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Phronesis and Hermeneutics: The Construct of Social / Economic Phenomenon and their Interpretation for a Sustainable Society

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Abstract

This article has provided a forum for analytical discourses pertaining to two philosophical and methodological concepts (Phronesis and Hermeneutics) in a bid to addressing the key objectives set out. Discussions emanated from the work (more so from literature review carried out) clearly shows that, there is no crystal dichotomy between the two concepts, but more so the prevalence of interconnectedness as interpretation of situations or even texts can also be based on an expression of positive biasness towards what one may perceive as being humanely justifiable, closely linked to Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy. The methodological inquiry of the study's reliance on literature review materials and other documentations has helped greatly in unravelling an open, but more critical discourses pertaining to the two case study countries selected (Sierra Leone and the United Kingdom).

Keywords: *Phronesis; Hermeneutics; Social Construct; Sustainability; Sierra Leone; UK*

JEL Classification: *Q23; B45*

Introduction

The words '*Phronesis*' and '*Hermeneutics*' are methodological approaches, and derivatives from the Greek words "*Phronēsis and Herneneus*" respectively. The test on this study is to see whether there is a dichotomy between the two concepts, as their application mostly in the academic domain (philosophically rooted), can be used to explain concepts relating to human existentiality and their virtuous actions in an economic system, more so in planning the way for a sustainable society capable of managing resources without destroying the environment for the good of future generations.

Methodologically rooted, hermeneutics is the interpretation of texts [Jackson and Conteh – forthcoming], initially on the phenomenon of biblical exegesis (Seebohm, 2004: 10); it is no surprise as to the reason for the mass emergence of new formed churches (as the slogan goes in Sierra Leone, '*Pan-body churches*'), all propagating the scriptures based on their own selfish manipulation, probably so in cajoling the minds of followers.

How does sustainability interplay between the two concepts - whether on the basis of theological discourse(s) or personal interpretation(s) attributed to the economic management of

a nation, the basic tenet is rooted on trust; an evangelist may purport to be propagating the word of God to his / her followers, but only as a way of fleecing resources from the ignorance of their innocence. Similarly, a government (particularly as seen in the so-called democratisation of economies around African) may purport to be working in the interest of a nation, and at the same time filling their pockets with cash, while the rest of the population is subjected to abject poverty / deprivation (social and economic). A sustainable society is one that seeks to openly challenge the two discourses (hermeneutics and Phronesis) in an epistemic manner so as to enhance human understanding about what is considered to be virtuous based on common sense interpretation.

For a society to be sustainably reliant on its resources, virtuousness must not only be seen in terms of filling the pockets of those considered to be in allegiance of a (political) system, but much more being self-critical in mind about the obvious means of preventing a collapsed state, such as that seen in the era of a decade of civil unrest in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone during the late 1980s and early 1990s respectively (Jackson, 2016). As expressed by Engberg-Pedersen (1983; 236), the derivative of *Phronēsis* according Socrates is equated to *virtues*, the power of being good, and the manifestation of intelligence to discern the obvious sense of knowing when things are not right, particularly so in the economic management of a state.

Rationale and Objectives

The epistemic notion of *Phronesis and hermeneutics* is historically rooted from as early as in Socrates and Plato's time (Seebohm, *ibid* and Stefanazzi, n/d), and more so in the 17th century of man's exploration of biblical hermeneutics (Seebohm, *ibid*). Human being by nature is born with an inherent tendency of being selfish; the pervasiveness of this is acutely felt in the dominance of a repressive state where the virtues of being virtuous is superseded by people's lack of conscience to maintain a sustainable lifestyle where resources are utilised for the good of all. In the midst of human selfishness lies the problem of a society to co-exist in abject poverty, while the minute powerful are living a life of affluence. Based on the aforesaid explanation, this article is intended to examine the philosophical base of both concepts (*Pronesis and Hermeneutics*) rooted on the under-mentioned / stated objectives:

1. Interpret the basis of economic and social construct of what constitute a sustainable society.
2. Examine virtuous-ness (phronetic values) in relation to the economic state of affairs in the context of developed and under-developed economic systems.

Method(s) of Inquiry

The two concepts, Phronesis (socially constructed) and Hermeneutics are methodologically underpinned by the fact that they provide the basic means by which human quest for knowledge can be explored, and in this situation, through interpretation of text or information, and also the understanding of what constitute virtuous behaviour of mankind. The technique to be applied in this study is based on a review of documents relating to the interpretation of state actors, on the basis of their virtuous approach in sustainably managing resources for the good of both present and future generations. Case studies of document references have focused attention on the African state of Sierra Leone, and the UK (where selfishness is being suppressed by the strict discipline of transparency of state actors, so as to make it possible for people to live sustainably). The justification of this selection is to do with the author's experience of residence in both nations.

Literature Review

Both Phronesis and Hermeneutics are methodological concepts; they are meant to add value in the human epistemic potential to increase their knowledge through critical discourses about how they perceive things / concepts around their environment. In attempting to construct social / economic phenomenon, and the possible interpretation of what constitute a sustainable society, we must first of all take a look at deconstructing the two concepts so as to make it possible for the lay-person to understand the true meaning of the words, '*Phronesis and hermeneutics*'.

In an extract from Flyvbjerg (n/d), "*Phronetic social science is explained as an approach to the study of social phenomena based on a contemporary interpretation of the classical Greek concept Phronesis, variously translated as practical judgment, practical wisdom, common sense, or prudence*". In contemporary society, its application (see next section) can be linked to policy / planning relevant for the advancement of society, which is obviously tied with the ethical doctrine of conscience; that which allows the mind to focus on virtues / goodwill, and also the evil deeds of mankind. Aristotle's approach (384-322 BC) to the philosophical doctrine of Phronesis is ethically constructed through advocacy of careful and reasoned deliberation, based on how people live life, not to the detriment of community / society (Stefanazzi, n/d and Eikeland, 2006); a '*political*' doctrine considered as the highest level of practical science, much more about the organisation of communities for the best, particularly so in the sustainable utilisation of resources - in his view, the word political as used here is not necessarily to do with tension between opposing parties, but more related to the need for society to act wisely so as to make it possible for resources to be judiciously utilised for the good of all.

As explained by Eikeland (2004), ethical virtue (related to the concept of Phronesis) is classed as a '*virtue of character*'; the power or manifestation of being just, friendly and caring for others, while at the same time respecting their autonomy as independent thinkers. The concept of Phronesis is considered both ethical and intellectual, as there is a tendency for someone to be blamed for obvious action in failing to act ethically, for example, to care for a needy child, and the obvious and deliberate misbehaviour of acting rudely / irrationally when intoxicated with alcohol – and also the case of a parliamentarian not investing cash provided from the national budgetary allocation to enhance community life in a constituency - for example, repairing dilapidated school buildings or 'constructing a brand new community centre' - there is obvious attestation of such virtuous (good-will) action being manifested by some in Sierra Leone to enhance community life. In the words of Findlay (2009: 11), Phronesis is explained as an act of '*wisdom*', that which is epistemologically capable of enabling human beings to develop some form of compassion towards the other, possibly so during crisis time.

This act of wisdom attributed to the concept of Phronesis can open up critical discourse(s) of interpretations (hermeneutics), as the manifestation of being good or bad may also unwrap memorable experience(s) [past or present] of individuals, from the action(s) of others. As already highlighted, the concept of hermeneutics is rather old, and mostly used in disciplines like Law and Theology (based on biblical exegesis), but very much applicable in the practical world of social interaction. The development of hermeneutic concepts was made prominent in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century by writers like Chladenius and Meier, Ast and Schleiermacher; the theorisation of the concept was based on general textual interpretation (Gadamer, 2015). Hermeneutics as a concept was further exemplified as the '*methodology for the recovery of meaning that is essential to the understanding of human or historical sciences*' (Gadamer, 2015 and Dilthey, 2012).

The doctrine of hermeneutics was also moved a step further by Heidegger (2008), from his lectures in the early 1920s titled '*Ontology - The Hermeneutics of Facticity*', interpreted as the pursuance or investigating of factual existence; this is not necessarily based on the existence of theory or as a method of scientific understanding, but as the disclosure of the structure of human

understanding (Gadamer, 2015). The concept of hermeneutics as explained by Gadamer is also fraught with subjectivism, that which is positively portrayed in the '*eye of the beholder*'; such subjectivity can also be viewed positively as it has the tendency of opening up new wave of discourse(s), be it about a concept or human understanding of what is perceived to be '*good or bad*' (links with the epistemic discourse of *Phronesis*). In this situation, and more so in explaining the process of political governance, our understanding of what constitute good governance may be positively prejudiced on the basis of allegiance towards a (political) group, and in most cases the governing / ruling party.

Application / Discourse Analysis of Concepts in Contemporary 21st Century Society

On the basis of the aforesaid literature on the concepts of *Phronesis and hermeneutics*, this section seeks to address the applicability of the concepts to two cases of practical situations using examples from Sierra Leone and the UK, but more so in a bid to addressing the above stated objectives. The word sustainability has become very much popular in all spheres of working life; simply that which makes it possible for resources to be wisely utilised in the present without destroying opportunities for future generations (Jackson, 2015a). In the case with Sierra Leone, there have been a lot of ill memories in relation to a failed / collapsed state, perpetrated by poor governance of the state which resulted in the uprising of a decade of civil crisis (spearheaded by Foday Sankoh with his allegiance group, the *Revolutionary United Front - RUF*). During this period, the country experienced massive exploitation of her natural resources (for example Gold, Diamonds and Timber), and which in the present is still prevalent in the forest sector for example, masterminded by poor governance, more so selfishness manifested by unscrupulous and self-conceited individuals at the Ministry of Lands (Jackson, 2015b and Munro, 2009).

To some, particularly those individuals benefiting from the unsustainable use of the country's natural resources / forest environment, there is an inclination to apply Gadamer's concept of positive notion of prejudice due to the fact that their ideologies are subjectively biased towards their act of (selfish) financial gains, while at the same time, their attitudes can be interpreted as in-humane unethical to society. The impact of such act can also be felt widely through the erosion of community traditions (Jackson, 2015c), masterminded by the continuous depletion and exploitation of essential livelihoods (firewood fetching and hunting) by selfish individuals, and in addition, the obvious wide-scale change in climatic conditions (high level of humidity and emission of carbon into the atmosphere) experienced by locals, and in the country as a whole; now being the subject of debate across the entire country, with shortages / rationing of basic necessities like water supply, because unscrupulous individuals are continuously evading the country's main GUMA Valley Water dam located on the Freetown Peninsula. Poor legislative control by the lands ministry can also account for the problem, while authorities in the division of forestry at the Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Food Security (MAFFS) are subjected to a state of being powerless to execute their monitoring control in preventing further encroachment and the pervasive depletion of the remaining protected forest reserves.

The situation of such pervasive and unscrupulous abuse of the country's natural resource environment is less so of a concern in the UK economy, simply due to tight legislative control on the use of forest protected areas, and most importantly, the power of democratic voices of people in raising concerns about the abuse of (local) communities endowed with the richness of natural resources like forest cover. The prevalence of a transparent and democratic system of governance in such an economy meant that people in trust may likely be able to manifest strict code of ethical principles, through avoidance of being engaged in corrupt acts that may likely erode their virtues of acting in the best interest of the nation. There is very high scope / possibility for natural resource endowed communities in a nation like the UK economy to

sustainably manage their environment, with very minimal risk of destruction caused to future generations. Such manifestation of state actors to promote ethical utilisation of the natural resource environment (like forest areas), can also bring about positive result to communities through improved economic valuation of forest resources, and utilisation of protected areas for the use of activities like eco-tourism, and also scientific exploration by educational institutions, for example, schools and universities across the country (Jackson, 2015d and Jackson, 2016 - forthcoming).

In terms of the application of the two concepts (Phronesis and hermeneutics) to the identified case economies (UK and Sierra Leone), the endemic level of corruption and selfishness manifested amongst individuals (particularly in miniseries, and other parastatals) in the Sierra Leone economy is making it very impossible for virtuousness to be prevailed amongst citizens. This can be hermeneutically argued on the basis of the positivist discourse surrounding the low level of salaries / wages paid to public servants (minimum stipulated by government still in the region of \$85 a month) is making it very impossible for corruption to be curtailed.

The notion of 'good virtue' has become a redundant terminology in Sierra Leone, given the very low earning power of people. On the other hand, those benefiting through means of contacts (political or allegiance through other means) may find it difficult to join forces with the masses to express concerns in favour of the majority; this is simple due to the fact that the inherent selfishness of mankind, that is, the desire to look after oneself as the number one priority, would always act as the dominant factor, and in addition, the fear of losing a job, which in most cases may result in massive discomfort to family life. Such tendency is mostly common in developing nations where the will power to do what is right is dictated by the immediate pressure to become connected or upholding allegiance with a group that may help people to be in support of corrupt acts of unethical behaviour / corruption. Sierra Leone, in her present state is no exception, given the bitter experiences of civil wars, and more lately, the Ebola pandemic which left the country in a state of economic and financial collapse, thereby leaving people at the risk of not knowing as to whether they may be able to keep their jobs or even receiving the next month.

The situation of what constitute virtuousness is quite different in places like the UK, because of the supremacy of the law, which therefore supersede everything else. Integrity is considered paramount, and closely tied with the natural tendency or drive to be transparent. Therefore, any attempt of suspicion / being caught in an act of corruption may in most cases result in criminal conviction / or imprisonment (Bennett and Ares, 2011). The UK government's embracement of the EU-FLEGT policy on the fight against illegal timber trade and importation was greatly welcomed through Chatham House commendation in 2010 of the government's work towards an environmentally sustainable society:

The UK scored highest of the five consumer countries studied in an assessment of laws, regulations and policies necessary to tackle illegal logging and related trade. The UK was often the first of the five countries to take relevant steps.

The UK has been a strong supporter of additional legislation at the EU level to prevent the import and sale of illegal wood; it has also been actively involved in developing voluntary partnership agreements between the EU and producer countries. However, the agreements currently in place or under negotiation will cover only 20% of the UK's estimated imports of illegally sourced wood.

The UK was the first country to implement a government wood procurement policy; its policy is the best designed and implemented of the five countries studied. The policy has had a major impact on the response of the private

sector and the level of illegal wood consumption (Bennett and Ares, 2011: 4 and Chatham House, 2010).

This is a greeting expression of good governance, which is intended on maintaining a well-balanced and sustainable economy for the benefit of both present and future generations. The upholding of the EU-FLEGT policy across the European community is also an attestation (Jackson, 2015e), and considered as hermeneutic virtues of good governance, not only for the benefit of protecting illegal importation of wood products, for example, Timber and Poles into countries in the EU block, but more so, the humane manifestation of ensuring that the world's natural resources, for example, forest timber produce from the developing countries like Sierra Leone, are traded ethically, with benefits ploughed back in regenerating ruined communities where poor governance, and corruption seem to be superseding the obvious good of protecting national interests in preserving the environment.

In Sierra Leone for example, evidence of lack of virtues became a great concern during the wake-up call of corruption manifested during the Ebola crisis; this to any human being can be hermeneutically construed as unethical / pernicious, as the crisis was seen as a means for the selfish and corrupted to express their acts of amassing wealth, while others were dying, and with family members being battered in minds because of the loss of their loved ones (Rubyan-Ling, 2015) - his study manifested high level of virtues demonstrated by the Sierra Leonean diaspora communities living in the UK to rally concerned citizens in taking action on the situation as it were. This to any concerned individual can be viewed as humanely just as the end goal was to ensure the country is back to normalcy through support (financial and other means) provided for loved ones.

Despite the call on his excellency the president to set up public accountability, the beneficiaries were still hoping for such pandemic crisis to continue, because of the natural tendency of the human race to exhibit unethical gains in a bid to maintaining a comfortable lifestyle, even in time of crises. The macro-economic consequences of the Ebola crisis are becoming clearly evidenced in the country's current state of affairs with closure of business (in the late 2014 to early parts of 2015), and also other essential services like education and good health, still struggling to make way in the recovery of the economy (Davis, 2015). The effect on the education system is evidenced through distorted academic year, while the corrupted acts of poor administrative management in universities [for example, the USL] is exposing years of corruptive behaviours that had gone unchecked, where students are allowed entry without being properly vetted for the appropriate entry qualifications, and finally exiting institutions [with high grades] without formally enrolling on courses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided some philosophical thoughts on relevant points about concepts pertaining to '*Phronesis and Hermeneutics*'; in view of the analysis emanating from the literature review, and also reference to Sierra Leone and the UK as case examples, there seemed not to be any form of distinct dichotomy between the two concepts. In all fairness, there is an implied *ontological and epistemological* linkage between the two concepts, as the strive for the country to become sustainable is widely opened to interpretations; that which allows human virtues to be expressed as being ethically good or evil towards one's own self-conscience. It is possible for the sustainability of a nation's resources to be adequately managed, and which depends on how humanely people (more so those in position of trust) are prepared to act in curtailing the over-exploitation of renewable resources, for example, forest products or even refrain from engaging in corruptive act(s) that may eventually deprive the nation (more so the National Revenue Authority as in the case with Sierra Leone) in collect tax dues for example,

that can be utilised by the government to fund essential services like the construction of roads, investing in education, health and the energy sector (electricity).

The process of journeying through life is in itself both an epistemological and ontological experience, as there are individuals within an economic system who are willing to make sacrifices in expressing their virtuous good-will as a sign of allegiance to the state, and for which the economic gains from this may outweigh the unethical virtues of being selfish, that is, one that perpetrate a profuse level of corruption, and the unsustainable use of the nation's resources as seen in the case with the continued depletion of Sierra Leone's natural forest reserve.

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