

**UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT**

LANGUAGE, TRUTH AND REALITY –  
A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE  
NOTION OF MEANING

**AN INAUGURAL LECTURE**

*BY*

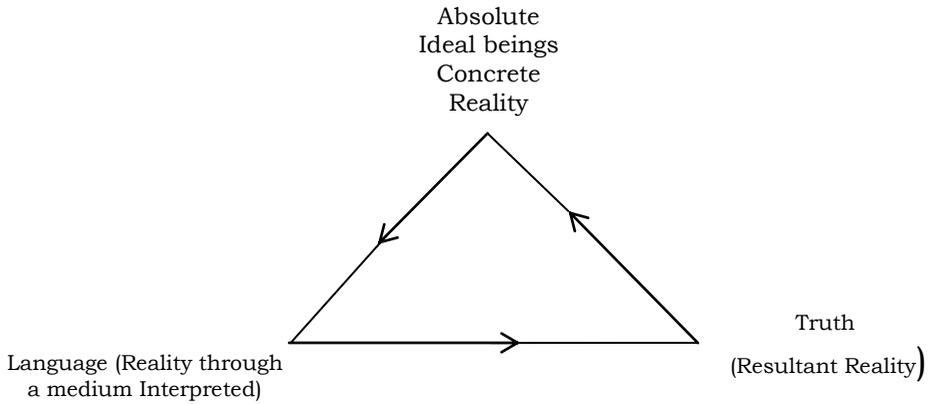
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## TRIPARTITE DIMENSION OF REALITY



DEDICATION

Dedicated to Professor C. S. Nwodo,  
who brought me to this place and stood  
by me against all odds

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Let me begin with an expression of gratitude to Almighty God for all His goodness to me. My late parents Catherine and Matthew Nwigwe, my late Bishop, Bishop V.A. Chikwe, my teachers at all levels of my educational training are all duly included in this expression of gratitude. The same sentiments of gratitude go to my brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, etc. for their love and nearness. But then, I must single out my very dear brother, late Msgr. Dr. L. U. Nwigwe, who was like a father, but also was my mentor and friend. I equally express sincere gratitude to my sister, Rev. Sister Chidebelu P. Nwigwe, who is not just my younger sister, but is also a very reliable friend and source of strength.

I wish to thank in a very special way the Vice Chancellor, Professor J. A. Ajienka, and all the Principal Officers of the University, for granting me the opportunity to present this inaugural lecture, and for the effort they make to administer the affairs of the University. I cannot forget the former Vice Chancellor, Professor Don Baridam for all his gestures of good will and kindness at every juncture up till date. It was during his tenure in 2009, that this lecture would have taken place, but for the long ASUU strike of that year.

I express gratitude to all my colleagues and to all the members of the Chaplaincy of Annunciation, for all their gestures of good will and love. Similar sentiments of gratitude go to my colleagues in the Department of Philosophy and indeed the entire Faculty of Humanities for the very friendly atmosphere that reigns in the place.

Then, again, I wish to thank all my benefactors and benefactresses both here in Nigeria and overseas, for their

love and support. But I must mention two great families: the Meyers in Dortmund and the Behrens-Meyer, in Garrel. They served as “my family” while I was in Germany. I thank the Franciscans in whose convent I lived, for offering me invaluable assistance in every way, during my stay and period of studies at the University of Münster.

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Finally I wish to thank the entire University Community and its environs for the relative peace we have witnessed these years. May I crave the indulgence of any friend, colleague or well wisher whose name is not mentioned in this list that I did not willingly decide to omit such names, but that it was a matter of inculpable forgetfulness.

## LANGUAGE, TRUTH AND REALITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE NOTION OF MEANING

The Pro-Chancellor, Sir  
The Vice-Chancellor,  
Members of the Governing Council,  
Deputy Vice-Chancellors,  
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Provost, College of Health Sciences,  
Dean of School of Graduate Studies,  
Deans of Faculty,  
Distinguished Professors and Scholars,  
Heads of Department,  
Staff and Students of Unique Uniport,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

### 1. Preamble

I begin with an expression of gratitude to the authorities of the University of Port Harcourt, especially Professor J. A. Ajiyenka, for offering me the opportunity to deliver this inaugural lecture entitled: *Language, Truth and Reality – a Philosophical Investigation of the Notion of Meaning*.

I am equally grateful to Professor Don Baridam, within whose tenure as Vice Chancellor this lecture would have taken place but did not.

This lecture would have taken place in November 2009, but could not as a result of the ASUU strike of that year. Again, it was not possible in 2010 and 2011 due to some unavoidable logistic reasons. I am

happy that it is taking place today. In saying this, I am encouraged by the excellent policy of “better late than never”.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir - on a day like this in which all the disciplines converge under this roof to celebrate academics, we have a feel and genuine experience of the essence and meaning of the “University”.

Though divided into Faculties, Departments, College, Institutes, etc., the University is a constituted and unified whole: the various disciplines as areas of specialization are specific perspectives of the same great quest for knowledge. Again, all quest for knowledge is search for the meaning of reality and search for reality is quest for truth. This lecture is an attempt to examine certain features of truth, reality and language and especially the relations of logical dependency among them.

In the search for knowledge, two main types of inquiry are identifiable: empirical and formal inquiries. Corresponding to these two levels of inquiry are two main methodological approaches namely, - the inductive and deductive approaches.

Empirical inquiry is carried out by the natural sciences: physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, theoretical medicine, etc.

Included in the concept science, are individual sciences: cultural *sciences* as they are called: history, religion, language, etc. Belonging also to this group of individual sciences are the social and economic sciences like sociology, political science, economics etc. All these

areas of knowledge – the natural and individual sciences, constitute when collectively taken, the real sciences<sup>1</sup>.

The other type of inquiry is formal inquiry as we see in architecture, engineering etc. I include architecture and engineering among the formal sciences along with mathematics and logic etc., because they deal with forms in terms of shapes and designs, as is evident in fine arts and engineering designs. All these levels of inquiry have and will continue to make invaluable contributions in the development of the human society.

There are other levels of inquiry, which are neither empirical nor formal, but are very essential for the rational and value orientation of the human society. Philosophy belongs to that level of inquiry.

## 2. Philosophy and other disciplines

Philosophy is neither an empirical nor a formal science and it is not bound to any given method of inquiry. Whereas the real sciences go after some definite aspect of nature, or investigate some aspect of human art or creative genius, the formal sciences do not have any aspect of experience as their object. They deal with the pure and abstract forms and structure of human reasoning. This is what obtains in disciplines like logic and mathematics. They transit from certain basic axioms or principles to more general knowledge.

The natural sciences are empirical in the sense that they go after some objective data of experience. Objective data are facts that can be shown to be the way we think they are by conducting some demonstration or

proof. Included among objective data of experience are historical facts, languages, works of art, definite human modes of behavior, social structures of society, economic processes and so on.

Much of philosophy has to do with questions that we do not know how to answer in a systematic way that is characteristic of the sciences. One major deficiency of the approach adopted by the natural sciences, is its abstractness. I know that from the Antiquities, Pythagoras, Plato, Archimedes, Aristotle etc., and in the modern times Galileo, Descartes, Newton, Kant, Husserl etc., believed that nature or reality can be forced into mathematical moulds, I want to agree with the top rate mathematician Penrose in his work. *The Road to Reality*, published in 2004, that mathematization of science is not the ultimate road to reality. But, then, I still believe that it gives us a perspectival view of reality, since quantity, which is largely what the sciences deal with, is at least considered the first of all the accidents of matter.

Beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the area of scientific knowledge increased tremendously as systematic methods for the investigation of nature was developed. This gave many thinkers the erroneous impression that the methods of the natural sciences especially physics and chemistry, might be generally applied to solve the problems that most perplex us. Such optimism turned out to be fruitless, and most of the philosophical problems that worried the Greek philosophers – problems about truth, nature and composition of reality, justice, virtue and the

good life, problems regarding the existence of God, life after death, human free will, etc; are still current.

Much of philosophy is concerned with questions that we do not yet have an agreed on method of answering them. This is why sometimes the question will cease to be philosophical when a method for answering it has emerged.

However, the fact that there are no universally accepted procedures for solving philosophical problems does not mean that anything goes, that you can say anything or that there are no standards. On the contrary, precisely the absence of such things as laboratory methods to fall back on forces the philosopher to even greater degree of clarity, rigor and precision.

Philosophical questions are such that tend to be about boundary questions rather than specific questions. For this a question like “what exactly is the cause of AIDS” is not a philosophical question; but the question “what is the nature of causation?”, is a philosophical question. Again, the question “Is what President Jonathan said really true?” is not a philosophical question; but the question “What is truth?” is a central philosophical question.

Another feature of philosophical investigation is that it tends to be, in a broad sense, about conceptual issues. When we ask, in a philosophical tone of voice, what is truth, justice, reality, virtue, causation, etc; we are not asking questions that can be answered just by having a good look at the environment or even by performing good experiments on the environment. Such questions require at least in part an analysis of concepts of “truth”, “justice”,

“virtue” “reality”, “cause” etc. This means that the examination of language is an essential tool of the philosopher, because language is the vehicle for the articulation of our concepts.

### 3.0 Need for critical reasoning

Philosophy has to do with concerns which are felt by every thinking person. If we reflect a bit, we would come to the realization that it is the philosopher that usually has the courage to question those issues on which a great deal of our normal day-to-day beliefs rest.<sup>2</sup> Belief systems whether in forms of traditions, religious beliefs, day-to-day modes of living and presuppositions, are often looked upon as sacrosanct. People do not look kindly at anyone who tries to raise questions on the assumptions they make. People very easily get upset and feel uncomfortable, when they are asked to justify the basis of their claims and beliefs. It is often these presuppositions of the ordinary day-to-day common beliefs that serve as matters for philosophical reflection.

When most of our presuppositions and beliefs are critically examined, they often turn out to be a great deal less secure, and their meanings and implications become a good deal less clear than they seemed at first sight.

In critically examining our day-to-day presuppositions and beliefs, man’s self-knowledge is thereby increased and enhanced. Critical examination of beliefs and presuppositions mean examination of self and society as well. The importance of such self-examination is

evident when Plato makes Socrates say that the unexamined life is not a life worth living. By implication, a society that avoids critical self evaluation is doomed to fail.

The truth is that if beliefs and presuppositions are unexamined, but simply uncritically accepted, society becomes ossified, beliefs harden into dogmas, the imagination is warped and the intellect becomes sterile. If the imagination is to be kept awake, if the intellect is to function aright, and if mental life is to be kept dynamic and the pursuit of knowledge, truth, justice and self-fulfillment is not to cease, assumptions and beliefs must be questioned and presuppositions challenged.

Any one who reads Plato's, St. Augustine's, Locke's, Descartes', Kant's etc conception of the world would see that they were down to earth thinkers, who saw clearly much of the basic issues of life, which elude the perception of ordinary people. Today, no scientist or academic worthy of the name can remain indifferent to the philosophic enterprise.<sup>3</sup>

The need for critical examination of knowledge arises, because there are thinkers, who do not believe that the human mind is capable of knowing anything. Those who think this way are generally referred to as skeptics.

### 3.1 Skepticism

There once lived a Greek philosopher named Gorgias. He is said to have doubted the possibility of any form of human knowledge. He posited three propositions in support of his claim:

- (i) Nothing exists, not even the external world,
- (ii) If anything exists, we cannot know it,

- (iii) If anything existed and we could know it, we would not be able to communicate it to others.

These propositions may seem simple or appear as mere sophistry, but they are not. They embody very serious issues, which we often take for granted. For instance, you could have the best possible evidence about some issue or domain and still be radically mistaken. Again, you could have the best possible evidence about people's behaviour and still be mistaken about their mental states etc. This is possible, because you could be dreaming, having hallucinations, or be deceived systematically by an evil demon.<sup>4</sup>

Allied to this skeptical stance is argument from science, namely, that all that we see is literally the visual experience in our brains. In other words, perceivers do not actually see the real world.

Besides the foregoing arguments, doubts about the certainty of scientific knowledge abound in the writings of several contemporary philosophers of science, notably Thomas S. Kuhn and Paul Feyabend etc<sup>5</sup>. For these authors, science as a rational engagement is infected with arbitrariness and irrationality. Kuhn thinks that a major scientific revolution like that of Copernicus, Newton, Einstein, etc., is not just a new description of the same reality, but the description or creation of a new "reality"<sup>6</sup>. This is to say, that after a revolution, scientists work in a different world, – a world that is different from the one that preceded it.

The problem in achieving objective knowledge is that we human beings are often subject to whatever

gossips, reigning orthodoxy in beliefs and assumptions, patterns of behaviour etc. that circulate at any given time. Plato tells us in an allegory, that that is what happens to us when we uncritically accept issues:

Human beings are held prisoners in a cave and they see only shadows of objects on the wall. Some of them are liberated and they see real things and lastly the sun itself. They go back to the cave in order to take the other prisoners to flight.<sup>7</sup>

In this allegory, Plato tells us about the difficulty that is entailed in the acquisition of authentic knowledge. Human beings are often like prisoners living in the darkness of ignorance and chained to their opinions and prejudices. But a cognitive position that is laden with mere opinions and prejudices cannot bring about objective knowledge and so is incapable of leading us from the darkness of ignorance to light of truth and progress.

This allegory sums up the goal of every informative knowledge: it must be critical, that is to say, philosophic, it must be objective and thus directed towards the liberation and progress of the whole man. If these demands are put side by side with what often obtains in our claims to knowledge, we would have cause to apply more rigor in our quest for knowledge.

As human beings we have somewhat built-in or acquired dispositions in us that stand heavily against every sense of objectivity. We all know about certain obstinate

mental and attitudinal prejudices, which influence and sometimes totally blur our vision and perception of issues. Francis Bacon characterizes these as the “Idols of the Mind”<sup>8</sup>.

### 3.2 “Idols of the Mind”

Under “idols of the mind”, Bacon means false opinions, prejudices etc that hinder the mind from acquiring authentic knowledge. He classified these under four headings:

- (i) “idols of the Tribe”
- (ii) “Idols of the den”
- (iii) “Idols of the market place”
- (iv) “Idols of the Theater”<sup>9</sup>

#### 3.2.1 “Idols of the Tribe”

These, according to Bacon are certain generic influences proper to the human nature, which make it difficult for us to achieve certain and objective knowledge. We think that our senses give us direct and valid knowledge of reality; but on close examination of our human perception, it becomes evident how faulty such claims are. We often forget that our perception is based on minds and that our minds are often infested with self interest, bigotry and ignorance. Factors like these distort our sense of judgement, they colour our feelings and shape our beliefs to conform with what we have made up our minds to believe.

#### 3.2.2 “Idols of the den”

Bacon thinks that there are defects that are proper to individual men and women. He refers to these as “idols of the den”. Referring to Plato’s “allegory of the cave”, about which we have already spoken, Bacon thinks that there are people, who as a result of ignorance never achieve authentic knowledge, they perpetually live in a state of darkness, they pursue shadows, but believe they are in possession of reality. Bacon believes that each person has his or her own “den” that intercepts and discolours the light of nature.

Most of the time, on account of such influencing factors, we fail to see the big wide real world at all, because we are blinded by obsession, anxiety, greed, envy, resentment, fear and here in Nigeria, ethnicity, religious bigotry and so forth. We make small personal worlds in which we often remain enclosed.

### 3.2.3 “Idols of the Market Place”

These have to do with problems that arise as a result of interaction of people among themselves. In such interactions language is used, but words as they feature in language are often ambiguous and are sometimes taken as things, when in fact they serve representative functions for real objects.

Such ill-application of language is evident in advertisements and other forms of commercial engagements. For us Nigerians, if we remember such words like “original” and “Taiwan”, “original” and “non-original” – words with which we are confronted in the purchase of wares, we would see how easily we could be

manipulated through the application of words by sweet tongued insincere people. Such words as these often bear no relationship with the realities they purport to stand for, we often mutilate issues to suit our needs.

Finally, Bacon talks about “idols of the Theater”.

### 3.2.4 “Idols of the Theater”

These he thinks, are false influences that affect the human mind owing to some dogmatic adoption of one philosophical or religious system or the other.<sup>9</sup> No singular theory, dogma or standpoint renders a total view of the universe as it actually is. Bacon condemns such “idols” thus: “Not only fantastical philosophy but heretical religion springs from an absurd mixture of matters divine and human”<sup>10</sup>

Dogmatic fanaticism of any form is, of course, nothing more than a display of ignorance and credulity.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir,

I have so far tried to sketch some of the difficulties, which beset every genuine quest for knowledge. It is this desire to achieve the right understanding of issues, this philosophic element, which is expected to be part of every academic engagement, that has led to the choice of the topic: Language, Truth and Reality. Let me point out that a topic like this is not unique to the western philosophical tradition. African philosophy, for example, deals also extensively with questions in the theory of knowledge, logic, metaphysics etc; questions that are similar to those of classical contemporary European, American, and Asian philosophies. Fundamental questions regarding the nature

of knowledge, reality, truth etc. are likely to arise in any culture: everyone has some stake in distinguishing truth from error, wisdom from ignorance and the path to knowledge from the path to ignorance. For this reason, this consideration is trans-cultural and so presupposes what every healthy human understanding can know about language, truth and reality. For this reason, I want to advance some presuppositions:

- (i) We as human beings have direct perceptual access to the world through our senses, especially the senses of touch and vision.
- (ii) Words in our language – e.g. “tree”, “stone”, “water”, “fire” etc. typically have reasonably clear meanings. Because of their meanings, they can be used to refer to or talk about real objects in the world.
- (iii) The world does not exist independently of us, our experiences, our thoughts, and our language.
- (iv) Our statements are typically true or false depending on whether they correspond to how things are, that is, to the facts in the world.
- (v) Truth is normally a quality of propositions and sentences, not of objects and things.

Before proceeding further with the lecture, let us make some conceptual clarifications.

#### 4.0 Conceptual Clarification of the key concepts of the topic

We apply words, adopt belief systems often without knowledge of their historical origins and meanings.

We can use words positively to create room for equality, liberty and brotherhood. We can apply them negatively to create divisive, ethnic, racial and thus narrow minded perception of issues. For this reason, it is necessary to delineate the way words are applied, in order to have smooth social interaction among people.

#### 4.1 “Language”

Language is used to mean natural language, i.e. the various languages spoken by the various peoples that populate the earth, e.g. English, French, German, Igbo, Efik, Kalabari, Swahili etc.

The meaning of natural language becomes clearer, if it is contrasted with formal or “artificial language”. “Artificial language” is what features in mathematics, formal logic, etc often expressed in algebraic form.

There are intermediate cases, e.g. Esperanto, Pidgin, Creole etc; which also are languages in their own right.

The need and utility of language cannot be over emphasized. For instance, we would never be able to think abstractly, have sense of history etc., without language. Again we would never be able to name our experience, our social relations and the objects we encounter without language. Our experiences do not come to us independently of any language. For instance very few people would ever fall in love, if they had never read about love encounters. The possession of verbal categories like “love” “hate”, help a great deal in shaping the experiences they designate. Contemporary thinkers

like Jerry Fordor, Steven Pincker and possibly Hilary Putnam believe that concepts can be formed in the human mind with or without the aid of words. Fordor speaks of a specialized type of language of the mind, which he calls “mentalese”, that does not use the common vocabulary of ordinary language. But I want to believe that concepts are part of experiences, and in many cases it would be impossible to have the experience at all without a mastery of the appropriate vocabulary. The German philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein illustrates this as follows:

I have a glass of water in front of my face. It is not enough to have certain visual data. I need to be able to identify different elements within the complex visual data as falling under those concepts. So I couldn't ever have the experience of seeing a glass of water without some linguistic equipment. Thus language helps to create the very categories in which we experience the world.<sup>11</sup>

This seems to suggest that the limits of our language is the limit of our knowledge. We shall return to this issue later.

What this means, then, is that even though language does not create reality, it is the linguistic categories which we impose on the world that help to shape the experiences we make.

In an excellent passage in his book – *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, published in 1959, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger illustrates the point the more. He cites the Poem, ‘*The Word*’ by Stefan George. In this poem, the

poet talks about a traveller, who while in a distant land found a pearl of great worth. He wished to take it to his country, but needed to wait at the threshold of his land to find a name for the pearl:

He sought for long and tidings told; 'no  
like of this these depths enfold' And  
straight it vanished from my hand.  
The treasure never graced my land. So I  
renounced and sadly see, where word  
breaks off nothing may be.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.2 "Reality"

When we use the word "reality", what do we mean? What is reality and what is mere appearance? Is this microphone real? What of this rostrum, these tables and chairs, are they real? What of the world of physical things, the buildings and the human beings we see around, are they real?

Are there other shades of reality that we do not know about? For instance, are there such things as mental realities? What type of reality is the Golden Rule (do unto others what you would want done unto you)? What type of reality are the laws of nature - including physical and mathematical laws? What about your own reality? Are you only a body, i.e. a mere material organism or does your reality consist in your being a mind or a soul? What kind of reality does the universe have - is it mind or matter or is it some kind of spiritual being? These are no frivolous questions. They are rather questions on which much of human and societal life depend. The type of personality

we have and much of our overall attitude to life depend on the answer we give to these questions.

In the history of ideas there have been traditionally two opposing standpoints on reality – namely spiritualism and materialism. Spiritualism as a model of reality was endorsed by Thomas Aquinas, G. W. F. Leibniz, Henri Bergson, many Christian and Islamic philosophers, etc.

Materialism, the opposing conception of reality is associated with the atomists, notably Democritus, Karl Marx, Ludwig Feuerbach and others of like mind. For Karl Marx, mind and thought are epiphenomena of matter. Marx's actual disposition to spiritualism is evident in his verdict on religion.

For him, religion is nothing but a world of fantastic unreality, made by man for his own illusion. Religion, he says is the opium of the people.<sup>13</sup> Even though this is a bogus condemnation of religion; yet it embodies very serious and thought provoking insight on how not to treat or understand religion. These two doctrines spiritualism and materialism have their corresponding epistemological equivalents as idealism and realism.

The idealist like the spiritualist thinks that what we know are mere appearances of things. The realist like the materialist thinks that the world is knowable, because like a huge machine, the world is made up of parts that are analyzable. Though complicated, the world is according to the realist rational and predictable.

Besides these two conceptions of the nature of reality there is a third and new conception emerging from quantum physics. This new conception relies on both

idealism and realism and is designated as meta-realism. With this the boundary between idealism and realism, metaphysics and physics breaks down. Scientists like Niels Bohr, Albert Einstein, Karl von Weizsäcker, Erwin Schroedinger etc; tend to favour this view. In fact, as we study in the philosophy of science, modern physics and new discoveries therein touch in very serious ways the sphere of metaphysical intuition. For a more balanced overview of reality, physics and metaphysics need to work together in more fundamental ways.

On account of the foregoing, we will presume in this lecture, that the world is not merely material or spiritual alone, but that it is a composition of both and beyond.

#### 4.3 “Truth”

The word “truth” is used to specify what indeed is the case. Whereas in the sciences, determining the truth has to do with discovering which propositions in their domain possess the property of truth; in philosophy, the concern is to discover the nature of that property. Thus, the philosophical question is not –“what is true?”; but rather “what is truth?” Allied philosophical questions are: Is there any guarantee that what we think we know, is true? Can we say that something is true, because our senses say so? Is truth absolute and eternal as some philosophers and religionists say, or is truth relative and so subject to change?

The sciences claim to give objective truth but the revolutions we see in the sciences, whereby one long established scientific theory is replaced by another and so

on forever, suggest that sense perception may not be reliable all the time. What we perceive through the senses turns out to be different when subjected to observation through the microscope. Here we have already the beginning of one of the distinctions that cause most trouble in philosophy – the distinction between “appearance” and “reality”, between what things seem to be and what they are. Even in the case of observation through the microscope, we are naturally tempted to say that what we see through the microscope is more real, but that in turn would be changed by a still more powerful microscope. For this reason, what then is truth? Is it absolute, unchanging or is it changing and relative? These are issues for examination in this lecture. Meanwhile, in what follows, attempt will be made to properly situate the problem.

## 5. Basic Metaphysics: Reality and Truth

In philosophy, metaphysics and epistemology form the core areas for the study of reality, knowledge and truth. Metaphysics has to do with the philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution and structure of reality. Epistemology studies the nature of knowledge and justification. Specifically, it is the study of the defining features, the substantive conditions or sources and the limits of knowledge and justification.

Truth is the quality of those propositions that accord with reality, specifying what is in fact the case, and this specifying is achieved through the agency of language.

This is the reason why truth is said to be in propositions, not in objects.

When we talk, act, think, we take for granted that there exists a real world containing objects, places and other forms of objects. For instance, if in his bid to enter a University to study history, John reads in one of the Nigerian dailies, that there exists in Port Harcourt, a University called “Unique Uniport”, that offers a degree in history, what the paper says would be true, if and only if it is really the case that such a University that offers a degree in history exists.

This presupposition, namely that there is a real world existing independently of us is called *Realism*.

For the realist, there are mind independent and mind dependent realities. Mind independent realities are objects like stones, trees, air, animals and the like. Mind dependent realities are: money, marriage, wars, games, parties, cultures, etc. Mind dependent realities are created by human agents as a result of human consciousness. For this, and along with realism, we believe that when we talk, we typically use words that refer to objects in a world that exists independently of our language.

Opposed to Realism is *Idealism*. According to this position, there is no such thing as an objective world that exists independently of our minds. The whole of reality is the product of the mind, which constructs and structures all things. Realism and idealism were the two dominant theories of reality from Plato to Hegel in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Opposed to, but somewhat allied to these positions, is *Positivism*. For the positivists, it is the human reason that determines and establishes what we refer to as reality. So the world of chairs, tables trees, animals, planets etc. consist in being what they are through our representations.

These three schools of thought: Realism, Idealism and Positivism represent the three dominant positions in philosophy and constitute the main areas of interest around which our discussion centers. We shall examine these schools of thought through their key representatives.

## 6.0 Philosophical Positions on the nature of Reality

### 6.1 Idealism (Plato)

There are a number of strands of idealism, but their central doctrine is that ideas are the only reality there is. Reality does not exist independently of our perceptions and modes of representations.

The idealist position is primarily an effort to counter the skeptic's claim that all we imagine we know about the external world, is a massive hallucination.

To solve this problem, Plato divides reality into two tiers: the observable and the non-observable universe.

The observable universe consists of inauthentic changeable objects, whereas the non-observable universe consists of eternal, changeless "forms".<sup>14</sup>

These "forms" are not creations of our minds, they are on their own independently of our thoughts. As

incorporeal, changeless and imperceptible entities, we have access to them only through our thought. In fact, it is these ideal entities that make all propositions to be true or false. This means that the names and words we apply for objects and in making sentences, have structural equality with the “Forms” of objects.

What every tree, man or any object has in common with every other object of its kind, is that it bears a certain relationship called “Participation” to one and the same thing, namely, the “form”, “treeness” or “manness”, if a tree or a man and so on. When we call trees, “trees”, or men, “men”, we are implicitly appealing to a standard of “treeness” or “manness” just as someone would appeal to a standard when the one says that a painted portrait of someone is a man. True enough, the pigment on the canvas is not a man, it is properly called a man because it bears a certain relationship to a very different sort of object.

Plato claims that the “forms” are what many of our words refer to, even though they are radically different sorts of objects from the ones revealed to our senses. In line with this, when articulations of intelligible order are credited with being true, it is true in the sense that the proposed articulations match the way things are in reality. For instance, the sentence: “John flies”, is false, because the ideas of man and the ability to fly, do not belong together. On the contrary, the sentence, “John sits down”, is true, because man has the natural ability to sit down.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, an opinion, thought or impression is true or false, depending on the extent it measures up to or mirrors

the reality it refers to. Reality in this regard are the “forms”. This means that reality as something knowable, already has, prior to human knowledge its own structural patterns of interrelation and order. The goal of human effort at achieving knowledge and truth, therefore, is to find out what these components, patterns and order are and giving them correct suitable reference and inclusion in an acceptable description.

In its more modern sense, especially as is evident in the writings of René Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza etc; human knowledge comes through the direct and immediate subjective consciousness of the knower alone. Reason for this is that all knowledge comes from the activities of the intellect and such knowledge aims at a comprehensive description of the world that exists independently of human experience.

Even though this position has inherent problems as Plato himself saw, for instance problems of whether universals or abstract entities exist, yet it has had great appeal in several other areas of knowledge.

### 6.1.1 Merits of Idealism

Idealism has had serious appeal in the development of the history of ideas. In science, for instance, we see this in systems of scientific investigations that search for the inherent intelligible structure in nature that would explain the occurrence of observed phenomena. In philosophy, we notice this influence in the formulation and adoption of theories like realism, empiricism, etc. In religion, we see this in all forms of religious beliefs like the survival of the

soul after the death of the human body and allied doctrines and beliefs associated with this. Again, the belief in the existence of ideal entities like values, principles, standards of measurement and evaluation, etc., owe background to idealism. The contrary position to idealism is *realism*.

## 6.2 Realism (Aristotle)

Aristotle agreed with Plato's philosophy in very basic issues, but rejected Plato's doctrine of separated ideas or "forms". According to him, properties and qualities exist in objects and do not have separate existence of their own.

In his book – The *Categories*, he divides reality into two distinct aspects: primary substance and accidents. Every accident or quality exists in a substance and cannot exist on its own. The category, substance, is divided into individual or primary substance and secondary substance. Examples of primary substance are individuals like John, Paul, Mary etc., whereas secondary substance are – the species man and the genus animal. Search for the essence of primary substance stands at the center of Aristotle's metaphysics and pervades the writings of subsequent philosophers like B. Spinoza, John Locke, G.W. Leibniz, D. Hume, I. Kant, etc.

Aristotle demonstrates, using the structure of simple sentences, the way substance and accidents relate. According to him, a simple sentence is made up of two parts: subject and verb e.g. "John runs". In this sentence, the name "John", has a referential function of designating the subject of attribution. The verb, "runs", on the other

hand, is essentially predicative, and signifies something that holds of the subject. In the same vein, verbs also indicate when something is asserted or denied to hold, and so make precise the statement's truth value.

For Aristotle, language is a social phenomenon. Our experience of things is permanent irrespective of the nature of the language we speak. Spoken words, he thinks, stand for ideas in the mind, but written words are symbols of spoken words. Because the alphabets are not the same across the languages, the sounds of words formed from these languages, sound differently from language to language.<sup>16</sup>

For Aristotle, the meaning of a thing is the idea of that thing in the mind. This is the ideational theory of meaning, which was greatly expanded by John Locke in his book – *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

In the process of reflecting on language and how it relates to objects, Aristotle formulated the theory of truth known as the *Correspondence theory of truth*.

According to this theory, a belief, statement, sentence, proposition, etc., is true provided there exists a fact that corresponds with it. In line with this theory, reality and truth are objective in the sense that they exist prior to our knowledge of them. All that the human mind does, is to discover them.

This doctrine of the objective existence of truth and reality that exist independently of the human mind, pervaded the history of thought from Plato up to Hegel in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This belief in the objective existence of truth constitutes the main point of

disagreement between traditional philosophy and modern/contemporary philosophy. This is evident in what follows.

### 6.3 Positivism (Immanuel Kant)

The history of philosophy could be divided into two phases: Pre-Kantian and Kantian – Post Kantian periods. The pre-Kantian and Kantian periods are what I designate as stretching from Plato to Hegel whereas the Post-Kantian period is usually referred to as Positivism.

The positivist position is based on the claim that our knowledge of the world arises from observation. Reality is only what one sees and touches, nothing more. We cannot have knowledge of unobservable physical objects. This claim, which is the main statement of all positivist thinking, actually derives from Immanuel Kant, who to my mind is the chief source of all modern positivist thinking. This is evident in what follows.

#### 6.3.1 Kantian Positivism

For our purposes in this lecture, let us summarize Kant's position thus:

- (i) The empirical world, i.e. the world we all experience and live in, is a world of systematic appearance, it is a world of how things appear to us. This is to say, that our world that is made up of physical objects like chairs, tables, trees, human beings, plants, animals etc. consists entirely in our representations.
- (ii) There is another world behind our physical world, a world of "things in themselves", but this world is

totally inaccessible to us, we cannot even talk about it meaningfully. “Things in themselves” are things not structured by the categories of the mind.

With these claims, Kant goes on to say that all knowledge consists in the ability of the human mind to construct and invent various linguistic and conceptual schemes that render material experience intelligible. In his book, *Critique of Pure Reason*, he writes:

[...] hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all our attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them a priori by means of concepts, have on this assumption, ended in failure. We must, therefore, make trial whether we may not have success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge [...] If intuition must conform to the constitution of the objects, I do not see how we could know anything of the latter a priori, but if the object (as object of the senses) must conform to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, I have no difficulty in conceiving such a possibility.<sup>17</sup>

Kant does not mean to say that our minds create objects. In the preface to the second edition of his work *Critique of Pure Reason*, and in the section of that work on “Transcendental Dialectic”, he says that it is the human mind that structures the physical objects. The mind achieves this through an interplay of concepts innate to the human cognitive faculties (categories) and the data of sense experience. He writes: “All human knowledge

begins with intuition, goes on to concepts and ends up in ideas”<sup>18</sup>.

What he means, is that the phenomenal world is the product of the human mind in the sense that the mind brings to its cognitive activities, a set of antecedently present, necessary ordering device, or rules and truths that belong to its own cognitive equipment, which it imposes on the raw, unordered sensory data. This, he thinks, stays in analogy to a person who wears coloured glasses, who sees everything in that colour. In this way, every human being, who has the faculty of thought, inevitably thinks about objects in accordance with the natural structure of the mind.

This means that what we call an object of knowledge is not a thing external to and independent of our cognitive machinery, it is the product of the application of innate conceptual structures to the subjective states of our sensory faculties.

Again, according to him, the world that produces those subjective states, is, something that, as it is in itself, is inaccessible to us, we grasp it only as it affects us, only as it appears to us.

Kant thinks that every concept is a symbol. For instance, he thinks, that the concept say “stool” or any concept whatsoever that we use to designate objects, is simply a conventional symbol imposed on the object named. For this reason, he claims that all our knowledge comes to us in symbolic forms and meaning is, therefore, meaning of symbols. We can define the word or concept “stool”, since it has a meaning; but although we can sit on

it, point at it, burn it, or describe it, we cannot define a stool itself, for a stool is an article of furniture, not a symbol that has a meaning that we need to explain.

The central problem of Kant's philosophy, as we can see, was to investigate the relation between concepts and how they relate to reality. Kant's work in this subject matter was popularized by Ernst Cassirer, especially in the study of symbolic representations and later by C.S. Peirce, Charles Morris etc., in the study of linguistic signs (*Semiotics*.)

Following Kant, all words and sentences are signs, in the sense that they stand for something in some respect or capacity. Our knowledge of reality is, therefore, a function of the concepts and categories, which we ourselves impose on things.

Kant links up this symbolic function of language to the various models or paradigms of judgement that we observe in the history of thought. In the antiquities, the stoics based their knowledge on the physical analysis of nature, in the medieval period, especially with the influence of Christianity, the world was understood from the perspective of kinship relationships. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, use of legal models was made, hence the phenomenon of the social contract theories as basis of social bond, was upheld. In the modern period, the pervading model of truth is the scientific model. According to this model, the meaning of a sentence is given by a rule, which determines in exactly which experiential situations the sentence is assertable. All of these as paradigms of knowledge retain their validity, since they as perspectives of knowledge, are

not mutually exclusive but rather are mutually complementary and inclusive to one another.

This innovative turn in the understanding of the nature of truth and knowledge is referred to as the “Copernican turn”, in memory of the scientist Copernicus, who failing to find satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved round the spectator, tried whether he might not have better success, if he made the spectator revolve and the stars remain at rest.

Again, Kant thinks that the world as it appears to us is not the ultimate reality, all we can know is reality as we perceive it.

He divides reality into two: the phenomenal and the noumenal spheres. The phenomenal sphere has to do with the physical world. The noumenal world has to do with the inaccessible region of reality. To this region belongs questions like the existence of God, Immortality of the soul, the question of human free will etc. According to him, there is no demonstrative proof that these exist or do not exist, because whichever position one adopts for or against, has very valid arguments, that could lead to the assertion of the contrary. This means that there can be no definitive proof either that people are free or are not free, that God exists or does not exist, etc. These concepts, as he says, cannot be produced by our intuition, they are simply products of pure reason alone, for the moral life of man and society. We attempt a summary of our discussion on Kant.

### 6.3.2 Summary of Kant's position on Reality

- i) Kant rejects belief in the objective existence of a unique, intelligible structure that pre-exists the application of the conceptual or linguistic schemes introduced by human beings. Again, he rejects claims that purport to appraise scientific or metaphysical knowledge in terms of a correspondence between human sources of conceptual understanding and the putatively existing, unique, intelligible order in reality.
- ii) The world is full of normal temporal and spatial objects. This philosophical proof of objectivity, confirms the existence not of abstract perspective free world, but of a world in which reality is comprehensible only through the continued activities of the mind and the data of experience.
- iii) The way we see and understand the world is a function of the concepts and categories which we impose on things.

Much of philosophical reflections in the contemporary period takes after the critical stance introduced by Kant.

Following Immanuel Kant, much of contemporary philosophy sees what we usually refer to as the “real world”, as mere “social construct”. This is a challenge against the idealist and realist conceptions of reality. The claim, even though not according to the mind of Kant, is that there is no universally valid rationality, but that different cultures have different rationalities.

Versions of relativism of this type are common in the intellectual movements known collectively as “cultural relativism,” “Pragmatism”, “Post modernism” etc. Another version of this form of relativism is perspectivism. This is a dominant epistemological mode of contemporary intellectual life. Perspectivism is the view that all knowledge is essentially perspectival in character. This is to say, that knowledge claims and their assessment always take place within a framework that provides the conceptual resources in and through which the world is described and explained.

According to perspectivism, “[...] no one ever views reality directly as it is in itself, rather they approach it from their own slant with their own assumptions and preconceptions”.<sup>19</sup>

In relativist thinking of this sort, not even science is spared. The rationality of science has been severally questioned by authors such as Thomas S. Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend etc. For them science is infected with arbitrariness and irrationality. Kuhn thinks that a major scientific revolution is not just a new description of the same reality, but the description of, or creation of a new “reality”<sup>20</sup>. In the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein, there are no universal standards of rationality, everything is intelligible to everybody, but in a series of smaller language games, each with its own inner standards of intelligibility.

These reactions against traditional theories of reality have led in contemporary times to the belief by some thinkers that “reality” is in jeopardy. But those who think

this way fail to realize that relativistic thinking involves serious self contradictions –

- i) It makes the mistake of rejecting the dichotomy between fact and value. They fail to realize that there is a difference between the way things are and how they are evaluated. For instance, that people obey the law or act honestly is one thing, that they should is quite another. The first is a matter of fact, the second is a matter of value.<sup>21</sup>
- ii) It is self-referentially incoherent, since it presents its statements as universally true, rather than simply relatively so. We shall come back to this as the lecture progresses.

Now, these schools of thought notwithstanding, I rely on healthy human intuition to say, that a realistic account of reference makes sense. It makes sense, because it makes sense for a sensible theory of the world. Again it makes sense because we are rational conscious beings and as J.S. Mill<sup>22</sup> rightly says, the only reason that can justify beliefs about ordinary things and the existence of the outside world is direct consciousness. We will now look closely at this.

### 7.1 The Role of Consciousness in Knowledge

Our consciousness confers meanings on things and thus constitutes what we refer to as the intelligible world. Whatever we know, do or believe presupposes consciousness. That the external world exists and is knowable, is the framework necessary for us to hold opinions, formulate theories, do research, etc. We cannot

value life, justice, beauty, survival, have hopes beliefs, desires, fears, love, hate etc, unless we are conscious beings. The ability to do these is referred to in philosophy as Intentionality.

### 7.1.1 Intentionality

Intentionality is that feature of the mind by which mental states are directed at states of affairs in the world.

Generally speaking, our consciousness gives us access to the world in two ways: the *cognitive* and the *Volitive or conative* ways.

Through the cognitive ability, our consciousness makes us represent things as they are. Through the volitive or conative ability, we represent things the way we want them to be. We see this exhibited in art works, music, religion, etc. This is evident also in the way we use words to stand for objects. On their own, words are cold and meaningless, until meaning is attached to them. In this way, our mind creates objective social reality?

### 7.1.2 Language and Mind in Objective Social Reality

Let me begin with an illustration: Looking at a Naira note, we see that it is paper that is made up of cellulose fibers and stained with dye. What then makes it legal tender? It is so, because the Nigerian people have conferred that status function on it. The word “Naira” is just a placeholder for a complex set of intentional activities and it is the capacity for playing role in these activities that constitutes the essence of the “Naira”. In a similar manner,

everything else, property, marriage, titles, government etc is constituted.

In social engagements, - political rally, church service, all forms of social encounters, collective cooperative behaviour is involved. This is evident in the sharing of thoughts and feelings and in the use of language. These common grounds make it possible for names and status functions to be assigned to objects.<sup>23</sup> That we use pots to cook food, spoons to eat, hoes to dig, knives to cut, are instances of assigning functions and names to objects.

Collective assignment of status functions and above all their continued recognition and acceptance over long periods of time create and maintain the reality of the objects in question. In a similar way, names assigned to objects could be replaced with some other names, if the community so desires. In the process of creating social reality, language plays a prominent role.

## 7.2 Role of Language in the Creation of Objective Social Reality

Language plays a very important role in constituting institutional facts. People would not have such thoughts of money, marriage, schools and infact everything else without language. Language is not used merely to describe facts, it is partly constitutive of the facts. As has already been pointed out, when the treasury says “[...] this note is legal tender for all debts public and private”, the treasury is not describing a fact, but is in part creating a fact. This

function of language being used to stand for other things is referred to as symbolization.

In the case of the “Naira note”, and all other cases of symbolization, the utterance is performative. Performative utterances are those in which saying something makes it true. A very good example of a performative utterance and how it brings about institutional reality, is given by J.L. Austin:

When in a wedding ceremony the minister says, ‘Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?’ and the bridegroom responds ‘I do’, he is not describing a marriage, he is indulging in one. In making his utterance, he is performing an action, - and here part of the total action of getting married.<sup>24</sup>

This shows that even though language does not create reality, it constitutes it by providing it with meaning, provided the necessary truth conditions for doing so are given.

But how does the mind interact with language in constituting objective social reality.

### 7.3 Language and Mind in Creating Objective Social Reality

In looking at this issue, I do not intend to include the neurobiological processes of the mind, the analogous relationship between the mind and the computer or even the philosophical mind - body problem. All that is of interest to me, is that experience seems to show that the mind and language are inseparably bound together to the

extent that some thinkers like Noam Chomsky and others believe that man is essentially a syntactical animal.

The mind is linguistically structured in the sense that it is imbued with guiding categories. Categories are the highest genera of entities in the world. Aristotle listed ten: substance, quality, quantity relation, place, time, passion, when, where and effect. Rene Descartes listed two: matter and mind. Every reality belongs to one or the other of the categories. In cognitive processes, the external senses provide the mind with impressions of things. The mind works on these impressions turning them into ideas of various complexities. Conventions impose vocal signs or symbols (words) on such general ideas.<sup>25</sup>

For this reason, when human beings make some acoustic sound, such sound is said to be a statement, an explanation, a question, a command, a piece of advice, order, a promise, a request etc. The mind imposes on these acoustic signs or sounds some intentionality. This process of the mind achieving intentionality is referred to by philosophers of language as “Speech acts”<sup>26</sup>

### 7.3.1 Speech Acts Theory

As we can see, Speech acts are human acoustic sounds made in normal speech situations. By means of such sounds or signs, a statement, a question, an order, a request, or prediction is made. J.L. Austin refers to these minimal complete units of human linguistic communication, as *illocutionary acts*. Whenever we talk or write to each other, we are performing illocutionary acts. He refers to

the effect of these, such as persuading, convincing or making someone to do something as *perlocutionary acts*.

The theory of universal mental ideas and the position that such universal ideas assume vocal representations in various cultures and conventions, has been seriously challenged.

#### 7.4 Language and Environment

The early Greek philosophers notably Plato and in fact many modern and contemporary thinkers believe that the line of thought expressed in any language could be translated without loss of meaning into any other language. This belief has been seriously challenged by Ludwig Wittgenstein, B.L. Whorf, Edward Sapir, J. B. Vico, Martin Heidegger etc. Wittgenstein sees language as a public and social institution, pluralized into countless language “games”, grammatical rules and forms of representation, - all constructed by people and applied by them in the multifarious “forms of life” in which they are generated and embedded, and in which they are repeatedly applied.<sup>27</sup>

Again, according to Wittgenstein, there is no sense in finding the meaning of a general term by trying to find the common element in all its applications:

The meaning of a word is what is explained by the explanation of the meaning. i.e. if you want to understand the use of the word ‘meaning’, look for what is called explanation of meaning.<sup>28</sup>

Wittgenstein believes that the various grammatical rules, when taken as norms of representation, are free, unconstrained, conventionally agreed on publicly shared ways of endowing words or other types of linguistic expressions with meaning. This means that grammatical rules do not disclose and conform to what is already “there” in reality.

In general, then, norms of representation should be seen for what they are: human creations or conventional constructs, not as means for discovering or mirroring a putatively inherent, independently existing, essential structure in the world. We cannot justify the choice of a norm of representation by saying that one discovers it to be valid or true:

The connection between ‘language and reality’ is made by definition of words, and these belong to grammar, so that language remains self contained and autonomous<sup>29</sup>

As we can see, according to Wittgenstein, the basic forms of representation of which the grammar of our language is constituted, are arbitrary. The grammar we use is autonomous: it is not determined by appealing to reality.

As we saw above, Martin Heidegger subscribes to this and in his book: *On the Way to language*, highlights the arbitrary relationship that exists between reality and language.

Similarly, the arbitrary nature of language is evident in the writings of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee-Whorf.

According to Sapir, the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group.<sup>30</sup> Language in this sense, is taken not as constituting a mere systematic inventory of the various items of experience. It is rather seen as a self contained creative symbolic organization, which helps us organize our experience by reason of its formal completeness.

Similarly, Whorf thinks that language enables us to dissect nature along lines laid down by our native inter-subjective language. According to him, we cut nature up, organize it into concepts and ascribe significance to it as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.<sup>31</sup>

What this means is relativism of knowledge, to the extent that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of things, unless their linguistic backgrounds and foundations are similar.

Finally, J.B. Vico thinks that what we refer to as truth of a word is the human experience attached to that word. For this reason, if the word “Jupiter” is identified with the phenomenon “Thunder”, this unity is true.<sup>32</sup>

We can sum up our discussion so far as follows:

- i) Reality is essentially knowable and truth about it is absolute and intuitively discoverable. This was the conception of truth that was adopted from Plato’s time up to G.W.F. Hegel in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.
- ii) Truth is objective, but quasi-subjective in the sense that the knowing subject contributes a lot of conventional temporal and historical factors that

help to colour what we as individuals experience. This position was adopted by Immanuel Kant.

- iii) There is nothing like reality that is essentially fixed. Reality is not intuitively discoverable. Truth is conventional, because what we call “truth” is always an expression of a worldview. This was L. Wittgenstein’s position.

From the foregoing, the question is: Is truth objective or is it relative?

## 8. Truth and Truth Conceptions

The three major theories of truth: correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories can be summed up into two – viz truth is objective, truth is relative. The correspondence and coherence theories (Plato –Hegel) maintain that truth is objective. The more contemporary view is that truth is relative.

We all fall consciously or unconsciously into either of these two positions. We adopt either of them in certain circumstances of life. Whichever of the two we adopt, determines our vision of and attitude to issues.

### 8.1 Truth as Objective

There is no doubt that there are certain fixed truths. Take for instance the fact, that you are biologically either a man or a woman. In saying this, I completely discountenance the pervasive attitude of lesbians and homosexuals, who in the attempt to alter their sexes, create monsters out of such attempts.

By men and women, I mean natural men and women. Let us take another example- astronomically, it is correct to say that Saturn is the sixth planet from the sun. Now, that we *are* either *male* or *female*, is simply a law of nature. We cannot go against that, irrespective of what human wickedness can contrive or attempt to achieve. However, that we are *called* “men” or “women”, is merely a conventional tag. It could be altered, if human convention agrees to do so.

In a similar vein, that the planet Saturn is the sixth planet is a matter of the physics of the solar system. The name given to the planet is an alterable conventional tag. If we think along this line, we discover so many other forms of truth that are objective.

In addition to this, we see objectivity in the universal application of values. For example, the ethical value expressed in a sentence like, “you must not kill your fellow human being”. This is an objective statement. Its validity and universality derive from the very essence of man and it is basically rooted in the instinct of self preservation. Values as values are imperatives, they do not require further justification, because in themselves they are self *justifying*. They are “ideal beings” so to speak, and like mathematical laws, they operate and are effective everywhere. They are as Immanuel Kant says, categorical.

Again, theoretical knowledge, whether in the form of inductive or deductive logic presupposes some universal principles on which such generalizations and inferences are based. This is very evident in the so called laws of

thought: principle of identity, principle of contradiction, and principle of excluded middle. These principles are necessary laws against which and without which no discipline can operate. They are non-empirical, but are objectively valid. Without them, our thoughts would be totally confused and muddled up. Furthermore, for us to talk coherently about truth, we must have certain reference points that serve as measures of our truth claims. For instance, we talk about love, beauty, freedom, etc. How would we know the meanings of these, unless we had some ideals for measuring and determining them?

Having seen some arguments in support of the objectivity of truth, we now look at the problems involved in maintaining that truth is objective.

### 8.1.1 Problems of Objectivity of Truth

The claim that truth is objective has its very serious problems. One of the problems has remained since Aristotle. It is the question whether future contingent statements are true statements in the sense that what they express must happen. Put more directly, the question is: Are statements about future events true? For instance, can the declarative sentence that there will be a sea battle tomorrow, express a true sentence? This is to ask whether there are general facts like the “Forms” of things as Plato and Aristotle say there are, to which propositions correspond?

If we say, (and Aristotle already saw this danger), that future events are true already today, we face a paradox.<sup>33</sup> If sentences involving contingent human actions

are already true, then we as human beings would be determined and we would not be free beings.

The issue becomes more intractable, if we are believers in divine omniscience. If God has fore-known that a particular line of action would be taken by some one, then the action is already true, since an omniscient being had foreseen its outcome. A contingent being cannot contradict what an omniscient being has foreseen, would happen. If we are not free, then the laws that are meant for the establishment of justice in society and all our claims to freedom would be baseless. If we are not free, then our actions cannot be free and for this, our actions cannot deserve merit or blame.

Belief in the objectivity of truth besides leading to absolutism and all its allied consequences, has brought about all forms of mistrust and maltreatment of peoples and cultures. Euro-American centered perspective of the world is a good example. Civilization is measured on parameters set up and determined by the so-called “civilized cultures”.

Again, even in religion, we see this operating. Religious intolerance has led to all forms of misjudgements and injustices. For instance, the scientists Giordano Bruno, Nicholas Copernicus, etc. suffered serious tribulations for upholding the heliocentric theory as against the erroneously endorsed Geocentric conception of the world.

When we look at all forms and shades of discriminations, strands of racism, we notice that they all stem from false ideological dispositions that border on false conceptions of truth. The Nazi holocaust, the horrors

of the gas chambers and all allied acts of inhumanity, were as a result of placing oneself in judgement against others. In all circumstances of life we see this wave of self righteous disposition operating. If we turn to examine truth as relative we see a lot of reasons why it cannot be so.

### 8.1.2 Truth as Relative

Relativism denies that there are universal truths. For relativists, the world has no intrinsic characteristics, there are just different ways of interpreting it. Many contemporary thinkers, notably N. Goodman, H. Putnam, R. Rorty, etc. subscribe to this view.

Generally speaking, our contemporary world is steeped in relativism. We live in a period of human history that brings with itself all manners of social, ethical, political and religious orientations. Such crises of orientation often lead to beliefs that there are no norms and principles that ought to guide human action. There is the feeling that everyone is free to pursue everyone's own arbitrary decisions. As we saw earlier on, relativism of this sort is self-defeating, because it denies the possibility of all knowledge, while asserting its own truth. In fact, it even destroys the very meaning of truth and false-hood.

Now, even though many people reason the way we have expressed, what then is it for something to be true for a person, rather than simply true?

### 8.1.3 True for me, rather than simply true

The relativist position should not be confused with the claim that people can, in some sense, make their own

truth. For example, I have the power to “create” truth: If the window is open and I am feeling cold, I have the power to “create” the truth of the window’s being closed; I get up and close the window. The sentence, “The window is closed” was false, but I make it true by closing it. In this way, we can make our own “truth” and our own “reality”.

The above must be distinguished from the controversial claims of the relativist, - it could be true for me that the window is open, while at the same time it is false for you that the window is open.

Distinction also must be made that it can appear to me that the window is open, while at the same time it appears to you that the window is closed. This happens, because the same thing can appear in different ways to different people depending on their differing perceptions, their differing process of perception, the differing handicaps involved in such perceptions and so forth.

In this regard the excellent fable of the six blind men of Hindostan and the elephant, by John Godfrey Saxe, comes to mind. The first touched the broad and sturdy side, and said that the elephant was like a wall. The second felt the tusk and said that the elephant was like a spear. The third touched the trunk and said that the elephant was like a snake. The fourth felt the knee and concluded that the elephant was like a tree. The fifth touched the ear and thought that the elephant was like a fan. The sixth felt the tail and proclaimed that the elephant was like a rope.

All the above judgements were based on wrong perception of what the elephant actually is. Each would

have said: the part of the elephant I touched was like a tree, a snake, a wall, etc., when well formulated, their expressions would have been necessarily true or false.

For the relativist the standards that one uses for determining or identifying what is true actually constitute what it is to be true. But as we have already seen, there are ways of determining and identifying some objective truth. As we saw above, we can objectively identify a naira note. We all know that it is not the mere external characteristics of colour, shape, appearance, etc, that make the naira note what it actually is.

Likewise, we have an important distinction between the standard by which we try to identify true statements and the definition of what it is for a statement to be true. There are however, many situations in which relativism makes a lot of sense.

There are certain situations in which relativism makes a lot of sense, for instance, in some countries, it is right to drive on the right hand side, whereas in others it is wrong to do so. Relative to Nigerian laws, one has obligation to drive on the right hand side. Relative to English laws, however, one has the obligation to drive on the left hand side.

The obligation to drive one way or the other exists, in this example, only relative to a legal code, and legal codes can vary from place to place. The obligation is merely relative, because beyond the respective legal systems, there is no objective, or absolute obligation to drive one way or the other.

This perspective of relativism features in many aspects of life. In the sciences, for example, one can say that a scientific theory is relative to another scientific theory, depending on the period of history in which the theory is operative.

Before the advent of the Copernican heliocentric worldview, the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic geocentricism had held sway for over a period of two thousand years. From the perspective of utility one can say that even though the heliocentric worldview presents a more balanced worldview, yet relative to the state of the world at a time, what the heliocentric worldview is to the modern mind was what the geocentric worldview was to those who lived at the period in which it was operative.

In a similar vein, what is today referred to as superstition may no longer offer as accurate a prediction as natural science does, yet what science is to the modern mind was what superstition was to the so-called “primitive mind”. Both superstition and organized science serve as attempts at accurate predictions; both have their strength, weakness and utility. For this, one can therefore observe, that relative to the “primitive” mind, organized science is to the modern man, what superstition was to the “primitive” mind. Events in the last world cup competition and in the overall occult inclinations of the so-called “civilized world”, show that much of our contemporary world is steeped in superstition: In the last world cup competition, people consulted and believed in the ability of an octopus to predict the outcome of a football match. For this and similar cases, both in the sciences and in the so called

superstitious beliefs, the claim is that what is aimed at is not truth but truth approximations. In a similar vein, many philosophers are of the view, that every research in physics, economics or any other discipline is aimed at utility not at truth. When we remember Hiroshima or the depleted ozone layer, when we look at our environment and see the ever ongoing degradation it suffers; when we see all manners of hazards and insecurities associated with modern western science; or even the ethical and moral problems that are rife in modern science, and the fact that this science is often largely at a loss at how to resolve such problems; we begin to realize, as many sincere western scientists have, that unregulated, unmoderated western mode of science is perhaps not the way into the future.

Our African scientists must realize that there are alternative and complementary sciences to that of the west, and that the so called “superstition”, is one of them. Like in the case with everything African and in order to establish her supremacy over everything, the West has forever inferiorized and devalued everything African, just as it did the dignity and humanity of Africans.

It is now left for African scientists, even though trained in the western tradition of science, not just to ape western science, but to see how to develop African counterparts of such knowledge.

I say this, based on a western scholar’s admission, (Sir Karl R. Popper), that all hypotheses, theories and even laws are at best conjectures, subject to testability and utility (of such hypotheses, theories and laws). This is to say, that Africa’s challenge is to see how her worldview,

and 'counterpart science', could be brought into practical service and utility for mankind.

The above standpoint is given credence by the history of scientific theories. One scientific theory comes to be and is overtaken by another one: The Aristotelian worldview was replaced by the Copernican worldview, the Copernican worldview was overtaken by the Einsteinian relativity worldview and so on forever. For this reason, many leading philosophers, notably C.S. Peirce, William James, Moritz Schlick, Thomas S. Kuhn, etc., claim that scientific theory and in this connection, especially atomic theory is not true or false, but is simply useful for predicting and achieving needed data.

Experts tell us, that the Newtonian theory, the Euclidian geometry are correct in our little planet - earth, but not so in space, where other conditions and considerations are involved. For this, it is right to say that a proposition is true under certain circumstances, but false in others. For this reason, a physicist may choose a non Euclidean geometry, like that of Riemann, Brouwer or Weierstras etc; because in using it he is better able to structure and configure his theories for his purposes.

We observe relativism in various religious confessions. We see that even though the basic tenets of all religions have much in common, there are relevant differences in their various modes of organizing and expressing themselves. This level of relativism guarantees autonomy, - at least autonomy of belief, and practice. For this reason, a non-believer who queries a religious practice that is upheld in a legitimate system of belief may

find himself running into problems. In the same manner, a scientist, who questions a given religious article of faith, because it is not scientifically analyzable, may find himself in a serious position of not being able to justify his claims.

If a scientist takes a consecrated host to the laboratory to see if it contains particles of human flesh and blood, he involves himself in what Gilbert Ryle calls, “category mistake”.<sup>34</sup> The error of category mistake rests on putting something in the wrong logical category. If in describing Holy Communion, a catholic were to say, “I know this is blood, not wine, this is body not bread”, the phrase “I know” in this context does not have the same application as it does for the chemist.

The certainty and knowledge claimed for this statement has nothing to do with technical scientific enterprise. It is not an empirically warranted judgement. It has to do with a component of a world picture that has a particular religious character. Moreover, and as Plato tells us, each level of knowledge, imagining, conjecture, belief, understanding, or reasoning has its own objects and method of knowledge.<sup>35</sup> This leads us to very important aspects of language and language application. Relativism is evident in the nature and application of language.

## 8.2 On the various applications of language

Language has an enormous variety of uses. We can apply language to make up jokes, tell stories, give instructions, write poems and works of fiction, effect scientific explanations and express mathematical formulae,

etc. The various language applications can be grouped under the following headings:

- Directive e.g. commands, requests, etc
- Commissive statements, e.g. promises vows, pledges, contracts guarantees, threats, etc
- Expressive application, e.g. apologies, thanks, congratulations, condolences etc.
- Indirect speeches, e.g. metaphors, metonymy, irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, understatements – etc.

All these applications of language are prefigured in intentionality and ultimately go to show that the limits of meaning and consequently language are the limits of intentionality.

Other aspects of language application that speak for relativism and justify the application of language even in issues that transcend the human senses, are the analogical and the mythical language applications. I will examine the analogical language application.

### 8.2.1 Analogical language as rule of theological matters

As Christians or Moslems, etc; we must speak about God, praise and worship him. But there is, as we know, no direct logical or empirical way of establishing the existence of God. Proofs or attempted proofs to achieve this, like the ontological, cosmological, teleological arguments, have not been generally accepted as convincing proofs.

Reason for this is that the very concept God is not a definable reality and the name “God” is not a proper but a descriptive name. His transcendence does not allow a

definite form of definition to be ascribed to Him. Moreover, as St. Thomas Aquinas tells us, we cannot talk coherently about God's transcendence, because the day-to-day language we use, is full of imperfections. In addition, our human process of knowledge acquisition is essentially discursive and so, cannot lead us to a direct knowledge of God. How then do we talk meaningfully about God?

St. Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, suggest, the use of analogical language. Aquinas referred to it as a "convenient device", for all talk about God.<sup>36</sup>

According to him, names of pure perfection such as "good", "true", "being" etc, cannot be used in referring to God in exactly the same way (univocally) as they are used for creatures. Again, such attributes should not be applied entirely differently (equivocally) in referring to creatures. The attributes are therefore affirmed of God and the creatures by an analogy that is based on the relationship that obtains between a creature when it is viewed as an effect and God as its uncaused cause.

Aquinas is convinced that in some way a caused perfection imitates and participates in God, its uncaused and unparticipated source. He is equally convinced that no caused effect can ever be equal to its uncaused cause. But there exists enough similarity for us to say that what we understand by perfection such as goodness in creatures, is present in God in an unrestricted manner.

According to Aquinas, in acts of predication, we must distinguish between the mode of signification of a being (*modus significandi*) and the being that is signified

(*res significata*). For this reason, the predicates attributed to God cannot be univocal with any statement of ordinary objects of experience. The terms in statements with God as subject must be partially equivocal with respect to the same terms in statements with objects of experience as subject. Both Aristotle and Aquinas think that this is achievable through the application of analogical language.

### 8.2.2 The two levels of analogy

Aristotle and later Aquinas introduced two levels of analogy: analogy of attribution and analogy of proportionality. Both belong to the same stock and mean the same as comparison. They share similar characteristics in the sense that in both, the predicate belongs formally to one of the analogates, - the prime analogate and relatively and derivatively to the other - the secondary analogate.

Regarding the analogy of attribution, if one says; “John is healthy” and “John’s complexion is healthy”, one means to say, that the adjective “healthy” applies both to John and to his complexion. But the term “health” is ascribed formally and properly to John and derivatively to his complexion.

The peculiarity of the analogy of proportionality is that each analogical term is found formally in each of the analogates, but in a mode that is determined by the nature of the analogate itself. For this reason, it can be asserted that both man and God possess life formally, but that man

possesses it in the mode proper to man and God in that supreme mode that is proper to God.

Analogy of proportionality operates in all academic disciplines and also in our day-to-day lives, because to achieve new knowledge, we often proceed from what we know to what we do not yet know. In philosophy, this is the approach *par excellence*, because we begin from the empirical things to the non-empirical ones. This attitude to knowledge is the soul or engine that drives all research in the sciences and especially the mathematical sciences.

The elastic nature of language is very evident in the practice of definitions. In definitions, we regulate and determine how we want to use a given word. For instance, the word “East-West-Road” can be used to designate the road that links the eastern with the western parts of Nigeria. In doing this, we are not analyzing what is there before us, we are rather regulating for the future how the word is applied and understood. So by way of definition we can say:

East-West-Road = def: Expressway  
that links Eastern and Western Nigeria.

This essentially is what happens in all definitions. In acts of definition the elasticity of language shows very evidently.

From the foregoing, we see how relativism can guarantee some autonomy and tolerance. We see, too, that relativism does not mean the same thing as arbitrariness, because if what is true for you, is false for me and vice versa, we run the risk of violating the principle of non-contradiction, and if we are to avoid anarchy in the society, in academics and in all spheres of life, we cannot

afford to reject the laws of logic. We can say, then, that there are some merits in relativism.

#### 8. Merits of Relativism

Besides what has so far been said, in this regard, relativism has led to the rise of comparative cultural studies – a feat that was unimaginable so many years ago.

The central idea of comparative cultural studies, is that there is no such thing as absolute universal truth. Truth is taken as it applies to individual cultures. We may think that western science and worldview reveal absolute truth about the world, but cultural relativists say that other cultures and societies have their own perspectives of truth and worldviews. This to my mind constitutes a serious point of ideological divergence between, the older cultural anthropologists and more contemporary ones, who follow new rules of sociological theory.

The naturalist view that the methods of the social sciences should closely correspond with those of the natural sciences, is giving way to the new view that social phenomena are metaphysically distinguishable from natural science phenomena, because they are intentional. They are intentional because they depend on the meaningful actions of individuals. Being intentional, they require intentional explanation, not causal explanation.

- This new understanding of the nature of social phenomena is greatly proposed and projected by contemporary philosophy, especially in the areas of phenomenology, existentialism and pragmatism. Result of research in these areas of contemporary

philosophical thought have influenced much of new ways of looking at social science theories. This is evident in the writings of Max Weber, Alfred Schutz, Peter Winch, Harold Garfinkel etc. in what has come to be called *Verstehens* (understanding) sociology. The goal of this new rule of social science studies, is the realization that human social action is purposive and meaningful and the explanations of the social sciences must be related to the values and ideals of the actors it studies.

Pioneer works in this area that show that social inquiry is to provide interpretations of human conduct within the context of culturally specific meaningful arrangements are available in the writings of deconstructionist post modernist thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault etc.<sup>37</sup> True enough there is merit in cultural relativism; yet, outright, such relativism would serve no use. A more, needed response to the situation should be intercultural dialogue among the cultures. Such dialogue should aim at mutual acceptance and tolerance of the values that are richly present in the various cultures of the world. This ought to be the right disposition of academics in the years ahead.

For the foregoing reasons, there should be more constructive and creative collaborative research engagements between the humanities and the social science studies and between these and the other disciplines, because to have a holistic overview of reality all disciplines must work together. And for us even to have the right platform for intercultural dialogue, we must try to

know what our cultural values are all about. To achieve this, there should be in the Nigerian Universities centres for the study of African cultures and worldview. This is not what general studies alone can achieve, at least not in the way it is being organized.

Perspectival research should gradually give way to a more holistic conception of reality. The more the disciplines understand one another, the more they would realize that every discipline presupposes and complements the others. For instance, there is so much metaphysics in physics and the other sciences. Religion and the sciences sometime say the same things using different modes of language and expression.

If we look at science and philosophy, for instance, we notice that science is saturated with philosophy. This is evident in the form of theories about how to conduct the scientific enterprise, in questions about how things become accessible to scientific investigation.

Generally speaking, and to show that all disciplines are interrelated, there are only two types of knowledge: scientific and philosophical knowledge. This is to say that all knowledge is summed up in knowledge of facts and in knowledge of values. For this reason, to have the right orientation and adequate balance in the pursuit of knowledge, there must be a good blend between the two and this is the reason why a well educated man or woman must be sound in character and in learning.

## 9. Conclusion

Mr. Vice Chancellor Sir,

In this lecture, we have examined the various perceptions of reality and truth. We have seen how language stays at the center of every knowledge, to the extent that what we know is to a very great extent a function of the language we speak.

In this exercise, we have tried to show the nature, scope and utility of the philosophic enterprise. We have seen that most of our beliefs about truth and reality lead to serious problems, if they are closely examined; even though they seem intuitively acceptable and problemless.

The question of whether truth is objective or relative is a complex question that cannot be answered with a straight forward “yes” or “no”. The suggestion that is greatly favoured is that it is both objective and relative. If one says that truth is relative one presupposes that there is some sense in which it is objective. If one says that truth is objective, one implicitly says that it is relative in the sense that it is translatable into specific concrete languages and perspectives.

In philosophical inquiry, what is aimed at may not necessarily be the solution of any given problem, but as is usually the case, in all philosophical engagements, the mind is stirred, concepts are clarified and made more explicit, prejudices are pointed out and argumentatively shaken, old beliefs are reviewed, dogmatic standpoints are re-examined, room is made for alternative views. This is the exercise we have just carried out in this lecture. I want to thank you all for participating in this exercise.

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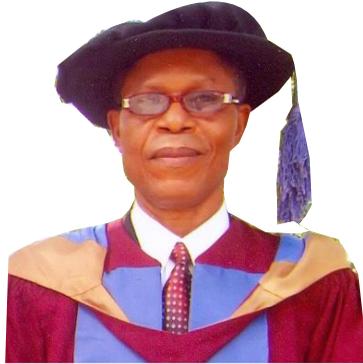
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**CITATION ON  
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Professor Boniface Enyeribe Nwigwe was born on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1949 to late Paa Matthew and Mrs. Catherine Nwigwe of Umuokrika in Ahiazu Local Government Area, Imo State.

He began very early to go to school, but had an unsettled primary school education as he constantly accompanied his father, who was a school teacher, on teaching engagements to various parts of the then Eastern Region.

On completion of his primary education in 1962, he did his post primary education in the then distinguished Mbase Secondary School, Imo State from 1963 – 1971. The undue delay in the secondary school was as a result of the civil war at the time. Even though the school is located in the village, it was very renowned in academics and sports and thus attracted

students from all over Nigeria. This gave him the opportunity to meet and know people from different parts of the country.

After his secondary school education and contrary to the expectations of his friends, family and relations, he opted for the priesthood, having been so positively influenced by the lifestyle of his senior brother Monsignor (Dr.) L.U. Nwigwe.

At the Bigard Memorial Seminary Enugu, an affiliate of the Urban University Rome, he studied philosophy and theology and was promptly ordained a priest barely four years after - graduating magna cum Laude in both the B.A. and the B. D. examinations in 1977.

After a brief stint at Parish work in Owerri (from 1978 – 1979), he left for the then Western Germany where after achieving the requisite knowledge of the German language, he was admitted into the prestigious University of Münster in 1980, to study Comparative Linguistics, Sociology and Philosophy. He quickly obtained the M.A. degree of the University of Münster in 1983. Thereafter in a record time of two years, he obtained a Ph.D in 1985 from the same University with the topic “Temporal Logic, Omniscience and Human Freedom: Perspectives in Analytic Philosophy”.

### **Working Experience**

After his masters degree, he served as an assistant to Professor Dr. Fernando Inciarte, who was then the Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Münster. His work entailed being in-charge of the Department of Philosophy Library and helping to make available to the Professor relevant books and other forms of literature for lectures and seminars. During this period, he simultaneously served in several rectories, chaplaincies and parishes in Germany. He carried out his duties so effectively

that, till date, he is frequently invited for summer relief duties by those German parishes and chaplaincies.

Back to Nigeria in early 1986, he briefly served as Latin and English teacher at St. Peter-Claver Seminary, Okpala for seven months. Thereafter he served as assistant Priest at Owerri and was appointed to serve as lecturer at the seat of Wisdom Seminary, Owerri, for two academic sessions. In 1988, with the permission of his Bishop, he transferred to the University of Port Harcourt where he has remained till date.

### **Academic Responsibility in and outside Port Harcourt**

Professor Nwigwe has taught almost all aspects of philosophy at all academic levels in the Department and has been part of very many academic responsibilities in and outside the University of Port Harcourt.

These include serving from 1996 – 1998 as executive member of the National Institute of Teachers' Writing workshop and as External examiner respectively to Imo State University (1999 – 2003), Claretian Institute of Philosophy, Nekede Owerri (2002 – 2003), University of Nigeria, Nsukka (2008 till date, for their M.A. and Ph.D. Programmes), Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka (2008 – till date), University of Ife (2009 till date), University of Lagos (2010 till date), among others.

Professor Nwigwe has also served on two occasions as part of NUC accreditation panel to Universities, Seminaries and theological affiliates of the University of Port Harcourt, and others.

He served as treasurer and executive member of the Nigerian Philosophical Association from 2004 – 2008.

Beyond these, Professor Nwigwe has supervised over sixty undergraduate projects, twenty masters theses, fifteen doctorate dissertations and many of his former supervisees are now senior academics in the Department of Philosophy, University of Port Harcourt and other Universities.

### **Administrative Positions Held**

Besides serving on numerous adhoc and statutory committees in the Department of Philosophy, the Faculty of Humanities and the University, he has served two consecutive terms as Acting Head of Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies and Department of Philosophy (1997 – 1999, and 2001 – 2003, respectively; and as Dean of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Port Harcourt (2008 – 2010).

### **Extra- Curricula Responsibilities**

Professor Nwigwe has served as Acting Chaplain and Associate Chaplain to the Chapel of Annunciation, University of Port Harcourt. He has assisted in the establishment of church centres and parishes in the Diocese of Port Harcourt. He has also served as Chaplain, Knights of St. John International, Archdiocese of Owerri. He is currently the Vice President of the Unique Uniport Co-operative Association.

### **Publications**

Professor Nwigwe has published seven books, and over thirty articles in local and international Journals.

### **Awards, Honours And Recognitions**

Professor Nwigwe's University education was jointly sponsored by the Diocese of Münster and Missio Aachen, Germany. His 1985 doctoral dissertation was adjudged so good that the entire work was published by the Peter Lang Publishing Company, Frankfurt, Germany.

Other awards include:

- Award of Excellence, National Association of Philosophy Students (Uniport Chapter) 2007.
- Peer group award of excellence, from the Mbaise Secondary School Old Boys Association, 2007.

### **Personal Attributes**

All who have interacted with Professor Boniface Enyeribe Nwigwe would not have failed to notice his friendly and amiable nature. Soft spoken, humble and extremely modest, he lives by personal example – conducting himself with quiet dignity and the highest level of personal integrity at all times. Never to get embroiled in any unnecessary divisive controversy, he always strives to promote peace and harmony based on truth and justice. He truly reflects the most desirable attributes of a man of God – truly a role model to many.

### **Conclusion**

Vice Chancellor Sir, it is my singular honour and privilege, to present to you, to deliver the 86<sup>th</sup> Inaugural Lecture of the University of Port Harcourt, a fine gentleman and distinguished scholar, a renowned philosopher, a highly respected and beloved man of God, a bridge-builder and peace-maker, an incisive thinker and a thorough-bred and committed academic – Professor Boniface Enyeribe Nwigwe.

**Professor Michael N. Oti**