

The Perceived Paradox of Cultural Dependability and Intellectual Freedom

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Abstract

The notion of ethnophilosophy does not give a guarantee for “contradictions in a culture.” This argument gets its foundation from the belief that ethnophilosophy could either reconcile in a rational way those “contradictions in constants of culture” or convince the contenders that the internal incoherencies are only ill-conceived or do not actually exist. Though there might be contradictions in a culture as in any other totalities of human life, it would not jeopardize the rationale of ethnophilosophy. A thought of a person is highly dependent on her/his own mother tongue, social, and natural environment, and cultural beliefs and practices of her/his ancestors. Hence, there would be no thought, without a thinking subject. There are both particulars and universals in every culture. But no culture is in apposition to determine what should be the particular and what should be the universal.

Keywords

Ethnophilosophy, Particular, Thought, Universal.

INTRODUCTION

This article critically exposes the sixth chapter of Paulin. J. Hountondji’s book titled “The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa” [1]. The topic of the chapter at stake is “Rootedness and Freedom.” And for the purpose of critically reflecting on the chapter, I titled this article *The Perceived Paradox of Cultural Dependability and Intellectual Freedom*.

This study is composed of four sections, apart from this introductory part. The first section, contrary to Hountondji’s assertion, presents and defends the claim that the notion of ethnophilosophy does not give a guarantee for “contradictions in a culture.” This argument gets its foundation from the belief that ethnophilosophy could either reconcile in a rational way those “contradictions in constants of culture” or convince the contenders that the internal incoherencies are only ill-conceived or do not actually exist.

The second section deals with the problem of “thinking of a thought without a thinking subject”. This is the part, where I shall explain why Hountondji’s assertion that a thought could exist independent of a thinking subject is not viable. One of the main reasons for this objection is that a thought must be under continuous revitalizations and revisions, which indeed necessitates the presence of a subject, otherwise, that thought ceases to exist as it would be cannibalized with the thought that has got a thinking subject.

The third section sheds light on the issue of whether the distinctions between the particular and the universal must be drawn within a culture or across cultures. At this point, I would pose and attempt the following important questions: Is the universal being universal in single culture or across cultures? Who is/are epistemically and rationally legitimate

to decide what would amount to the universal? By the same token, is the being particular within a culture or across cultures? Who is/are epistemically and rationally legitimate to judge what must be deemed the particular? For D. A. Masolo:

A major dispute in African Philosophy has been whether disciplines are defined solely internally, by the theoretical structures of their contents, such as the abstract and universal character of concepts in Philosophy, or whether they are equally influenced by external conditions, which account for their acceptability within the schemes they serve [2].

Finally, the fifth part presents the central arguments of this article and indicates possible areas of emphasis for further study. This part suggests that Hountondji’s “counter critique of the critique of ethnophilosophy,” is still in need of another counter critique.

THE NOTION OF ETHNOPHILOSOPHY AND ‘CONTRADICTIONS IN CONSTANTS OF CULTURE’

Though there might be contradictions in a culture as in any other totalities of human life, it would not jeopardize the rationale of ethnophilosophy. Because doing Philosophy from within would be more fruitful by critically reflecting both on the ideal scenarios and the actual real-life cases pertaining to a particular society. Some writers also call up on philosophers working on African philosophy to philosophize, think and write in their own mother tongues! [3]. In other words, being relatively closer to the object of the study in terms of space and time would be more useful to paying attention to the details of both the imaginary and actual cases in relation to the practice and knowledge of a particular cultural group. According to Hountondji,

by the same token, the counter response to the objection to ethnophilosophy (what he calls “learned ethnophilosophy”) implicitly explained, metaphorically associated with the idea that every project that needs to be creative and life changing must be rooted in the very tradition, customs, moral, values and norms of that particular society in which it is being implemented. More importantly, the language and folks of the local community must be considered when it comes to philosophical works [1].

The other point worth mentioning here is that some sort of beliefs and practices that would probably seem self-contradictory, to the ones observing merely from outside, might possibly remain plausible for the natives. So those who are unaware of the world view, lived experience and psychological makeup of the members of a particular society might distort and misinterpret some of that culture’s beliefs and practices as contradictions.

The problem of distorting and misinterpreting another culture’s belief and practice may arise either deliberately or unknowingly. For V.Y. Mudimbe, “[s]ome thinkers, such as Lévi-Strauss, thought that studying a diversity of cultures reduced the weight of ideology and allowed anthropologists to fight such falsehoods as those about the natural superiority of some races and traditions over others.” [4]. On one hand, some would deny the contextual rationality of such beliefs and practices by downplaying it based on their own wrong assumptions that it is irrelevant and, in a way, wishfully think that theirs is more rational and acceptable. And on the other hand, some would distort or misinterpret another culture’s beliefs and practices due to the shallow knowledge that they possess regarding the internal integrity of the facts and the circumstances that could be tolerated reasonably. “Some philosophical thoughts are embedded in hidden traditional values and customs, followed by some points of reference and assessments that serve in critically evaluating actions and behaviors involved [4].

Hence, inevitably some of the primary reasons, facts, and decisive circumstances that serve as the foundations of a particular society’s beliefs and practices could be comprehended only through lived experiences. Therefore, ethnophilosophy, would be more cognizant and self-reflexive of the internal cohesion and coercions among practices and beliefs of a given cultural group. And this is contrary to Hountondji’s claim, that ethnophilosophy, to some extent guarantees the “contradictions of constants in culture.”

IS IT THINKABLE TO THINK OF A THOUGHT WITHOUT A THINKING SUBJECT?

Hountondji’s claim that a thought could exist independent of a thinking subject is not viable. One of the main reasons for this objection is that a thought must be under continuous revitalizations and revisions. And this indeed necessitates the presence of a subject, otherwise, that thought ceases to exist as it would be cannibalized with the thought that has got a thinking subject. A thought of a person is highly dependent on her/his own mother tongue, social, and natural environment,

and cultural beliefs and practices of her/his ancestors. Hence, there would be no thought, without a thinking subject. Hountondji claims that we can come across an idea that is unique and innovative, exists independent of a subject, consistent, logically sequenced and justifiable in its own way, ironically convincing and serves as a principle for individual actions and behaviors [1].

Another issue that needs to be addressed here is that even if the notion of a thought without a thinking subject is accepted; that thought would become a victim of being connoted with whatever interpretations and improvisations in favor of the contender. And this would still be tantamount to non-existent; since we would no longer have the supposed original thought that has already gone the risk of being interpreted and improvised whatever in the absence of its thinking subject. Kwasi Wiredu asserts “African scholars have not left it to foreigners alone to proclaim this image of African thought. Some of them have assumed eminent responsibilities in that direction.” [3].

Furthermore, “thinking a thought without a thinking subject” would be devastating as it retards the development of original and diversified thoughts. In other words, if thought is welcomed as not having a thinking subject, there would be no room for healthy competition to contribute an alternative thought. And the reason is that human beings by nature need credit, acknowledgment, and sense of ownership as well as the feeling of contributing something worthwhile.

THE PARTICULAR AND THE UNIVERSAL: WOULD THE DISTINCTION BE DRAWN WITHIN A CULTURE OR ACROSS CULTURES?

Hountondji argues that ethnophilosophy affects intellectual responsibility and liberty by making them stacked in “particular pitfalls”. However, this assertion is still vague, because there has been no standard as to which culture is the limit of the universal.

At this point, I would like to pose and attempt the following important questions: (1) Is the universal being universal in single culture or across cultures? (2) Who is/are epistemically and rationally legitimate to decide what would amount to the universal? (3) By the same token, is the being particular within a culture or across cultures? (4) Who is/are epistemically and rationally legitimate to judge what must be deemed the particular? For Hountondji, denying relativity and relativism approach for the sake of looking for a kind of universality that he considers to be the base for all other thoughts. However, at the same time he acknowledges relativism and that some of our actions and behaviors need to be contextualized beyond universality [1].

Another attempt made by Hountondji to present ethnophilosophy and ethnosciences analogously has partly caused the problem of implicitly associating the universal probably with that of the so-called “civilized” society and the particular with that of the so-called “traditional” society. In other words, the analogy is weak, or it was not based on relevant and appropriate kind of comparison. K. A. Appiah

argues:

If we call any group of human beings of common descent living together in some sort of association, however loosely structured, a "people," we can say that every human culture that was aware of other people's seems to have had views about what accounted for the differences—in appearance, in customs, in language—between them [5].

We can speak of particulars and universals within the context of ethnoscience, because even though some part of the world claimed it; parts of the science were contributed by various individuals where one refutes that of the other to approve her/his own. And at least the methodology or the dynamism could be taken as universal while specific discoveries are particulars. However, this cannot be the case for ethnophilosophy, since every culture is unique and self-reflexive of what is particular and universal within itself, but needlessly not for the other cultures. According to Hountondji, the trend in which philosophers working on African philosophy write and think in European languages implicitly made them to philosophize on issues, problems and cases that are non-existent in the context of African societies. This would lead them to distort and misrepresent the indigenous knowledge of the sages and local communities as they are the main sources in African philosophy which is mostly based on oral literature and sagacity [1].

Therefore, I believe that there are both particulars and universals in every culture. But no culture is in apposition to determine what should be the particular and what should be the universal. Accordingly, ethnophilosophy enhances intellectual responsibility and liberty, unlike what Hountondji claims.

CONCLUSIONS

Though there might be contradictions in a culture as in any other totalities of human life, it would not jeopardize the rationale of ethnophilosophy. Hence, doing Philosophy from within would be more fruitful by critically reflecting both on the ideal scenarios and the actual real-life cases pertaining to a particular society. Leading texts in continental philosophy also confirm this very same view about rationality [6] [7] [8] [9].

Some sort of beliefs and practices that would probably seem self-contradictory, to the ones observing merely from outside, might possibly remain plausible for the natives. Therefore, ethnophilosophy, would be more cognizant and self-reflexive of the internal cohesion and coercions among practices and beliefs of a given cultural group. Hountondji suggests the following alternative way of philosophizing: Do we have any other alternative? Can we balance the act of avoiding the superstitions and uncritically distorted views guided by philosophical foundations having roots in a different society on one hand and attempts made to hide oneself in cultural prejudices of collective thinking? Avoiding these two extremes would be the alternative way to philosophize for African philosophers [1].

Hountondji's claim that a thought could exist independent of a thinking subject is not viable. A thought of a person is highly dependent on her/his own mother tongue, social, and natural environment, and cultural beliefs and practices of her/his ancestors. Hence, there would be no thought, without a thinking subject. "Thinking a thought without a thinking subject" would be devastating as it retards the development of original and diversified thoughts. This claim is well defended by the main proponents of phenomenology [10] [11] [12].

Hountondji's assertion that ethnophilosophy affects intellectual responsibility and liberty by making them stacked in "particular pitfalls" is vague, because there has been no standard as to which culture is the limit of the universal. Paulin. J. Hountondji states that it is very important to redefine and rethink the objection to ethnophilosophy for the sake of doing justice to the ideas and claims of the proponents of the contending schools of thoughts. This would help us in better understanding the claims and arguments of those who criticize ethnophilosophy while advancing the main claims and arguments for ethnophilosophy [1].

However, his counter critique of the critique of ethnophilosophy is still in need of another counter critique! And this must be area of emphasis for further philosophical discussion in this regard.

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