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A SYNTHESIS OF THE RATIONALIST IDEAS OF PLATO, DESCARTES, SPINOZA, AND LEIBNIZ AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR 21ST CENTURY PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

In synthesizing the rationalist postulates of Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, this study seeks to make evident those features that are common to these rationalist philosophers as well as their peculiarities and diversities as independent thinkers. The paper also tries to show the implications of these rationalist ideas for 21st century philosophical discourse. Rationalist epistemology, which came into prominence with the arrival of Rene Descartes to the epistemological rostrum, has been there right from the classical era. Though Plato is not a continental rationalist, he is construed in this research as a 'charter member' of the rationalist school of thought. Some of the fundamental features of the rationalists which include the preeminence of reason over and above sense experience, the idea of innatism, intuition, and the indispensable role of the human mind in acquisition of knowledge are all identified in Plato's epistemic exploits. It is striking that though the rationalists have some features common to them, there also exist areas of epistemic divergence and peculiarities in the manner they conducted their independent debates. This has been construed as a problem by some scholars; however, this work conceives it as epistemic advancement and consolidation. Critical analysis is chiefly the research method employed in this study.

KEYWORDS

Charter Member of the Rationalist School of Thought, Epistemic Advancement and Consolidation, Epistemic Diversity and Peculiarities, Rationalist Epistemology, and 21st Century Philosophical Discourse



Introduction

Epistemology has advanced from the ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary epochs of philosophical inquiry. As a branch of philosophy, epistemology sprang up out of philosophers' reactions to the Skeptics' denial of the possibility of objective knowledge. Skepticism is the fulcrum or pedestal upon which epistemology, as a branch of philosophy, is built and stands (Uzoigwe 5). One of the greatest controversies experienced in the historical development of philosophy is the problem of knowledge acquisition. The polemical debate between the rationalists of the continental divide and the British empiricists over the primary source of knowledge dominated the modern period of philosophy.

However, this study focuses on the rationalist epistemological positions of Plato and the continental rationalists namely: Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. One might ask, 'why include Plato among the rationalists?' Though the term rationalism or rationalist school of thought or rationalist epistemology is associated with the modern period of philosophy, rationalism actually began in the ancient period when Plato flourished. There is no doubt that Plato's epistemic ideas have some common features with the epistemic views of the continental rationalists. Notable among these common features are innate ideas, intuition and the pre-eminence of reason over and above sense experience. Plato is therefore considered in this work as a 'charter member' of the rationalist school of thought.

Etymologically, rationalism derives from the Latin word *ratio*, meaning *reason*. Rationalism is a theory of knowledge which emphasizes reason as the primary source of our knowledge. It is a school of thought which holds that knowledge is derived through logico-mathematical reasoning (Ozumba 50). The rationalists collectively down played the role of senses as the primary source of knowledge. For them, we can know even without the aid of sense experience.

The variation in the submissions of the rationalists who were of the same school of thought and epistemic background, the lacuna of the rationalists' submissions discovered by Kant in his reconciliation of rationalism and empiricism as well as the reactions of epistemologists and other philosophers who draw insight from what has already been there, all these put together is what I call epistemic advancement and consolidation. By implication, drawing a synergy between diverse epistemic positions and complementarity which holds sway in the 21st century philosophical debates, which undoubtedly draws some form of inspiration from the already established views of the ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary thinkers imply among other things, that philosophy is a continuum as well as a living discipline. The positions already held by scholars across diverse ages serve as veritable instrument of labour for 21st century philosophical inquiry.

THE RATIONALIST IDEAS OF PLATO

Plato (427-347 BC) was one of the most outstanding Greek Philosophers. As the best student of Socrates, he was highly influenced by his master. He is widely known as an idealist philosopher, though I describe him as a rationalist-idealist philosopher. Plato's epistemology had some antecedent influences. The world of flux of Heraclitus impacted on Plato's conception of sensible realities. For Alexius, "The world of flux for Plato is not real and no real knowledge can be derived from the fleeting world of appearance" (25). Eleatic Parmenides' postulates of permanence, changelessness and unity had also another form of influence on Plato. This was the major motivation to seek for reality, and I add knowledge beyond the physical realm. Again, Socrates' search for the essences of things (especially in the moral realm) and the inadequacy of the exemplification of moral virtues in physical things or realm necessitated a dialectical search which ended in accepting the existence of essence in forms of transcending their particular instantiations (Ozumba 6). Along with many other Greek Philosophers, Plato believed that reason, which distinguishes humans from the lower animals, comprises the essential nature of the human being. The classical definition of man as "a rational animal" comes from these Greek philosophers. Human good and happiness, therefore, lie in contemplation and knowledge. On the other hand, ...Plato believed that the only proper object of knowledge, or the only thing that can really be known is *Being*. This means that we can have no real knowledge of the world about us, the relative and fluctuating world of *Becoming*. Of this world we have only opinion, not knowledge (Miller 214). As it were, Plato made his mark in the diverse branches of philosophy.

Plato's epistemology is a continuation of that of Socrates, and it is mainly contained in his *Memo*, *Republic*, and *Theaetetus*. Like Socrates, Plato was very critical of the skepticism and relativism of the Sophists and was convinced of the objectivity and universality of knowledge. For him knowledge is not relative, but

objective and universal (Omoregbe 63). Some scholars are of the opinion that Plato's epistemology has a great chunk of metaphysical coloration; and so they describe it as metaphysical epistemology or ontological epistemology. Plato pursued his epistemology through his analysis on the allegory of the cave, metaphor of the divided line, the world of Forms and 'reminiscence' which is the classical understanding of knowledge by Plato. For him, knowledge is quite different from true belief, or opinion. True belief and opinion are liable to error, while knowledge is characterized by four qualities namely: objectivity, universality, stability, and certainty. This implies that for Plato, we cannot have knowledge of sensible things since we cannot attribute the quality of absolute necessity to them which is a necessary ground for all knowledge claims (Hamlyn 10-11). Coming from the rationalist divide, Plato was of the view that knowledge is acquired by reason and not by sense perception, because sense perception is deceptive, while reason is immutable and unchanging. In making a distinction between reason and sense perception, Plato argued that only reason leads us to knowledge, while sense perception can only lead us to opinion, not knowledge. The objects of knowledge are not the material things of this world, but the Forms in the world of Forms, the supra-sensible world which he believed to be the real world. Analysing Plato's view about knowledge, Omoregbe further puts it this way: "the things in the material world are not the real things. They are shadows of the real things. Hence they are not objects of knowledge. The real things are the Forms (or ideas) in the world of Forms (or the world of ideas) and these are objects of knowledge because they are stable and unchanging whereas the things in the material world are not stable, they are always changing. Hence they cannot be the object of knowledge. They are only objects of opinion" (64).

Plato in line with his master Socrates, and the rationalist tradition believed in innate knowledge or innate ideas technically called *innatism*. Plato linked innate ideas with belief in the world of Forms and the pre-existence of the soul in the world of Forms prior to its coming into this world. Before coming into this world, the soul, according to Plato, lived in the world of Forms (the world of Ideas) and while it was there it was acquainted with the Forms which are the real things, the real object of knowledge. But when it was sent into this world and united with a material body, it forgot its knowledge of the Forms when it sees the things of this world. It is on this basis that Plato conceived knowledge as reminiscence. Considering Plato's theory of innate ideas in another way Miller writes: "But Plato's rationalism becomes clear in yet another way. Even in this world, knowledge-insofar as it is possible only because it is *innate*, that is, inborn. The theory of innate ideas is a popular one among rationalists. But it is important not to confuse innate ideas with instinct. Instinct is not a result of cognitive activity; rather, it is the *subcognitive* and purely mechanistic behavior which enhances survival. Innate ideas...usually means that fundamental ideas or principles are built right into the mind itself and require only to be developed and brought to maturity" (217). If it is true that we acquire our knowledge before our birth, and lost it at the moment of birth, but afterward, by the exercise of our senses upon sensible objects, recover the knowledge which we had once before, I suppose that what we call learning will be recovery of knowledge, and surely we should be right in calling this recollection (Plato74A-75D). Just as knowledge that is inborn-innate is recalled through the process of dialectics (question and answer) for Socrates, Plato maintained that through metaphysical reasoning which leads to the world of Forms, true knowledge can be derived. Miller instantiating this claim writes: "Now Plato has Socrates announce in *Phaedo* that only do real philosophers have no fear of death, but they actually desire and look forward to it. In fact, real philosophers view their lives as lifelong preparation for death. Why? Because as long as we are in this world we are held back from the attainment of real knowledge..." (214).

In the allegory of the cave espoused by Plato, the slaves were held inside the cave which they understood to be the real world (which can as well be likened to the Ideal world), unfortunately, they were only seeing shadows that characterise the world of physical existence. Plato tried to make us understand that there is a demarcation between the world of ideas and the world of appearance, world of thought and the world of senses. The world of appearance merely reflects dismally the nature of the real, the proto-type and arch-type of things. This is Plato's way of proving the fallibility and inadequacy of the physical things, and the reality of forms existing in the world of Ideas. What this means is that we can only have knowledge of forms and not of shadows and images. The senses are themselves defective and the object of the senses are fleeting, changing, mutable and therefore, their real nature, can never be grasped and knowledge of them is impossible. This provided the grounds for Sceptic's position that nothing can be known. But, Plato, answers the Sceptics by showing that there exists a realm of the real, unchanging, the stable, the forms, of which perfect knowledge is possible since they are not affected by limitation plaguing physical things (Ozumba 10). From the metaphor of

the divided line, Plato presented the allegory of the cave in another way by capturing the process whereby the mind moves from the lowest level of knowledge to the highest and clearest form of knowledge, that is, from the level of images to the level of “the good of the form”.

THE RATIONALIST IDEAS OF DESCARTES

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) has been identified as one of the most influential philosophers of the 17th century. This Europe’s father of modern philosophy was educated at Jesuit College. He was a mathematician, scientist and philosopher. He sought to lay a new foundation for philosophy with the mathematical method (Martins 77). The long conflict with scholasticism, which had been carried on with ever increasing energy and ever sharper weapons, was brought by Descartes to a victorious close. The new movement, long desired, long sought, and prepared for from many directions, at length appears, ready and well established. Descartes accomplished everything needful with the sure simplicity of genius. He furnishes philosophy with a settled point of departure in self-consciousness, offers her a method sure to succeed in deduction from clear and distinct conceptions, and assigns her the mechanical explanation of nature as her most imperative and fruitful mission (Falckenberg 86). In order to achieve his epistemic mission, Descartes published a good number of works. Notable among his works include: *Meditations*, *Discourse on Method*, and *Principles of Philosophy*.

Descartes was repelled by the contradictions he observed among philosophers, but was attracted by the certainties he discovered in mathematics. In his *Discourse on Method* Descartes writes: “Most of all was I delighted with mathematics because of the certainty of its demonstrations and the evidence of its reasoning; but I did not yet understand its true use, and, believing that it was of service only in the mechanical arts, I was astonished that, seeing how firm and solid was its basis, no loftier edifice had been reared thereupon” (1, 85). Descartes based his rationalism, among other things, on twofold basis of knowledge namely, intuition and deduction. In his epistemology, Descartes reduces the derivation of all possible knowledge to the principles of intuition and deduction (Ojong and Ibrahim 144). In philosophy intuition means, usually, a direct immediate knowledge of something. Intuition is the faculty by which truths are grasped immediately, without the intervention of sense experience or other ideas. Deduction, on the other hand, is construed as the faculty by which truths are known with necessity from intuited truths, or from intuited truths taken together with other deduced truths. Putting it in an unambiguous way, Ojong and Ibrahim articulates, “By “intuition” Descartes means the activity of grasping some simple truth with such clarity that there is no room for doubt while “deduction” for him is “all necessary inference from facts that are known with certainty” (145).

To be noted is that before Descartes came up with his principles of intuition and deduction, he first rejected Aristotle’s logic in order to advance his own for clarity and precision. According to Descartes, Aristotle’s logic only explains and confirms those already known. It is in fact with intuition and deduction that he discovered new truths and so moving from the known to the unknown. Omoregbe supporting this position reflects: “Intuition grasps truths in the light of reason while deduction makes inferences and draws necessary implication from such truths (80). Descartes down played the role of sense experience in acquisition of knowledge. For him, sense experience was deceptive and unreliable. Clear and distinct truths can be attained by reason. There is a complementary dimension of intuition and deduction in rationalist ideas espoused by Descartes. It is the position of Descartes that our knowledge is not limited to intuitions. For him, it is necessarily possible to deduce further ideas and truth from our intuited ones. This process of complementary relationship between intuition and deduction provides the ground for the indefinite expansion of our knowledge.

Descartes sets out to demolish all the edifice of knowledge he had in the past because for him, they were filled with contradictions and opinions. Just as children receive everything hook line and sinker without being critical about them, such was the situation in which Descartes argued that he found himself. He therefore proposed a new epistemic foundation that could guarantee certain, indubitable, and apodictic knowledge. This principle he called the ‘methodic doubt’. In a translated words of Descartes, Falckenberg articulates it in another way: “That which passes nowadays for science, and is taught as such in the schools, is nothing but a mass of disconnected, uncertain, and often contradictory opinions. A principle of unity and certainty is entirely lacking. If anything permanent and irrefutable is to be accomplished in science, everything hitherto considered true must be thoroughly demolished and built anew... Let us therefore renounce our old views, in order later to accept better ones in their stead; or, to take the former up again after they shall have stood the test of rational criticism. The recognized precaution, never to put complete confidence in that which has once deceived us, holds of our

relation to the senses as elsewhere. It is certain that they sometimes deceive us - perhaps they do so always” (88-89). Going further in his methodic doubt, Descartes realised that he was thinking, and when he tried to doubt this he discovered that it was impossible to do so. To doubt is to think and to think is to exist. Descartes doubting goes to prove that he was thinking, and his thinking was an evidence that he was existing. And so, he could not doubt his own existence. He took the fact of his existence as the first truth that is absolutely certain and indisputable. Descartes made it the solid foundation of the newly reconstructed philosophical edifice, that is, the foundation of his philosophical system. It is on that basis that he espoused his “*cogito ergo sum* - I think therefore I am” a certain, apodictic, and indisputable truth.

For Descartes, clear and distinct perception in the light of reason is the criterion of certainty. Descartes’ use of the term perception in this context is not in line with the empiricists. Perception in his usage is *intuitive*, inner perception in the light of reason. A close look at Descartes’ use of reason is as if to say that reason is infallible. Descartes posed a question that he responded to. What is the guarantee that my reason is not deceiving me? In response to this question, Descartes resorted to God, “the absolutely perfect being who gave me reason. Such a perfect being would not give me something that would be deceiving me. I can therefore trust the reason he gave me because I trust him. I trust him because he is an infinitely perfect Being” (Wilcox 58). In his prove of the existence of God, Descartes noted that he had an innate idea of God as an infinite being. He argued that he had in his mind an idea of infinite being. How did this idea come to my mind? Where did this idea come from? Who is the source? For Descartes, the source of this idea couldn’t be him because he is a finite being; it must have come from an infinite being, because only an infinite being can be the source of infinite idea. Therefore, there must be an infinite Being, from whom the idea came to my mind. It must be the infinite Being that put the idea in my mind. Again, from God’s infinite perfection, Descartes argued that God is infinitely perfect. Existence is perfection. Therefore, God has existence. To deny God’s existence is to contradict oneself because existence is part of his very nature. After his proof of God’s existence, Descartes then used God to justify the reliability of reason. He summarized by arguing thus, an infinitely perfect Being would not give me a reason that would be deceiving me. Since my reason is given to me by God, it is therefore reliable. Descartes rationalist idea is like a vicious cycle. He used reason to prove the existence of God and used God to prove the reliability of reason.

SPINOZA’S RATIONALIST IDEAS

Benedict Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) was a rationalist thinker (epistemologist), Dutch metaphysician, psychologist, moral philosopher, political theorist, and philosopher of religion, generally regarded as one of the most important figures of seventeenth century rationalism. Born of the Jewish parents and educated in the Jewish community of Amsterdam, he preferred his Latin name ‘Benedict’ to his native name ‘Baruch’ (Wiseman 201). After studying the philosophy of Descartes in the school of Francis van den Eden, also, having developed unorthodox views of the divine nature, and having seized being fully observant of Jewish practice, he was excommunicated by the Jewish community in 1656. He therefore spent his whole life in Holland.

Spinoza’s theory of knowledge is an extension and refinement of the Cartesian theory of clear and distinct perception (Scruton 54). Spinoza sees the existence of an idea as a presupposition of its *ideatum* (an object conceived under the attribute of extension which exactly corresponds to the ideas in the system of the world). For every idea there is an *ideatum* and therefore, every idea possesses what Spinoza calls the extrinsic mark of truth, namely, an extent and necessary correspondence to its *ideatum*. The failure of many ideas to possess the extrinsic mark of truth brings about the possibility error (Iroegbu 54). It is only in adequate ideas that Spinoza maintained that the intrinsic mark of truth can be found. Adequate in Spinoza’s usage means an effective replacement of the notion of distinct perception of Descartes. All adequate ideas are self-evident to the receiver. It has no confusion, ambiguity, or inadequacy in it. Spinoza so distrusted sense perception such that he argued that an example of inadequate idea is sensory perception like the image of a pool of water ahead of us on the road on a sunny day.

It is also necessary that we do not lose sight of representational faculties which Spinoza argued are necessary in articulating knowledge of things. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* puts it this way: “Like other rationalists, Spinoza distinguished two representational faculties: the imagination and the intellect. The imagination is a faculty of forming imagistic representations of things, derived ultimately from the mechanism of the senses; the intellect is a faculty of forming adequate, non-imagistic conceptions of things” (760). In this

kind of distinction, Spinoza elevated the intellect much more than imagination. For him, the human intellect or reason can grasp things unimaginatively unlike the imaginative faculty that is characterized by error because it operates through the aid of the mechanisms of the senses.

Benedict Baruch Spinoza went much further to identify three degrees of knowledge or three levels of cognition which include: experience, reason, and intuition. First is the knowledge derived from sense perception or experience, by isolation of individual things from the totality of which they are only parts (Omogbe 6). It is important to point out that, the inclusion of Spinoza's idea of sense perception is to show how through the analysis of sense experience and also scientific knowledge that will be discussed later he arrived at his idea of intuition, which is within the purview of rationalism; and in fact, real source of knowledge. Knowledge derived through experience is assigned as the lowest of the three levels of cognition; the level that Spinoza calls imagination or opinion (Ojong and Ibrahim 147-148). Second is scientific knowledge obtained at the level of reason; and the third is intuitive knowledge, which according to Spinoza, is the highest.

As already pointed out, our main concern is on the third, that is, knowledge by intuition. For Spinoza, intuitive knowledge is the highest form of knowledge. It derives from an adequate idea of the knowledge of God, to the knowledge of the essences of things as existing in God, derives from Him, and as His modifications (Omogbe 84). Considering this in another way, the third kind of knowledge which Spinoza called intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*), proceeds from adequate knowledge of the essence or attributes of God to knowledge of essence of things, and hence proceeds in the proper order, from causes to effects. Spinoza was a Pantheist. In his further analysis of intuitive knowledge, he argued that everything is part of God and a modification of God. To drive home his point, he maintained that to know this and see everything as part of God is to be on the third and highest degree of knowledge. Spinoza averred that intuitive knowledge in which all things are seen and known as existing in God, derives from him, and parts of him or modification of him as "the highest achievement of the human mind" (Omogbe 24).

Intuition, in Spinoza's usage of the term, is a comprehensive knowledge of a complete system of things. This kind of cognition proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things (Scruton 55). From another perspective, Spinoza conceived intuition as a holistic or comprehensive understanding of the truth of a proposition that is granted to the person who grasps it, together with a valid proof of it from self-evident premises, in a single mental act.

In his work, *Ethics*, Spinoza argued that we come to have cognition of God by way of intuition, and that anything one can think of derives its being from God. He says, "Whatever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived" (189). It is with his notion of God within the framework and analysis of the notion of intuition that Spinoza employed the idea of intuition as a comprehensive avenue to cognition. It is at the level of the intuition that one acquires knowledge of a complete system of things. It is knowledge that proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things. As it were, Spinoza continued the rationalism of Descartes but had epistemological discontinuity with him in some respects. Instantiating this claim, Ojong and Ibrahim articulate: "Although Spinoza agrees with the Cartesian principle that there is only one clear and distinct idea from which all knowledge can be derived. He however, rejects the thinking (*res cogitans*) as the fundamental source of our idea and hold on to God, the only absolute substance" (149).

LEIBNIZ'S RATIONALIST IDEAS

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1746), the son of a professor, was a great mathematician, a logician and a metaphysician. In the contemporaries Spinoza and Locke, the two schools of modern philosophy, the continental, starting from Descartes, and the English, which followed Bacon, had reached extreme of divergence and opposition. Spinoza was a rationalist-pantheist, Locke, an empirical individualist. With Leibniz a twofold approximation begins. As a rationalist he sides with Spinoza against Locke, as an individualist with Locke against Spinoza. It is fitting to state that, "...Leibniz remained true in all the fields to which he devoted his activity" (Falckenberg 266). Apart from philosophy, this German rationalist thinker, Leibniz, made seminal contributions in geology, linguistics, historiography, physics, and mathematics. Leibniz's rationalist ideas in particular and philosophy in general were known to his contemporaries through articles published in learned journals, correspondence, and a book published in his lifetime in 1710 titled, *The Theodicy*.

It is worthy to note that Leibniz did not consider in detail many of the fundamental epistemological issues that so moved Descartes and the British empiricists. However, that does not preclude the fact that he made significant contribution in the theory of knowledge. In his book, *Monadology* that was published posthumously, Leibniz distinguished two kinds of truth namely truth of reason and truth of facts. Leibniz refers to *truth of reason* as *a priori* or innate knowledge prior to experience. The truth of reason is also independent of experience. From another perspective, Leibniz construed *truth of facts* as *a posteriori* truth experientially grasped outside mathematical reasoning. He so much trusted truth of reason and mathematical reasoning that he advised philosophers to employ words accurately and logically the way mathematicians use numbers. Omoregbe presents this in another way: Leibniz "... distinguishes two kinds of propositions and two kinds of truth. The former are necessary propositions and contingent propositions while the latter are truth of reason and truth of fact. A necessary proposition is a proposition that states truth of reason while a contingent proposition is that which states truth of facts. A necessary proposition is necessarily true and cannot be denied without self-contradiction. But a contingent proposition is not necessarily true. It may be true, it may be false, and can be denied without self-contradiction" (84).

It has to be recalled that Leibniz's account of contingent truths can be likened to what one would expect from the empiricists. It is his position that our knowledge of particular contingent truths has its basis in sense perception. For him, simple enumerative induction cannot account for our knowledge of universal contingent truths; it must be supplemented by what he called the *a priori conjecture method*. In this method is a nexus between hypothetical and deductive methods which he technically called *hypothetico-deductiva* method.

Leibniz holds reason to a very high esteem just like the other rationalists. In reason man possesses reflection or self-consciousness as well as the knowledge of God, of the universal, and of the eternal truths or a priori knowledge... (Falckenberg 282). In his monadology, Leibniz further instantiated his claim that reason is the very essential source of knowledge. The term "monad" derives from the Greek word "monas" which means "unity". Monads are the basic unity of all things. Each monad is a self-contained and windowless entity which develops on its own from within according to its inner principle of activity, for the monads are also the basic principle and sources of force and activity in the universe. The notion of monadology holds that the world is a composite of simple substances without parts. For Leibniz, monads are the substances which form the basic elements of which all things are made. Substances or monads are unextended, immaterial and simple. Not only that these monads are shapeless, they are also unique, dynamic, windowless, invisible, without quantity, and sizeless individual substances which mirror the universe in various degrees. These monads are not empirical; they are metaphysical elements conceived more or less clearly and distinctly, and more or less adequately by the senses. On the other hand, the metaphysical monads espoused by Leibniz can only be clearly and distinctly grasped by the intellect.

For Leibniz, God's place is irrevocable in our acquisition of knowledge. OJong and Ibrahim highlighting further Leibniz's epistemic postulates write: "In his rationalist epistemology, God is given a functional role of being the source of our ideas" (150). It is the rationalist contention of Leibniz that human reason cannot see how the subject is contained in the predicate, but God's knowledge can. God's knowledge in Leibniz's understanding is the very essence of things, absolute and necessary. It is necessary truth because the very concept of God implies his existence.

The rationalist ideas of Leibniz are apparent in his account of our *a priori* knowledge, which he held that accounted for our necessary truths. For Leibniz, the human mind is the primary source of our a priori knowledge. Presenting the thoughts of Leibniz rationalism against John Locke's empiricist position, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* highlights: "Our differences are on matters of some importance. It is a matter of knowing if the soul in itself is entirely empty like a writing tablet on which nothing has as yet been written (*tabula rasa*), ...and if everything inscribed there comes solely from the senses and experience, or if the soul contains originally the sources of various concepts and doctrines that external objects merely reveal on occasion" (429). The claim that some concepts and doctrines are innate is a central idea in the rationalist views of Leibniz.

In *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, Leibniz developed his theory of knowledge in the form of a polemical commentary to Locke's chief work presented by G. Hartenstein. According to Falckenberg: "Leibniz agrees with Descartes against Locke in the position that the mind originally possesses ideas; he agrees with Locke against Descartes that thought is later than sensation and the knowledge of universals later than that

of particulars. The originality which Leibniz attributes to intellectual ideas is different from that which Descartes had ascribed and Locke denied to them... Thus Leibniz is able to agree with both his predecessors up to a certain point: with one that the pure concepts have their origin within the mind; with the other, that they are not the earliest knowledge, but are conditioned by sensations. The synthesis, however, was possible only because Leibniz looked sensation differently from both the others" (283).

It is the view of Leibniz's rationalist ideas that some concepts and doctrines are innate in the mind. Interesting as it is, Ojong and Ibrahim employed the term first class truths and second class truths to further describe what Leibniz called truths of reason and truths of facts, respectively. According to them, "The first class of truths are absolutely necessary-truths which affirm absolute identity of subject and predicate in the form of "A is A" or "A is not A", such are truths of reason and their opposites impossible. These are eternal, essential, metaphysical and geometrical truths. The second class of truths are the truths of facts; such truths are contingent and existential and their opposite possible. For instance, "Malabites are brilliant" is a proposition whose truth or falsity depends on the circumstantial evidence" (150).

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RATIONALIST POSTULATES OF PLATO, DESCARTES, SPINOZA AND LEIBNIZ FOR 21ST CENTURY PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE

The implications of the rationalists' convergent as well as divergent postulates of Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz for 21st century epistemological debate cannot be over emphasised. The variation in the submissions of the rationalists who were of the same school of thought and epistemic background, the lacuna discovered in Kant's reconciliation of rationalism and empiricism as well as the reactions of epistemologists and other philosophers over the years and across diverse ages put together is what I call epistemic advancement and consolidation. Why? It is in the atmosphere of positions and counter positions that scholars blend vision, think outside the box, and come up with more formidable ideas and better insights for maximum effectiveness and this aids the growth of epistemology in particular and philosophy in general in the final analysis.

As it were, had it been Descartes, for instance, adopted the positions of Aristotle, John Locke and the empiricists hook line and sinker, he wouldn't have come up with his famous methodic doubt and *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore, I exist), which among other things, brought him fame and then, offers a new insight to the epistemic and philosophical world by way of advancement the frontiers of philosophical discipline. Descartes raised a fresh perspective to consolidate the ideas of his predecessors like Plato and brings about new nomenclature in philosophical lexicon. Epistemology in particular and philosophy in general thrive where there are views and counter views, even among scholars of the same school of thought and orientation as this work makes evident.

Plato introduced the idea of reminiscence in his theory of Forms, Descartes developed the idea of cogito ergo sum with intuition and deduction, Spinoza brought in monadology with imagination and intellect and the three degrees of knowledge namely: experience, reason and intellect; while Leibniz espoused the idea of necessary (first class) truths and contingent (second class) truths. In all these, these scholars are of one accord in downplaying sense experience and enthroning reason – the human intellect as the primary source of knowledge. There is also evidence of complementarity in the position of these scholars like Spinoza's *hypothetico-deductiva* method which is not far from what Kant did in his synthetic a priori, and *foundherentism* of Susan Haack showing clearly that 21st century philosophical debate draws and keeps on drawing lots of insight from the postulates of the rationalist thinkers.

CONCLUSION

Plato has been identified from the above analysis as a charter member of the rationalist school of thought. The continental rationalists: Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz drew a lot of ideas from their predecessors in the ancient and medieval era not losing sight of their own individual contribution to knowledge. One striking this this has done in the 21st century philosophical inquiry is that scholars complement their ideas with those of their forebears. Again, scholars go outside their schools of thought to integrate the gains of other schools of thought to advance their peculiar ideas. This is a way of encouraging intercultural philosophy, which I shall not discuss in this paper. These scholars' introduction of new epistemic concepts which in turn enriches philosophical lexicon is describes as epistemic advancement and consolidation.

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