

Full Length Research

The Quest for Self-reflective Knowledge and Practice: Is an Epistemological Blindness Relative to Time and Situation?

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This article serves as both an expository and critical reflection on the fifth chapter of Boaventura De Sousa Santos's book (2014), titled "Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide". The fifth chapter, entitled "Toward an Epistemology of Blindness: Why the New Forms of 'Ceremonial Adequacy' Neither Regulate nor Emancipate" (pages 136-163), is the focus of this article. This paper advocates for the need to cultivate self-reflective knowledge and practice, fostering an epistemological paradigm that acknowledges its own blindness or incompleteness to contribute to global betterment. Furthermore, this study aim to establish the assertion that epistemological blindness is relative, varying based on the era, socio-economic circumstances, and political context in which the society exhibiting the blindness finds itself. Contrary to Santos's claim, this essay will present the perspective that "knowledge as regulation" and "knowledge as emancipation" are interdependent, mutually reinforcing elements. This is in contrast to their portrayal as mutually exclusive, even within marginalized cultures themselves.

Key words: Self-reflective, Epistemological blindness, Relativity, Knowledge and practice.

INTRODUCTION

The initial portion of this essay addresses the assertion that any knowledge, practice, or culture must strive to transcend the mere recognition of others' blindness. In other words, it should cultivate an awareness of its own limitations and incompleteness in the pursuit of better comprehending the world and advancing humanity. The subsequent section introduces the notion of the relativity of epistemological blindness. This relativity can be observed in the context of specific time periods, socio-economic conditions, and political circumstances through which those accused of epistemological blindness have navigated. The third segment establishes the perspective

that "knowledge as regulation" and "knowledge as emancipation" should not be treated as mutually exclusive, contrary to Santos's assertion. To clarify, associating the former solely with "dominant knowledge and practice" and the latter solely with "silenced or marginalized knowledge and practice" fails to adequately capture the distinction. This section also dedicates itself to my viewpoint that the knowledge and practice of marginalized groups should not be merely reduced to "social emancipation," and similarly, the knowledge and practice of dominant groups should not be solely confined to that of "social regulation." In essence, this suggests

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to that of "social regulation." In essence, this suggests that both "marginalized" and "dominant" cultures should be open to considering aspects like emancipation, regulation, and other forms of knowledge. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the implications of the central arguments, provides remarks, and offers suggestions for further studies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methodologically, this article employs a purely qualitative research approach, which is both relevant and essential for philosophical inquiry. The research design employed is meta-analytic in nature, aiming to dissect the comprehensive concepts of knowledge and practice into their constituent components. Plausible arguments are formulated by reflecting on the foundational principles of these two concepts, examined in a comparative manner concerning their interrelations and interplay with the overarching goals of emancipation and unveiling epistemological blindness. In undertaking this, the study posits claims pertaining to the implications arising from the dynamic between knowledge and practice, in relation to the self's epistemological blindness and that of others.

Moreover, potential counterarguments against the claims presented in this article are anticipated and subsequently addressed through counter-replies. This methodological approach draws inspiration from Kagan's suggestions on "How to Write a Philosophy Paper": "State a thesis and defend it. That is, you must stake out a position that you take to be correct, and then you must offer arguments for that view, consider objections, and reply to those objections" (2007: 1). Whenever an attempt is made to deconstruct an established claim within this article, alternative perspectives and possibilities are immediately provided, rather than dismissing potential viewpoints outright.

The primary source underpinning this study is the fifth chapter of Boaventura De Sousa Santos's book (2014), titled "Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide". Specifically, the fifth chapter is titled "Toward an Epistemology of Blindness: Why the New Forms of 'Ceremonial Adequacy' neither Regulate nor Emancipate" (pp. 136-163). However, personal observations, lived experiences, discussions with colleagues, and pertinent previous studies have significantly contributed to the richness and depth of this work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Noticing the blindness of others: should it be accompanied by observing one's own blindness and considering the critics of it?

This study shares Santos's view that human beings are very prone to see the blindness of others, especially of those lived in the past, since it could be relatively simpler to articulate and in fact might have the opportunity of being replicated. The study is built on this claim by discussing some relevant real life situations and local examples.

A popular 'Afaan Oromoo' proverb which says "*Muka Jigetti Qottootu Heddummata!*" meaning literally, "There will be a plenty of hands with an axe to cutting down an already fallen tree!" To be more concrete, world view and

public philosophy of a particular cultural group or society is embedded in its vernacular language and lived experience. Emmanuel paraphrases Wredu's argument to defend this view, stating "... the causal laws of nature are, logically speaking, continuously anchored in the normative requirements of concepts and of the grammatical, sentential structures of languages" (2008: 106). In a local community, where I was brought up, this proverb is used to metaphorically deliver the message that once your incompleteness or/and wrongdoings observed; people would be very obsessed about that failure. This study argues that this might have resulted even in neglecting the present blindness, incompleteness and wrong doings of one self. Being merely obsessed about the apparently observed blindness of others, would inevitably lead to paying little or no attention to some of the blindness that are not observed or overlooked whether intentionally or not. Santos argues:

Common sense collapses cause and intention; it rests on a worldview based on action and on the principle of individual creativity and responsibility. Commonsense is practical and pragmatic. It reproduces knowledge drawn from the life trajectories and experiences of a given social group and asserts that this link to group experience renders it reliable and reassuring. Common sense is self-evident and transparent. It mistrusts the opacity of technological objectives and the esoteric nature of knowledge, arguing for the principle of equal access to discourse, to cognitive and linguistic competence (2014:158).

As it has been noted in the above self-explanatory sub-topic of this essay, I believe that being able to observe the blindness of others (whether in the past or at present) must be utilized for the sake of drawing crucial lessons. And this has to be accompanied with the psychological readiness and curiosity to become aware of one's own blindness and at the same time by being open to taking into account criticisms and suggestions, since as a matter of fact one's blindness could be best expressed and articulated by others.

In order to create a better world through enhancing humanity, observance of others' blindness, must be undertaken in a manner that would teach the existing generation and the generations to come, a real life lessons not to live again with the same or similar blindness. "One may ask if the insight into the epistemology of blindness is not in itself a blind insight" (de Sousa Santos, 2014: 156). And this must be reinforced by the willingness and readiness to become cognizant of one's own past and present limitations and the critics that follow while seeing that of the others.

Here, the case of Apartheid system that took place in South Africa would be stated in order to clearly establish the claim that seeing others' blindness must be accompanied by being aware of one's own blindness or at least being open to critics of it. For instance, I believe

that the racial segregation that took place during the Apartheid system was the effect of the blindness of the then Apartheid system builders and implementers. So they did not either observe their blindness or deliberately suppressed the opportunity to take a lesson from their blindness to refrain themselves from such an inhuman act. And on the other side, one could say Nelson Mandela's administration was able to see the blindness of the people who built and implemented the Apartheid system in a manner that would teach a lesson the rest of the world. This happened when the system has come to an end officially in principle (I do not think that this is case actually or in practice) through forgiveness from Mandela's administration.

However, it would be still safe to argue, that Mandela's administration also had blindness when they practiced the forgiveness and reconciliation without a fair redistribution of the means of production and other national resources which very recently gave birth to xenophobia. One might argue at this point, that there should be no preconditions for a genuine forgiveness. One could respond to this anticipated objection, saying that the forgiveness was for the past wrong doings, but not to provide them with a guarantee to continue to possess the means of production and national wealth they monopolized taking advantage of the systemic injustice.

Relativity of “epistemological blindness”: in relation to a period of time and socio-economic and political situations

The relativity of “epistemological blindness”, referred to at this point, might be manifested both in the case of an individual person and cultural group. In other words, an individual person, while passing through the stages of intellectual maturity would manifest an “epistemological blindness” that might vary in relation to a period of time and real life conditions. “-----This view does not, however, discredit the fact that our unique landscapes and geographical enclave poses unique and somewhat differing realities and problems” (Aribiah, 2016: 104). For instance, currently, I am a Ph.D. student. And I believe that there is still an “epistemological blindness” that I might exhibit, which needs in fact to be refined through sustained intellectual endeavors. However, I would certainly argue that the “epistemological blindness” that was exhibited by me during my undergraduate study is quite different from the ones I might exhibit while I was a Master's degree student. And by the same token, now being a Ph.D. student, sometimes I might be wondering looking back to my own “epistemological blindness” during last educational levels at University and beyond.

Similarly, a cultural group or society, while passing through various stages of psychological makeup and concern for the enhancement of humanity; might exhibit an “epistemological blindness”. And that could be seen as relative to the specific periods of time and varying

socio-economic and political conditions that that particular society goes through. For example, there were/are Ethiopian people and even people from a different country, who came to believe that emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia was an elect of God to rule the then people of the country. And I believe that was an “epistemological blindness”. So if another Emperor would claim the same thing; (being an elect of God) at this moment, given the relative political consciousness of the present Ethiopian society that would be of no effect.

It is believed that colonialism, imperialism, modernization, Westernization and globalization are movements and projects born out of “epistemological blindness”, of course, at different periods of time and in various socio-economic and political situations. However, these projects had one thing in common, which is considering the societies affiliated with the projects as adequately representing the whole world, instead of being taken as one part of the world. And they strive to implement the projects having in mind that they got the so called “civilizing mission” as if knowledge and thought are solely revealed to them (colonialists, imperialists, racists, and the like). Contemporarily, there are intellectuals, who believe that the situation in which Africa finds itself now could be best expressed as “neo-colonialism” and this is the view that I also share.

Therefore, doing injustice to others with the name of colonialism, “Western modernity project” or whatever are manifestations of “epistemological blindness”. Then it would be safe to argue that “epistemological blindness” might be wrongly justified in the particular period of time and socio-economic and political contexts where it is entangled in. That is partly why the inhuman projects mentioned above (imperialism, colonialism, racial segregation, and so on and so forth) and the “epistemological blindness” that gave them birth are being emphasized and condemned long after their coming to existence.

“Knowledge as regulation” and “knowledge as emancipation” are not mutually exclusive

Though this study is in agreement with a portion of Santos's idea of the “twin pillars” (“knowledge as social regulation” and “knowledge as social emancipation”), there are reservations still. For instance, when it comes to whether the two forms of knowledge could be treated separately associated with “order” and “solidarity” respectively. “The paradigm of modernity comprises two main forms of knowledge: knowledge-as-emancipation and knowledge-as-regulation” (de Sousa Santos, 2014: 139). For me, these issues of emancipation and regulation as forms of knowledge cannot adequately categorize and clearly describe the distinctions between the knowledge and practice of the dominant and that of the marginalized societies. For example, most of or almost the entire curriculum, education system, pedagogy

and andragogy of the formal education that have been implemented in the Global South have been following the footsteps of the Global South. Santos states:

Modern science has become the privileged form of knowledge-as-regulation, despite the fact that, the social regulation cautioned by it is neither reliable nor sustainable. On the other hand, modern science has totally deserted the other possibility of knowledge inscribed in the paradigm of modernity: knowledge-as-emancipation (2014: 156).

However, sometimes, there might have been the opportunities for the reciprocity and converse relationship between “knowledge as regulation” and “knowledge as emancipation”. “Philosophy, as an intellectual activity, is universal; it cannot be assumed to be confined to the peoples of the West and the East” (Kanu, 2014: 92). “The Eurocentric thinkers of the 19th and early 20th centuries thought that philosophy was a European phenomenon” (Bekele, 2015: 141). At this point, the study discusses the case of an Anthropologist who was a professor at Mekelle University of Ethiopia and of Japanese origin (I took the story from her interview with Oromia Broadcasting Service Television (OBS TV), 2020). She used to conduct an anthropological research in Borana, a place which is well known for its indigenous and aboriginal cultural practice in Oromia Regional State of Ethiopia. And the local community gave her the name Dr. *Lookoo*, though Dr. is the regular academic title that she got after doing her Ph.D., ‘Lookoo’ means literally a pretty woman in Afaan Oromoo. She got the name for mastering the language of the local community fluently within a very short period of time through being cognizant and respectful of the tribe’s established cultural norms and values. And eventually she acknowledged that she got real life lessons of how to enhance humanity and live in harmony with nature from the Borana indigenous and aboriginal community that she couldn’t get from the so called “civilized” parts of the world. “These supercilious Eurocentric scholars conceived philosophy as preserved for the higher breed of humanity” (Nelson, 2017:95). So the knowledge and practice of the marginalized could also be both emancipatory and regulatory if it would have been well situated. Santos relates:

Modern science built itself against common sense, which it deemed superficial, illusory, and false. Common sense was the name given to all forms of knowledge that did not meet the epistemological criteria that modern science established for itself (2014: 157).

Therefore, it would be safe to argue that knowledge and practices in both dominant and marginalized societies had their roots in almost the same pattern of thinking. This influenced most of the individuals in the Global South, often unknowingly to them to accept the abnormal as the normal way of living. For instance, for me, the so

called “Westernization” or assuming the ways of life or practices (like homosexuality) emerged and practiced in some part of the world as the super model for the rest of the humanity is abnormal, and yet being considered as the abnormal normal.

Conclusions

It is believed that knowledge and practice must strive to go beyond noticing the blindness of others. In order for a culture, to do this, it needs to become aware of its own incompleteness and limitations with regard to best understanding the world and to enhance humanity as well.

Another claim established is that a cultural group or society, while passing through various stages of psychological makeup and concern for the enhancement of humanity; might exhibit an “epistemological blindness”. And that could be seen as relative to the specific periods of time and varying socio-economic and political conditions that that particular society goes through.

Emancipation and regulation as forms of knowledge which Santos calls the “twin pillars” cannot adequately categorize and clearly describe the distinctions between the knowledge and practice of the dominant and that of the marginalized societies. This is due to the fact that there might have been the opportunities for the reciprocity and converse relationship between “knowledge as regulation” and “knowledge as emancipation”. According to Masolo (2003):

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 (2003:21).

To bring about the desired change__ enhancing humanity with the modern sciences and the “Western Project of Modernity” is untenable, since the methods applied are not convenient and as such relevant to tackle the problems in real social life. “The project of Western modernity is organized around a discrepancy between social experience and social expectations” (Santos, 2014: 138). Hence, we need an intellectual endeavor toward an “epistemology of seeing” that might emancipate humanity from being imposed by knowledge and practice that appears to create a better localized world in monopoly; at the expense of diverse knowledge and practices.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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