

Untangling the Complex Dynamics Between Philosophy and Culture

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Abstract

Philosophy has long suffered from misconceptions, ranging from being perceived as an abstract, impractical discipline remote from the concerns of life to being fallaciously viewed as anti-religious or anti-God. Additionally, philosophy is often mistakenly perceived as an outdated and obsolete discipline. Similarly, it is frequently conflated with culture. However, philosophy remains an essential, timeless component of human endeavour, driving critical inquiry and meaning-seeking. This study challenges pervasive misconceptions surrounding philosophy and seeks to reaffirm its timeless relevance in human endeavours by demonstrating its intricate relationship with culture. Through critical evaluation and expository methods, this study navigates beyond superficial understandings to illuminate the profound impact of philosophy on human experiences, cultural narratives, and existential understanding. The research draws on the philosophical ideas of Nietzsche and Heidegger to establish its central thesis, providing an in-depth knowledge of the intricate relationship between philosophy and culture. By and large, it proffers answers to these research questions: What are the main misapprehensions about the relevance and significance of philosophy, and how can an examination of its relationship with culture help to dispel these misconceptions? How do the philosophical theories of Nietzsche and Heidegger shed light on this relationship, and what does this mean for our comprehension of the relevance of philosophy in human endeavours?

Keywords: *Culture and philosophy, critical evaluation, misconception, Nietzsche, Heidegger*

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy, a discipline steeped in history and complexity, has long elicited diverse reactions from the general public. While some view philosophy with disdain and disinterest, seeing it as irrelevant or disconnected from everyday life, others are intimidated by its abstract nature and technical vocabulary. Erroneous associations with mysticism, occultism, or esotericism persist, and some perceive philosophy as empty, confusing, or useless. These misconceptions stem from a lack of understanding or exposure to philosophy's practical applications and benefits. However, philosophy encompasses more than abstract theories. Broadly defined, it includes the beliefs, customs, arts, ways of life, and social organisation of a particular group making it deeply intertwined with culture, yet not reducible to it. Both domains include ideas, codes, customs, and attitudes, but philosophy retains its critical and interrogative stance, distinguishing it from the broader cultural context.

This paper contends that philosophy is neither an obsolete nor an isolated discipline, but rather an indispensable and dynamic force that actively shapes and is shaped by culture. By dispelling persistent misconceptions—such as the notions that philosophy is strictly abstract, irrelevant, or inherently anti-religious—this study demonstrates that philosophy's vitality lies precisely in its ongoing dialogue with cultural contexts.

This paper's concerted examination of how Nietzsche and Heidegger's philosophies demonstrate the mutual constitution of philosophy and culture distinguishes it from previous discourse, such as Akhter and Lamba (2022), Agbanusi (2015), and Essien (2015). Instead of treating philosophy and culture as separate or conflated domains, this paper shows—through critical and expository engagement with these thinkers—that philosophy provides the tools for interrogating cultural narratives and existential questions, while culture offers philosophy its lived ground and urgency. Finally, the paper considers the broader implications of this relationship for the relevance of philosophy in contemporary life. By making explicit how philosophy and culture shape human values, norms, moral principles that guide human behaviour, preserve heritage and customs, foster social cohesion, cooperation, and personal growth, and provide collective meaning, the study challenges existing binaries and misunderstandings and offers a framework for understanding their dynamic, mutually informing roles.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMING

This paper employs a critical and expository methodology. Texts and concepts are selected for their relevance to the theme of the mutual constitution of philosophy and culture, with particular emphasis on works that explicitly address the intersection of these domains. To guarantee a thorough viewpoint, primary and secondary materials from both philosophical and cultural studies are explored. Heidegger and Nietzsche are selected as interpretive anchors because of their significant perspectives on the interplay between philosophy and culture. Their writings are examined for their portrayal of more general trends in continental philosophy as well as for their theoretical discoveries. The paper clarifies how each thinker negotiates the interaction between philosophical inquiry and cultural context through close reading and comparative analysis, using their viewpoints as fundamental points of reference for the larger argument.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

Philosophy and its Challenges of Definition

Philosophy is a dynamic and multifaceted discipline that defies a single definition. It is a systematic and critical exposition of existence, reason, knowledge, and value. It also looks at the mind and language. At its core, philosophy is the relentless pursuit of wisdom, a continuous quest for meaning, intelligibility, and answers to life's profound questions. According to Plato, philosophers have an insatiable thirst for knowledge, driven by an unrelenting passion for truth and reality (Rowe, 1993). This description aligns with the etymological origins of the term "philosophy," derived from the Greek words "*philos*" (meaning "love") and "*sophia*" (meaning "wisdom"). As Pythagoras claimed, philosophy is the love of wisdom, not wisdom itself. This etymological understanding is reinforced by scholars such as Roark (1982), Ogbinaka (2010), Obioha (2014), and Olubanjo-olufowobi (2022). Akande (2022) further emphasises that philosophy is present whenever individuals actively seek wisdom. This underscores the notion that philosophy is an act of loving wisdom, rather than wisdom per se.

The question of what philosophy is, is inherently philosophical, sparking ongoing debates and discussions. This is evident in the myriad definitions postulated by various philosophers and scholars. As Bertrand Russell aptly noted, "philosophy" remains an elusive term, defying a definitive definition (Russell, 2009). The varied definitions of philosophy can be attributed to factors such as diverse intellectual backgrounds, differing ideologies,

historical epochs, cultural perspectives, and the ambitions of individual philosophers. Bolstering this, Mbaegbu (2014) writes:

People often confine this definition within the branch of philosophy in which they are tutored, the era in which they live, or their moral or cultural biases. Others, in undue haste to answer the question or for lack of knowledge, define philosophy merely by its tools or method of inquiry, often highlighting the difficulties inherent in both.

Defining philosophy from a moralist perspective, Socrates (470–399 BCE), views philosophy as “a reflective self-examination of principles of the just and happy life”, while David Hume refers to it simply as “the moral science” (Agbanusi, 2015). From the hedonistic point of view, Epicurus (470–399 BCE) defines philosophy as "an activity which secures the happy life through discussion and argument"(Omoregbe, 2011). Plato (428-347 BCE) viewed philosophy as both science and art, as evidenced by his conception of it as "the science which is the science of itself and the other sciences as well" and "the noblest and greatest of art" (Agbanusi, 2015). Buttressing Plato’s conception of philosophy as science and its etymological meaning, René Descartes defined philosophy as “the mother of the sciences” and “the study of Wisdom” respectively (Rorty, 2009). Reverberating Plato’s idea of philosophy as an art, Margolis (1968) argued that philosophy is creative work, and philosophers approach it in many different ways. Since there is no single method that all philosophers follow, we study past thinkers to see how they tackled philosophical problems.

Some philosophers and scholars view philosophy as a search. Hence, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) believed that Philosophy is the ultimate search for truth. Amaele (2007) describes philosophy as a systematic search for truth and reality, focusing on people and the existence of things both within and beyond experience. Philosophy uses reason to bring together ideas that seem unfamiliar in the natural world and helps us understand our place in it. (Aderibigbe, 1998). Omoregbe (2011) sees philosophy as a rational search for answers to question that come up when we reflect on human experience, and as a rational search for answers to basic questions about the ultimate meaning of reality as a whole and of human life in particular.

Despite the debates surrounding its meaning and definition, philosophy's unique nature is evident in its critical and analytical approach. Philosophers engage with topics with a commitment to critical thinking, carefully separating emotional considerations from objective analysis. This critical

stance is complemented by philosophy's argumentative nature, fostering the inconclusiveness of answers to profound questions. This, in turn, enables the questioning of authority, encouraging the exploration of new ideas and perspectives. Furthermore, philosophy's broad scope and subject matter encompass various branches, schools of thought, and methods of inquiry.

Philosophy's rational inquiry seeks to dispel ignorance, enrich understanding, broaden experience, and expand horizons through critical examination and synthesis of knowledge. Bertrand Russell aptly captured the essence of philosophy, noting that it endeavours to respond to "ultimate questions" – questions concerning the comprehensibility, rationality, or coherence of fundamental notions and assumptions (Agbanusi, 2015). Russell characterised philosophy as "a critical and rigorous intellectual activity." Ultimately, philosophy's core lies in its pursuit of wisdom, driving individuals to explore, question, and seek answers to life's most profound and enduring questions. Through its critical, analytical, and argumentative nature, philosophy offers a distinctive framework for examining the complexities of human existence and the world around us.

Culture and Its Components: Towards a Definition

The word "culture" is derived from the Latin *cultus*, meaning "care," and from the French *colere*, meaning "to till," as in "till the ground" (Berger, 2000). Thus etymologically, culture means "to tend to the earth and grow", "cultivation and nurture", or "act of promoting growth in plants. It refers to the process of nurturing and perfecting anything until the result inspires our respect and adoration. The concept of culture is a complex one, defined from various perspectives and disciplines. Haranguing its complexity, Schmitt (2019), quoting Tylor (1871), asserts that culture is a complex whole comprising knowledge, beliefs, art, moral laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by humans as members of society. This implies that culture is all of the knowledge and traditions that people have acquired over their shared history. He made it quite evident in Tylor (1881), as cited by Larsen (2013), that culture, in its broadest sense, belongs to humans alone. This is because culture is transmitted not by biological heredity, but rather is learned within society. Culture is thus the pattern of learned behaviours whose components are shared and transmitted by the members of a particular society from one generation to another.

Customs, traditions, religion, and beliefs (including notions of time, roles, and hierarchies); clothing; language and proverbs; artistic and craft

creations; manner of life; social networks; outlook on life; and the institutions and technologies/tools of the civilisation are all examples of these components. It is anything that is communicated from one generation to the next through human behavioural patterns and technology. Schaefer and Lamm (1997) provided an unambiguous yet insightful description of culture when they argued that culture includes the values, ideas, practices, and artefacts of groups of people; the totality of learned, socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects, and behaviour.

Culture, therefore, is the identity of a people as a distinct entity. Recognising that every person is a representative of their own culture, which varies geographically, Akhter and Lamba (2022) state that cultures can differ in terms of norms, conduct, cuisines and culinary, persuasions, customs, treaties, contraception, attire or costumes, courtesies, dialogue or communication, time, concepts, facilities, calendars, currencies, contracts, relationships, gentleness and lines, courting, questions, crossing, commercialism, cooperation and conflict, synergy, and crafts. In the words of Edo (2012), culture is the total way of life of a people within a given society. It is the manner of life, particularly the prevailing beliefs and practices, of a specific group of people during a specific period. This total way of life according to Edo (2012), includes the type of food they eat, the way they get the food and how they eat it, the type of dress they wear, their belief about the existence of this world, how they worship their Creator, what they think about other people, how they marry and beget children, how they rule themselves, the language they speak *etc.* Providing another definition of culture from an anthropological perspective, Fairchild (1967) defined it thus:

A collective name for all behaviour patterns socially acquired and transmitted through symbols; hence a name for all the distinctive achievements of human groups, including not only such items as language, tool-making, industry, art, science, law, government, morals and religion but also the material instruments or artefacts in which cultural achievements are embodied and by which intellectual cultural features are given practical effect, such as buildings, tools, machines, communication devices, art objects, etc. (p.80).

Fundamentals of Culture

Expatriating Fairchild's definition of culture, Berger (2000) highlights some salient elements/topics contained in the definition as follows: i) Behaviour Patterns which refers to the behavioural norms and rules that are prevalent within social groupings. ii) Socially Acquired. These are the kinds of behaviours one learns as a child growing up in a family in a certain place.

One's upbringing, the family's religion, and a host of other factors all have a significant impact on one's behaviour.iii) The Distinctive Achievements of Human Groups. We are not only unique individuals but also members of society; it is in communities that we develop into human beings and get enculturated. iv) Artefacts in which cultural achievements are embodied include the popular culture texts that appear in the media as well as other non-mediated (or indirectly mediated) facets of popular culture, like dietary habits, fashion trends, language use, sexual practices, and artefacts (also known as "material culture"). Culture embodies traditional knowledge and skills, encompassing indigenous understanding of natural resource utilisation and management. This includes knowledge of botanical properties and their medicinal applications, as well as social interaction patterns that foster the welfare and identity of both groups and individuals (UNESCO 2017). Cultural heritage is deeply rooted in traditional practices, providing a sense of continuity and shared identity among community members.

Unravelling the Complex Dynamics between Philosophy and Culture

The relationship between philosophy and culture is intricate, with the two concepts being intertwined yet distinct. As Mbaegbu (2014) aptly notes, "philosophy and culture are two related concepts separated by a layer so thin that this thinness has been a source of much-confused thinking" (p. 6). This nuanced relationship has led to a tendency to conflate philosophy with culture, highlighting the need for careful consideration and distinction between the two concepts.

Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger are two towering figures in Western philosophy whose ideas have left an indelible mark on the development of various philosophical movements and disciplines. Their views on philosophy and culture have been particularly influential, profoundly shaping the trajectory of modern thought.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) on the Relationship between Philosophy and Culture

The relationship between philosophy and culture was explored by Nietzsche (1973; 1997), a social critic who challenged conventional norms, values, and assumptions that underlie Western culture, emphasising individual creativity, self-overcoming, and liberation. Nietzsche argued that philosophy is both a reflection of the culture in which it emerges and a critique of dominant cultural values; a form of cultural diagnosis that examines the origins, functions, and psychological needs fulfilled by

dominant moral frameworks. According to him, traditional morality, religion, and cultural norms imposed a kind of "herd mentality" on individuals, stifling their creativity, individuality, and potential for self-overcoming. Individuals who should be free to create their own values and meaning in life are now conforming to external authorities or traditional norms that limit and constrain them. Philosophy as a critical and transformative force that challenges and re-evaluates dominant cultural values, norms, and beliefs should question and subvert established cultural narratives, promoting individual creativity, self-overcoming, and the will to power. Thereby promoting new perspectives and ways of thinking.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) on the Relationship between Philosophy and Culture

Heidegger, a renowned German philosopher, delved into the intricate relationship between philosophy and culture in his seminal works, "Being and Time" (1962), "The Origin of the Work of Art" (2017), and "What is Called Thinking?" (1968). Heidegger's philosophical inquiry was driven by a critique of modern culture, which he believed had become overly enamoured with technology, rationality, and efficiency (Guignon, 1993). This focus, he argued, led to a profound forgetfulness of being, causing humans to become disconnected from their fundamental existence. He introduced the concept of "world" (Welt) to describe the shared, meaningful environment that humans inhabit. This concept is central to his understanding of culture, which he saw as a way of being in the world that shapes our understanding of reality (Guignon, 1993). Culture, in this sense, is not merely a collection of customs, values, and beliefs, but a fundamental way of understanding the world.

Heidegger's philosophical framework emphasises the significant role that culture plays in shaping our perception of reality, providing a shared understanding of the world, and influencing our values and beliefs (Ricoeur, 1976). Culture also provides a context for philosophical inquiry, shapes our understanding of key philosophical concepts, and fosters critical thinking and reflection. For instance, culture influences our perception of reality, shaping our understanding of the world and our place within it (Heidegger, 1962; Guignon, 1993). Additionally, culture provides a shared understanding of the world, which is rooted in tradition and history (Heidegger, 2017; Gadamer, 1975). Furthermore, culture shapes our values and beliefs, influencing our moral and ethical frameworks (Heidegger, 2017; Ricoeur, 1976). It also provides a context for philosophical inquiry,

shaping the questions we ask and the answers we seek (Heidegger, 1967; Wrathall, 2010).

Heidegger held that philosophy plays a crucial role in culture, serving as a catalyst for critical thinking, reflection, and transformation. According to Heidegger, philosophy's role in culture can be discussed under five main points. Firstly, philosophy questions the underlying assumptions and values of a culture, revealing the taken-for-granted and the unconscious (Heidegger, 1968; Guignon, 1993). This questioning enables individuals to think critically about their cultural practices and institutions, fostering a deeper understanding of the world around them. Secondly, philosophy seeks to disclose the meaning of being, which is the fundamental question underlying all cultural practices and institutions (Heidegger, 1962; Wrathall, 2010). By exploring this question, philosophy encourages individuals to reflect on their existence and the nature of reality. Thirdly, philosophy critiques the dominant cultural narratives and challenges the status quo, revealing how culture shapes our understanding of the world (Heidegger, 1962; Young, 2001). This critique enables individuals to think more critically about the cultural norms and values that shape their lives.

Fourthly, philosophy fosters critical thinking and reflection, enabling individuals to think more deeply about their cultural practices and institutions (Heidegger, 1968; Gadamer, 1975). By encouraging critical thinking, philosophy empowers individuals to make informed decisions about their lives and to participate actively in shaping their cultural heritage. Lastly, philosophy preserves cultural heritage by examining and interpreting the cultural traditions and history of a people (Heidegger, 2017; Ricoeur, 1976). By preserving cultural heritage, philosophy ensures that the cultural traditions and values of a people are passed down to future generations.

The Intersection of Philosophy and Culture: A Discursive Analysis

Culture is not philosophy but entails philosophy through proverbs, wise-saying, folklores, artworks (artefacts, sculptures and crafts) *etc.* which are full of vividly articulated wisdom and are produced from deep reflection on human, their interactions with themselves and their natural world, and the complexities of their being; the fleeting nature of human existence, the ups and downs of life, the intensity of human control over the natural world, human weakness and strength, happiness and sadness, triumphs and setbacks, human finitude, experiences of pain, misery, illness, death, and decay, human greatness and anxiety, *etc.* Not only does culture entail

philosophy, but it is rooted in and originated from philosophy. Culture, as a philosophical emergence, shares a common feature with philosophy, which is an intellectual, moral, and communal substance.

Its etymology, which describes philosophy as the "love of wisdom," conveys an irresistible desire to think, implying that philosophy is a reflective activity. By examining and interpreting the ideas, values, and beliefs of past cultures, philosophy helps preserve and transmit cultural heritage. What is known as culture or community thoughts emerges from the introspective thoughts of various individuals within a particular society, which together create cultural norms that are transmitted and preserved from generation to generation. This was sustained by Omoregbe when he asserted that:

The term "community thought" can mean nothing other than the collective thoughts of individuals within a community. Consciousness is always an individual phenomenon, and thinking is a personal activity. Thoughts and ideas put forward by individual thinkers eventually become the property of all in a given commodity, but this does not mean that they had no original individual thinker (p. 10).

Culture itself has an impact on philosophy. Philosophers' questions and answers, as well as the methods or paradigms they employ to address these questions, are influenced by their cultural background. Since culture shapes a philosopher's perspective on a subject matter, philosophers are often regarded as products of their cultures. Culture is what philosophers use as their raw material, their fieldwork for analytical experimentation. The framework of intellectual reflection culture provides the source of academic philosophy. It is in this sense that Takov and Tosam (2016) opined that "every philosophy emerges as a reaction to, or as justification for a particular culture, and it is for this reason that philosophy may differ from one culture to another".

The traditional ways of living, believing, and thinking were criticised by various thinkers who pushed the boundaries of thought to create Western philosophy in Ancient Greece. For instance, before Thales, who is often considered the first Western philosopher, people sought to answer fundamental questions through divine revelation, making recourse to God or gods by asking those who know the ways of the gods. Such a culture was challenged by Thales, who provided a rational explanation of the causes of nature (Olubanjo-Olufowobi, 2022). Moral philosophy originated from Socrates in reaction against the corrupt socio-political sphere of Athens (Omoregbe, 2011). Epicurus challenged the culture of excessive reverence

for the gods, which led to a fear of death and a fear of life after death. Asserting that the gods have no influence on human lives and that the soul is an immaterial substance, evaporating at death (Omogbe, 2011). Existentialism emerged in response to the culture of nihilism in late nineteenth-century Europe (Aho, 2023). These are just a few examples of how philosophy emerges as a counterpoint to certain cultures.

However, philosophy may not always emerge as a defence or reaction to culture, e.g., Aristotle's logic. Beyond reacting to or explaining a particular culture, philosophy as an academic endeavour engages in several activities which transcend one's cultural perspective. As a professional thinker, a philosopher possesses the mental fortitude to go deeper than a cursory understanding of challenging and intricate life issues. Philosophy is an inquiry that aims to direct behaviour through reflective, critical thinking, broadening our intellectual horizons, examining our presumptions, and making sense of the values and beliefs we live by. Cultural anachronism can be avoided by using the rational prism that it provides. It gives the ability to reflect, consider, critique, and ultimately embrace or reject any culture. The confines and shackles of ignorance, bias, superstition, narrow-mindedness, and cultural absolutism are all things that philosophy helps people escape. The ability to think critically and creatively that philosophy offers allows people to reject the deceptions and false impressions created by cultural manipulations that are used as tools of oppression and slavery. Philosophy thus catalyses progress.

As an open-minded discipline, it fosters an understanding that, as individuals, we are ambassadors of distinct cultures. When evaluating other cultures, philosophy frees people from using the norms of their own culture as a benchmark, instead relying on the standards of the specific culture in question. In that way, liberating one from ethnocentrism, the notion that one's own culture is of higher standards, more accurate or genuine than all others. Philosophy encourages tolerance and understanding by exploring diverse perspectives, promoting empathy, and challenging dogmatic thinking.

CONCLUSION

This research offers a multi-layered account of the longstanding and complex relationship between philosophy and culture, advancing the view that they are independent yet fundamentally complementary phenomena. The analysis demonstrates that philosophy shapes cultural norms, values, and beliefs, while culture, in turn, provides the context and material for

philosophical inquiry. Both are deeply tied to the human condition and presuppose the rational nature of human beings. A central intellectual contribution of this work is the framing of culture not only as a product of philosophical reflection but also as a raw material and inescapable target of philosophical scrutiny. Philosophy acts as a rational lens, ensuring that culture remains dynamic rather than rigid or dogmatic, and enriching it through critical engagement. Conversely, the ever-evolving nature of culture continually challenges and inspires philosophical thought.

Accenting the mutual constitution of philosophy and culture—especially through the interpretive anchors of Nietzsche and Heidegger—this research provides new insights for scholars, policymakers, and cultural leaders. It underscores the inescapability of philosophy in every dimension of human life and its vital role in shaping and interrogating culture. In the long run, the study affirms the enduring value of philosophy as a pursuit that encompasses all facets of human endeavour, fostering a richer understanding of both ourselves and the world we inhabit.

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