

FOLKS-PHILOSOPHY: A SHORT REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

The concept of modern philosophy, attributed to Eurocentric scholars and folk philosophy used to describe African philosophy has become topical. While African philosophy is regarded as narrative and inferior, modern philosophy is said to be superior. This paper argues that there is no such thing as a superior or inferior philosophy but rather African philosophy exists and is coated in the unique African languages. It concludes that Africa should be given its rightful place in History and philosophy.

Introduction

According to Professor Wiredu, philosophy is the tradition of a particular people with certain presuppositions. This means that no people can exist without philosophy. Philosophy therefore is the totality of a people's way of life as determined by their environment. The question is can one limit philosophical exercise to traditional elements only? It must be stated here that philosophy gains a systematic locus once the conflicts of continuity and discontinuity are contained in the inter-flux of given human mental and creative indices. This will lead to geo-localities and geo cultural ties that generate distinctions and differentiations like: Greek philosophy, French philosophy, and Bantu philosophy, English philosophy, European, African etc philosophies.

When such geo-delimitations exist, it distorts facts, but we may have to accept the challenges that we have inflicted serious harm to the objective science of philosophy. It is important to observe that it is not possible to present any formal method of philosophy outside the human cultural milieu. Every philosophy is rooted somewhere. It depicts the culture, history and experience of the people.

Wiredu strongly distinguishes between Folks-Philosophy and Critical-Philosophy. It is in this light that Oladipo (Ibid:14) observes that:

Central to Wiredu's idea of African philosophy is the distinction which he makes between 'African philosophy as folks thought preserved in oral tradition and African philosophy as critical. Individual reflection using modern logic and conceptual techniques. For Wiredu African philosophy should not be equated with African folk thought to grab this equation, he argues, is to be content with the mere narration of the ideas Africans lived by as an adequate fulfillment of the philosopher's task in contemporary Africa. But this kind of contentment is, at best, unfortunate. This is so because such narrations of traditional African conceptions are hardly critical or constructive.

The conflict here is between what is Narrative Philosophy (Traditional (Oral) Philosophy) and Critical Philosophy (Modern Philosophy).

No matter how this is described, it is important to note that such description is dangerous and misleading. What one should be more concerned with is does it convey the experiences and thought system and world view of the people. Does it serve the needs of the environment in which it is used? To what extent do the people and rely on that philosophy. These are the most important factors to be considered. In this case there are ample evidence that this is the case with the African philosophy, as practiced and taught today.

Problem of Modern Philosophy

Sogolo (1983:xiv) states that there is a crisis situation in African philosophy. This view was expressed based on the view that African philosophy is different from modern philosophy. Sogolo must have been shocked by the conceptions of some of his contemporaries. He argues:

If African philosophy means traditional African philosophy, as surprising many people seems to think, then we can forget any pretence of modern philosophizing. In most parts of Africa we would have, in that case, to abstain from such disciplines as symbolic logic and its philosophical interpretation, the philosophy of mathematics and of the natural and social sciences, the theory of knowledge associated with the foregoing disciplines and the moral, political and social philosophy which has arisen as a response to the needs of modern times. We would have to regard all such disciplines as un-African and content ourselves with repeating the proverbs and folk conceptions of our forefathers. Or, should we be moved by some quirk of the spirit to dabble in those modern disciplines, we would have to represent ourselves as venturing into un-African domains.

The concept of modernism is problematic, modern philosophy have methodologies and doctrines arising from, renaissance and scientism, rationalism and empiricism, existentialism epistemology etc. These movements are modern with Eurocentric interpretation. Beyaraza (2005:197) asserts as follows:

So, modernism in a nutshell, stands for Eurocentricism. The European religious experiences for example, were considered to be superior to all the rest in the whole world. Here Christianity despite its universal tenets such as love was spread to the rest of the world as European culture and civilization. Even where the Christian missionaries found better cultural practices than European ones, including those closest to true Christian doctrines, they preferred their inferior European ones. This may be exemplified by the violation of human rights by colonialism and exploitation of colonies despite the Christian commandments against stealing, hatred among others...

The truth is that modernism became Eurocentricism, disguised in different forms. Traditions and philosophies were rendered extinct and inferior. As it was often applied to everything African or black, it is time Eurocentric writers acknowledge the place and contributions of African to world civilization.

Davidson (1969:107) showed that Africa is the cradle of the world's systems and philosophies. It is a disservice to present African philosophy as mere narrative philosophy and reduce its systems to oral traditional narratives. Philosophy is created out of the actions of man. Philosophy implies practical domestication in intellectual human habits that may not only be universal but also culture-relative. Philosophy is real when it gains a situated usage and applied to the immediate human situation. It must be noted that philosophy has history and every history has philosophy. Modern philosophy from the points of Eurocentricism has to be subjected to critical re-constructions. Philosophy is culture-bound and universal. Philosophy should not be dogmatic and Europe cannot be "Alma Mater", sole architect, and sole origin of everything good.

We have seen that a pure and exclusive Afrocentric or Eurocentric philosophy is not the answer. As Professor Asuzu suggests, philosophy is complementarities. One group can and must learn from the other. Philosophy as we understand is a dynamic science in the face of human reality. The conception of African philosophy as folks-philosophy and European philosophy as modern philosophy is dangerous. Philosophical conceptions such as this are the genesis of continued polarization of the world in thought and action. True scholars should make provisions that would create little or no room for diversity and plurality. What can be done?

Conclusion

It is important to state here and now that intellectuals should be above bigotry and philosophy should regain its focus. Cassirer (1944:111) gave an important and instructive suggestion. In his words:

Not the material but the human world is the clue to a correct interpretation of the cosmic order. In this human world the faculty of speech occupies a central place. We must, therefore, understand what speech means in order to understand the meaning of the universe. If we fail to find this approach – the approach through the medium of language... we miss the gateway to philosophy.

Language is the oil through which the yam of philosophy is eaten. The local language must carry with it the mores, without the encumbrance of a foreign identity. It must be remembered that language is a principal tool for the communication of messages, tradition and more often, it is used for the transmission of intentions and ideologies of the writer (Duruoha, 2001:22).

Finally, it is worthy of note that, it is through language that the philosophy of the people can be properly conveyed. And language is one effective way to remove the yoke of Eurocentric philosophy.

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