

PHILOSOPHY AS A HANDMAID OF THEOLOGY: DYNAMISM OF QUEENSHIP AND HANDMAIDEN OF SCIENCES.

Anacletus Ogbunkwu PhD.

Department of Philosophy,
Pope John Paul II Seminary, Okpuno Awka South.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is an attempt to establish that philosophy is both the queen and handmaid of theology and other sciences. Using the method of analysis, this paper makes a historical and critical conceptual assessment of both philosophy and theology to understand the lines of queenship and handmaiden in the relationship between philosophy and theology. The paper studies philosophy as a rational inquiry into all the vicissitudes of life while theology is the science of God in relations to creatures especially the human person. This paper establishes that Philosophy is historically the first professional discipline which supplies the tool of reason to all other sciences and theology inclusive. The implication of the relationship between philosophy as a handmaid to theology is not that of slavery but as a minister or in the service of rational inquiry. This is not a relationship of superiority and subordinate but of service. Thus, philosophy provides theology with the tools for exegesis, interpretations, analysis, historicity, proofs/defense of dogma/faith, etc. Therefore, philosophy can be said to be the handmaid of theology while maintaining its position as the queen of all sciences.

Keywords: Philosophy, Theology, queen, handmaid, reason, faith, etc.

Introduction

Philosophy as a handmaid of Theology has evoked lots of emotional and rational concerns in the history of philosophy especially in the mediaeval era. It was a common saying in the Middle Ages that *philosophia ancilia theologiae* that is, philosophy

is a handmaid of Theology. Minding the seemingly extremes in their methods of operations, it becomes difficult to understand how philosophy could be a handmaid of Theology. While philosophy deals with reason, Theology deals with faith, hence one would immediately begin to imagine the incompatibility of these two extremes. If logic is the tool of doing philosophy, could it replace faith as the religious tool of knowing God? Also, could faith replace reason as the tool of doing philosophy? Thus this topic poses a great challenge in understanding since both terms, philosophy and theology seem so incompatible considering their natures, methods, conclusions, etc. Philosophy has always been known as the queen of all sciences. Thus it becomes seemingly derogatory referring to Philosophy as the handmaid of theology, hence introducing a puzzle needing further explanation for clarification. It was Peter Damian (91-150 AD) who introduced this concept, *ancilia theologiae* (Philosophical Sciences are the handmaiden of Theology). In the middle ages, the Angelic Theologian, Thomas Aquinas and Clement of Alexandria popularized the concept. This was to express his belief that philosophy should serve theology. In the modern era, John Locke (1632-1702AD) the enlightenment philosopher also referred to philosophy as the handmaid but to all sciences.

Conceptual understanding of Philosophy as the Queen of all Sciences

The word philosophy was born when the Greek philosopher and mathematician, Pythagoras of Samos (572-497 BC) was asked if he thought he was a wise man. He answered no, he rather referred to himself as a lover of wisdom¹- a *Philosophia*. Etymologically philosophy is the Anglicized form of the Greek word *Philosophia* (φιλοσοφία) which is a combination of two Greek words; “Philos” (φίλος) and “Sophia” (σοφία). Here “Philos” (φίλος) means love and “Sophia” (σοφία) means wisdom or knowledge. This etymological translation as philosophy became popularized around

the 1175 CEⁱⁱ. Thus philosophy can be defined as the love of wisdom or the pursuit of knowledge/ wisdom such that in the ancient Greek world, philosophers were seen as individuals who loved wisdom and pursued knowledge. They were men who commanded respect for the reason of their intellectual powers. Thus one who is thirsty and goes in search for knowledge is a philosopher.

Philosophy is the study of fundamental truths about all realities; the world and ourselves. It is a reasoned understanding towards establishing standards of evidence, creating methods of evaluating ideas and arguments, conflict resolution, asking questions, examination, explaining fact, finding relationships between ideas and assumptions, etc. Philosophy is a rational inquiry into all realities or vicissitude of life. It is a systematic discipline which seeks to provide solutions to the basic questions regarding the ultimate meaning of life as a whole and human life in particular.

This search for knowledge is what Dilthey referred as “philosophic spirit”. Here “philosophic spirit” is the disposition that makes a philosopher to “leave no valuations and aspirations unexamined and no piece of knowledge isolated; it seeks the ground for the validity of whatever is valid”.ⁱⁱⁱ Philosophy can be approached in two senses; ordinary and professional sense. Ordinary sense of philosophy refers to world views of persons or groups in which perceptions, feelings, are expressed as product of reflections and speculations^{iv}. The professional sense of philosophy is an expertise philosophical engagement. It is a formal philosophical engagement or the methodological activity of critical and reflective thinking as applied to various aspects of human life and experience. This is why the modern philosopher, John Locke refers to philosophy as the maid of all sciences. For Locke, philosophy has the duty to clarify assumptions, concepts and definitions, interpret, analyze and synthesize the results of all sciences.^v

The nature of philosophy is a way of studying both the physical world, mental world and all realities through rational inquiry. With its tool of rational inquiry, philosophy boundlessly pries into all areas of human experience. This dynamism of friendliness to all fields of human endeavour makes philosophy so diverse with numerous branches. Since it is in the nature of philosophy to pry into all vicissitudes of life with its tools of rational inquiry, when philosophy pries into the methods of acquiring/sourcing and verifications of knowledge, it is referred as epistemology. When philosophy pries into the moral principles of conduct, it is referred as Ethics. When philosophy pries into the principles of correct reasoning, it is referred as logic. When philosophy pries into the nature of reality and being, it is said to be Metaphysics. Similarly, with the tool of rational inquiry, when philosophy pries into the field of medicine, it is referred as philosophy of medicine, when philosophy pries into the field of religion, it is referred as the philosophy of religion, when philosophy pries into the field of mathematics, it is referred as the philosophy of mathematics, etc.

Philosophy has always been considered as the queen of all sciences because it is the study of everything that “is”. Nevertheless, the status of philosophy as the queen of all sciences is better referred as the queen-servant of all sciences because it both rules all sciences and serves all sciences with its method of rational inquiries. Originally, philosophy as the oldest discipline was considered as the mother of all sciences such that all intellectuals of old were all philosophers. It was till the time of the philosopher - Hippocrates who began as a philosopher and broke away to promote medicine as an independent discipline, hence initiated separation/independence of other sciences from philosophy. In spite of this separation, philosophy has remained the foundation of all sciences supplying them with its tools and methods of rational inquiry.

On the Concept of Theology

The word theology is derived from the Greek word, *theologia*, (θεολογία) which is a combination of two Greek words; *theos* (θεος) and *logos* (λογος). The word *theos* (θεος) translates as God while *logos* (λογος) translates as “word, study, discourse, principles, rule, reason,” etc. Thus, Theology can be said to mean the study, science or discourse on God. It was first used by Plato around 380 BC to refer to discourse on God and his relation to the world. Thus God is the primary object of theology while creatures or world is the secondary objects of theology. Also, theology can be defined as faith seeking understanding that is, *fides quaeris intellectum*. This imputes responsibility upon man such that God is simply there and man makes attempt to comprehend better what God has revealed and man has accepted in faith.^{vi}

Since Theology refers to discourse on God and his relation to the world as both the primary and secondary objects, it is both a speculative and practical science. The first objective shows Theology as a speculative science because it contemplates God and the things of God which is the specialty of dogmatic or systematic Theology. Also, as a science of God in relation to the world, Theology is a practical science. As a practical science, Theology directs human beings to God his creator by ordering human conduct. Theology is concerned with God who disclosed himself through revelation and directs human beings to God who is their ultimate end. Also, Theology can be said to be superior to all other sciences which are primarily concerned with creatures and immediate ends while itself is concerned with God.^{vii}

According to Gratesh, Theology is chiefly about the knowledge of revelation by the methods of scholarship, to penetrate, clarify, and interpret, to make appropriate application of it to life, to discover created analogies useful for illustrating revealed mysteries, to arrange revealed truths in a systematic order, and to answer objections against the whole of revelation or against particular

revealed truths.^{viii} For Aquinas, Theology is a science in an epistemological sense, Chenu records that if theology is a science, reasoning is a major operation in Theology.^{ix}

Qualifying Philosophy as a Handmaid of Theology

The adage, *philosophia ancilla theologiae* (Philosophy as a Handmaid of Theology) originated from Peter Damian. Thus Theology employs Philosophy as an instrument of truth in order to establish conclusions which are not philosophic but theological. However, it should be noted that the term *Ancilla* does not imply a slave rather theology employs philosophy as a minister of states in accordance with its own proper laws.^x This claim of *philosophia ancilla theologiae* gained prominence in the scholastic era by the Theologians of the middle ages. To the question whether philosophy is the handmaid of theology has attracted lots of intellectual debates, leading to two extremes in the similitude of cat and dog living under the same roof.^{xi} There was a kind of mutual suspicion between the two camps.

The mutual suspicion between both extremes raises lots of questions whether philosophy is a slave or housekeeper to theology. Gyula maintains that there is sufficient autonomy between philosophy and theology such that *philosophia ancilla theologiae* does not imply slavery but complementary relationship^{xiii} such that philosophy serves theological discourse with her methods of reasoning, language and logic. Thus theology is a beneficiary of philosophical methods of language analysis, logical discourse, method of rational inquiry and questions. In this sense, philosophy becomes a supportive co-worker with theology in the field of faith. Every discipline of study can be said to be scientific. It is a science because it operates with some basic principles, methods or rules that must be reasonable. To be reasonable means it must be systematic, logical and procedural. This implies that every field/discipline of study must be philosophical. Thus philosophy

can be assuredly said to be the queen of all sciences and at the same time, the handmaid of all sciences. This is because philosophy as the most ancient of all disciplines provides the foundation and basis upon which all other sciences build and ratify their assumptions. As a rational inquiry into all realities and human endeavors, philosophy is a master of all sciences in as much as they qualify as sciences. As the foundation of all sciences, all other sciences must test and strengthen their assumptions in philosophical methods, hence all disciplines in Nigerian universities and beyond must expose students to the study of philosophy as a foundation before full integration into a particular discipline of study. More so the highest academic degree in any field/discipline is a doctor of philosophy (PhD) in that field/discipline. Thus philosophy is inextricable in all disciplines/sciences such that theology cannot be an exception, hence if theology is a science of God then it needs the tool of philosophy to establish its claims. Therefore, if theology is a science, it must be philosophical!

Though both disciplines of philosophy and theology are autonomous, they do not contradict each other. According to Aquinas, just as grace builds on nature and does not destroy it, so the light of faith does not do away with the light of reason. Aquinas claims that there is a form of overlapping between philosophy and theology. Wherever reason is capable of knowing something, faith strictly speaking, is necessary, and what faith uniquely knows through revelation cannot be known by natural reason alone.^{xiii} Philosophy examines, understands and interprets natural phenomena as it affects human experiences or human beings. It provides answers to the fundamental questions or the basic questions that confront man and his existence in the universe.

Pope John Paul II's encyclical on Faith and Reason gives a deep insight into the relationship between faith and reason or theology and philosophy respectively. According to Pope John Paul II,

philosophy is one resource among many generated by humankind in order to advance knowledge of truth. It is also directly concerned with asking the question of life's meaning and with sketching an answer, hence he referred to philosophy as one of "the noblest human tasks" which "shows that desire for truth is part of human nature itself".^{xiv}

Furthermore, John Paul II states that;

there is a form of knowledge which belongs to the order of faith which is higher than the knowledge belonging to the order of (proper to) natural reason. Worthy of note is that these two orders of knowledge are neither identical with nor mutually exclusive from one another. They differ with regard to their source and their object. The knowledge proper to the order of reason has its source in sense experience and as its object those things which reason can derive from such experience. The knowledge proper to faith has its source in divine faith and its object are those things which God reveals to mankind. There is, nevertheless, a "profound and indissoluble unity" between these orders of knowledge.^{xv}

Quite unlike Anselm who states that reason cannot pass judgment on matters of faith, since that is not its role, Thomas argues that there is a great harmony between faith and reason because both ultimately come from God. For Aquinas, faith and reason cannot contradict one another. According to Aquinas, just as grace builds upon and perfects nature, so does faith relate with reason. Though philosophy and theology are two different disciplines, they relate meaningfully to each other. A good knowledge of philosophy is super necessary in order to understand Theology, hence a good Philosophical knowledge enables one to appreciate more deeply the meaning of theological realities. Typical of this claim is that the knowledge of Aristotle's *Categories* enabled Gregory of Nyssa to

develop a good doctrine of the Trinity^{xvi}. Also, the church fathers of the mediaeval age developed their theological studies with their foundation of philosophy from the ancient discourses. This is evident in the different application of philosophical arguments in the proof of God's existence by Aquinas, Anselm, Augustine, Boethius,^{xvii} etc. If philosophy has its end as the attainment of wisdom and wisdom is the knowledge of the first principles and causes and no doubt, these first principles and causes are divine, therefore theology is the end of successful philosophy. Thus for Aquinas, theology is simply philosophy that deals with divine things.^{xviii}

A major service that philosophy renders to theology is that it allows a deeper penetration and exegesis into the truths that are already known by revelation or through faith. For instance, the application of philosophical ethical principles and logical analysis help to interpret revealed truths for better understanding. Typical of this claim is seen in the creation story which claims that man was created in the image of God (Gen 1: 28). From this we can conclude that man is different from all other animals who were created simply from the word of God's mouth, hence man commands some respect and dignity above other animals such that man cannot be owned by another man in slavery as man owns an animal. Thus interpretation of faith, doctrine and revelations are highly aided with the tool of reason which is a philosophical method.

Conclusion

This paper has made effort towards delineating the claim that philosophy is the handmaid of theology while establishing a model of relationship between philosophy and theology as that of service. Here philosophy was described as a systematic discipline which seeks to provide solutions to the basic questions regarding the ultimate meaning of life as a whole and human life in particular^{xix}. For Locke, philosophy has the duty to clarify assumptions, concepts and definitions, interpret, analyze and synthesize the

results of all sciences.^{xx} The philosopher's attitude or "philosophic spirit" refers to the disposition that makes a philosopher to "leave no valuations and aspirations unexamined and no piece of knowledge isolated; it seeks the ground for the validity of whatever is valid".^{xxi} In the same vein, theology is described as faith seeking understanding that is, *fides quaerens intellectum*. It is a rational effort man makes to comprehend better what God has revealed and accepted by man in faith.^{xxii}

The claim that *philosophia ancilla theologiae* (Philosophy as a Handmaid of Theology) has evoked great debates from the ancient times to the contemporary time. This debate has been raising questions whether philosophy is a slave to theology? Historically philosophy has been established as the queen of all sciences as the first of all professional disciplines. It becomes seemingly a contradiction for the same philosophy to be addressed as a handmaid of theology. This paper establishes that the relationship between philosophy and theology is not that of slavery but of service^{xxiii}. The concept *Ancilla* here does not imply a slave rather theology employs philosophy as a minister of service in accordance with its own proper laws.^{xxiv}

Thus philosophy offers help and service to theology in trying to articulate, elucidate, clarify and introduce deeper understanding of some of the crucial issues of our belief. It is an invaluable and highly instrumental friend of theology. It is an invaluable aid and instrument towards explicating difficult religious concepts. The tools of philosophy allows a deeper penetration and exegesis into the truths that are already known by revelation or through faith. Therefore, though philosophy is the queen of all sciences, it can be said to be a handmaid of theology minding its tool of rational inquiry into theological discourse.

Endnotes

-
- ⁱ Joanne Ciulla, *Philosophy as Handmaiden and Queen* (Richmond: University Press, 2011), 45.
- ⁱⁱ Soren Overgaard; Paul Gilbert and Stephen Burwood. *What is Philosophy*, (Cambridge: University Press, 2013), 17-44.
- ⁱⁱⁱ H. P. Rickman (ed.) *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1979), 129.
- ^{iv} Olusegun Oladipo, *thinking about Philosophy: A Guide*, (Ibadan: Hope Publication, 2013), 11-12.
- ^v John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (London: E.P. Button, 1961), 34.
- ^{vi} Gratsch, E.J. Civile, J.R. Raph, J.L. (eds). *Principles of Catholic Theology: A Synthesis of Dogma and Marais*. (New York: Alba House, 1981), 17.
- ^{vii} Brent Adkins and Paul Hinlicky, *Rethinking Philosophy and Theology with Delueze*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishers, 2013), 25
- ^{viii} Gratsch, E.J. Civile, J.R. Raph, J.L. (eds). *Principles of Catholic Theology*: 18.
- ^{ix} M.D. Chenu. *Is Theology a Science?* (New York: Hawthorn Books Publishers, 1964), 28.
- ^x Jacques Maritain, “An Essay on Christian Philosophy” <https://www3.nd.edu/~maritain/jmc/etext/aeocp15.htm> accessed on December 10, 2024.
- ^{xi} M. Nidoncelle. *Is there a Christian Philosophy?* Trans. By Lllytyd Trethowan, (New York: Hawthorn Books Publishers, 1960), 23.
- ^{xii} Gyula Klima, “Ancilla Theologiae Vs DOpera Philosophorum: St. Thomas, Latin Averroism and the Autonomy of Philosophy” <https://faculty.fordham.edu/klima/ancilla.htm>

- ^{xiii} T. Aquinas. *Faith, Reason and Theology*, trans, Armand Maurer. (Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987), 82.
- ^{xiv} John Paul II, *Faith and Reason*, (Indiana: Veritas Publishers, 1998), 42
- ^{xv} John Paul II, *Faith and Reason*, 46
- ^{xvi} Brent Adkins and Paul Hinlicky, *Rethinking Philosophy and Theology with Delueze*, 26.
- ^{xvii} Simon Hewitt, *Negative theology and Philosophical Analysis*, (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 21.
- ^{xviii} John Paul II, *Faith and Reason*, 46
- ^{xix} H. P. Rickman (ed.) *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, 130.
- ^{xx} John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, (London: E.P. Button, 1961), 34.
- ^{xxi} H. P. Rickman (ed.) *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1979), 129.
- ^{xxii} Gratsch, E.J. Civile, J.R. Raph, J.L. (eds). *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 18
- ^{xxiii} M. Nidoncelle. *Is there a Christian Philosophy?*21
- ^{xxiv} Jacques Maritain, “AN Essay on Christian Philosophy” <https://www3.nd.edu/~maritain/jmc/etext/aeocp15.htm> accessed on December 10, 2024.