Linking Philosophy to the Caribbean through Comparative Examination of Rastafari and Popular Philosophical Discourses

by

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Abstract

Caribbean people often view philosophy as a discipline which does not offer much value to Caribbean life and thus, people should not waste their time perusing such studies. My research is aimed at highlighting the fact that philosophy is an inseparable part of Caribbean life. The problem with accepting the value of philosophy and accepting that there is such a thing as Caribbean philosophy rests with the fact that certain systems of thought are not readily identified as philosophy. In addressing this problem of identifying Caribbean thoughts as philosophy, my research focuses on the similarities of Rastafari and classical as well as modern philosophical discourses. The reason for using Rastafari to make the claim for there being Caribbean philosophy is that Rastafari has more or less been accepted as a movement which originated in the region and has been recognised to hold philosophical significance.

The research firsts establishes definitions for the two major concepts which are focused on, that is, Rastafari and philosophy. After defining these concepts an examination of Rastafari’s core principles was undertaken, whereby the similarities between Rastafari and Western philosophical discourse was evidence enough to make the claim that even by the standards of Western philosophy, there is a Caribbean Philosophy. The study thus concludes that Rastafari presents itself as a unique Caribbean philosophy where its existential, epistemological and moral arguments are founded in the traditional definition of self or, the “I and I” concept.

Key words: Caribbean Philosophy, Rastafari, Existentialism, Morality, Epistemology
The Caribbean places little interest in the subject of philosophy. There are several reasons for this lack of interest. First, the Caribbean suffers from what Bertrand Russell called “practical man syndrome,”¹ that philosophy does not put food on the table and cannot solve the deep economic problems facing most Caribbean countries. Second, philosophy, and the humanities in general is perceived as not being immediately relevant to economic development and thus students are discouraged from perusing these studies.² Third, philosophy is vilified as a system which had given justification to slavery and colonial oppression in discourses such as natural law theory.³ Therefore, the view is that there is no justice in trying to learn from a system of thought which was once used for the very enslavement and debasement of a people. The result of this particular idea about the historical use of philosophy in the Caribbean has resulted in mistrust of the discipline as being particularly useful in developing the interests of Caribbean people. However, even with such ideas about philosophy, there is no separating philosophy from Caribbean life as it is deeply entrenched in systems of thought, even though those systems are not readily identified as philosophy.

It is not absurd to ask whether there is Caribbean philosophy. It would however be absurd not to accept that Caribbean philosophy exists. The primary goal of this paper is to examine a number of similarities between classic philosophical discourses and some ideas that are described as distinctively Caribbean. These ideas are found within the context of Rastafari, which is classified as a religion and also a movement, but is more widely accepted as a way of life. The discussion takes into consideration whether the principles of Rastafari can be viewed as

philosophical. The paper will also focus on Rastafari’s development of the “I and I” concept and how the meaning one ascribes to self bears on one’s interaction with the world. I will argue that a certain sort of philosophy exists in the Caribbean, using Western Philosophy to benchmark Rastafari principles as expressions of philosophy – even by Western standards.

The claim that there is a unique Caribbean philosophy requires a definition for ‘philosophy.’ Philosophy taken as “a multifaceted academic discipline,”⁴ attracts numerous, sometimes varying definitions. Although philosophy is here regarded as an academic discipline, I will make the point that philosophy should not be restricted to the field of formal education but rather, the status of philosophy ought to be extended as far as to include all systems which expressly strive towards deriving truth, meaning of self and the world, through direct and deliberate representation in words, thoughts or ideas.

Bamikole’s reference to aspects of philosophy helps in developing an understanding of what philosophy entails. From this understanding it may be determined if Rastafari at all resembles philosophy as an intellectual exercise. He begins with the traditional Greek definition of philosophy being love of wisdom, where wisdom involves an understanding of fundamental laws and principles⁵ which may be further linked to another aspect of philosophy that speaks to the development of worldviews. Chevaness sees Rastafari “as constituting a worldview, which speaks to the totality and interconnected logic of the doctrine of philosophy.”⁶

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The question of whether or not there is an absolute conceptual schema is a central issue. Therefore, one may ask whether the possibility exist within Rastafari for there to be improvements made to the most basic of ideas held about the nature of the world and our relationship to it. Implicit in the ideology of Rastafari is that the most fundamental nature of reality is constant; however, words play a significant role in understanding such reality. It is also seen that within the Rastafari community, there is a common worldview, “identified by the beliefs and practices that various groups [of Rastafari] share.”

Bamikole states that one of the things that define Rastafari is the belief in the divinity of Haile Selassie, but given that this is not a view that “all” Rastas share, my view is that the more accurate appreciation of the features of Rastafari is: Rastas have the shared belief in a Divine, a belief in repatriation, a belief in reasoning and adherence to the “livity,”9 that which is involved in attaining “the good life.” Yasus Afari defines livity as “essentially a redefinition of culture along moral perspectives”10 which is embodied in the idea of “oneness” (one aim, one heart, one destiny) which Rastafarians try to cultivate.

Understanding the “Livity”

Rastafari livity is interpreted as the perceived condition which allows Rastas to live the best life possible. As mentioned before, it has the undertone of a code of conduct, notwithstanding the possibility for such codes of conduct to be reinterpreted or redefined by each Rastafari. The thought which presupposes Rasta livity is the belief of good over evil. As put forth

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8 Ibid., 131.
by Afari, “Evil is a tolerance which Good itself allows, and, in the interest of its own ultimate preservation and survival, Good will find it necessary to do without tolerance of evil.”¹¹ It is also thought that the “purpose of Rastafari is to restore the ancient and original order of life and creation;”¹² that all of humanity is a family whose origins is Africa; humankind is the guardian of creation and ought to live in love and harmony with creation; the human body houses the essence of existence and as such ought not to compromise the health of the body, reason being that the spiritual, the mental and the physical are one.¹³

These are but some of the ideas which guide Rastafari livity or the Rastafari way of life. At the very core of Rastafari lifestyle is deliberate practice of living within a framework of what is considered ‘natural.’ That is, one ought to lead a life that is in keeping with nature, both one’s inner nature and one’s external environment. It is the belief that if one’s way of life or livity is in keeping with the orders of nature then one will that will attain, for him or her, the best possible life.

**Rastafari Historical Background**

To gain a greater understanding of the Rastafarian ideology, it is necessary to look at its historical origins. This is important in highlighting the fact that, etched into the foundation of the systems presently governing societies are ideas which were developed through thinking and reasoning about the means of achieving the good life. Hegel explains that though past thoughts stand outside of what is now real, what presently “is,” constitutes only one side of reality, because present thoughts are inextricably linked to past thoughts. Hegel further argued that “The possession of self-conscious reason, which belongs to the present world, did not arise

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¹² Ibid., 71.
¹³ Ibid., 79-74.
suddenly…” and therefore, they must have come from some previous thought. Philosophy is thus a product of thought, and thought occurs within a thinker, who is affected by culture and who has an historical existence within society. Therefore, understanding the historical context – the soul of Rastafari – is a step towards understanding its essential nature.

The Caribbean society emerged from a system of slavery. Against this background is a deep seated quest for freedom, both physical and mental freedom, among Caribbean people. As a result, religious practice became, for Caribbean people, a means of expression, given that during slavery there was a prohibition on communicating in African languages and expression of culture among the slave populace. The emancipation of slavery in 1834 in all British territories brought indentured servants from the orient to replace black slave labour. The arrival of indentured labour further led to an undermining of the relevance of Africans. While slaves were granted their physical freedom, they had little more than that. Marcus Mosia Garvey, a descendant of Maroons, runaway slaves, has been one of the most influential people who tackled these deep social, political and economic issues through a strategic philosophical approach that set into motion the Pan-African movement from which Rastafari emerged.

Garvey, in his speech at Nova Scotia, spoke to the needs of an oppressed people. It is seen that some of the guiding principles of Rastafari were derived from this speech which Garvey gave. Garvey spoke of nature being a mighty power and held that if human beings act within the laws of nature, then the almighty power will take care of the human situation.

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16 Ibid., 13.
speech are found some of his most famous words, which have become a part of Rastafari ideology as well as popular Reggae Music of Bob Marley. Garvey said,

We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind. Mind is our only ruler… The man who is not able to develop and use his mind is bound to be the slave of another man who uses his mind… When god Almighty made man in His own image and likeness, it wasn’t the physical, it was the mind that was like God. Every man represents God in his unitary intelligence.\(^\text{18}\)

One issue to which Marcus Garvey paid close attention was that of personal identity. It is not difficult to understand how a displaced people, enslaved for over four hundred years and forced to accept foreign ideas about themselves and god, would suffer an identity crisis. One of the biggest issues then, as is now, directly relates to the problem of not having a well defined sense of identity. Who are Caribbean people? How are they defined outside of the geographic space they occupy and in which they exist? Can the identity of a dislocated people be restored?

Scaltsas purports that whether animate or inanimate, identity is given to things that exist and that identity can be destroyed and reconstructed.\(^\text{19}\) Studying the work of Garvey, one realises the deliberate effort made in restoring a sense of identity in the black population, by highlighting a connection of the individual to the Almighty, which is nature and in whose image humankind


was made.\textsuperscript{20} It is my view that Garvey had sets the tone for the transcendentalism which emerged in Rastafari.

The birth of Rastafari occurred during the 1930s, which was a period of great depression.\textsuperscript{21} According to Lewis, several of the founders of the Rastafari Movement, like Leonard Howell, were known to be followers of Marcus Garvey. One marked difference between the Marcus Garvey Movement and the Rastafari Movement is the religious connotations which Rastafari took on. As Marx argues, “religion is the sigh of the oppressed … the heart of a heartless world.”\textsuperscript{22} Examined in this context, the religiousness of Rastafari can be thought to have resulted from the duration of hardship faced during the period leading up to its inception. The religious nature of Rastafari, in essence, represents a reaction towards oppression. Resistance towards oppression for Rastas begin in the redefinition of self. Niiah holds that from a pedagogic perspective the “interned self-generating and self-justifying system of belief and action” stemming from an embrace of local knowledge system concerning Rastafari existence, may bring forth a theory of Caribbean identity.\textsuperscript{23} He holds that Rastafari presents ideas that are “central to the consciousness of self.”\textsuperscript{24}

Barnett highlights the apparent paradoxical nature of Rastafari, noting its strong belief in individualism, which runs parallel to an equally strong belief in communalism. He refers to it as the dialectic nature of Rastafari. He portrays Rastafari as a group which upholds the ideals of self reliance both in terms of economic self reliance, as well as the reliance on self for deriving truth

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. 27.
and knowledge about self; all of this in relation to the space they occupy. In the same breath, Rastafarians place equal value on communalistic living which serves as a direct rejection of the kind of Western individualism rooted in capitalism, that is, self interest of a materialistic nature. Given that the Rastafari Movement is a direct retaliation against that “system” (in the sense of government and the socio-economic systems) of oppression, it can be seen as an expression of unity without the need for conformity. This is expressed in all facets of Rastafari livity, including its religious aspect.

The particular individualistic feature of Rastafari emerges out of the accepted belief that every person “has a divine essence within themselves,” and this essentially makes all people equal. This belief appears to be quite similar to the transcendentalist belief which is the foundation of American Philosophy. And in a sense, Rastafari may be linked in this way to American Philosophy, through transcendentalism. Delving a little further into this similarity, the assumption can be made that there might be a correlation between transcendentalism and an urgent need to survive. It can be said that transcendentalist beliefs contributed to the development of pragmatism, as did the transcendentalist beliefs of a group of Garveyites contribute to the development of Rastafari. To understand more clearly this particular transcendentalist idea which Rastafaris hold, one only needs to understand the language used in portraying their view of self, embodied in the “I and I” concept.

The “I and I” Concept

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Afari holds that the “I and I” language of Rastafari is in keeping with its philosophy of oneness, that is, the “concept of one-in-all and all-in-one.”

Barnett purports that “I and I” is the belief that everyone has both the higher I and the lower I within themselves. Afari further states that “I and I” in essence represents a concept, more or less, of a union of The Universal I - The Divine, and all the other Is that revolve around it. This further expands the “I and I” concept to be a rather complex idea of oneness; of the self with the Divine, of the self with other selves, and of the self with oneself.

Afari argues that language allows for the painting of mental images, impressions and thoughts, upon the minds of others, as well as our own minds and so, the more vivid and picturesque the language, the more effective it is. This is similar to what Wittgenstein argues in the Tractatus, that the world consists of facts of which we make pictorial representations to ourselves, where such pictorial representations are supposed to be a representation of those facts about the world. These picture representations are hereby interpreted to mean conceptual schemas which Davidson explains are the “points of views from which individuals, cultures or periods survey the passing scene.” In other words, representations are how people perceive reality. Propositions, words or language further serve as a representation of a particular understanding about the world. Relating the picture theory to Rastafari’s use of the lexicon “I and I,” prompts the question: ‘what exactly is the picture of “I and I” representative of?’

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30 Ibid.
Contrary to the belief that “I and I” is merely an honorific title such as Dr., Sr., or Honourable, “I and I” for Rastafari represents much more than a title. “I and I” represents the belief that I (the individual) has a personal I (ego) as well as a Universal I (divine). In addition, another I (individual) possesses the same divine and personal I, and thus, there is a connection between I (myself) and I (another), which allows “I and I” to take on the connotation of “we.” This leads to a discussion on the suggested epistemological and moral implications of the idea of there being divinity in all individuals.

If it is believed that “I and I” (self) expresses the divine, then it follows that I would know truth. However, Rastas hold that truth is inter-subjective. McFarlane claims “There are parallels between Rastas’ and Plato’s theory" concerning knowledge and how it is attained. He says, “The I and I locution … resembles Plato’s notion that knowledge resides in the soul and is “teased out” in conversation and introspection. Thus … no one can give us knowledge,” it must be sourced from within. Therefore, it is not necessary to rely on anyone to impart knowledge, as knowledge already lies within the individual.

What is particularly interesting is how Rastfaris avoid being in an isolated situation. The need for “reasoning” (talking or dialogue) in order to bring to the surface his or her in-dwelling truths is the dialectical nature pointed out by Barnett. Rastafaris believe that through reasoning they may bring out the truth by coming to a consensus. Although it is an accepted fact that the individual already possesses truth, it is also accepted that only through the process of

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35 Ibid.
“reasoning” can one become aware of their truths – via a collective process and not in isolation.\textsuperscript{37} This is not to say that the individual is not able to come to truth on their own; the individual can come to their own truth. However, such truths are “reinforced via a collective communal experience,”\textsuperscript{38} This conveys the notion of an independent knower within an interdependent knowledge system. Bewaji discusses this idea of social epistemology in \textit{An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge}.\textsuperscript{39}

Rastafari’s belief in self-reliance, particularly in terms of knowing, also has moral implications. The fact that one naturally possesses knowledge allows for one to know, \textit{a priori}, what is considered good and what is considered bad. Naturally, this self-determination of good and bad will gain reinforcement by other members of the community through reasoning. McFarlain says, “For one to know, one must be; for one to do anything (efficaciously), one must know … This state of affairs not only changes the individual but also emphasizes the “livity”… (well-being) of Rastafari, temporally and eternally.”\textsuperscript{40} He makes an interesting observation about the way Rastafari treats with knowledge and its translation into Rasta morality.

Rasta morality he claims rests in the observation that Rastafaris make no distinction between being, knowing and doing. McFarlane argues that being, knowing and doing are not separated from the ontological definition of Rastafari and makes the claim that such an idea would be the foundation upon which a Rastafari theory of knowledge is built.

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In other words, the basic concept of reality for Rastafari is a state of existence in which one ‘is’ what one ‘knows’ and ‘does.’ Based on this premise, it can be further argued that the particular idea of knowledge and morality is what justifies the Rastas smoking of ganja (marijuana), which is a violation of their country’s laws in the context of the Caribbean. As far as this theory goes, the assumption that “I and I,” which is the total conception of Rastafari, is capable of knowing good from bad, wrong from right, then positive law ought not have jurisdiction in matters concerning or which conflict with Rastafari’s livity. In addition, the livity also makes room for ethical dilemmas to say, wherever there are conflicts with physical and spiritual values, then one’s indwelling conscience will guide them.

In total there are twelve different subgroups, called mansions or houses, within the broader group of Rastafari. Mansions can be understood in relation to denominations, where each mansion has a slightly different view about the livity or what the Rastafari way of life ought to be. Furthermore, there are also cases of unaligned and the self-made Rastas who are still recognised (even by those members of mansions) and treated as a Rastas. Unaligned Rastas could arguably be the largest set of Rastas. The case of having unaligned Rastas is in keeping with the individualistic ideology stemming, from the belief that every individual is capable of charting their own destiny and that every individual is entitled to their personal livity. And as argued previously, Rastafari’s understanding and definition of self has direct bearing on Rastafari epistemology; this in turn has major influence on the livity or Rasta morality and by extension, affects their interactions among themselves and with others.

**Rastafari’s I and I versus the Monad**
It is a personal belief, for the Rastafari, that the question “Who am I?” is one of the most important and significant questions in the history of thought. When considered carefully, this question appears to be a fundamental metaphysical questions. The word “who” is here understood as an interrogation of the nature of an intelligent being. Within the same context, “am” represents the idea that something exists, and “I” is the subject in question. If Ockham’s razor was used to remove “who,” “I am?” would essentially be probing into the same subject matter. Therefore, if the question “I am?” is to be interpreted, it would represent intelligence questioning its own existence. However, I’s (my) existence is a priori justified as it is self-evident, at least to myself. Whether “I” exist is not the primary concern; it is the absolute nature of “I” that needs to be understood. What am I?

Philosophy throughout the millennia has been constant in at least one thing – dichotomising. Dichotomy, as a feature of philosophy, could be a result of 1), truth being paradoxical,⁴¹ where each version represents the perspective as seen from either side of the pole; or 2), the dichotomy is purely psychological and arises from the enigmatic distinction between mind and body. That very statement stands as an example of the aforementioned dichotomy.

Leibniz in the “Monadology” presents an argument which speaks to the elusive distinction between mind and body, since everything is thought to be a composite of one simple substance. Leibniz describes this simple substance, the monad, as having no parts and as constituting composite.⁴² Leibniz further claims that every living body represents a monad or

soul\textsuperscript{43} so that every human being is essentially a monad and can be said to behave in the way that a monad would behave. He also states that even though all things are fundamentally related, the internal quality of the substance is such that no two can ever be alike. The monad operates on an internal principle of change and cannot be influenced by anything outside itself and therefore presents a theory of “multiplicity in the unity or that which is simple.”\textsuperscript{44} The presence of unity within diversity is possible only because of pre-established harmony. This paints a picture similar to that spoken of by Rastafari – unity in diversity.

How, if at all, can Rastafari’s philosophy be compared to the Leibniz’s theory of the Monad? There is nothing which directly links Leibniz’s theory with Rastafari; however it might not be too farfetched to say that a connection between the two can be made. One of the most interesting philosophical features of Rastafari is how self or personal identity is conceptualised and represented by the term “I and I”. Rasafari’s idea about “I and I”, as already stated, represents a conceptualised awareness of the combined qualities of the higher I and lower corporeal I in the human being. The human being is further connected to everything by means of the higher or universal I within him or herself. The theory however still falls short of explaining what the “I” is. If Rastafari’s theory of “I and I” is linked to Leibniz’s theory of the Monad, an explanation can be given of what constitutes I; thus, Leibniz’s Monadology would act as a predicating theory for Rastafari’s “I and I”. The combination would further serve to humanise or demonstrate the consequences of Leibniz’s argument of oneness; as Leibniz’s theory would also help Rastafari to define “I.”

\textbf{Conclusion}

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 267.
The principles of Rastafari have been presented as an example of a unique philosophy that is Caribbean Philosophy. The existential, epistemological and moral arguments found in Rastafari are rooted in the transcendentalist definition of self. The self or “I and I,” having both an individual and a universal aspect, gives tremendous freedom to the group and individuals within and outside the group, to chart their own path to attaining the good life. This, above all else, is an example of the means by which oppressed or colonised people in the Americas have used transcendentalist ideas and reasoning as a means of escaping their state of captivity. This in itself is a value and is valuable to Caribbean existence.

The fact that the utility of philosophy is not seen in the Caribbean speaks to the perspective from which the subject is being viewed. That is, philosophy is viewed as something that is not personally ours, but as a set of doctrines brought here by others. This perception, of philosophy cannot be changed by any form of external impressing upon persons that philosophy is indeed useful. Since there is unity in the multiplicity of individuals, it necessarily means, as Leibniz suggests, that any change caused in another is only ideal. The nature of the change rests in the notion of oneness or the interconnectedness of all through essence or substance, and so, any change in a particular will ultimately result in change in the whole.⁴⁵ Therefore, whatever changes that will occur in the minds of others about the value of philosophy can occur only from inward changes.; that is, persons within the sphere of philosophy will have to first accept, then agree that Caribbean Philosophy is, indeed, valuable and useful.

Like Leibniz’s theory, Rastafari’s philosophy reflects the monist view that there is just one substance. For this reason there is made no clear and distinct separation of mind and body.

This basic understanding of existence is the foundation upon which Rastafari’s identity is built and from which its epistemological and moral reasoning draws justification. It is seen where the type of understanding or reasoning behind the construct of identity influences one’s actions and interactions with the world, as in the case of Rastafari’s ideology. If philosophy can be viewed and accepted as that basic understanding or reasoned thought about the nature of the world, the nature of existence and how “I” fits into that understanding, then it can be said unequivocally, that there is Caribbean philosophy.
Bibliography


