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A HEGELIAN READING OF *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*:

RECHT, MORALITÄT AND SITTlichkeit

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Abstract

This research studies the concepts of recht, moralität and sittlichkeit in the chosen case study, *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka, according to the philosophical theories of Hegel. The play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, portrays the society of Africa in which the individuals are ought to sacrifice their morals values for the sake of what the society addresses as right and ethical. This research investigates the characters mainly including Elesin, Olunde, and Iyaloja in order to find the contrasting ideas on morality projected in this play. An analysis is done in order to study the concept and nature of morality and its connection to the actions and speech of characters according to Hegel's theory.

Keywords

Hegel, Death and the King's Horseman, Recht, Moralität, and Sittlichkeit.

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1. Introduction

This research investigates the concepts of recht, moralität and sittlichkeit according to Hegel's theories on the subject, such theories of his had always created a suitable ground when the judgment of an action is the subject. This study projects light on the concept of morality in the chosen case study, *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka. This research aims on clarifying the fact that the action of one is moral, acceptable, or a norm depends on the social and traditional background of the society that is under study.

Wole Syonika is a well noted African play writer, novelist, poet, and author. He was born on 13th of July 1943. He wrote "Death and King's Horseman" in 1975. He also won the Nobel Prize of literature in 1986.

"The play *Death and the King's Horseman* is probably the most well-known work by Soyinka. It was written in 1973 and published in 1975, based on a true event that happened in Oyo, an ancient Yoruba city, in 1946, when a ritual suicide, of great importance to the community, was prevented by an English colonial authority." (Migliavacca, 2018: 12)

The story portrays the life of African tribe and their traditions, in accordance to their rules after the death of king his horse man should follow him to the afterlife, if not he won't be able to move on to the next life and the duties of the horse man is unfulfilled and will bring great misfortunes upon the tribe. Although the horse man acted as ready and willing to follow his path, he fails to do so and his son commits a suicide in order to prevent the coming catastrophe which was as Iyaloja had prevented a result of his refusal in following his path.

According to the concept of morality, what is against it is what harms the concept of right or wrong in the situation one may be, as an example the Hegel believed what may be labeled as

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moral should not harm or damage any being not the oppressive system. In other words the concept of morality is the right of individual in the society not the norm it follows. This research aims on the investigation of the existing contrasts between what the society believes as moral action in contrast with what Hegelian philosophy addresses as moral.

2. Theoretical Background

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is one of the greatest figures in philosophy; his works are mostly focused on the concepts of recht, moralität and sittlichkeit the man relation to the society. The greatness of Hegel's philosophy not only had affected the great minds of his own time but also has been a fascinating subject to the contemporary searchers. The first book on Hegelian philosophy was published by Hegel himself titled *The Phenomenology of Spirit* published in 1807; his later works include *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, and *History of philosophy*.

The concept of morality was mainly a result of enlightenment since there exists an undeniable relation between Hegel's philosophy and the ideologies of enlightenment. Morality or Moralität, is as a necessary element of enlightenment especially in concepts of religion, the concepts of recht, moralität and sittlichkeit were the nearest shape of this ideology accepted by the philosophers of that period. The basic idea of natural religious and morality was the valuating one with logic and reason which is the same way of thought for everyone:

A natural religion or morality would be one established according to reason alone, such that it held for everyone alike, simply as an intelligent being. Only if reason had such a power would it be possible to dispense with competing forms of intellectual authority, such as the Bible, ecclesiastical tradition and inspiration. (Beiser, 2005: 26)

Such gave birth to a raging reaction which mainly aimed on the rejection of such claims which was mainly graded by two main ideas: "(1) a first cause of the universe, a God who freely creates it, and (2) freedom, the power of doing otherwise. For Jacobi, the first result means that Spinozism leads to atheism, the second implies that it ends in fatalism" (Beiser, 2005: 26). The rejection of such ideology by Jacobi became the star of the moralist view of not only Hegel but also many other philosophers.

The main idea of Hegelian philosophy shaped from such era which leads to many different conclusions one in particular, the concept of morality or moralität. Hegel aimed to make a clear path between the two sides of Jacobean dilemma, he believed that rational way of thinking can create a balanced individual and as a result a balanced society. The main focus of Hegel's idea was on morality and religious believes since both can act as powerful controlling forces of man. Yet what Hegel was aware of the fact that this rational way of thought had failed before and are to fail in future since we can see the concepts of realism and naturalism rejected with an almost semi rational ideologies as a result "he wanted to do so without relapsing into the problematic rationalism of the past, whether that was Spinoza's naturalism, Kantian-Fichtean idealism or the old Leibnizian- Wolffian dogmatism". (Beiser, 2005: 27)

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This existing relation between the concept of morality and good and conscious is undeniable the main idea “both the abstract good and conscience, are as yet without their opposing principles. The abstract good is etherealized into something wholly devoid of power, something into which I can introduce any content at all” (Kitchener, 2001: 130), such was addressed by Hegel as recht or for its equivalent in English, right. Recht is the abstract concept of what is good with ought any subjectivity, pure objectivity. Recht stood in relation with the concept of what Hegel addressed as morality, Hegel argued that the recht if taken over by will and subjective will become what is addressed as moralität or morality, such relation to morality may be explained as Hegel states: morality is the form of will in subjective manners. By subjective here he means free from the ethical, or sittlichkeit. Sittlichkeit is the relation of the whole or society to the will of the individual since society as a whole is governed by rules and regulations which protects it from chaos, on the other hand the concept of ethical life is in direct association with these rules since it emerged from the ideologies of enlightenment. As stated before neither one of these concepts may exist independently, the will is meaningless without the existence freedom meanwhile the concept of morality would not imply any meaning if it did not stand in contrast with the concept of ethical life for the concept of sittlichkeit is both subjective and mostly objective will which is concerned with the outcome of the action on the society. In another way if the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity did not concern the judgment of the choices which are made by an individual the concept of morality did not appear as a literary and philosophical concern.

Morality is the general form of the will as subjective; but the ethical order is not simply the subjective form and the self-determination of the will, but contains their conception, namely, freedom. Neither right nor morality can exist independently, but must have the ethical as its pillar and support. In right is wanting the element of subjectivity, and in morality is wanting the objective, so that neither by itself has any actuality. (Kitchener, 2001: 130)

These ideologies were stated as a two separated stands taken by Hegel on two differing concepts including ethical life which with in itself had the concept of moral actions. Morality of one may differ from another since the concept is associated with the individual as an isolated concept of Recht. The concept of ethical life on the other hand investigates the relations of an individual as an external concept without any attention to the agent of the action and act as law. “They differ from ethical life because they treat each individual on its own, apart from its place in society and the state. By contrast, ethical life considers the individual as an integral part of the social and political whole”. (Beiser, 2005:234) Such view on recht, moralität and sittlichkeit obviously stand in a contrasting position to both the bible and the controlling society.

Such contrasts were what created the main difference between the ethics and morality. Since while morality is mostly concerned with the individual the concept of right or recht and sittlichkeit or ethical life is associated with society then as a result with the law and religion. Such important aspect is separated by a very simple and yet crucial point, it simply depends on how you view the way of interaction of an individual and society as whole. Morality is an abstract

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concept it is concerned with the individuality and subjectivity and is separated from the whole, still this individual is more valued than the whole. Meanwhile ethical life is both subjective and objective and is associated with the actual real world, making whole more valued than the individual. This means that even the identity of the individual depends on the association it has with the whole which is the society. "Hegel therefore thinks that the standpoint of morality is one-sided and abstract because it separates the individual from his place in the social whole, which gives the individual his very identity." (Beiser, 2005: 234-5) The association of the concept of morality with the concept of identity is mostly studied in Hegel's book *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.

3. Analysis

This research investigates the concepts of recht, moralität and sittlichkeit in the chosen case study, *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka, aiming on the analysis of closing of the play, the speech and actions in order to justify the actions of Elesin, Olunde, and Iyaloja. This paper mostly focuses on the death of the king horseman's son, Olunde. In the play, as the plot advances the failure of Elesin is witnessed in fulfilling his duty since it is how the ritual is addressed by Iyaloja, Elesin enjoying his short but limitless freedom to the fullest, enjoys all the earthly pleasure he desires for he is about to take part in a ritual, in other words "The play is centered around Elesin Oba, the king's horseman, who is preparing to die ritualistically so that he can accompany the king who died 30 days earlier into the realm of ancestors" (Sudha, 2004 :260). At the ritual Elesin is unable to fulfill his duty and he fears his destination and detests the sacrifice ritual, the ritual is postponed due to the inference of the colonizers and Elesin's own unwillingness. In this part we know that Iyaloja, presented as spiritual guide and the symbol of spirituality, had warned subjects of the doom which shall be upon them if the ritual had not taken place. In the grip of tension and frustration of the shame his father had brought upon him, Olunde, the horseman's son fulfill the duty of his father and performs the ritual. As Elesin witnesses the crops of his son carried by the villagers he commits suicide which is mocked by Iyaloja as she states: "Because he could not bear to let honor fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life. The son has proved the father Elesin, and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gums." (Soyinka, 1975:75)

In the play Iyaloja symbolizes spirituality or what is objective right or recht and yet it is not morality for morality is labeled as the will which profits the individual and has subjectivity in its nature. As Hegel states religion, politics, and law are what to man as a form of prewritten form of what is ought to be good for the individual, yet these preset values and norms do not consider the result which may have on the life of the individual but these are viewed in the form of subjective will. As an example while the whole village expect Elesin to take part in the ritual and offer his soul to the realm of ancestors they do not reach the realization of the opposing and contrary truth that while this action may be the law of the society and which by Hegel is addressed as ethical life. Hegel detests the morality and stands in favor of ethical life for he believes what brings the balance to society is the ethical life. The concept of ethical life is the actions, or in Hegelian sense, the will which is both subjective and objective. Hegel addresses the ethical life as the actions in

which the individual possesses freedom in making the decisions and yet this decision does not harm the society and profits the individual by the good cause which is brought upon the common wealth. In this play the final act of Olunde, his suicide, is an example of the ethical life which is addressed by Hegel. In this act Olunde has the role of a martyr, protecting the value of the society and protecting the common wealth. By the death of Olunde the doom which Iyaloja as a spiritual guide of the village had predicted is vanished and the village is safe and also along with it the religious and spiritual values of the village are protected. On the contrary stand to this suicide is the suicide of Elesin as he witnesses the dead body of his son carried by the villagers.

The death of Elesin is the concept of morality not the concept of the ethical life, as Elesin takes his own life, he protects himself from the shame and dishonor he would have faced if he had not committed the suicide. In the point of view of villagers Elesin is pictured as a cowerd who is unable to fulfill his duty and contribute to the common wealth. At the same time what differentiates ethical life from morality is the presence of objectivity in the will since in both cases the concept of will is associated with the subjectivity.

4. Discussion

This research investigates the contrary and yet similar clues of existence of Hegelian concepts *recht*, *moralität* and *sittlichkeit*. This research counts *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka as primary source. In this research the characters including mainly Elesin, Olunde, and Iyaloja in the closing of the play and perform an investigation in order to label each character's decision, actions, and dialogs as one of the chosen Hegelian categories in this research which includes *recht* or right, *moralität* or morality, and *sittlichkeit* which means ethical life.

Hegel shared the definition of morality with Kant's theories, he believed morality as an element which is consisted of both will and subjectivity of the individual is dangerous for the society and system and he believed it as a contrary element to the ethical life. "Moralität, unlike *Sittlichkeit*, stresses the inner will and intention of the agent, in contrast to his outer conduct and its consequences" (Inwood, 1992:192). *Sittlichkeit* on the other hand is a mixture of both subjectivity and objectivity which is controlled by law and values. *Sittlichkeit* or ethical life has more profit for the system which is why it has a higher value in Hegel's opinion and point of view, "Thus in simple Greek *Sittlichkeit*, on Hegel's view, guilt or responsibility is ascribed to an agent (such as Oedipus) for what he does (his *Tat*, 'deed'), regardless of his knowledge and intentions" (Inwood, 1992: 192). The concept of *recht* or right exists in order to create a ground for understanding the concepts of morality and ethical, right is labeled as an absolute objective concept, the literal meaning of *recht* includes: "Recht. This means: (1) a right, claim or title; (2) justice (as in, e.g., 'to administer justice', 'to have justice on one's side', but not justice as a virtue, viz. *Gerechtigkeit*); (3) 'the law' as a principle, or 'the laws' collectively" (Inwood, 1992:259). Hegel, in contrast with Kant, introduced *recht* as absolute and objective right and placed the concept of morality under the category of *recht* for its subjective nature and introduced ethical life, *sittlichkeit*, as a mixture of both.

In the play if Iyaloja's ideologies and speeches are viewed as the *recht* for it is absolute and the subjectivity is absent from its nature, the actions and speeches of Elesin, Olunde are labeled as

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moral and ethical Elesin, Olunde. Yet even Iyaloja, herself does not approve of some of the actions and manners which are done by the power of the ideologies she projects and presents. In the final parts of the play Elesin's refusal to perform the spiritual ceremony is moral for it is subjective and also it stands against the law and the concept of recht. Elesin's suicide is also an act of morality since according to Iyaloja's ideologies after the arrival of Olunde to the realm of ancestors the presence of Elesin is absolutely useless and he had done such action in order to only help himself and free himself from the guilt and mockery he had to face if he had not committed suicide. The suicide of Olunde is counted as the concept of ethical life for it benefits the society for according to the spiritual law of the village if the horseman fails to fulfill his duty one of his blood must perform the ritual in order to save the village. Also Olunde's character benefits from this action as well due to the shame and disgrace his father had brought upon him and his family and the fact that now his one to be his wedded wife is carrying his father's child.

5. Conclusion

This research investigated the concepts of Recht, Moralität, and Sittlichkeit in the chosen case study, *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka, according to the philosophical theories of Hegel in the chosen characters Elesin, Olunde, and Iyaloja. This research aimed on labelling the behavior and actions of each character as Recht, Moralität, and Sittlichkeit. The research took interest in the final parts of the play for due to the presence of the death as a key concept death as a singular action by the different individuals was studied. In the play, by the help of textual extract from both primary and secondary sources, it was concluded that the actions and speeches of Iyaloja are the Hegelian concept of recht for she does not include any subjectivity when she addressed the ritual ceremony and only stated the rule without any subjective opinion given. Elesin's first refusal and then his suicide were both moral and moralität for he acted with absolute subjectivity and uses his will in order to benefit himself and not to assist anyone but himself. Olunde as final character, he presented the concept of ethical life for his suicide benefited both him and his village.

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