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The Relationship between Philosophy and Culture

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Abstract

Over the years, there has been this controversy over the relationship between philosophy and culture. It is an issue that has always polarized scholars including philosophers. On one side, a group of philosophers and scholars hold the view that philosophy is distinct from culture, whereas an opposing group is of the opinion that the two concepts are merely different names for the same thing. Using analytic and hermeneutic methods, this work takes a critical look at the two concepts -- philosophy and culture -- with a view to showing the relationship between them

Introduction

This work deals with philosophy and culture *vis a vis* showing the relationship between them. In doing this, we shall first discuss the two concepts separately and somewhat extensively. Thereafter, we shall discuss the relationship between them.

What is Philosophy?

Generally, the word 'Philosophy' means different things. Sometimes, it is used as a replacement for the word, 'rationale'. For instance, we may ask. What is the

philosophy behind the American attack on Iraq? Which means: What is the rationale or justifying thinking behind the American attack on Iraq?

Again, the word, philosophy is used to refer to the guide for action or guiding principle. In this sense, we sometimes hear somebody ask the question: What is your philosophy of life? In other words, what is the guiding principle of your life? To that, the one may answer: My philosophy of life is that what will be, will be (*quod sera sera*).

Sometimes too, we hear somebody say to a bereaved friend: ‘Take it philosophically’. In other words, that the person in question should accept his or her loss with the mind of a philosopher, or as a philosopher would, that is, with mental quietude. The one who gives such advice, knowingly or unknowingly, makes an allusion to the philosophical view that pain or suffering is a natural condition of life, which must be accepted.

Coming to the world of philosophy itself, philosophers have no univocal definition of philosophy. Etymologically, the word, ‘philosophy’ derived from two Greek words – *philos* (loving) or *philein* (love of) and *sophia* (wisdom). Hence, etymologically, ‘philosophy’ means “the love of wisdom.” (Udoidem, 1992:4) Besides the etymological definition, many others have been advanced by philosophers. As already noted, there is no universally accepted definition of philosophy among philosophers. This, according to Randoll in Aghamelu (2005:6), is because

...in every definition turns out to be the expression of an individual and it is limited in conception reflecting only the practice of that enterprise in the definers own culture and shutting out as much as it includes.

In other words, every definition of philosophy usually reflects the intellectual background, ideology, cosmology, orientation or age (i.e. generation) of the philosopher in question. For instance, the ancient philosopher, Pythagoras defined philosophy as “the brainchild of wonder.” (Aghamelu, 2005:6) Socrates, operating from the background of morality, defined philosophy as “a reflective self-examination of principles of the just and happy life.” (Udoidem, 1992, p. 3) Plato defined philosophy as “the science which is the science of itself and of the other sciences as well.” (Plato, Republic, p. 8) He also defined it as “the acquisition of knowledge.” (Plato, Euthydemus: 370) In another of his books called *Phaedo*, Plato also described philosophy as “the noblest and greatest of art.” (Plato, Phaedo, p. 376) Finally, in his most famous book, *Republic*, Plato concluded that “philosophy has direct access to true reality.” (Plato, Republic, p. 374) Hence, he described the philosopher as the man “whose heart is fixed on reality,” (Omogbe, 1990:1). That is, the man whose passion it is to seek the truth. (Omogbe, 1990, p. 1) Aristotle seems to agree with Plato

because for him (Aristotle), philosophy is “a systematic search for truth” (Omoregbe, 1990, p.1). The hedonist philosopher, Epicurus defined philosophy as “an activity which secures the happy life by means of discussion and argument.” (Omoregbe, 1990:1) The French philosopher, Rene Descartes defined philosophy as “the mother of the sciences.” (Aghamelu, 2005, p. 6) David Hume refers to philosophy simply as “the moral science” (Aghamelu, 2005, p.7). For Immanuel Kant, philosophy is “the articulation of the spirit of the age.” (Udoiem, 1992, p.3) Ludwig Wittgenstein defined philosophy as ‘I know not what.’ (Udoiem, 1992, p.3) He also defined it as a ‘conceptual disease of which we should be cured’ and states that philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thought. (Udoiem 1992, p.3)

We can go on and on to mention many other definitions of philosophy, and we can still see that every definition is distinct from others because it naturally reflects the nature or nurture of the definer. For this reason, the etymological definition of philosophy as the love of wisdom has remained the meeting point, and as such, the standard definition of philosophy. However, some of these individual definitions enjoy a wide range of acceptability.

As an academic discipline, philosophy has five major branches, which are: Metaphysics, Epistemology, Ethics, Logic and Aesthetics. Metaphysics is the branch which studies the nature of being, that is, the nature of reality as a whole, including issues about God, man and the universe. Etymologically, the word “Metaphysics” was derived from two Greek words- *meta*, meaning after or beyond and *physica*, meaning physics or nature. Metaphysics, therefore, means “After Physics”. The word *Metaphysics* is believed to have originated from Andronicus, the editor of Aristotle’s works who, after arranging Aristotle’s works on physics, did not know what to call the other ones that followed. He then decided to refer to them simply as Metaphysics, that is, after physics. Later, Metaphysics came to be seen as the discipline which studies being. What is the essence of being? What are the essences of things? What is responsible for the being of things? In other words, what is the origin or source of the existence of being? Why do things exist? Why is there something, instead of nothing? Who is man? What is the purpose of life, if there is? Does the soul exist? If it does, what is its origin? Is there an interaction between the body and the soul? Where is the location of the soul in the body? Etc. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy which deals with the nature, the sources, the means, the limit, the extent and the validity of human knowledge. The word, epistemology was derived from two Greek words - *episteme*, which means knowledge and *logos* meaning theory or study. Hence, etymologically, *epistemology* means knowledge theory; or better put, theory of knowledge. It raises such question as: What does it really mean to know? How do we know that we know what we claim to know? When we say we know this or that, what do we mean? In other words, what constitutes knowledge? That is, what is the nature

of human knowledge? What is the difference between knowledge and belief? Can we know something without believing it? Can we believe something without knowing it?

Ethics is the branch of philosophy which deals with the morality of human conduct. It is also known as Moral Philosophy. The word *ethics* was actually gotten from the Greek word *ethos*, which means character or way of life. Technically, ethics refers to the study of the principles of human action. The first great moral philosopher in Western philosophy was Socrates. With Socrates, ethics became an important part of Western Philosophy. The central question of ethics is ‘How does man live a moral life? Put differently, ‘What is the moral standard? The main ethical theories in the history of Western philosophy are different answers to this central question of ethics. Some other questions of ethics are: What is good? Is there anything that is intrinsically good or bad? Are there circumstances under which it is proper to tell lies? Is abortion wrong? Can we ‘help’ a patient who is in serious pain by taking his life? In other words, is euthanasia justifiable?

Logic is the branch of philosophy which deals with rules or principles used to distinguish correct reasoning from incorrect reasoning and correct arguments from incorrect arguments. Hence, logic is, sometimes, said to be the science of arguments. The word ‘logic’ was derived from the Greek word - *logos*, which can be translated variously as reason, justification or rationale. The implication here is that logic is synonymous with rationality. Hence, to operate without logic is to operate irrationally. Since all men are rational, it implies that all men are imbued with some logic and they practice logic – knowingly or unknowingly. For example, logic is applied in soup-cooking. As the old woman’s pot is on the fire, she determines what to put into it, and what should follow after what interval. This is a case of the application of natural logic. However, logic, as a branch of philosophy is a special thing. This is academic or scientific logic. It is not the kind of logic common to all men. It is the kind of logic seen as the science of thought. In other words, academic logic is interested in reasoning. There are two major kinds of arguments or reasoning – inductive and deductive.

Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy which deals with the assessment of beauty and works of Arts. Etymologically, the word, *aesthetics* was derived from the Greek word, *aesthet-ikos*, which means perception. As an academic discipline, Aesthetics studies what immediately appeals to our visual and auditory powers of perception. By the way, there are three main types of beauty – intellectual beauty, moral beauty and physical beauty. It is pertinent to point out here that aesthetics is concerned with physical beauty. It raises and tries to address such issues as: What is the nature of Art? What is the purpose of Art? How does one recognize a good work of Art? In other words, what makes a work of Art good or bad? What is the nature of beauty? Are there objective standards of beauty or is it a subjective phenomenon? Where does the essence

of beauty lie? Does it reside in the thing or person said to be beautiful, or is it in the 'eye of the beholder,' or does it exist somewhere outside of both, as held by Plato.

Besides the major areas of philosophy, there are applied areas which include philosophy of language, philosophy of law or jurisprudence, philosophy of history, philosophy of mind or psychology, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of religion, Philosophy of sports and the philosophy of culture.

What is Culture?

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines culture as the "customs and beliefs, arts, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group." (Wehmeier) This implies that the culture of a people is the totality of their life because their way of life includes their language, feeding, proverbs, wise-sayings, religion, clothing, technology, health system, *et cetera*. Hence the culture of a people is what gives them their identity as a people. Culture lives just like those who harbour it. When a people's culture dies, the people no longer exist. Since culture lives, it can also change. The changing of culture is what is referred to as cultural dynamism.

In Nigeria, for instance, prior to the advent of colonialism, the various ethnic nationalities which constitute the present day Nigeria had existed on their own with their respective cultures. However, with the 1914 British amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates, all these cultures which have some similarities and differences amongst them have come together to now make up what is today referred to as Nigerian culture. In spite of the obvious differences among these ethnic cultures, there is still this uniqueness which makes them distinct from Western culture. Colonialism provided the platform for the British to introduce western culture into Nigeria through education and religion. The resulting conflict of culture gave birth to cultural dynamism and the crises of identity which still lingers in Nigeria over half a century of the nation's independence from colonialism. The truth is that the nation is yet to completely extricate itself from the shackles of colonialism. Culture is one area where colonial entanglement has been strong.

In any case, cultural dynamism could be positive or negative. It is positive if it involves either the absorption of acceptable ideas or practices into a culture or the extrication of unacceptable ideas or practices from a culture. For instance, the introduction of the use of mobile phones into the Nigerian culture is a welcome development, as well as the stopping of the killing of twins in Nigeria championed by Lady Slessor, a foreigner who lived virtually all her life in Calabar. On the other hand, cultural dynamism is negative if it involves either the absorption of unacceptable ideas or practices into a culture or the ejection of healthy practices from a culture. For instance, the introduction or absorption of pornographic ideas and materials into the

Nigerian culture is unacceptable, as well as the impression that everything about Nigerian culture is fetish or anachronistic.

Cultural dynamism is usually preceded by acculturation which is the emulation of the objects of one culture by another culture. (Okodo, 2003:93) It is as a result of acculturation that cultural dynamism takes place. Acculturation is either planned or unplanned. In the case of planned acculturation, the objects of one culture are deliberately introduced into another culture. Planned acculturation is common between colonial master nations and their colonies. This was the case with Nigeria under Britain. Another example is that of the Franco-phone West African countries in whose schools the French language and culture were taught. Unplanned acculturation is a situation where a person or two informally begin to imitate a person of another culture or to adopt the objects of a different culture. With time, that aspect of culture gradually spreads and eventually becomes part of the culture of the imitators. In this case, the people of the culture copied may be oblivious of their culture being imitated.

Besides the possibility of cultural dynamism, it is also possible for a people's culture to die since it lives. The dying of a culture is referred to as cultural extinction. A people whose culture dies, technically cease to exist. This is because it is culture that gives a people an identity. It is in recognition of the possibility of cultural dynamism and cultural extinction that cultural revival projects are embarked upon from time to time to resuscitate any dwindling aspect of culture or the entire culture if it is sickly. It is also owing to the great importance of culture to human existence that the United Nations set aside the 21st day of May for the annual celebration of World culture day.

The Relationship between Philosophy and Culture

Over the years, there has been this controversy over the relationship between philosophy and culture. It is an issue that has always polarized scholars including philosophers. On one side, a group of philosophers and scholars hold the view that philosophy is distinct from culture, whereas an opposing group is of the opinion that the two concepts are merely different names for the same thing.

Around the 1970's, 1980's and early 1990's, a debate, which was to be later referred to as the Great Debate on African Philosophy, raged among philosophy scholars in and outside Africa, concerning the existence, nature and scope of African philosophy. (Nwala, 1992:1) One of the issues under contention was whether or not African culture was qualified to be referred to as African Philosophy. Once more, philosophy scholars were divided along two parallel lines. Members of the first group answered 'No' to the question because they viewed philosophy as a universal academic discipline with distinct methodology and specific branches, some of which branches are integral parts of philosophy, and therefore inseparable from it. Those in this first group would, therefore, not tolerate as philosophy any work which did not fit into this

categorical enclave. This group included such scholars as Paulin Houtondji, Henry Maurier, W.A. Hart, Peter Bodunrin, J.E. Wiredu, Robin Horton and Odera Orika. The second group was made up of philosophy scholars who saw philosophy as any system of knowledge, written or not, which portrays the fundamental thought-pattern of a people and which addresses fundamental issues about the existence of the people. So they answered in affirmation to the question because, for them, culture contains philosophy. This group includes such scholars as Kwamme Gyekye, K.C. Anyanwu, Akin Makinde, Molefi Kete Asante, Barry Hallen, Henry Olela, Innocent Onyewuenyi, C.S. Momoh, Joseph Omoregbe and T.U. Nwala. Members of this group held that the culture of a people constitutes their philosophy. T.I. Okeke was like a middleman between these two groups because for him, culture and its contents do not constitute philosophy. But Okere insists that culture provides the raw materials for intellectual reflection which can lead to the emergence of Philosophy. In other words, for him, culture is not philosophy, but culture forms the background for the emergence of philosophy. Presenting his argument against members of the opposing group, T.U. Nwala, in his book, suggests that their opponents in the debate held the opinion they held as a result of their somewhat entanglement in Western education. His words:

Many of the disputants were Western-trained scholars educated either in Western Universities...or in African Universities influenced by the curricula of Western universities. Some of them went straight into the study of philosophy and were introduced to appreciate the meaning, content, branches, methodology and history of Western philosophy. (Nwala, 1992, p.5)

By and large, the direction taken by a scholar on any issue of controversy depends on his view or understanding of the key concepts. On the great debate in question, it is intelligible that scholars in the first group viewed philosophy somehow from the same perspective as Bertrand Russel who saw it as “a critical and rigorous intellectual activity....” (Odimegwu, 2009:1) On the other hand, members of the second group are likely to agree with Joseph Omoregbe in his argument that the worldview or culture of a people constitutes their philosophy. His words:

As man takes a reflective look at himself or the world around him, he is filled with “wonder” and some fundamental questions arise in his mind. When he reflects on these fundamental questions in search of answers, he is philosophizing. (Omoregbe, 1990:4).

Based on this premise, Omoregbe claims that: “...Africa too has its own philosophers, its own Socrates, its own Plato, its own Aristotle.” (Omoregbe, 1990:9) Omoregbe gives a final answer to those opposed to ethno-philosophy in these words: “Wherever there is reflection on the fundamental questions about man, or about the universe (whatever form this reflection may take) there is philosophy”. (Omoregbe, 1985:5).

In dealing with the relationship between philosophy and culture, we are struck not only by the complexity of concepts but also by the meaning of meaning. However, from the foregoing, it is glaring that from a certain angle of conception or perception, culture harbours philosophy. In other words, elements of philosophy can be found in the aspects of culture. In Nigeria, for instance, the cultures of the various ethnic groups, including their proverbs, wise-sayings, traditional stories or folklores and language; contain the philosophies of these ethnic groups. In this sense, Nigerian culture, even in its evolution, reflects the philosophy of the Nigerian people.

Another crucial element in the relationship between philosophy and culture is the fact that in some other sense, philosophy helps to sharpen culture. Philosophy prides itself with the ability to sharpen all spheres of existence, including culture. The application of philosophical principles to the issues of culture is the pre-occupation of the philosophy of culture. These principles include criticality, consistency, logicity, profundity, coherence and comprehensiveness. The philosophy of culture has been of immense help to the development of culture. For example, experience shows that if not for philosophy and philosophers, religious fanatics would have branded everything about our culture as anachronistic and, worse still, fetish.

Conclusion

There is a strong relationship between Philosophy and Culture. Culture forms the background for every Philosophy and, as such, gives meaning to Philosophy. On the other hand, Philosophy helps to rationalize culture and save it from anachronism. Suffice it to say that there are elements of culture in every Philosophy and that there are elements of Philosophy in every culture.

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