

A CRITIQUE OF ULTRA-MATERIAL EMPIRICISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF KWAME NKRUMAH

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Abstract

The question of the meaning, source and nature of knowledge arose quite early in the history of the philosophic enterprise. It is a question that is at the basis of the philosophical enquiry. It has continued to colour and shape philosophical discourses. For anything to be known at all, it is imperative that how it ought to be known be clearly outlined. Philosophers from antiquities to the contemporary era have endeavoured to unambiguously chart the path to true knowledge. In this endeavour, many schools of thought have emerged but two patterns of viewing knowledge bestride the discourse. Thinkers have generally devolved into those that hold the true knowledge of reality comes from the mind or spirit, and those who believe that the knowledge of the world comes from the senses. Kwame Nkrumah not only embraced the latter, upheld such a materialist view of the nature, and knowledge of the world that everything in the world is reduced to the operations and conversions of matter. This research x-rays Nkrumah's ultra-materialist epistemology. Library research and philosophical analysis remain the key methodologies employed in this work.

Key words: Ultra-Material, Empiricism, Knowledge

Introduction

A glance at Nkrumah's works readily reveals a thorough going materialism that makes him interpret all phenomena in materialist terms. He rejected any allusions to the spirit in relation to the interpretation of the world. The world for him was not more than matter in motion. The world, the object that knows it and the process of knowing it are all material (Nkrumah, 1964). Therefore, Nkrumah embraced a brand of empiricism that has no room for the non-material.

The question of knowledge which he addressed is as old as the philosophic enquiry. If the world must be known at all, we must be certain of how we can know it. He was apparently reacting to the positions of the philosophers before him on the theory of knowledge. Berkeley in his empiricism had reduced perception to the activities of spirits and ideas. Materiality was blatantly denied in his rendition of empiricism. Since the mind deals with ideas alone, Berkeley concluded in his subjective empiricism that all knowledge of the world were but ideas in the mind (Berkeley, 1709; 1710). We have no way of materially knowing these empirically (Bethe, 2008).

Nkrumah seemed to have set out to address the conclusions made by Berkeley in his rendition of empiricism. A thoroughly materialist system of empiricism became for him, an effective antidote to Berkeley's spirit based empiricism. It is interesting to note that Nkrumah did not embark on his investigation into the nature of knowledge as an abstract quest. He approached knowledge existentially. First, he was concerned about understanding the world around him as a post-colonial African who faced a triangular crisis of ideology. The African must make synthesis of the three conflicting ideologies that are presented to him as truths about the world: Judeo-Christian ideology, Arabian-Islamic ideology and the African traditional worldview. Since, the African can't accept any of these ideologies uncritically, he must define "knowledge" and adopt a way of attaining it.

Materialist empiricism appealed to Nkrumah because the African traditional worldview is fundamentally materialist. Nkrumah sought to understand the world around him in materialist terms. The other two ideologies have otherworldly ends. Nkrumah declared the world material and sought the

knowledge of it by observing matter in action – empiricism (Nkrumah, 1964).

Also, Nkrumah did not see knowledge as something that is sought after for its own sake but as something sought after in a social milieu for a social purpose. Thus, Nkrumah (1964) declared that there is always a social contention in every philosophy. Knowledge is at the service of the society; people who profess knowledge about the world always have social contentions which their ideas address. Since knowledge is so important for the survival, and understanding of the mission of the society, what then is knowledge? That was how Nkrumah's theory of knowledge emerged. How does the African understand the world in order to choose how best to live in it?

Although the African exists in a peculiar world subject to peculiar conditions, knowledge does not hold a different meaning for the African. Like the rest of humanity, Africans face the universal problems of: how do we know, what can we know and what can be called knowledge? Although, socio-political environments differ, human nature is basically the same. The principles of understanding remain same for all humanity. From a regional quest for understanding, Nkrumah embarked on a universal mission for the conquest of truth; the truth about the world. Thus, he had to launch a critique of the theories of knowledge from the classical times to the Berkeley's modern period, pointing out their shortcomings and the social contentions inherent in them. He had to make a synthesis which became his own theory of knowledge.

The Challenge before Nkrumah: Historical Background to his Epistemology

To understand the full import of Nkrumah's materialist empiricism, the epistemological challenges to he responded in his theory of knowledge ought to be kept in perspective. Socrates has maintained a union between knowing and doing, there was no case of bifurcation of knowledge nor dichotomy of being and appearance in his philosophy. However, Plato his disciple thought otherwise. Plato bifurcated knowledge into forms and images which invariably bifurcated the world into mind and matter (Theaetetus, c.369 BC). The stage thus became set for the debate on what knowledge is and where it resided. Aristotle (c. 350 BC; c. 351 BC) his disciple, quickly answered him and restored all knowledge and al reality in matter (Burt, 1889). That marked the division of philosophers into two major blocs: the idealists and the materialists. The idealists generally held that knowledge resided outside matter, and as such could only be apprehended by the mind. The materialists on the other hand, believe firmly that observation of matter alone gives us knowledge. These schools of thought with time became more like two parallel lines that can never meet. This birthed the mind/body problem in philosophy. Nkrumah rose to the challenge of resolving the mind/body problem in philosophers' quest to define true, certain knowledge of the world. First he had to take a stand. He did. He embraced empiricism, and located knowledge in the experiences of the human senses in their interaction with matter as interpreted by the mind. He equally had to take a stand on whether mind is a material entity or a nonmaterial entity. He had to resolve the epistemological dichotomy between mind and body. The way and manner he did these things constituted his theory of knowledge.

Empiricism before Nkrumah

Properly speaking, empiricism could be said to have originated in Aristotle's response to Plato's otherworldly theory of knowledge. Plato had placed true knowledge in the forms which exist in the world of the mind. As such, only the mind could apprehend knowledge. Matter was but a mere illusion as material things were but poor copies of the universal ideas in the world of the forms. Plato's theory of knowledge shifted the epistemological focus from the material world to an imaginary world of ideas. Aristotle however, restored the focus on matter through his theory of hylemorphism which sought to explain the relationship between form and matter. Aristotle located reality in matter. He effectively jettisoned the attempt to explain the material world by making allusions to an imaginary spiritual world. He institutionalised observation as the principle of knowledge by carrying out detailed research on numerous natural phenomena, thereby effectively establishing the empirical tradition (Posterior Analytics Bk. 1).

The contest for supremacy between empiricism and idealism continued until Francis Bacon waded in the sixteenth century. Bacon (1620), dismissed all propositions not based on observation as idols. Francis Bacon reiterated the importance of observation in the theory of knowledge. He championed the establishment of the scientific method as a mode of knowing. His works led to the separation of science from philosophy.

Rene Descartes would eventually turn the direction of the scientific movement rationalism (1641). He brought in the sceptical frame of mind but ended up with subjective solipsism. Although he was a scientist, his proposed methodology was a let-down to the scientific movement. He was one of the pillars of the scientific movement but he is regarded more as a rationalist than an empiricist. His relevance

previously held assumptions when they have been proven incorrect, irrespective of the authority behind them. It could be said that John Locke through his empiricism placed scientific methodology on sure footing. He effectively banished appeals to spirits or gods in scientific discourse. He equally eliminated the ambiguity that comes with accounting for some natural phenomena by appealing to innate ideas. His characterization of the self as a continuity of consciousness was eponymous. Locke fairly deserves the credit for establishing empiricism as the surest way to the knowledge of nature.

Locke was succeeded by George Berkeley on the empirical quest for knowledge. Berkeley however introduced a bizarre dimension to empiricism. For Berkeley, to be is to be perceived (1709;1710). He denied the extra-mental existence of the objects of perception. Berkeley was of the view that only spirits and their ideas existed. All our knowledge of the world come from the ideas of the world perceived in our minds. Our senses do not tell us what things are but our minds. The mind does not deal with substances but ideas. In the final analysis, what we really know are ideas. There is no “empirical” way knowing that the ideas of the objects in our minds are extra-mental. We can only be certain of the existence of the objects perceived in our minds. But what happens to the world when no one is perceiving it; will it disappear from existence since ‘to be is to be perceived’? Berkeley answers that God, who is the universal spirit always perceives the world even when no one else does. In so doing, he keeps the world in perpetual existence.

Although Berkeley did not explicitly raise it, the seemingly queer conclusions he reached in his empiricism implied the problem of causality. David Hume would later address this

problem. Hume generally echoed the main points of Locke's empiricism except on the concept of causality. Hume declared that we do not "empirically" observe causality. It is purely a habit of the mind and the observation of the conjunction or concurrence of events that induce us to believe that one thing is the cause of another. The causality is never observed empirically. Our belief that the one is the cause of the other is but a mere habit of the mind. He brought out lucidly, the implicit critique of empiricism in Berkeley's sarcastic rendition of empiricism. He was the first thinker to methodically critique empiricism. He would go further to critique induction which is the bedrock of the scientific method. He declared that the whole enterprise of induction is predicated on the belief that the future would resemble the past (Hume, 1777). This cannot be known empirically. It is sheer faith. There are no possible empirical guarantees to that.

Immanuel Kant would later delve into the problem of the extra-mental world and the intra-mental representation of it by our mind. Kant would eventually conclude that "the thing in itself is unknowable" (1781y). There is no way of knowing objects in themselves except the pictures of them presented by the mind. We cannot be sure that the faithfully represent these phenomena as the mind may have made its own inputs. The mind has its own ontological constitution that must necessarily make it perceive things in certain ways. Its constitution would definitely influence how it pictures reality. At the end of the process, what we may have might be a synthesis of the impressions from the object and the inputs from the mind. Kant however, was silent on the fundamental nature of the mind.

Social Contentions in Epistemological Enquiries

Nkrumah observed that there are always social contentions inherent, though often undeclared in epistemological propositions (1964). The social milieu and social contention pursued by the author colour decisively, the epistemological conclusions he puts forth. In other words, there is a social dimension to epistemological propositions. The propositions are seldom made for their sakes. The need to make them is always necessitated by the social milieu. The thinker often weighs in to make his own input in the social contention created by the social milieu. This is a novel observation by Nkrumah which he painstakingly proved. When Berkeley declared that only ideas existed, did he really believe that he was just an idea or that his breakfast and lunch were mere ideas? Definitely not. Berkeley was worried that the interpretation of nature with nature banished God from nature, thereby aiding the scepticism of the atheist. The social contention for him was to restore God in nature. The milieu created by empiricism tended to push God to the corner in the scheme of nature. Berkeley, being a priest was unhappy with that. After denying the existence of objects outside the mind, he appealed to his readers that he had not done any harm to world; that he merely denied the atheist a fulcrum from which to launch his atheism. That was the social contention. Nkrumah sarcastically quipped that grateful church rewarded Berkeley with a bishopric for his attack on atheism in the guise of epistemology. What was true of Berkeley was also true of Locke. Locke lived in a society where legitimacy was based on the divine right of kings to rule; where submission to the state was seen as a matter of obedience to divine injunction. He had to interpret nature with nature in order to eliminate God from socio-political affairs. Rather than revelation, empirical observation became the source of truth.

The concept of social contention in epistemological enquiries opened a vista into author bias and intentionality in epistemological propositions. The social contention was always the critical issue philosophers set out to address in their epistemological propositions. In the same guise the social contention in Nkrumah's epistemology is fashioning out an ideology of liberation for colonial and postcolonial Africa. The African was assailed by Judeo-Christian influence from the West, Arab-Islamic influences from the Middle East and the tenets of African traditional religion which are still alive in the consciousness of the African despite the influences of Islam and Christianity. The result of this triangular ideological influences in the consciousness of the African is a crisis of identity (Nkrumah.1964).

Through his epistemological propositions, Nkrumah set out to create a truth path that would epistemologically equip the African to successfully cut through the triangular crisis of ideology he faced. Nkrumah chose materialist empiricism because African worldview was largely this-worldly. There was no dichotomy of mind and matter. Traditionally, Africans largely did not look for beatitudes beyond the material world. Both Islam and Christianity refocused the African to otherworldly pursuits and created a dual reality of the material and non-material, the here now and the hereafter. A critical look at Nkrumah's materialist empiricism shows an espousal of single material world and a unity of mind and matter. These epistemological propositions that are already embedded in the African worldview.

Nkrumah's Materialist Empiricism

Nkrumah saw the world in thoroughly material terms. He disregarded Berkeley's ideas-made world and shrugged off Hume's scepticism on causality. Nkrumah saw the existence of matter as self-evident. As such, any attempt to deny it would lead to absurdity. It would be self-deceit to deny the existence of the physical world as even the proponent of such an absurd proposition would not believe it himself. For Nkrumah, the physical world does exist and it is fundamentally material in nature. Matter is the primary reality in nature. It is eternal and indestructible. It is dynamic, self-moved, spontaneous, intelligent and purposeful (1964). The senses perceive matter because matter is always sending off corpuscles which the senses perceive and transmits to the mind for interpretation. The senses give us effective representation of the world.

Departing from classical physics, Nkrumah, defined matter not as an inert substance but an active, dynamic phenomenon. He called "a plenum of forces in tension" (1964). These novel attributes of matter enabled him to conceive reality as an uncreated unity,

Mind and Categorical Conversion

A perennial question in epistemology is the relationship between the mind and matter in the process of knowing. Nkrumah set out to eliminate the dichotomy. Nkrumah declared that mind is an outcrop of matter. It is the highest organization of matter; the apex evolution of matter. Matter in varying degrees display the characteristics of mind. It exhibits intelligence as is evident in the orderly organization of matter, the order and the immanent laws governing the behaviour matter. Matter is self-moved both at macro and micro levels. The planetary systems are in constant motion without any aid from any external entity. At micro level, matter gives off

2. Discovering the true nature of the world.
3. Fashioning the appropriate view of the world (worldview) for the liberation of the colonial African.

It was an existential quest for meaning. Although the theories he espoused had universal applicability, his focus was fashioning out an ideology of liberation for colonial Africa (Nkrumah, 1964).

The Critique

Although Nkrumah introduced new and interesting perspectives to epistemology, some of his ideas face questions that are difficult to dismiss. He was an ultra-materialist empiricist. In his bid to materially explain the world, he glossed over issues that are so difficult to resolve even by his own brand of empiricism.

i. Categorical Conversion

The idea of categorical conversion is but sheer obfuscation. The notion that a pure category can yield a category other than itself is a logical absurdity. If mind is “reducible without any residue to matter”, it was always material. It was never changed into non-material category. Nkrumah like other thinkers before him apparently attempted to resolve the mind-body problem. He made elaborate progress in expanding the attributes of matter. There was no need to move mind to a non-material category in order to account for it. Since, he had bequeathed intelligence, purpose and spontaneity to matter, it should have been sufficient if he stated that mind was a critical evolution of matter – still material. Moving mind to a non-material category at that point made no logical sense. He

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should have gone ahead to explain the mind as a sophisticated activity of the human brain.

ii. Eternal, Uncreated World

The declaration by Nkrumah that the world is eternal and uncreated is empirically fallacious. Such conclusions cannot be empirically warranted. If the world were uncreated, it would be impossible to observe that act. The *uncreatedness* of the world cannot be empirically known for the simple reason that there would be no being to observe the act of the world not being created. Such conclusion was not empirically arrived at. It was rather, a product of ratiocinations. The declaration was a sheer act of faith. Nothing warranted empirically.

Eternity is not an empirical term. Endlessness is not observable. Even if the world were indeed eternal, that fact cannot be empirically ascertained. It could only be a product of reflection, not observation. Although Nkrumah set out to espouse radical empiricism, this assertion from him is an act of rationalism.

iii. Dismissal of the Divine from the Cosmos

There is neither an empirical evidence to assert nor to deny divine influences in the cosmos. If the cosmos were created by a God; it cannot empirically proven. It cannot be empirically disproven. The world could as well be as God intended it to be. There is no way of confirming or disproving this. It could as well be that there is no being beyond matter. We cannot know this for certain. Empiricism does not warrant a conclusion here. Yet Nkrumah made his conclusions.

iv. The Meaning of Matter

Matter is but a collective world that is used to represent the multitude of things which are so different individually. Giving them qualities as if they were one and same phenomena might be problematic. What the various phenomena known as matter share in common is existence. The substances that constitute matter have no uniform behaviour. Matter therefore, could not be spoken of as if it were any particular thing. It is just a broad characterization of phenomena.

v. Contingency of Perception

There is no empirical guarantee that we have all the senses necessary to perceive all possible phenomena in the cosmos. Evolution states that the natural adaptations of man are products of chance. In the same vein, the fact that we have five senses might be a product of chance. It is possible that there are phenomena in the world that require a sixth or seventh sense to be perceived. Our inability to perceive such phenomena would certainly influence our knowledge of the world. Until the invention of the microscope humanity was ignorant of the existence or the exact nature of microorganisms talk less of phenomena that would require extra sense organs to perceive.

The naïve faith in materialist empiricism by Nkrumah did not take into sufficient consideration, these possibilities. Empiricism is contingent on the senses. To assume that humans have all the sense organ for the perception of every possible phenomenon in the world is to assume a maker or a designer for the world. That knowledge is not empirically possible. The assumption therefore, runs counter to the empirical principle which he sought to uphold. If the senses are contingent, only a cautious faith in the ability of senses to

intellectually. He had to do battle against the subjective idealism espoused in George Berkeley's empiricism. Matter, not idea, is the basis of reality. Matter, not idea pervades the world. Everything in the world is reducible without residue to matter. This declaration has decisive influence on the choice of ideology for the liberation of Africa. If matter is the ultimate reality, Africans should necessarily reject any ideology that will redirect their focus on any world other than this material world. Africa therefore, must reject substantial parts of the Judeo-Christian and Arab-Islamic ideologies. Their focus on the after world would not bring Africa the necessarily liberation in this world. Nkrumah was essentially redirecting the focus of the African to matter rather than God or the gods as the source(s) of meaning. Nkrumah essentially was calling on Africans to embrace a matter based ideology.

Nkrumah however recognises that Africans cannot successfully jettison Christianity and Islam. He called on Africans to pick the best of these ideologies to merge them with the best of our traditional worldviews. The African is placed on a sensitive epistemological position of being the measure of all values. His conscience, not the ideologies would be the judge. African philosophers should embark on detailed study of Nkrumah's existential epistemology. It is brilliant and pan-African. Despite its imperfections, it holds much promise for Africa. Africa must critique its values, foreign and indigenous.

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