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Hegel's Idea of the Absolute and African Philosophy: a Comparative Approach

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Abstract

The question of the existence of African philosophy has often been a debatable one right from old. However, as a result of much work done by both foreigners and African indigenous philosophers on African ideas as found in African traditional thought system, we can rightly say that African philosophy has come to stay. In this paper, our goal is not to emphasize on the already settled question but to make a comparative examination of Hegel's idea of the Absolute with African traditional thought system. There is no doubt that Hegel's "Absolute idea" is not a peculiarity to Hegel and western culture as we have discovered similar notions in African culture or thought system. Suffice it to say that, critical reflection permeates all races and culture.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the place of Hegel's idea of the Absolute in African philosophy. It simply suggests a metaphysical theme both in context and content. It is at the same time aimed at making an assertive portray of African philosophy from a comparative perspective and its restriction is on the idealist philosophy of Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel a German philosopher 1770 – 1831.

In his book *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel had derogatorily detached Africans from rationality. Succinctly stated, Hegel conceived the African as one who does everything except the ability to reason or reflect philosophically. This biased assertion of Hegel about Africa as a race could plausibly be regarded as not only been obsolete but also inconceivable and inconsequential, especially when we objectively re-examine African history and culture in addition to the diverse corpus of literature on African philosophy. Besides, there are innumerable African philosophers including Western scholars like Barry Hallen, George G.M. James, Thomas Hodgkin etc. who have done great works on African history and culture. Equally important is the universally accepted statement that Africa is the cradle of civilization, which reflectively is not devoid of rationality.

However, African philosophy has come to stay. In other words, African philosophy has gone beyond the debate on its existence or reality and is practically demarcated from myth. To support this claim, Uduigwomen expresses that;

The debate or controversy on whether or not there is an African philosophy is dead and buried. At least it is a matter of mere historical interest... there is now an established tradition of African philosophy. (3)

This assertion counters any claim about the non-existence of an African philosophy. Thus we are poised to examine fundamentally Hegel's philosophical idea of the "Absolute" and its place in African philosophy. We shall establish that the notion of the "Absolute" is not peculiar to Hegel's thought but is also inherent in African worldviews and culture. It will also show that African culture or thought system is anchored fundamentally on rationality. A position that can only be discovered by critical minds, thus affirming that African source of much of Greek and other civilizations cannot be denied. Supportive of these facts, G. M. James opines that:

From the Sixth Century B.C therefore to the death of Aristotle (322 B. C), the Greeks made best of their chance to learn all they could about Egyptians culture; most students (from Greece) received instructions directly from Egypt (1).

Thus Greek Philosophy is partly shaped by the Egyptian early Priests

and Hierophants (James 3).

Hegel's Idea of the absolute

Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804) in his "critical Philosophy" had a great influence on Hegel's idea especially his reaction to Kant's position on the "thing-in-itself". While Kant had argued that the Mind imposes its categories upon experience the idealists especially Hegel rather came up with the theory that every object and therefore the entire universe is a product of mind. Here there is a difference between 'the Mind' and 'Mind'. The former is finite while the later is infinite and eternal. Hegel therefore set for a transformation of Kant's critical philosophy into Absolute idealism. As an idealist, Hegel was of the view that there cannot be any unknowable thing-in-itself and that both the content and forms of knowledge must be the product of the mind contrary to Kant's notion that the mind produces the forms of knowledge through the various categories and that the forms of knowledge receive their material content from the given of our experience.

In strong terms, Hegel's reaction to Kant's 'critical philosophy' is that "the real is rational and the rational is real". According to Bertrand Russel,

When he says this, he does not mean by "the real" what an empiricist would. He admits, and even urges, that what to the empiricist appear to be facts are, and must be, irrational; It is only after their apparent character has been transformed by viewing them as aspects of the whole that they are seen to be rational. Nevertheless, the identification of the real and the rational leads unavoidably to some of the complacency inseparable from the belief that 'whatever is, is right. The whole, in all its complexity, is called by Hegel 'the Absolute'. (702)

When we consider Hegel's theory that every reality is rational and that the rational is real, Stumpf opines in this respect that; since there can be nothing unknowable, the idealists and Hegel in particular are confident that they could know the inner secrets of absolute reality. Furthermore, the reality for the idealists is expressed in some form of rationality because, they have argued that there is no independent and essentially unknowable external thing – in – itself that causes consciousness rather, it is only Mind that produces the object of our knowledge (314).

In this connection, one may note that we experience external things in the world independent of us. If therefore all objects of our knowledge are the products of 'Mind' as against our individual minds, then, we can attribute all objects external to us to be the product of an intelligence other than that of a finite individual. Thus Hegel concludes that all forms of knowledge, all objects indeed the whole universe is a product of an absolute subject, an Absolute Mind called God. It is pertinent at this juncture to consider some steps taken by Hegel in arriving at the conclusion of an Absolute idea.

The Nature of Reality

The world for Hegel is like an organic process (made of many related parts and arranged in a system). The real is what Hegel called the Absolute. Theologically, the Absolute is God. However, Hegel's idea of the Absolute does not refer to a being separate from the world of nature or individual persons. Obviously, his reality is a departure from plato's distinction between appearance and reality. Everything in the world of Hegel is related. Nothing is unrelated. Thus, a question about the separate individual things we experience different from us, Hegel according to Stumpf would say:

Whatever we experience, as separate things will upon careful reflection, lead us to other things to which they are related until at last the process of dialectical thought will end in the knowledge of the Absolute. (316)

Here one notes that the Absolute is not the unity of things as such since Hegel rejected the concept of materialism which holds that there are separate, finite particles of hard matter which when arranged in different formations make up the whole nature of things. Also rejected by Hegel is the extreme alternative as conceived by Parmenides and Spinoza that "everything is one" or "a single substance with various modes of attributes" respectively.

For Hegel, the Absolute is rather a dynamic process, an organism having parts but nevertheless united into a complex system. Thus, one understands Hegel as saying that the inner essence of the Absolute could be reached by human reason that is, by reflection since the Absolute is described in both Nature and the working of the mind. In this connection, the Absolute, nature and Man's mind are all connected by thought for

example, a person's way of thinking is as if it were fixed by the structure of Nature, that is, by the way things are naturally ordered. Things behave the way they do because the Absolute expresses itself through the structure of Nature. In other words, a person thinks about nature, the way the Absolute expresses itself in nature.

Here, we see a major departure of Hegel from his predecessor Kant. Whereas Kant sees the categories of the mind (space and time) as that which merely makes knowledge possible, Hegel sees the categories as having a mode of being independent of any individual mind except the Absolute mind. Equally while for Kant, the categories are conceived as a mental process thus, providing the critical explanation of the modes and limits of human knowledge, and as concepts in the human mind by which the mind can understand and experience the world, they are on the other hand for Hegel, not only mental processes but are objective realities possessing being independent of the thinking individual.

Here Hegel succeeded in transforming Kant's 'critical philosophy' into Absolute idealism since for Hegel, the categories do not have their existence in the individual mind but in the Absolute. Hegel unlike Plato never ascribed any independent existence to the categories or universals. They are rather independent of any subjective mind. This means that ideas or categories are not different from things (objects) like chair, trees, apple etc. Example what is in a 'table' is not more than the universals or categories that we find in it. There is no unknowable part of the table as held by Kant (the thing-in-itself). The universals or categories have their being (existence) independent of the knowing subjects. Thus the object of thought consist in thought itself.

Logic and the Dialectical Process

Logic in the Hegelian conception is equated with metaphysics. Here, knowing and being are one and the same thing. The rational is therefore identified with the actual. The actual is where logic and logical connections are discovered. It is through logic that we deduce from our experiences of the actual, the categories that describes the Absolute.

Hegel's dialectic is expressed in a triadic structure, the Thesis → Antithesis → Synthesis. The graduation or movement from the thesis to synthesis, is a continues one. From synthesis, a new thesis develops and the process continues until it ends in the Absolute. This indicates that, thought instead of coming to a halt, it rather moves in a contradiction. However, Hegel's basic triad is that of Being → Nothing → Becoming. It suggests that one common feature found in all

objects is their Being (existence). It is prior to any specific thing and a general concept the Mind can formulate.

Logic therefore begins with the indeterminate, the featurelessness preceeding all definite character especially as the first of all things. It is Being (thesis), the first concept in Hegel's philosophic system having no content. The lack of content in Hegel's Being is based on the fact that once it is given some content, it ceases to be the concept of pure Being but that of something which might limit its existence.

The movement from Being \longrightarrow Not Being occurs when we contemplate Being without any particular characteristics. Thus Being and not-Being are the same because the concept of Nothing is a deduction from Being (something). This implies that the antithesis "Nothing" is contained in the thesis 'Being'. The mind moving from Being to Nothing results to a third category 'Becoming' which for Hegel is the unity of Being and Nothing. Here, Becoming is conceived as the Absolute idea, a process of self development. While logic begins with the abstract concept of Being, Nature rather begins with another abstract concept – space.

The place of Hegel's absolute idea in African philosophy

In this section, our concern is not to define African philosophy or argue for its existence. For sometime past, this had been the major concern of every researcher or writer on African philosophy. Thus, the available corpus of literature on African philosophy and philosophers could lead to the conclusion that African philosophy has come to stay and is real both in context and content.

We shall therefore focus our attention on the area of African metaphysics and try to find the place of Hegel's Absolute idea in African thought system or world-view. We shall adopt a comparative approach between Hegel's Absolute idea and African traditional thought system as a philosophy.

The idea of Reality, Being or Absolute idea as conceived by Hegel no doubt has its place in African culture. According to Bartholomew Abanuka, reality is "all that is perceptible or conceivable on the basis of human experience of the universe" (16). This in a way is to be understood as that which underlies African beliefs, signs and symbols. The unity of reality as a whole in the African context stems primarily, from the fact that reality that is, things as they are in themselves, are different from appearance, that is, things as they appear to us in our individual transitory, subjective state as a whole. This is opposed to nothingness. According

to Kwasi Wiredu: "Any claim to know something as it is in itself would be a contradiction as much as it would amount to a claim to know something as it cannot be known" (113).

Here, Wiredu an African indigenous philosopher, appear to deny Kant's cognizance of a "thing-in-itself that cannot be known. He however seem to agree with Hegel's holistic notion of reality. It is equally a contradiction in line with Hegel's clear version of dialectics of Being and not-being.

Reality in African context cannot be reduced to nothingness. Something must always exist. According to Abanuka in line with the Hegelian conception; "all particular things have one thing in common; they are all real" (21). This implies that all things have being, existence, which in Hegel's logic is derived from non-being. Abanuka argues further that "so far as all particular things are real, they are not repugnant to one another, their reality must arise from one source or an ultimate support or reality" (21). Reality in thought actually is a combination of both experience and 'being' serving as the ultimate or support. The question one is likely to ask is what is this ultimate support or source? Answering this question takes us to the ontological base of African thought system.

Thus, the ultimate support referred to here is a believe in a supernatural Being which as perceived by the African is the highest of all beings. This Supernatural Being no doubt is conceived in the notion of God the Creator of the universe. The African supernatural being is supreme among a hierarchy of beings. This Supreme Being in the African context expresses itself through other smaller beings such as deities, ancestors, spirits, rivers etc., which are further expressed in either animate or inanimate things around us. Thus both objects and human are discovered by reason to connect one another to the Supernatural Being. According to Eneh;

The African believes that man's ontology or notion of existence is a relationship with all the existent beings or forces including God. This is because the African accepts that he lives in a co-ordinated, harmonious, united and religious universe – the universe created, ordered and directed by the supreme force. The Highest force-God is responsible for the existence of all other existent beings and things or forces (14).

This shows that the African concept of ontology is based upon the interconnections and interactions of beings. At this juncture, we cannot hesitate to admit that reality is perceived from a holistic perspective, a theory that is in agreement with Hegel's inseparatism of things. To buttress this holistic view of reality, Eneh succinctly states that "for the African, there is a harmonious linkage between these forces of human beings, animals, things, plants etc" (15).

It is pertinent to note that the principle of ultimacy as conceived in African tradition, deals with the first cause or origin of all things. For there is no other principle that can be conceived as more fundamental than ultimacy itself. Its significance is found in all things being a manifestation or expression of the ultimate reality itself (being). Thus in African belief, whatever that has ontological reality is what it is because the reality it possess has its basis on the ultimate origin or support of all things.

Inferring from the above, we can assert that the African idea of the universe is conceived as unitary and this can be likened to Hegel's concept of inseparable world of things. This includes ancestors, deities, divinities, spirits, man, rivers and even the dead considered as not being far removed from the living.

Argumentatively, if reality is conceived as the totality of everything, which is and their ultimate support, source or force, then, every particular thing is a part of the whole of reality. Just as Hegel's totality of reality ends in the Absolute idea or Being, in African tradition, you will agree, that, every object of being or existence and their relation is an attribute of the supernatural being linked by other hierarchy of beings. With this interconnectedness of beings ending in the supernatural, and the supreme Being or force behind all things having a holistic character, we can liken this African notion of Supreme Being to Hegel's theory of the Absolute idea. Both are experienced and reached by means of reason, which in a technical sense each is part of itself.

Thus, the traditional African perceives existence whether physical, or metaphysical, visible or invisible material or immaterial as one because of the ontological relationship among all beings. He does not make a strong distinction between spiritual values from the physical life because the African thought patterns are more concrete than abstract. This is in a way similar to Hegelian conception of totality.

Conclusion

We should be reminded once again and in summation that the Supernatural Being (God) is the centre of all things in so far as it contains in itself all the characteristics which are manifested in varying degrees in all particular things. Since in this connection, reality is a totality of all that is and anchored on the supernatural Being or Force, it is realized that, African Being or not-being cannot be experienced by sense experience as an apple is, it is therefore reached in conclusion, through reason or Mind. According to Eneh in Hegelian manner,

The African believes that man's ontological or notion of existence is in relationship with all the existent beings or forces including God. This is because the African accepts that he lives in a coordinated, harmonious, united and religious universe – the universe created, ordered and directed by the Supreme Force. The Highest Force – God is responsible for the existence of all other existent beings and things or forces (14).

This implies that the totality of reality in African tradition is rational and that which is rational, is real. A theory already held by Hegel. In a dialectical manner, the principle of nothing distinguishes reality from what it is and this further distinguishes itself from nothing (thesis – Antithesis – synthesis) it take a unity of being and nothing to get at the real.

Finally, Being or force in African context permeates all things and is responsible for what is and what is not. According to Idjakpo in Uduigwomen, the African do not look at Being as God, Reality or something mysterious. All these for him represent aspects of Reality. In other words, the African do not consider reality to be one, two or many as in parmanides, Descartes or Spinoza respectively but reality as a holistic notion similar to Hegel's concept of the Absolute idea.

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