



A THEORETICAL VALIDATION OF IDEALISM

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Abstract

One of the fundamental and unending debates in political science is that between realism and idealism. Realism is often regarded as the acceptance and response to a situation as it is, or as presented by the senses. Idealism, on the other hand, is the belief that the human mind is capable of comprehending reality. There have been arguments of superiority between the two doctrines, as well as their complementarity. Political scientists have continued to disagree over the relative merits of idealism and realism. It is also becoming widely acknowledged that reason and experience can work together to evidence social reality. However, this treatise is an attempt to theoretically validate the status of idealism, including its importance as a reliable tool for understanding phenomena. Resting on rationalism as its theoretical and methodological frameworks for analysis, the study argues, among other things, that idealism's approach to knowledge is intellectual and holistic, and that human existence will be inherently material, appetitive and irrational without the normative principle that defines idealism. It recommends the cultivation of moral and ethical character through virtue education and discipline to ensure that humans maintain the ideal purpose for which they live. This study contributes to knowledge by extending beyond the meaning of idealism to offer valuable insights into its ability to produce a well-rounded individual capable of critical thinking, moral orientation and peaceful existence.

Keywords: Theoretical, Validation, Idealism, Mind, Mental, Reason.

INTRODUCTION

The idea that knowledge of the world is only gained by experience as held by realists stands in contrast to the principle that the world could be understood through the mind or consciousness, or that reality is a mental construct. This realism-versus-idealism argument has been the basis of most discussions among political scientists and scholars for many years. The origin of the idealism and realism dispute in social discourse is as old as presented by ancient scholars, but its modern flame was ignited in the period between the first and second world wars in what is usually called the "first great debate" of international relations (Noor & Kasap, 2022). The arguments and presentations of the two sides constitute the foundational disagreement, also known as the constitutive debate, which shaped and continue to influence the discipline.

Realism is the acceptance of, and appropriate response to, a situation as it is or the presentation of things in a way that is through to life (Horwich, 1996). Thus, realists argue that reality exists independently of human perception or thought. On the other hand, idealism is the doctrine that reality could be evidenced by human mind or thought (Guyer & Horstmann, 2023). In other words, the mind or spirit is the ultimate source or foundation of reality. Russell (2007) observes that idealism is used by different scholars in different ways, but what seems general is the belief that it is the doctrine that whatever exists, or whatever can be known to exist at any rate, must be in some senses mental. These two methods of thinking, research, inquiry and proffering solutions had been used in ancient times by scholars such as Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, among others. There are also some arguments of superiority between idealism and realism that may be found in literature. However, it is increasingly recognized that social reality is something understood by experience and reason. The point has to be made that this treatise is not a debate about the superiority of one doctrine over the other or their complementarity; it is rather an attempt to logically authenticate idealism as a valid tool for understanding phenomena. In other words, the study intellectually validates the strengths of idealism as a framework for interpreting and establishing reality.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

The study rests on rationalism as its theoretical and methodological frameworks for analysis.

Theoretically, rationalism encompasses the idea that reason is the chief source and instrument of knowledge. In other words, rationalists defend the primacy of reason in the acquisition of knowledge. It is assumed that human beings born with certain truths, that rational data are more reliable than sensory data which are deceptive, and that by reason, fundamental truths – often seen as essential, universal and self-evident – can be evidenced. In Meno, Plato (1976) proposes that knowledge must be recollected from the soul. When the soul enters the world of space and time, it remembers its knowledge of unchangeable truths. Also, while René Descartes argues that knowledge is deduced from pure reason (Descartes, 2013), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz maintains that necessary truths come from within the mind (Leibniz, 1981). However, Immanuel Kant asserts that the senses can generate sensory impressions (a posteriori knowledge), but it is the mind, through the exercise of reason, that organizes these raw data into coherent knowledge (Kant, 1781). Thus, human cognition depends heavily on a priori knowledge - knowledge that expands real-world (synthetic) knowledge, yet independent of sensory experience. This makes analytic knowledge a product of reason, and those who act based on the dictates of reason are knowledgeable, virtuous and wise.

In terms of methodology, data collection and analysis are intellectual and deductive respectively. In other words, data come mainly from pure thought, and universal, self-evident truths; while analysis is by logical reasoning and inference. However, because rationalism is not totally opposed to sensory data, some data are sensory such as what is seen, read, heard or observed; but these are intellectually reflected on in line with the rational approach.

The Concept of Idealism

Providing a precise definition of idealism is difficult. This is because of the many variants of the concept that exist and to which different scholars subscribe. Some philosophers talk about philosophical or metaphysical idealism, which is a set of abstract perspectives asserting that, most fundamentally, reality is equivalent to mind, spirit, or consciousness. Others use the expression, epistemological idealism to suggest that all knowledge come from human ideas and, so reject the possibility of knowing the existence of anything independent of the mind. Yet some others talk ontologically idealistic, to which the existence of all things depends upon the mind; thus, ontological idealism rejects the perspective of physicalism. Within these idealisms one can find further distinctions, such as subjective, objective or absolute/speculative idealism. While subjective idealism asserts that reality exists only as it seems to a subject/human mind (Berkeley, 2002), objective idealism maintains that there is an objective rational order or divine mind that sustains the world outside of human minds (Schelling, 1794; Marx & Engels, 1932). Absolute idealism, often credited to Hegel (1977), argues that there is no distinction between “subject” (human mind) and “object” (world); that they are identical parts of the “Absolute”, a unified, rational whole. Speculative idealism is often used interchangeably with absolute idealism, but with the term “speculative” specifically highlighting the dialectical method used to reach the conclusion that reality is absolute.

Nonetheless, it is often insisted that the belief that reality is a mental or spiritual notion unites all facets of idealism (Stumpf & Fieser, 2003). In other words, reality is fundamentally mental, mind-dependent or immaterial. This places the mind, spirit, reason or ideas at the center of being and knowledge, rather than material things. Sometimes, the meaning of idealism is taken from what is regarded to be its opposite. Thus, an idealist is someone who is not a realist, not a materialist, not a dogmatist and not an empiricist. There is also the understanding of idealism as the belief that things can and should be perfect, and that good will eventually prevail. Thus, an idealist becomes someone who usually prioritizes high moral standards or noble principles, such as world peace and poverty eradication even if these goals seem unrealistic to others.

The origin of idealism could be traced to ancient Greek philosophy. Plato, one of the most influential philosophers in western thought, is usually celebrated for laying the foundation of idealism. This is because in his theory of human nature, Plato (1974) advances the primacy of mind/soul, the immaterial part of man over his body, the material part. Plato further states that the soul/mind has three parts, namely, the appetitive part, the spirited part and the rational part. There is always a struggle in the soul, particularly between the appetitive part and the rational part. If appetite wins the battle and rules a man's soul, the individual behaves irrationally; but if reason dominates the soul of a human being, he/she behaves rationally. While the appetitive soul, because it is ruled by materialism, only sees shadows or appearances which are flawed or imperfect reality, the rational mind apprehends reality because it is governed by reason or thought by which the mind ascends the intelligible world where the true essence of things exists in an ideal form. It is this that informs Plato's insistence that only a philosopher should rule in order to realize a just society in which are found the ideals that guide human existence. Idealists, therefore, draw from Plato the notion that reality can be known through mental processes.

Although the origin of idealism is rooted in Plato, the term did not become the name for a whole family of positions in philosophy until the eighteenth century. While Plato laid the foundation of idealism, it was in the 18th century that the term "idealism" began to be used as a broad philosophical label for mind-dependent reality. This was heavily influenced by René Descartes and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's arguments against materialism,

linking idealism to anti-materialist metaphysics. Bishop George Berkeley further conceptualized idealism as the view that only minds and ideas exist; while Immanuel Kant's "transcendental idealism" emphasized that reality as it exists outside of human mind is entirely unknowable to humans because they cannot know anything without their thoughts (Kant, 1781).

Idealism is sometimes considered to be a theoretical orientation in liberalism; thus, some liberals are also idealists. In international relations, for instance, idealists stress the need for states to pursue moral goals and act ethically in the international arena. They envision a world that is less conflictual and violent, and have great faith in international organizations and universal education in achieving this end. In this category can be included scholars and statesmen such as John Rawls, Woodrow Wilson and Joseph Nye who emphasize the importance of human rights, morality and justice in maintaining global peace.

It is important to note that there are those who believe that reality is not mental, but experiential. They argue that knowledge of the world exists independently of human thought. This is the philosophical position known as realism. Thus, realism is a contrast to the assumption of idealism that all that is known of the world emanate from the mind. In other words, realism is the idea that knowledge of the world can only be gained by experience. Realists refuse to accept imagination, idealization, or abstraction, but depend on the senses to understand phenomena as they are. Some realists, such as eliminative materialists and radical behaviorists, reject the existence of the mind or soul (Churchland, 1984; Skinner, 1974). The concept of mind is challenged on the grounds that there can be no possible evidence that it exists. Some other realists insist that any mental state is a product of experience or matter (Aristotle, 1990; Hobbes, 1985). For instance, Thomas Hobbes asserts that "there is no conception in a man's mind which has not first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of Sense...that Sense is Motion caused by the action of the things we see" (Hobbes, pp. 85, 118).

However, idealists contend that the realist belief that the mind does not exist is based on ignorance which stems from intellectual laziness (Berkeley, 2002; Kant, 1781; Hegel, 1977). It is, therefore, illogical for realists to argue against the existence of the mind simply because they lack knowledge of the active role of consciousness in constituting reality. Also, the prejudices of realism are inconsistent with the reality of such phenomena as remembering, desiring, reflecting etc. Overlooking mental states such as these undermines our realization that more than just physical mechanisms are at play when we experience profound feelings like love or joy. In fact, for idealists, the only way to make sense of experience is to think about it (McLean & McMillan, 2003). This means that, whatever exists in the world of experience must have been thoroughly organized or understood in the realm of consciousness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Idealism's approach to knowledge is intellectual and holistic. The idealist method of knowledge acquisition is based on the principle that reality is fundamentally mental and that true knowledge is attained through the mind rather than direct sensory experience. Thus, the mind moves from mere perception of specific fact or data to the realization of universal, unchanging truths through critical thinking "according to which practitioners are not swayed by selfish motives, emotional impulses or even self-deception" (Sen, 2010, p.1). Critical thinkers are open-minded persons – those who are able to consider all the possible and reasonable inferences as well as all the possible points of view. Although information can be conveyed to the self by the senses, the mind being the superior part of the self, analyses the information and produces knowledge at the end. It is a fact that if I am hurt in my body and I feel pain, my body reacts according to the interpretation and knowledge produced by my mind. This is why Descartes makes the assertion: "cogito ergo sum," "I think; therefore, I am" (Descartes, 2013; Stumpf & Fieser, 2003, p.230). Explaining further, Bailey (1960) reveals that for the truly thoughtful, after receiving any information or instance from the sense organs, he or she follows it up with an analysis of the instance, its correlation with other instances, and an examination of cause and effect. The Tax Reform Act of 2025 in Nigeria which exempts small businesses with annual turnover of N50 million or less and individuals earning N83,000 or less monthly from personal income tax shows critical thinking to protect the most vulnerable. This depicts a governance reform system that is development-oriented and people-centered, a point which Ake (1996) reiterates by insisting that government is for the advancement of the people's interest, and should enhance their welfare and capacities.

Thus, without idealism, the knowledge process will be limited and incomplete, remaining only at the level of the senses. Unlike the ideal or universals which aid general knowledge of phenomena, sensory or empirical forms of knowledge are particulars and limit understanding due to their relativity. The realist's claim that moral standards are not the same in all societies, or that a concept that depicts moral standards may mean one thing in an environment and another elsewhere, ignores the fact that there are objectively good acts and conduct which remain the same despite the environment. Values such as respect for elders, speaking the truth, rule of law, probity, accountability, empathy, among others, are inherent in humans, which make them identify good from bad, and right from wrong. Without such ideals, moral evaluations would be impossible and at that rate there would be no need to condemn slavery, apartheid, oppression, torture, racism, murder and many such

anti-social behaviors.

The importance of reason, a central thesis in idealism, can also be seen in the evolution of the state or civil society. The social contract theorists, particularly John Locke and Jean- Jacques Rousseau, maintain that man's rationality is the basis of civil society, state or government. It is through the exercise of reason that men come to the realization of the need to go out of the state of nature and enter into civil society. In Locke, it is to overcome the inconveniences of the state of nature, while in Rousseau, it is to civilize man that the formation of political community becomes necessary (Locke, 1986, 1975; Rousseau, 1998). Thus, the people accept to establish the state and government to provide law and order protect lives and property and govern themselves in line with the General Will. In other words, it is because man can think that he is able to exit the state of nature and live in civil society with a more secured life regulated by social norms and laws.

Human existence will be inherently material, appetitive and irrational without the normative criterion (ideal principle) that characterizes idealism. This is because normative or ideal life is paramount in bringing forth the best possible situation. Hence, idealistic or normative theory is prescriptive in character, and is concerned with what ought to be, rather than what is (Amadi, 2015). This means that the idealist is mostly concerned with what is based on or derived from reason to ensure the right ordering and functioning of society. But, when individuals are empirically, bodily or materially inclined, they operate only at the level of the senses, which can never take them to the knowledge of the universal, unchanging and eternal truths that define life. The senses only present to us how things are without any consideration of how they ought to be. Plato (1974) maintains that this is the realm at which the material person, governed by appetitive mind, operates. This self-centered individual only thinks and talks about material things, and stops at nothing to gratify his bodily desires. It is this mindset, in most cases, that governs public service in Nigeria. For instance, according to former Nigeria's Information Minister, Lai Mohammed, about \$6.8 billion was stolen between 2006 and 2013 whose breakdown includes the theft of 147 billion naira (\$742.42 million) by 15 former state governors, 524 billion naira (\$2.65 billion) by bankers and 7 billion naira (\$35.35 million) by four former ministers (Sotunde, 2016).

On the contrary, Nwosu (2006, p.132) agrees that "souls in which Reason is the master ... are capable of knowing Reality". This is reflective of the action of Dr Alex Otti, Governor of Nigeria's Abia State, in signing the Abia State Governors and Deputy Governors (Repeal) Law of 2024 to drastically reduce cost of governance. The old law of 2001 had authorized lifetime benefits for these former state leaders. Joseph (1991) contends that normative reforms in democratic governance will deepen democratic accountability and institutional legitimacy. Hence, in aligning with the idealist perspective, he advocates for ethical governance and civic responsibility. This can be achieved through the inculcation and orientation of the right values in schools, through media and the ethical orientation and re-orientation of those in power. It is, therefore, evident why Plato insists that the philosopher – the individual whose reason dominates his soul – should rule if the state must see better days. Indeed, reflective living and political practice are not opposed to each other; in fact, man can live a more fulfilling life if these two component parts of life are tied together and prevented from maintaining separate ways (Cornford, 1945).

There is an ideal purpose which a society or state is established to accomplish. It could be to ensure justice as Plato (1974) would assume, or to realize the good life according to Aristotle (1990), or yet as Hobbes and Locke would suppose, to guarantee peace and security of lives and property (Hobbes, 1985; Locke, 1986). These purposes for which the state is established are mental suppositions which actual societies and states pursue eventually. Indeed, every society, real or imagined, aims at the ideal, or at least lay claim to it. Hence, those who study social phenomena with a view to improving them often make value judgments (Subrata & Sushila, 2007). For instance, democracy has become synonymous with progress as a result of the normative standards that characterize it such as the principles of the rule of law, popular will, human rights and liberties, among others. Little wonder, many states claim to be democratic even the ones that are clearly despotic and immoral.

Therefore, the inherent human qualities of imagination and empathy shape our environmental experiences; they are part and parcel of morality and immediately equip us with ideas to resist unacceptable behaviors and actions in society even without waiting to experience them. The idealist argument is that civilization is usually built on the foundations of morality. It is from this that some idealists believe in the existence of a moral absolute from which humanity patterns its own moral standards (Amadi, 2016). Proponents of idealism believe that the physical world is a shadow of the world of ideas. These realities of ideas or forms or essences which are objects of thought have perfection, permanence and immutability, unlike the realities of physical objects, which are objects of the senses and which constantly change and decay.

It is evident that global moral systems and rules that serve humanity are products of idealistic thinking. Idealism's insistence that the international system should be guided by moral or ethical principles, rather than by the quest for power or self-interest has been significant in shaping the development of international institutions and norms, such as the United Nations Organization and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

respectively. This contributed to the institutionalization of international conventions, protocols and laws to prevent the possible emergence of dictators who could instigate wars to the detriment of humanity. Accordingly, idealism focuses on norms, values and the pursuit of the common good; it lays emphasis on the importance of morality and cooperation among nations, states and supra-national organizations in managing conflict situations.

Thus, idealists believe that the international community should work towards the promotion of peace, justice and respect for human rights, and that international cooperation and rule of law are essential for achieving these goals. They often advocate for the use of diplomacy and international law to address global conflicts and challenges, and for the promotion of international cooperation on such issues as development, human rights, environmental protection and global peace. When considered from this angle, the importance of the United Nations Organization comes out in clear relief. The UNO has contributed a lot in preventing the outbreak of another world war, thereby saving humanity from calamity and extinction. Part of the strategy or means by which the organization has recorded these feats is the R2P- Responsibility to Protect, an international norm or principle that ensures that the global community is able to prevent atrocities such as war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleaning and other crimes against humanity.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study validates idealism as a crucial and comprehensive framework for understanding reality, highlighting its intellectual and holistic approach to knowledge. It argues that reason, being central in idealism, drives the evolution of civil society. Furthermore, the study suggests that without the normative, value-driven foundation of idealism, human existence would be reduced to mere materialism and irrationality. Finally, the findings credit idealism with fostering a global system that prioritizes morality, international cooperation, and peaceful conflict resolution.

However, in order to ensure that humans maintain the ideal purpose for which they live, this study recommends the cultivation of moral and ethical character through virtue education and discipline. Virtue education is one that emphasizes character formation that teaches individuals to recognize and adopt moral virtues like love, kindness, honesty and responsibility. Moreover, to achieve the above, schools should go beyond rote learning or memorization of information, and emphasize the strengthening of moral character and social-emotional intelligence in their curricula.

The disciplines which this work endorses are of two types, internal discipline and external discipline. The state must be ready to discipline or punish citizens who are not law abiding; this is external discipline. More important, however, is internal or self-discipline which is imposed by the individual from his or her inner-self, making him or her a well-adjusted social being. The importance of internal discipline, a mental state, is that with it, there will be less need for external discipline.

Contribution to Knowledge

The contribution of this study to knowledge is that it has expanded the understanding of idealism beyond conceptual explanation by offering valuable insights into its usefulness in creating an existential condition defined by critical thinking, moral orientation and peaceful existence.

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