AN INQUIRY INTO THE PLACE OF CULTURE IN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Historically, it is recorded in both Greek (Western) and African tradition that philosophy began in wonder. This wonder led the various or pre-Socratic philosophers to explore in search of the ultimate stuff of the universe. This search one would say was to seek explanation from their unaided reason taking recourse only to observation, experience, intuition and imagination. In other words, philosophizing was strictly speculative; giving rise to the variation in answers as to what philosophy really means. Essentially, this work attempted to answer the somewhat philosophical question; what should form the basic foundation of any philosophy? Is philosophy really mystical or is it purely transcendental or has no bearing or relevance to human existence? It aimed at examining the relationship between culture and philosophy and, indeed, the role and influence of the former on the later.

Key Words: Philosophy, Culture, Artifact, Tangible
Introduction

Every first comer to the concept of philosophy approaches it with some element of quandary and suspicion. Consequently, people look at philosophy as an esoteric, mystical, metaphysical, transcendental study which has little or nothing to do with the physical or human nature and character (Ozumba, 2002: 1). The above shows how ignorant some non-educated people and even academics are about the discipline called philosophy. Such an unschooled perception about the discipline sends a wrong signal to the uncritically minded public. Agreeably, it tends to portray philosophy as a complete abstract field of study, and has no bearing or relevance to human life. This paper disagrees entirely with such erroneous conceptions of philosophy. The point of departure of this work stems from its thesis, that philosophical reflections are systematization of, and rationalization of culturally organized ideas and institutions. That is, cultural institutions are the raw materials which form the original ideas with which a philosopher philosophizes. Philosophies are therefore products of prevailing or existing circumstances in each philosopher’s culture. It is therefore reasonable to say that philosophy began in all cultures (2). Culture, according to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, is the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group (Hornby, 2010:357). However, Raymond Williams (1976) as quoted in Haralabos and Holborn (2008), notes that all the ways in which culture has been used, implicitly or explicitly, contrast culture with nature. However, he observes that the things that humans produce or do are cultural, whereas the things that exist or occur without human intervention are part of the natural world (663). A simple inference from the above is that reflection which is a philosophic exercise is a product of culture. This is why Karl Jasper as quoted by Omoregbe (1990), says that man cannot avoid philosophizing; implying that men all over the world and in all cultures
philosophize (6). It is worthy of note, however, according to Uduigwomen (1995) that while it is true that a philosophical problem must have universal relevance, it is also true that a philosophical problem will remain in the abstract plain except it is made to have local or concrete relevance (7).

Culture

According to Joseph Margolis, culture may be metaphorically identified as the space proper to persons, artworks, language, history, institutions, civilizations, states, ideologies, myths, and deeds (1). In the words of Lawrence O. Bamikole (2007), culture means a total way of life of a group of people or community. This way includes the arts, music, and mode of dressing, beliefs and practices (24). For Raymond Williams as quoted by Bamikole, culture in its social, intellectual and artistic senses, is a metaphorical term derived from the act of cultivating the soil. Here, the cultivation of the mind was seen as a process comparable to the cultivation of the soil. Again, culture is here used for the description of certain people as cultivated or ‘well cultured’; a meaning very close to being ‘civilized’. In other words, to describe a man as cultured, in the etymological definition of culture is to appraise him as good and to describe him as uncultured is to appraise him as bad (24). Jaegwon Kin as also quoted by Bamikole, opines that culture may be used in a wide sense to describe all aspects of characteristic of a particular form of human life. This for him is a typical concern of historical, anthropological and sociological studies, while the narrow sense denotes only the system of values implicit in it, as a province of humanities, whose aim is to interpret and transmit to future generations the systems of values in terms of meaning and purpose (25). Culture, according to Matthew Arnold, comprises those aspects of human activity which are socially,
rather than genetically, transmitted (Taylor and Francis 2000:185). In another sense, culture means the knowledge and behavior of a people over time; it is the common way of life of people (Azenabor 2002:117). As defined from the cultural perspective, culture is the totality of a way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization; thus, distinguishing a people from their neighbors. Culture involves more than dance, music, charms and incantations but comprises materials and non-material dimensions, and blends practical accomplishments, inspiring philosophies, oral traditions and abilities in man’s continuous effort for development (Lecture note 1996: 1).

Alfred Kroebre and Clyde Kluckhohn (2011), define culture as most commonly used in three basic senses; “Excellence of taste in the fine arts and humanities, also known as high culture; An integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for symbolic thought and social learning; The set shared attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterize an institution, organization or group” (1).

They however, explain that when the concept first emerged in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, it connoted a process of cultivation or improvement, as in agriculture or horticulture and was also used first to refer to the betterment or refinement of the individual, especially through education, and then to the fulfillment of national aspirations or ideals. Furthermore, culture according to them was used in the mid-nineteenth century by some scientists to refer to a universal human capacity;
while culture emerged in the twentieth century as a concept central to anthropology, encompassing all human phenomena that are not purely the result of human genetics.

According to Christopher Jencks (1993) as quoted in Haralabos and Holborn (2008), there are four main senses in which culture is used: (1). Culture is sometimes seen as a state of mind, in which case someone becomes cultured if he moves towards the idea of perfection, a goal or an aspiration of individual human achievement or emancipation (2). Culture is closely related to the idea of civilization. Here culture is closely linked to evolutionary ideas, such as those of Herbert Spencer who saw Western societies as more evolved than other societies (3). Culture is the collective body of arts and intellectual work within any one society. Thus, it can be found in theatres, concert halls, art galleries and libraries, rather than in all aspects of human social life (663).

What is Philosophy?

A generally accepted definition of philosophy is historically problematic; thus, it has generated debates in each epoch within the history of philosophy. This is not to say that philosophy has defied being defined at all, rather the existing definitions are colored by individual’s ideological, cultural, intellectual, professional affiliation (school of thought), aim or objective of reflection, the world and personal idiosyncrasy. A few definitions will be attempted here. One of such definitions is that philosophy is the study of general and fundamental problems, such as those connected with existence, knowledge, values, reasons, mind and language. It is distinguished from ways of addressing such problems by its critical, generally systematic approach and its reliance on rational argument. Etymologically, it comes
from the Greek word *philosophia*, which literally has been described by William James as the principle of explanation that underlie all things without exception; the element common to gods and men, animals and stars; the first whence and the last whither of the whole cosmic procession; the conditions of all knowing, and the most general rules of human action (Ukpokolo 2004:5). According to the Baldwin Dictionary of Philosophy vol. II as quoted by Okolo(1989), philosophy is the theory of a subject-matter taken as a whole or organized unity and requiring a certain harmony of theory and practice (24). John Dewey conceives philosophy as a social method, an organ for dealing with the social and moral strife of our day (21). For J. H. Randall and J. Buchler (1971), philosophy is a human and cultural enterprise to be inquired into rather than a mere term to be defined (1).

**Influence of Culture on Philosophy**

The question that needs an answer now is, does culture influence philosophy? To examine and, indeed, show the influence of culture on philosophy, it suffices to adopt the meaning of culture that says it is the total way of life of a people (Ukpokolo 2004: 18). Such totality in a people’s way of life, whether Western or Africa, is used very broadly to refer to a heritage of social norms, ethical values, traditional customs, religious beliefs, political systems and specific artifacts, and technologies (Wikipedia 2011: 1). It also refers to social organization, ideals, rules for living, ways that humans solve problems of adapting to the environment, and ways of thinking (20). These categories of culture do generate crisis or conflicts which draws the attention of men. Hence, when scientists whether experimental, social or political, and even of the humanist bent attempt to settle such crisis by way
of reflection or thinking, the outcome is usually a new focus, a solution, a way forward or a philosophy. According to Quito as quoted by Gianan (2009), philosophy has often been conceived according to an individual’s point of view, and sometimes it is backed up by the spirit of the people. Gianan adds that it depends on one’s cultural experiences and exposure to other culture. Consequently, it cannot be denied that culture brings about one’s philosophy(124). This articulation is therefore not far from Okere’s position, as quoted by Iroegbu (1994) that Philosophy is individual thinking on a specific issue with culture as background for his reflection(129). To corroborate Okere’s opinion, Blackburn as quoted by Gianan avers that, in any culture there is a dynamic involvement of people or human beings, an idea, a thing, or an event, which is of primary importance in our understanding of culture. He argues that through such dynamism, human beings exhibit their capability of thinking and reasoning, as a sine qua non requirement without which philosophy cannot be. He adds that truly, in philosophizing, a human being must possess the thinking and reasoning capability, without which no human being can philosophize (120). In light of the above, Gianan posits further that, philosophy does not subsist in a vacuum; rather philosophy requires a culture of human being, capable of thinking and reasoning. A requirement that is universal and universalizable(118). Based on the above, he concludes that philosophy is truly embedded in a particular culture (121). And like Abanuka(1994) would say, The individual cannot form concepts in whatever way he likes. Concepts are meaningful within the experience of the community (75). He points further that the importance of concepts or reason is that without them, discourse about the world will not be
compelling; it will not have any urgency, and will therefore be meaningless (68). In other words, philosophical discuss are founded on systems, and such systems are rooted in concepts that have affinity with one culture or the other.

Again, one is forced to recognize the impact of culture on philosophy, when Henry Olela (1984) opined that, philosophy was not, and is not immune to the universal human process of sharing and assimilating of culture traits; philosophy was not, is not culture free. In light of the above, Comperz as quoted by Olela opines that knowledge about geographical factors and influences are necessary conditions for the understanding of a people’s philosophy (78). This is to say in a nutshell, that, philosophies are culturally and geographically rooted and influenced.

According to C. S. Momoh as quoted by Azenabor (2002), philosophy like any other profession is a child of culture and a culture often influences philosopher’s definition and perception of his subject-matter (2). Thus, over the course of history, the meaning adopted by philosophers seems to have shifted depending on the cultural climate wherein a philosopher philosophizes (Newell, 2011: 1). Ijiomah (2004) observes that many Western philosophers philosophize in a void, that is, without situation, environment, or culture (74). However, Ijioma’s position is insufficient to conclude about the West. This is because, as Gianan would want us to know; in ancient time, reflective thinkers pre-occupied themselves with addressing speculative or logical questions that arose from their cultural milieu regarding, among other philosophical themes, the nature and purpose of things, of life in the world, and so on (122). This has been the case, perhaps, because theirs is a philosophy begun speculatively. However, to correct such error, should it be the
case, Ijioma cautions that, specific culture has an important role to play in any meaningful discussion of any people’s philosophy (74).

At this point, it is expedient we point out that cultural artifacts are powerful philosophical categories. Salzmann (1969) posits that an artifact is any object manufactured or used by man (106). These artifacts which are cultural products, are also, in the words of Phillip L. Raven Hill as quoted by Sergeldin and Taboroff(1992), powerful because they are inherently multivocal and contain within themselves multiple messages and speak simultaneously of history, of technology, of aesthetics, of philosophy and of value, whether material or existential (281). It means, artifacts (tangible material culture) are part of the physical experiences that creates philosophic wonder, and make one think of other possibilities of existence. Being that they stand in contrast to perceived realities, they hence, make one to critically re-examine received wisdom.

Writing on the foundational significance of culture in the formulation of philosophies, Randall and Buchler aver that philosophies change as men’s cultural and social experiences change historically (25). This is basically due to the dynamic nature of cultural components (ethics, knowledge, aesthetics, religion, politics, perception of reality, etc). More so, it is because the distinctive character of philosophical problems lies in their bearing on the meaning of man’s experience in his world (26). Consequently, when we speak of the philosophy of an age or a culture, it s clear that it is not philosophic thinking that gives the age its intellectual temper, its assumptions, its controlling beliefs and its scale of values and general directions. Rather, these things must all be implicit in its institutions before they can
be consciously formulated and expressed in a philosophy. Also they add that, even the most conservative of philosophies; those which are most obviously rationalizations of the pattern of establishment and its institutional arrangements, in being rationalized formulations at all, are reorganization of beliefs and values in terms of some critical standards, and involve analysis, modification and adjustment. Furthermore, even the most radical philosophies, introducing revolutionary ideas and drastically criticizing some part of existing beliefs; accept without question the vast majority of the ideas and activities of their society (29).

In a nutshell, philosophical thought is critical re-organization and reconstruction of the beliefs of a culture. Put differently, it means philosophy never sets out from scratch to survey the world and organize men’s beliefs into a significant worldview. Rather it always start with some existing interpretation and some functioning set of values that has been challenged by fresh experience or novel ideas, and it reconstructs that interpretation and that scheme of value to take account of the challenging element (Randall & Buchler 1971, 34). In other words, it is the impingement of novel experience upon traditional beliefs and values which impel men to philosophical thinking, the emergence of new ideas irrelevant to or, in their initial form logically incompatible with the old, but which yet have somehow to be adjusted to them and worked into the accustomed pattern of living and thinking.

Philosophy is the expressions of those basic conflicts within cultures which drive men to the searching/thinking that is philosophy, and force them to thorough -going analysis and criticism, to intellectual reinterpretation and reorganization and to new insight and vision. In light of the above, philosophical thinking is the
intellectual expression of the process of cultural change. It is the intellectual phase of the process by which conflicts within cultures are analyzed and clarified, resolved and composed (35).

Henry Olela (1984) in an articulation on the African foundation of Greek philosophy noted that, there has been the argument that the African mind is in no way capable of any systematic philosophy (77). This argument is unfounded and unscholarly as it parades irrationality and is highly superstitious. More so, philosophy is part of human nature, it means that, men cannot avoid philosophizing, since all men in different cultures have peculiar experiences which they reflect on, as well as strife to proffer answers or solutions to their prevailing existential challenges. Again, it contradicts the popular argument by Descartes as quoted by W. V. Quine (1993), that man is the only animal endowed with mind, the others are automata. This according to him is widely held and on better evidence, that man is the only animal endowed with language, and that no appreciable mental activity is conceivable without linguistic aids (80). The above position is in agreement with Chomsky’s view as quoted by John Lyons (1995) that language system is stored in the brains of individuals who are said to know or to be competent in the language in question. And that linguistic competence is always competence in a particular language normally acquired by so-called native speakers in childhood by virtue of the interaction of the specifically human and genetically transmitted language. He adds that what Chomsky calls competence in particular natural languages is stored neurophysiologically in the brains of individual members of particular language communities (21). In essence, it means language is naturally acquired by man, and
in their specific cultures. Learning such language of the local culture according to O. B. Jenkins (2009), helps mold our thought patterns in the proper thinking expected and required in the new cultures which further gives one a unique internal insight into the thought-world of the people who speak that language. This thought-world for him, is the realm in which concepts are set and decisions are made (2). Olusegun Oladipo (2007) avers that language is a tool of philosophy. This is because philosophical ideas or doctrines are articulated in language. Explaining further, he adds that, it is expected that a philosopher would have a good command of her language of communication (17). Still in light of the above, A. J. Ayer is quoted as saying that ‘a philosopher who has no mastery of language would be as helpless as a mathematician who could not handle numerals’. According to him the point is that, language is a means to the achievement of the kind of clarity of thought without which the philosophical enterprise can hardly succeed. This is in view of fact that the pursuit of meaning, that is, clarification of thought by analyzing the meaning of the expressions that carry the burden of our ideas and values, and determining the real sense of our propositions, forms or is central to the definition of the philosophical project (Oladipo 18).

Inferentially therefore, it implies that philosophic ratiocination is a product of a naturally existent antecedence, because for one to be able to penetrate the culture guiding or that influences a philosopher’s philosophy, he must first of all acquaint his/herself with the natural or native language of the said culture. This is in view of the fact that, for his philosophy to make meaning, he must think in line with the thought pattern of the culture upon which his philosophy is rooted or for whom his
philosophy is meant to solve their existential problems. Olusegun Oladipo (2007) supports and corroborates the above position by opining that, philosophy, it is emphasized, is nothing unless it permits the kind of self-examination that enables persons as individuals and as social collectives to look into themselves and affect their environments in positive ways (13). The above position of Oladipo is an exact epitome of Greek reflection in its early stage. According to Umezinwa (2005), the Greek philosophers during the period of transition from traditional philosophy did not begin to philosophize with raw materials drawn from outside their cultural experience especially in matters relating to ethics and politics. Rather, they always took off from the elements or understanding existing in their culture. For instance, Aristotle brought together various concepts that were used by the Greeks to designate happiness, namely, virtue, prudence, wisdom and pleasure. In other words, he developed his own version of happiness not from abstract but from the raw materials already present in his culture (250). Similarly, S. E. Frost as quoted by Gianan corroborates the above view as he argues that, undeniably, the early thinkers have implicitly paved the way to this kind of understanding, exemplified in the capacity to think and reason, as exhibited in the Greek culture wherein philosophy is gradually unfolded by their wondering away from the theocentric or anthropomorphic view of the world (120). Gianan explains in addition that in view of the above, it is clear that the Greek culture made a huge impact in the manner with which philosophy is being treated worldwide. This is because it has become a window through which other civilizations have realized their own identity and purpose as rational human beings. It has also exemplified how their philosophy has
emerged from their culture (121). In a nutshell, since the history of philosophy, there is hardly any philosophical endeavor that stands the test of time without making reference to its cultural experiences or that is not culture dependent.

**Conclusion:**

From the foregoing, it is very clear against the lay-man’s belief that culture is indispensable in the philosophical enterprise. Culture commands such relevance in philosophic reflection mainly because it is the existential problem of a people within a culture that influences a philosopher, and also creates the raw materials which triggers the ratiocinative exercise, thus producing long lasting *episteme* needed to solve such societal problems.
References


