

# Thinking And Culture: A Philosophical Analysis

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*Abstract: Can man really think in a vacuum? The origin and scope of human thinking is still problematic. Some Scholars located this origin and scope in culture while a good number are still skeptical about it. The problem therefore lies in whether man can really think above culture. This paper investigates the possibility of thinking above culture; the nature, type, and basis of such thought. The findings remain that man generally thinks not above but within the context of culture. The space and time for such thought may not of course belong to his culture. Yet his thought emanates from the context of one culture or the other.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

It was H.G Gadamar who avers that nobody speaks from nowhere. This position generally indicates that human thinking and the corresponding human behaviour has a source. Yet, it is evident that the source of particular human thinking and action may not come from a particular culture, but rather from a conglomeration of diverse cultures and environment. Thinking above culture has to do with having a thought that is totally independent of any culture. In other words, this bothers on thinking fresh ideas that emanates from the thinker and not from any environmental experience. The question of thought and its bedrock alludes to whether innate ideas are possible in the context of human thinking. It as well points at whether human behaviours can come from a source other than culture and experience.

Scholars have often considered most ideas as primary sources. This is in the assumption that it is newly formulated by the agent concerned. Yet, a critical look at every "new idea" betrays one cultural experience that informed such thinking. It is therefore culture that inculcates an indelible thought that manifests in human behaviours. This thought plays an adaptive role which shapes human behaviours, and enables people to cope and interact with others. Thus, the mind cannot think if it is not furnished with materials for such mental activity. Such material comes from sense experience grounded in cultural context.

Observably, explicit and tacit assumption is central in human existence. One of such is the repudiation of the centrality of culture in mental activity. As such, some scholars think that culture no longer play prominently inextricable role in human existence. Yet, in our active mental activities, one aspect of culture comes to bear shaping all our inclinations, words, actions, judgments, and decisions. Thus, a critical examination of human assumptions regarding thoughts gives understanding that culture is the bedrock of the ideas behind the order and meanings in linguistic, social, political, economic, aesthetic, religious, and philosophical modes and organization of a people, and it is as well the hallmark of distinction and connection between one people and another.

Hofstede, described culture as the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another<sup>3</sup>. One instructive issue in Hofstede conceptualization is the fact that culture has to do with the programming of the mind. And I wish to add, that it is unconscious programming which goes on over a period of time. In the view of J.P. Lederach, culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them. Culture is not only about shared values, it is also the basis of action. To a large extent, perception cannot be divorced from thinking. It may not be out of place to refer to culture as the quantum of codified thought of a people which is amenable to improvements and revisions.

## II. NATURE OF HUMAN THINKING

Thinking as a conscious act is an outstanding activity of the human mind. This makes the mind a thinking entity. The consciousness characterizing the mind encompasses our awareness of an experience. Logically therefore, there exist a direct link between thinking and experience. This means there is also a connection between thinking and object of thought. Based on this reality Edmund Husserl in his phenomenology insists that thinking is always about something outside thinking itself. Indeed, an object of thought may not be material but a conjecture of that or all that have some sort of material representation.

In all, thinking involves seeing, imagining, and mental dialectics. But these are made possible through existent or existing link between the mind and experiential objects or events in the environment. In the process of thinking therefore, the mind simply establishes a nexus with these environmental realities.

Thus, thinking is a psychic exercise which gives rise to attitude which in turn propels human behaviour. This act encompasses reasoning, criticism, intrinsic argument, dialectics, and judgment which give rise to decisions. As a mental process, thinking was indeed the supposition of Hegel when he talks about the cyclic triadic movement of the absolute mind through thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Thinking is abstract and involves a mental abstraction that works on the apprehended images gotten from the environment through the senses. As such, thinking has environmental realities as its raw material. These objects are recognized within the context of culture. It then means that human thinking is conditioned by cultural values and realities within one or more cultures.

Based on this development, thinking can be viewed as a dialectical mental process set in motion by one empirical experience or the other. This experience though grounded in culture, could be direct or indirect, primary or secondary. Hence it is often said that ingredients for thought lie in diverse cultures and environments. These ingredients are made available to the thinking mind through the process of apprehension.

## III. THE QUESTION OF PHILOSOPHIC APPREHENSION

The entire corpus of this treatise revolves around the reality of philosophic apprehension. In accordance with Cyrille, "apprehension is the act by which the mind forms the concept of something". The mind through this process perceives and grasps an object intellectually. Intellectual grasp of a thing consists in apprehending its sensible image, definition and essential features. In this way, the mind stores the essential quality of a thing, its essence, whatness or quidity. With the process of thinking cast on these materials, the resultant effects are concepts, ideas or notion.

The reality of apprehension is however explicable from the perspective of various human experiences, which sets on motion some biological and psychological organs and tissues whose functions are to interpret the apprehended materials. These biological and psychological drives evolve from

endocrine glands and genes determining our thinking processes on the material of experience. Arua confirms these functions stating that these organs only confer characters on human nature, and not the material for thought. Based on this knowledge, there is a significant logical connection between the knowing mind and the known. In all, the known exists in contextual space and time which falls within the ambience of culture.

## IV. ESSENCE OF CULTURE

Culture encapsulates human institutions like language, religion, norms, and rules of behavior, beliefs and practices. It extends to contents of associations and social movements, which together constitute civil society.

The nature of culture is such that it manifests concretely in people's life, forming their way of life. In this sense, culture involves collectively a particular people whose identity: character, mode of life and orientation has been shaped by the product of their encounter with their environment. Apart from the material and intangible aspects of culture, the senses inherent in culture could be viewed from civilization, collective body of arts, intellectual works within any society, and the whole way of life of a people, which are people's identity visible in space and time.

Culture extends to "attitudes and beliefs about something that are shared by a particular group of people or in a particular organization". One thing with culture is that despite its enduring capacity, it is learnt. The progenitors coined it, thought of it, and taught same to their kinsfolk. The human person is therefore the active author, architect, and transmitter of culture, which in turn shapes his inclinations, assumptions, thinking and attitudes from the cradle to the grave. Though, it is learnt, culture forms part of the interiority of the being of a person.

## V. THINKING FROM CULTURE IN IMPROVED DYNAMISM

The union of thinking and culture in a person starts from the time of birth. This is the period contents of culture are inculcated in an individual. From that moment, those impressed cultural materials constantly provoke thinking in a person. Through association with other existential beings from other cultural backgrounds, the individual improves on these thoughts and often exhibits them in empirical and rational forms.

Within the context of culture are similarities of realities and thought pattern. This is such that every reality in one culture has a similar representation in another culture. Yet, these realities provokes thought based on how they posit problems that require solutions in an environment or on how they are close to becoming panacea to problems and issues plaguing man in his environment.

It therefore stands that when man thinks he is thinking out a totally new idea devoid of cultural contents, he is rather improving his thinking based on material contents replete in culture. Every idea is therefore not new in the strict sense. It is

rather a refined thought, an improvement from that which is. However, the point remains that the materials that inform the new idea may not be existent in one's culture. Yet it exists in other cultures, and one may have stumbled upon it through extended association. Thus, the physical representation of thoughts exists somewhere in part or in whole either in exact form or in similarity. As such, these existent realities give platforms to human thinking. For instance, the inventors of Airplanes had images of flying and diving directly or indirectly from one environment or the other. Based on this, the so called new thoughts and concepts are products of critical reformation from existent beings and realities.

#### VI. THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASIS OF THE ARGUMENT

Aristotle was emphatic that wonder about the nature of the universe is the beginning of philosophy. Plato echoes this view in *The Republic* asserting that "there is no other beginning of Philosophy than this wonder". The modern Philosopher Martin Heidegger calls this wonder astonishment which is the bedrock of thought. Wonder therefore leads to thinking. Hence a philosopher is not just a lover of wisdom but a curious and thinking personality. Mbaegbu shared this view, affirming that "wonder or human experience is the source of reflective activity known as philosophy".

Thinking can dwell on man's experience of himself. In this sense, such thinking becomes subjective as seen among post Socratic Philosophers where thinking is channeled to answering the complex questions surrounding man himself. Thinking can also be objective bothering on the cosmic experiences around man. This type of thinking (objectivity) has wholly informed pre-Socratic philosophy.

In the contemporary epoch of philosophy, thinking could start from subjectivity to objectivity and vice versa. Indeed, the early Greek Thinkers started with objective thinking, focusing on cosmological wonders until Socrates drew attention to subjective thinking which focuses on anthropological wonders. This effort is glaring in his ever green philosophical postulations: "man know thy self" and "an unexamined life is not worth living". His rationale for this turn remains that man is the most complex of all problems. The Socratic position however echoes Blaise Pascal's philosophical exclamation, "what a chimera is man! a chaos, a subject of contradiction".

From the foregoing, it stands that wonder leads to thinking or reflection. But, both wonder and thinking does not happen outside a cultural space. Thus, every thinker engages in thinking activity based on wonder discovered through the senses in his or other environment. In fact, the thinker himself does not think from a vacuum. He shares a contact with a particular environment which must have in large or small extent influenced his thought whether in an objective or subjective manner. Moreover, that which the mind thinks about is not devoid of total or partial representation within a cultural environment. The mind therefore does not wonder and think in a vacuum. It wonders and thinks from something within cultural contexts.

#### VII. THINKING ABOVE CULTURE, ANY PHILOSOPHICAL POSSIBILITY?

Since human mind acts on the direct and indirect existent materials it is fed with through the senses, it stands that human thinking happens within cultural contexts. In other words, the possibility of human beings thinking above culture is not there. But one can rather think within culture in a reformed and improved manner. Even the Socratic channeling of thinking from cosmological wonder which triggered Greek Philosophy to ontological wonder happens within cultural contexts from which it is understood. For those ontological realities which are source of philosophy; such as the marvels and complexities of the human person, the brevity of the human life, the vicissitudes of life, man's superiority over the rest of nature which he controls and dominates, his power and weakness, his joys, sorrows, successes, greatness, failures, his experience of suffering, misery, disease, death, decay, and his finitude, etc are all known and understood from cultural perspective.

Necessarily, man's thought has to come in an improved manner because of the dynamic nature of human existential challenges and problems. It therefore stands that man possesses innate faculties capable of aiding human thinking. But materials for thinking are furnished from the environment. What we then refer as thinking above culture are mere natural responses to stimuli and capability of thought which are part and parcel of human existence. These natural exercises are different from real thinking which are set on motion by impressions made on the thinking faculties by objects in the environment. Supportive of this submission, Ajay Rai concurs that, an Animal is born with tendencies to react in certain ways to certain stimuli-tendencies based on inherited neural connections between sensory and motor systems...we are born with all the brain cells we will ever have.

The varying degree of these biological existent realities however corresponds with the varying degree in human thinking process. This varying degree in individuals also corresponds to the individuals' abilities to respond to needs and circumstances. It as well dictates one's abilities to form more connections with realities in the environment through the senses. As such, any claim of thinking above culture is simply an evolution of thought replete with refining old realities and processes and replicating a similarly new psychic products using innate neural capacities.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

The possibility of thinking above culture is an assumption. Man rather thinks on materials supplied from cultural environments through the senses. Thus, even the products of imagination that comes within thinking evolved from one cultural reality or the other. What happens is that in the thinking processes, images and realities apprehended through the senses are abstracted and reformed into new ideas. There is also a merging of apprehended images during the thinking exercise leading to new ideas that seem not to have a cultural representation. Thinking therefore is a critical and dialectical improvement of what is. In this process, the human

mind like the universe undergoes the dialectical processes of thesis, antithesis and synthesis before producing the ideas that forms human decision.

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