroughs in criminology. Warlords who kill in the digital age, kill in millions. In the traditional society, thieves stole foodstuff and livestock; in the analogue society they stole money in thousands but in the digital age they steal in millions, billions and trillions, etc., thanks to modern technology. In the traditional society, nations worshipped their tutelary deities but in the digital age folks worship wealth. Religion has shifted base and power has changed hands from theocracy to *wealthocracy*. Multimillionaires massage their ego by competing for the first position as to who is the richest man in the world? With this kind of ideology, they will be seriously nursing and jealously guarding their wealth in order to surpass other rich men. This ideology is divisive enough to widen the already existing gully between the haves and the have-nots and it is also capable of recreating and multiplying cutthroat Shylocks. It is known that for every \$1 they plough into “philanthropy” in Africa they make \$4 gain.

Money is ruling the world, and people would do anything to acquire money. Somewhere in West Africa, it was alleged that Snake swallowed \$10 million public fund, in a supposedly cashless economy. The voice of sarcasm quipped in the social media: We were told that somewhere in the Middle East Snake deceived a woman and we believed it. Is it because of local contents that we doubt the ability of our own snake? Big nations exploit poor nations because of wealth despite their paternalism. Presidents get into power through corrupt practices and they sit on national wealth. Some government officials embezzle public funds. Religionists as the product of the society are now prosperity crazy. How did money become the highest value in the world? And how is it that peoples and nations would do anything to get this money? This is a crisis situation. There is a trade-off here, an indefensible wrong scale of values.

The dictum “My people perish for lack of knowledge” (Ho. 4:6), is now tenuous. In this information age, people rather perish for lack of wisdom, the wisdom to process data correctly and take timely moral decisions. There is so much influx of information that were Festus alive, he would emphatically repeat his

dictum: “Too much knowledge has made you mad” (Acts 26:24). Scientists travel to outer space, fix satellite in orbit to track information and transmit same. Knowledge is increasing in quick successions at an alarming rate. It is becoming stressful to catch up daily with the quantum of information in the media. Consequently, youths are glued to the social media, trying to catch up with the latest information and trends; and many are greatly distracted from their studies. Some visit immoral sites unapproved by parents, and they become critically disoriented, lured from chatrooms, ruined in the process. War of nerves is subtly going on in the internet and parents are losing their children and wards to hard drugs and pornography. At the same time digital divide has created another form of inequality. It has set the analphabetic many more miles behind the computer literate or the analogue far from the digital. Time waits for no one as it flies through cosmic space; the same is true of information in the cyberspace.

Scientists create artificial intelligence, do heart and kidney transplant, and now head transplant starting from 2018; soon good heads will be harvested for sale just like kidneys. Soon people will be head conscious; watching their heads the way they watch out for hackers. Truly, too much information is making people uncomfortable as increase in knowledge is associated with high crime rate.

Human beings like to receive gifts because we are gifts to one another and to the human community. Our giftedness is for mutual enrichment and therefore should not be used to undo humanity in any form. Our march of civilization ought to be physically, ethically and spiritually oriented because man is spirit in matter. Thus, the appraisal of human progress should be done with a physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual template. Nothing prevents scientists from giving technology a human face. After all, technology is a human enterprise; it should not be a force that oppresses human beings.

The world needs peace, love and synergy, not threats and intimidation. Recently, Putin telephoned Donald Trump to thank him for the information provided by CIA and the American Intelligence agents which foiled a terrorist attack on St. Petersburg, the second largest city in Russia, and he pledged to reciprocate the gesture “if Russian special services obtain any information on terrorist threats against the United States and its citizens, they will definitely and immediately pass it to American counterparts through partner channels.”⁷ This action is a step in the right direction. It is highly desirable and much better than the erstwhile quasi perpetual antagonistic rivalry between Russia and United States of America.

⁷ *Putin Phoned Trump to ...*; <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

PHILOSOPHY IN THE AGE OF CRISIS

Philosophy seeks to understand the mysteries of existence and reality, discover the nature of truth and knowledge, find what is of basic value and importance in life, and also examine relationships between humanity and nature and between the individual and society.⁸ There is a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is mindfulness, understanding and familiarity with facts. To know a thing is to get acquainted with it, comprehend it and deliberately keep it in mind. The things we know are conceptually in us and we can intentionally recall them at will. The quantum of knowledge in circulation in the information age is enough to make every human being civilised and comfortable but are we humane, cultured and comfortable? Why is increase in knowledge not matched by a corresponding rise in respect, refinement and economic wellbeing for all? Instead, with all our knowledge, we still have increase in greed, exploitative tendencies and the impoverishment of the poor. The haves lack self-contentment; they exhibit the avaricious tendency to have more instead of being more. Material culture and acquisitiveness tend to outweigh personal culture or refinement. One is tempted to ask, is knowledge not formative? Why is increase in knowledge not accompanied by increase in wisdom, insight and morality? Philosophical temperament is very much needed in an age in crisis such as ours. Wisdom is the right application of knowledge. High tech in secret science can be very deadly. Wisdom is needed to checkmate it. Herein lies the need for philosophers to play their gadfly role, the role of secular prophets: denouncing evil and indicating the right way to go.

Knowledge is indifferent; much depends on what one does with it. Knowledge can empower people for good or for evil. Science pursues knowledge with great eagerness. Of course, science is derived from the Latin verb “*scire*” which means to know and the Latin noun “*scientia*” means knowledge. Thus when science enthusiastically pursues knowledge, it is very much at home with itself. Knowledge encompasses all that can be known. Unfortunately, scientists eschew values in their pursuit of objectivity because values are not empirically measurable and cannot be weighed and experimented upon. In that way, the so-called objectivity eventually becomes subjectivity because scientists do not deal holistically with reality and so cannot be truly objective with a partial vision of the whole of reality. Holism is needed for objectivity.

Despite the technological feats attained in the digital and information age, wise and thoughtful people are apprehensive. “They are concerned over the situation in which our physical power, scientific knowledge and wealth stand in sharp contrast with the failure [...] to come to grips with the pressing intellectual and moral problems of life. Knowledge seems to be divorced from values; it

⁸ www.unexplainable.net>info-theories

is possible to have great power without insight.”⁹ We have allowed science to destroy our traditional values. The prospect of reconstructing or even creating new values is open to us but how ready are we to swim against the technological current of the digital age? For a scientific age to be a good civilization, it is necessary that increase in knowledge be complemented by increase in wisdom or in human values.¹⁰

As opposed to science, philosophy deals with values and fundamental principles, and it tries to gain a view of the whole. Philosophy is not only the love of wisdom but also critical and holistic reflection on reality. It acts as a check not only on politics and the society at large but also on science and the technostucture. For technology without wisdom is like fire in the hands of a toddler.¹¹ The misuse of technology is due to lack of wisdom; fundamentalism portrays a lack of wisdom too. The same is true of greed and vainglory seeing that man is a contingent being who takes nothing with him to the yonder world, the life world beyond the grave where ethical failures will be accounted for. It has to be emphasized that the purpose of technology is to alleviate human needs. Therefore, to make any aspect of technology a force that oppresses man is aberrant, anti-wisdom and hence unphilosophical. Every research outcome is not necessarily life enhancing. For instance, there is a general outcry against genetically modified organisms (GMOs), especially food, but agricultural scientists turn a deaf ear to it as if it does not matter how people feel yet desire and emotion are among the sources of knowledge and AI scientists are working hard to embody artificial intelligence in machines and make them sentient and able to respond to emotions. In an age where the poor consume genetically modified foodstuff produced by multimillionaire farmers while the rich eat costly safe organic foods, how will the poor cope with new diseases? How will human dignity be upheld when multinational pharmaceutical industries suppress the knowledge of the natural cure for certain “diseases” that are but deficiencies of specific vitamins and minerals? What need does excessive wealth serve?

Logic is clear and correct reasoning and it is the most fundamental branch of philosophy. “Logic forms the basis of all computer technology ...,”¹² which all adhere to. When people express their well-thought-out fears logically and succinctly, scientists ought to listen and review their technological enterprise in favour of the people because technology is for humans and not humans for technology. “The aim of philosophy is not to master a body of facts, so much as think clearly and sharply through any set of facts,”¹³ scientific facts inclusive. Scientists should respect people’s feelings.

⁹ Titus, H. et al. 1974. *Living Issues in Philosophy*. New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹¹ Eboh, M. P. 2011. *Introduction to Philosophy and Philosophizing*. Port Harcourt: Pearl Publishers, 145.

¹² www.whatisphilosophy.net

¹³ <https://www.brown.edu/undergraduate>

According to an epistemological basic view, knowledge has the property of truth, and apparent knowledge—falsity. In this age of animation, the Photoshop and Phishing, the verification of truth needs to go beyond the classical correspondence theory, coherence theory and pragmatic theory because imitations are intelligently couched to correspond to real things and occurrences. In like manner, images of dignitaries are artificially and graphically made to say things that are coherent with speeches the said dignitaries made earlier, things that are consistent with such opinions. Clever people are constantly posting false information on the internet. How to ascertain a truth is becoming more and more complex and challenging, and hence problematic in everyday life experience. As if that is not enough, other smart people are busy phishing: tricking people into providing a bank or credit-card information by sending fraudulent e-mails claiming to be from an internet provider, a bank or even from the front desk of a hotel where the guest is lodging, demanding the verification of the password or personal identification number (PIN), the bank verification number (BVN), etc. All these portray sheer values atrophy.

The digital age is heading towards the state of anomie, the social instability predicated on the erosion or abandonment of social and moral codes. It is as though there is a passive endorsement of the ideology: A snake that does not swallow another will not grow big. Sooner or later when the social and moral framework of the society must have been eroded, an association of scammers would get governments to legalise cracking, scamming, stealing and other anomalies. After all, streetwalking has been legitimised in some countries provided streetwalkers pay their tax. Philosophers have a lot of awareness to raise but as Alfred North Whitehead observed long ago, Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. Armchair philosophers still run commentaries on the works of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, etc. They hardly denounce the evils perpetrated by Western governments and businessmen. Under their philosophic surveillances, rich countries exploit poor nations in their greed for economic expansion, the so-called drive for economic efficiency, same sex marriage passed, and clones are being paraded as identical twins. Where on earth do we find natural identical twins who answer unforeseen questions by using the same words and saying exactly the same thing simultaneously? This feat can only be achieved by clones who are but one and the same person.

By keeping quiet in the face of evil, some philosophers join in the conspiracy of silence whereas they can change their countries' belligerency and exploitative tendencies by changing their people's thinking. In turn, their thinking would change their utterances and their utterances would change their action from conflictual to peaceful co-existence. "Change your thoughts and you change your world,"¹⁴ says Norman Vincent Peale.

¹⁴ Cook, J. 1999. *The Book of Positive Quotations*. New York: Gramercy Books, 264.

Philosophy is not only the love of wisdom and the quest for wisdom, but also the search for fundamental principles and traditional human values underlying reality, in general, and our socio-political institutions, in particular. Philosophy is critical thinking as well as an enquiry into the right application of knowledge, for wisdom is but veteran knowledge. Greater responsibility to guide the world aright rests squarely on philosophers. Governments ought to consider philosophers when they appoint special advisers but even if they do not, philosophers should find a way to make their voices heard through their teachings and write-ups, conferences, communique and press conference in order to sensitize the public, thereby playing their Socratic role as the gadfly which awakens the society from moral stupor.

It would appear that contemporary philosophers are reticent and so, more vocal people like human rights activists and civil societies now play the role of gadfly/the moral conscience of the state, which Socrates played in Athens. Something has to be done or philosophers may become irrelevant and the prospects of impacting on society with the philosophical temperament, i.e., patience, calmness and stoicism, will be lost. Philosophers need to sensitize people and register their disapproval by condemning evils, e.g., deadly and destructive inventions.

Thus far, the world has largely survived on the fundamental principles laid down by ancient solons and philosophers. In matters of using knowledge rightly to stem the untoward challenges of the age, philosophers are our brightest prospects. The information age seriously needs philosophers because crisis moments are times of great opportunities; tact and perspicacity are required in crisis moments more than ever. The age of crisis has great prospects of ushering in a better world than man has ever known. It all depends on whether we have the intelligence, the sense of responsibility, courage, and the determination to allow moral values guide our desires and aspirations. With all our knowledge and awareness, we have less excuse for failing than did all the civilizations of the past.¹⁵ We should take philosophy of science serious. We should also propagate and promote the idea of philosophers-scientists. This is not new because Sir Isaac Newton and Baruch Spinoza, among many others, were philosophers and at the same time scientists.

CONCLUSION

When one powerful nuclear state threatens to wipe out another nation there is utter disregard for values such as the sacredness of human life, love, tolerance, justice, discretion, self-restraint, forbearance and respect for human rights. They also ignore the fact that a nation is a moral entity which is inseparable

¹⁵ Titus, H. et al. 1974, op. cit., 8.

from its populace because a country is not a map but a collection of individual human persons endowed with co-natural inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms, which ought to be respected. Some nations have used technology to escalate societal crises and conflicts whereas the aim of technology is to alleviate human needs.

Philosophy should be up-and-coming in an age of crisis because moral values are very much needed for the smooth running of the human community. An amoral society is an anomic society. An anomic society is a sick anarchic community. The fact that thinking determines and conditions action and philosophy is critical thinking, makes philosophy a *sine qua non* in peace processes and in salvaging the world which has become a theatre of conflictive ideas, terrorism and militancy. Philosophy needs to bring dialogue to bear on the scientific community, on the political bigwigs and self-appointed pundits, who have taken it upon themselves to decide the fate of the rest of the world whether or not we agree with them. Philosophic wisdom needs prevail over fundamentalism, bizarre inventions, economic exploitations and political whims and caprices. Philosophy is needed now more than ever before because in a time like this there is need to be careful about correct behaviour. Therefore, philosophers should endeavour to foster justice and good neighbourliness among nations by encouraging healthy socio-cultural environment, intellectual insight, resourcefulness and social responsibility.

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