
History, Creativity and Philosophy: A Critical Relationship

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Abstract: *History, Creativity, Aesthetics and Philosophy are examined. The notion of the historian and his creative activities are explained in the context of historical reconstruction. History as a creative art harbour all attributes of aesthetics in an attempt to understand the past. The paper examines the relation and proximity of history to certain philosophical theories, such as the theories of beauty, goodness and truth, as expounded by Aristotle, Hegel, and Plato. It draws attention to the proximity of History to Philosophy and explains the critical relationships. It also discusses the extent of manifestation of ideas on history and their characteristics. Most people see historians as a group of mankind set apart from the normal run of mankind by their profession. These and other issues are interpreted and reflected in the paper. The paper finally recommends increased historical research studies in the philosophy of history.*

1. Introduction

Many approach the study of History with perplexing apathy. People tend to pay serious attention to politics rather than the educational system, in which all the indices of history, philosophy and creativity manifest. A lot of money is voted annually for Nigeria's political system, while the educational system is marked by poor funding, irregular calendar and acute shortage of qualified manpower. In the university system for instance, the academic programmes – History inclusive are characterized by apparent hopelessness. Yet in these, programmes lie true useful knowledge. It is also here that the great subject History and Philosophy are taught.

Creativity and Aesthetics are art concepts rather than philosophical concepts that are used by Historians to measure the degree of correlation and proximity in the creative process. Simply put, creativity is a function of aesthetics. Aesthetics means the deep involvement or intense reaction to a work of art. The historian's decision to write is in the construing of social or political events which is the product of the people's desire to record the past. When people, are unhappy they do not construe any social event as appropriately important to write history from it. Writing history is a typical creative activity while Aesthetics is the experience/process of writing good, beautiful and pleasant, history disregarding ugliness. Nothing is so central to the life of an individual as the sense he makes out of living as a divine phenomenon. The historian creates and recreates the past. It is as philosophers say "the trinity of beauty". Because aesthetics is so important, no effort should be spared in making all human beings participate more actively in creative activities.

The historian writes in time and space. The truth is that our knowledge, interpretation culture, history, anthropology, human science etc is only possible through language (Jaja 2008:132). According to a Ffulde proverb "speech is what gives shape to the past. Meaning that the study of the past will be shapeless without speech (Jaja 2008). Creativity takes place in times of need and the historian can only create where the right environment is provided. Every human being has the capacity to create things. Yet some people must work as full-time creative people. We often refer to this set of people as artists. The historian is an artist and draws from the past of society, when applied to daily living the historian is called a practical philosopher (Alagoa 2006).

2. History Aesthetics and Philosophy

History is the reconstruction of important achievements of man as a member of society (Jaja 2002). Some of the issues touched were intended to unmask the most vital and wonderful contributions of human beings Ibn Khaldun defines its scope very widely to embrace all of "human social organization or world civilization", and all

areas of human life and society (Alagoa 2006). History provides examples from the past for the guidance of present generations. For Ibn Khaldun history is a discipline with surface and an inner aspect. The surface aspect is merely narration of events, its appeal lying in its entertainment and information value. The inner variety is, indeed, a species of philosophy, involving speculation and a research for truth through investigation of historical processes as well as causes, the how and why of events” (Alagoa 2006).

Aesthetic is the study of a particular sort of value, especially the values involved in history and our experience of beauty. Beauty itself is the product of the historian’s reconstructive appreciation of the past. The entire field of practical philosophy addresses issues of history, historians and things they create which may be judged with some kind of objectivity, reality, truth and goodness etc. Both Plato and Aristotle dealt with these fundamental concepts and issues in philosophy – “the issue of art and creativeness”.

We often think of historians as persons set apart from the normal groups of human beings and of history as a special form of craft. Sometimes people refer to historians as practical philosophers, probably because of the nature of their activities. Sometimes we are accustomed to thinking of historians as crazy fellows, digging up the dead and some lost past. But these are very wrong notions indeed because of modern conception of history writers. They are also people who think deeply about the things (works) they create. Primarily, philosophers develop theories of and beliefs in things while historians do not just limit themselves to theories and beliefs but are more deeply concerned about recreating the past as it was beautiful and useful, using all known theories, beliefs and facts. Among all humankind it is perhaps only the historian that has been able to strike a balance between the concepts of Philosophy, History and Creativity, particularly in recent times when these notions are gaining world-wide attention. Again, it is only the historian’s encounter with the public that can explain some of these issues. In Africa South of the Sahara people did not bother to make clear distinctions between the historian and the craftsman. The traditional story teller, was teacher, philosopher and poet at the same time. He worked with his

fellows as part of one great creative workforce for a common goal. In the recent past the historian was regarded as a genius as was the situation in the 18th century, but today we know that everybody has the intellectual and practical capacity to create history – it all depends on the direction and disposition of the individual. People no longer talk of “the gifted” and the “talented”. Shiner (2002) a professor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois suggests it is a division that only inter-disciplinary exposure can guarantee. In that regard, there is need to expand the history curriculum in the school system to include other faculties of knowledge.

We can say that the meaning or content of history is often conveyed in the language and medium of its production. When a historian talks of meaning, he is thinking of cultural utility and time. Of course some of the terms we use in talking about creative works are metaphorical and philosophical at the same time. If, for instance, we say that a particular work is “beautiful”, “good”, “powerful”, we are not implying that they are literally alive and endowed with feelings. We are really talking about the way in which we perceive the creative work, or more precisely, we are referring to the historians influence in many spheres of philosophy.

As a response to interdisciplinary nature of history and other creative activities, the issues presented here teach us to look more critically at the various, relationships of history. Any branch of knowledge with facts and truth, together with their explanations and justifications deserves to be studied as Art and as has been explained, history is an intellectual study that prepares the mind for the direction of constructive activity. History is, in-fact the application of knowledge in specific production (Jaja and Brown 2007). As a response to interdisciplinary discussions on history and creativity, Plato, the great philosopher already set the stage for all discussions on history and other related subjects, particularly his position that history (Art) should be the “basis of education”. Considering his theories and ideas about history, and like an artist, the silhouettes he cut out at that early dark time of civilization might not have taken on such panoramic proportions had it not been for his deep understanding and involvement in applied philosophy which

came along just a few years after his death. Plato began nature studies and became very interested in the way things are made generally and the way work of art and man's taste and desires are woven into one format. From this format, two crucial concepts of direct concern to mankind emerged: The concepts of creativity and aesthetics. These two concepts, creativity and aesthetics are the two most important elements of this format. Indeed creativity is strengthened by diversity (Alagoa 1989). What is now commonly known as science is perhaps the manifestation of the long history and process of giving a name and meaning to a natural phenomenon. It was a phenomenon found in living and non-living things, substances, like air, gases, metals, etc. it was this phenomenon found in art that Plato was trying to describe, but not as most people would accept in the subject of biology, physics, chemistry or mathematics. Rather, the belief is that present-day philosophy is influenced by the modern science. Whichever way, the trends and circumstances of knowledge itself tell us something about the interrelatedness of Science and Arts; (Majuk 2001:22) for these are beautifully bound in a format more than any thing else. The real meaning of "natural phenomenon" is made clearer in the fact that since the creation of human beings, there has been art.

3. The Field of Philosophy of History

Philosophy of History as a field of study and practice encompasses speculative and practical philosophy that affects humankind. However the concept of philosophy itself was first articulated and used by Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras etc. These great thinkers went in search of meanings of things and somehow managed to impact on us the idea of philosophy. The concept of philosophy of History is sound in principle. It is derived from the essence and being of mankind which is the centre of all creations by the supreme "Being" God himself.

This explanation appears abstract and copious for a start. But for a quicker and a more thorough grasp of the subject matter at this stage, we may define philosophy of History as the creative and aesthetic oriented relationships

practiced across the boundaries of Arts and Science. Specific types of aesthetic and creative relationships which fall within the ambit of this broad definition are: Creative thinking, making things, engineering and technology, the application or use of the product of art and science. Against this background the field of philosophy of history can be seen to be much wider in scope than that which philosophers refer to as practical Philosophy. We appreciate our environment and love things that are well made and so we are aesthetic beings. Thus for each of these concepts we do have a branch of philosophy that explains it. "God created man in his own image". Man is a maker of things and making things is a special attribute of our creator God. Making things therefore is a function of the creative process, the products of which give us the good things of life.

The field of history is primarily concerned about the making of things but also to change things. I have shown elsewhere (Jaja, 2005) that the historian not only recreates the past but in doing so the pit falls of others and the successes help to change situations. The creative works of Ebiegberi Alagoa and Tekena Tamuno in the Niger Delta fall within this ambit and their appreciation thereof in terms of aesthetics and functionality (Jaja, 2005). Another word for making things is "Art" which has several connotations and meanings – so vast indeed, that space and time would not permit us to discuss here. History itself is a long established practice, but until recently more than five major compartments have been identified; all of which are united by aesthetics. Today, there are branches of history that operate and flourish under the theories of philosophy as well as the laws of nature. These branches of history are "multidisciplinary" and "multifunctional", in that they provide us with fresh visions and richer experience of life generally. Most disciplines now actively encourage their students to take courses outside their boundaries and borders for new ideas, materials and resources for better intellectual growth and fulfillment. Today, history business is ever flourishing not just for economic and aesthetic considerations, but also for political and cultural reasons.

Anyone who has followed the development of philosophy will remember how Pythagoras, the grey Greek thinker and mathematician, placed emphasis on the

dividends of philosophy when he postulated the parable about the superiority of the “Spectator” to the contestant and “vendor” at an athletic contest. It is always interesting to see how his articulation and postulation fit into our modern concept of the creative artist, the philosopher and the spectator.

Pythagoras argument that the spectator is superior to both the contestant and the vendor which is based on the fact that the contestants and the vendors have common interest which is utilitarian, by which he was referring to the money that both of them would make from the game, whereas the spectators’ interest is the game itself. The spectator is ready to spend his money to see the game. The beneficiaries remain the vendor and the contestant.

4. Works of History

The products of history are called works of history. The operations involved in the process of writing works of history are known as creative activities and the materials used in this exercise are obtained from the environment we live (Jaja 1994; 1995), from the social actions of man. Its practitioners require many sources, great varied knowledge, “a 8000 speculative mind” and thoroughness (Alagoa, 2006). A very high percentage of history are written out of the interaction of man in society.

In contemporary art practice, new materials are beginning to emerge and these have helped to increase creative challenges among historians. So to understand history and the various creative activities involved in its practice, a lot of thinking and research is involved. History exercises produce ideas and perceptions which are the basic ingredients of Applied Philosophy, in the way we have it today. These issues are discussed mainly in relation to the theories and ideas of those thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, who can be called the big pillars of philosophy. With these it is easy to see the claim of the historian that he is the authentic philosophers’ approach. This knowledge is very essential in our scientific and technological activities today. Today history has commonly been treated as a low priority subject in schools and society (Jaja and Kingdom 2007).

Today history is viewed differently in a technological era, hence for us and Pythagoras, art is indeed, a functional phenomenon not only in our society but also in other societies. Artistic creativity and philosophy in our society today examines and considers the functional and aesthetic relationship of art, science and technology in contemporary society, not only in Nigeria but the world over. Though people tend to compare the creative works from one region with that of another – Africa, Europe, Asia and America. With Pythagoras, the comparisons are mere philosophies under classical philosophy and modern history. There may be linkages and resemblances among the cultures that produced the historians.

5. Relationship with Undefined Boundaries

Essentially art rides upon the creative fields of making things as manifesting; sculpture, painting and drawing properly referred to as the Fine Arts. Moreover since the fine arts operate within the broad context of Creative Arts, of necessity, it also draws from a number of basic disciplines such as history, literature, music, dance, drama, poetry, economics, business and politics. In recent times it is difficult to compartmentalize these disciplines or even distinguish their products: These days we also talk of history as a business history for education, communication, history research, religious history, cultural and scientific history.

These functional areas and basic disciplines play significant roles in the study of philosophy. A fundamental grasp and appreciation of their relevance in today's world activities is important for every rational human person. No person can live in isolation. Even prisoners normally ask for freedom to interact with their fellows. Psychologists know the importance of interaction or seclusion; hence imprisonment is often used as a deterrent for social deviants or non-conformists. Philosophy of history determines the location, sources, factors or influence on history generally. It also directs attention to both natural and man-made history for explanation of development in science and technology. This technological knowledge empowers us with the suitable tools and materials with which to create history. In natural and

man-made factors of influence the historian finds expression, he employs theories, rules and the natural appearance of things to reconstruct the past. The historian must imbibe and digests all the trade secrets of the philosopher to remain wonderfully creative. It is not only the historian who creates, “everyone has the capacity to create” and so, it is important that every member of humankind should know about it, whether he can take part or not. It is a well known phenomenon that people can talk or write about history even when they did not go through formal study of history. But it is important to note that the experiences we express either in history of other fields or study were all derived from the same environment.

6. Conclusion

So, finally, history is important in our everyday life because reconstructive activities influence the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the God we worship and the people we relate with. The historian in the society identifies problems and opportunities around him. Appreciation of this issue would require a philosophical approach to it. History is essentially a visual recreation of man’s experience with nature. This is perhaps the commonest idea most people have about it. There is more to history than is commonly perceived – because the whole idea of creativity hinges on the ability to paint, write, reproduce what has happened or would happen based on facts from the past. There is no problem understanding or gaining knowledge through history. The problem has always been that of definition of what is history and what is not. Otherwise everybody attempts to use history. In addition to all branches of philosophy, perhaps applied philosophy is the area that deals more practically with the circumstances of mankind. In this regard, philosophy of history plays an important role. It questions what the historian is doing and how effective and why. Accounts are represented the way they are or expressed in a particular way. It is only through history that we have access to past reality and if indeed past reality, can lead us to better life in the future.

The philosophy of history and creativity seeks to unravel the justification for education. The basis of this essay is to answer the question why do we need to be creative? And what are the different schools of thought concerning the main product of creativity? Most philosophical schools of thought, one way or the other, touch on history whether they are humanists or not.

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