

African Philosophical Approach to the Problems of Western Philosophy.

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Abstract

The history of Western philosophy reveals that philosophy began with wonderment and curiosity by man towards responding to the complexities in nature. One of the major tasks of Philosophy is to make an attempt to solve problems within the social milieu. There are some peculiar problems that have stirred the nest of the western philosophical discourse viz: The problem of being, Essence and Existence, Change and Permanence, Substance and Accident, Appearance and Reality as well as the relationship between mind (immaterial) and body (material) to mention but a few. These philosophical issues have exerted so much intellectual prowess from philosophers ranging from the ancient to the contemporary age, however these problems do not appear to be delt with. It is on this basis that this paper seeks to discuss some of the problems and possible solutions to them via the tools of African thought. This paper adopts the analytic and expository method in its findings in other to keep bare the teething issues and its attendant solution using the African approach. The paper concludes that some of those issues that appear unresolved in Western philosophy can be critically handled in African philosophy. For instance, the Problem of Being has been simplified via the categories of hierarchies of being in Annang metaphysics as well as the problem of mind and body using Asouzu's complementary ontology.

Key words: Problems, Ontology, African philosophy, Complementary, Hierarchies.

Introduction

Taking a look at the development of Philosophy from the ancient Greek, it is realized that one of the catalysts of Philosophical development was the perplexities that shrouded the ancient Greek society. This held sway to the changing phenomena and seeming stability experienced in the cosmos; *Ab initio* change was attributed to the activities of the gods as presented by Hommer and Hesiod. The philosophic age marked the beginning of human reasoning seeking explanations to events in the physical world (Obioha 33). Those Myths according to Udo, (Myth 2016) became the first ratiocination to scientific knowledge. In Western philosophy, there are various problems that are peculiar to philosophical enquiry and some of these problems include but not limited to problem of Being(or existence), Time and space, causality, freedom and determinism, mind and body, appearance and reality etc (Udo Problems of Philosophy 50). These problems lie at the very foundation of Philosophy. They are the fulcrum upon which the edifice of Philosophy rest. These problems have helped to expand the philosophical coast of reasoning which in turn have helped to advance the disciplinary matrixes within allowable space and time. African philosophy as a unique and distinctive approach to philosophical discourse uses the rational tools shaped within the confines of African world view to address most of the problems faced by the western thinkers. Though this approach is peculiar to Africans, to a large extent it has proffered a new solution to the striking problem in western thought. This paper therefore, discusses some of those problems from an African philosophical perspective.

The Problem of being in Western Philosophy

In Western philosophy, one of the age long problems that has stirred the philosophical nest is the problem of being. Heidegger

pointed out in *Being and Time*, that in the history of Western philosophy, Being as the most topical issue of metaphysics had for long remained controversial (Umotong and Hussein 231). Heidegger felt that this all important question about Being should be refreshed. In view of this, he posed the question:

Do we in our time have an answer to the question of what we really mean by the word 'being'? Not at all. So it is fitting that we should raise anew the question of the meaning of being.. Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of the meaning of being and to do so concretely (1)

Though Heidegger did not succeed in capturing the meaning of Being in **Being and Time** and largely because the work remained unfinished. He rather succeeded in defining human being instead of Being. But in "The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics", Heidegger refers to Being as the light that gives sight to metaphysics or the light from which Metaphysics derives its sight". The truth of Being may thus be called the ground in which metaphysics, as the root of the tree of philosophy, is kept and from which it is nourished (Hartman 433).

The Being that Heidegger speaks of is not any particular being, it is not this or that being. Unlike Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, by Being, Heidegger does not refer to God who incidentally is regarded as the being of beings. Heidegger is rather talking of a most primordial ground that sustains all other grounds, including God.

Recall that Heidegger criticized Descartes for equating metaphysics with the roots of the tree, for referring to metaphysics as the science of the roots, the fall out of such criticism is to locate the ground from metaphysics takes its roots and also garners nourishment. The location of this ground from which metaphysics and every other thing derives source and garners nourishment is regarded by Heidegger to be the "overcoming of metaphysics" or in a more technical sense as Fundamental Ontology.

For Parmenides, being is whatever "is", that is to say, anything in existence is a being. To him, that which "is", that is qualified to be called being, must be unchanging and eternal. This Parmenidean notion of being therefore implies that the physical objects given to our senses are not qualified to be being because they are in a state of flux. If this is the case, then we must look for something that "is" (exist) which will be eternal and unchanging. In other words, being is the real thing behind every existing entity such that despite all the phases a thing may pass through in shape, size and probably form, one still recognises it as the stuff of its original nature. For instance, an infant at zero age grows to adolescence and to a full adult, that child who was about forty centimeters tall and about two kilograms in weight will be transformed to about one and a half meters tall and seventy kilograms in weight with a lot of structural changes in these phases, yet, we still recognize him as Mr. X. This then means that what made Mr. X of age zero, the same Mr. X at age nineteen is his Being because being does not change; that is why Mr X is still being recognized despite all the noticeable changes in him. Therefore, being here does not mean (in Parmenidean conception) the physical features manifesting in him.

There is a disagreement among philosophers as to what Being is. To Plato, being is that perfect structure or model existing in the world of forms and it is unchanging and eternal. On the other hand, Aristotle believed that being is one and eternal. The only thing that is eternal, one and unchanging is God, therefore being is God. To Aristotle, Metaphysics is the study of Being as Being or pure Being. The dichotomy in the identification of being was further worsened by the scholastic distinction between necessary and contingent Beings.

A necessary being is anything in existence that does not depend on other things to exist; it is self-sufficient and must necessarily exist irrespective of other factors or variables. On the other hand, a contingent being is that whose existence depends on others; contingent beings exist as finite entities, they undergo changes. From

the distinction, it can be concluded that only God can qualify as a necessary being: He exists in infinity necessarily without recourse to support by other entities; whereas other things exist, in as much as there are humans to recognize their existence. The contingent beings' existence is conditional, for example, when Descartes says. I think therefore I exist", this implies that without thought, he would not have existed. (Umotong *Metaphysics* 4).

On the whole, the problem of being has persisted through the ages till date. In other to attempt a more comprehensive position we will take the African approach to the problem of Being.

African Approach to the Problem of being

Seeing the difficulties faced by the western scholars in defining the nature of Being, Umotong, posits being in African context is viewed as the sum of whatever is in as much as it is comprehended (*Exploration of Metaphysics* 149). Umotong notes here that the unique method of African philosophy offers a peculiar approach to what is in variance with the Western culture in the sense that whatever philosophical posit is made in African concept especially in antiquity, has communal connotations unlike the Western Posit which is based on individualism. In this sense, world views are basically communal and each has been seen from the perspective of culture. Umotong presented Annang culture of the South South Nigeria as a case study of what being is from an African perspective.

Categories of Being

The Annang Metaphysics recognizes that Being in whatever form is arranged in categories or placed in hierarchical order. Everything that "is" exist in hierarchical form. Umotong maintains that the universe is in hierarchy ; the earth, human and other form of live exist; the heavens or sky where spirit exist and the beyond heavens or other non tangible being exist below human and they exist below the earth. Below the earth, humans are in charge where as beneath the heavens the spirit are and above the spirit is the

supreme God who rules over the affairs of both beast, animate, inanimate entities (Umotong *Exploration of Metaphysics* 150).

Even the inanimate existing objects are not the same, some are bigger in size than others while others may be small but placed on a higher value than others. Umotong added that the hierarchical presentation gives being its proper placement and value in scheme of understanding and operational formalities. Umotong categorize being as follows:

- 1) Awasi Ibom - The Everlasting and Almighty God
- 2) Mme Awasi - Deities (other gods) fertility, war, thunder
- 3) Ekpo - Spirits - Ekponkaowo - Spirits of Adultery, Ekpo
Esit Isong (Ancestral ghost Spirits)
Ekpo Afai - destructive spirits
- 4) Owo- Man (Humans)
- 5) Mkpo- Entities or Matter (Plants, Animals and inanimate objects)

Awasilbom - Everlasting God

This, according to Umotong, is the Supreme Being, it is eternal, indestructible and changeless, from it all other beings derives their existence. The word *Awasi* is a derivative from the word *Abai* and *Nsinsi*. *Abai* means Pillar, support, Strength and power. *Nsinsi* means everlasting, endless. *AbaiNsinsi* means everlasting pillar, strong and eternal pillar. It is synonymous with support and a life line in every architectural work and from here it is believed that the grand design of the universe is supported by this everlasting pillar, support that is endless and eternal. On the other hand *Ibom*, means vast, broad, extended. Therefore the direct interpretation of the ultimate being in Annang is *Awasi Ibom*.

Awasilbom is translated to mean or refer to an endless pillar or source of strength and life that know no bound and is eternal therefore to the Annang being at its peak is eternal endless and infinite from it, other beings derive their strength and being. This being is referred to in other cultures and languages as; God- English. Chineke or Chukwu- Igbo, Allah - Hausa / Fulani, Dieu-French, Gott-German, Dio-Italian, Deius - Portuguese, Dios - Spanish. These are all

mere names, representing the ultimate and the almighty, being the source of other beings. In Annang (African) metaphysics. Awasilbom is the final and ultimate being, it is formless, it generates, creates and supports other beings. Other beings finds their expression in the Awasilbom. It is the source, the ultimate focus, end point and reference to other beings. At the peak of being is this Awasilbom, it is spiritual only comprehended through its representations and diverse manifestations, therefore African metaphysics recognize that in existence there must be an ultimate being in as much as it does not negate the other beings.

The next on the cadre of Being as put forward by Umotong is *Mme Awasi*- DEITIES (other gods)Below the almighty and everlasting being is the deities:*Mme Awasi*(other gods), these are beings in charge of specific responsibilities such as; *AwasiEnyong*, *Awasilong*, *Awasiukot*, *AwasiUtin*, *AwasiOfiong*; (gods of; heavens, earth, moon, sun, forest, fertility, war, harvest, relationships, thunder, rains) etc. these are gods through which activities in their area of operations (Jurisdiction) are consulted which ultimately connects with the Everlasting being. They operate as spiritual entities but through symbols and images. In some African cultures these gods or deities are represented by not merely symbols but also by some animals like elephant, tortoise, python etc. in such cultures these objects, entities, symbols and animals are referenced and revered, they form part of the cultural heritage that must not be tampered with.

Ekpo - THE SPIRITS;

In Annang society, Ekpo are spirits, they are lower in hierarchy to the deities gods, Ekpo or spirits operates both in the spiritual form and in the physical form. The physical form is a replica of the spiritual form where they are used in human form with masquerade of various shades and forms and sizes with divergent duties to enforce laws and order in the society, these too are revered because they are seen as taking instructions from the gods. In any case of resistance it will

ignite the wrath of the gods on the people possibly the entire society or community therefore they are obeyed to the letter.

Owo-MAN (Human)

This is next to the lowest level or hierarchy of being or existence that is identified by the Annang metaphysics of reality. Owo is human in whatever form; male, female, young or old. Owo as an existence is superior to all other things in nature but lower than the gods. Within this category man as the male gender is superior to the woman, followed by the child in that order before the infant child (*Owo Human, Oworen - Male , Owoanwan- female, Child - Etok eyen, Infant - Nsek eyen*). Here Owo has some level of authority in the hierarchy.

MKPO - Entities (Matter; Trees, Animals; Everything that is Phenomenal and Sensual)

This is the hierarchy of being lower than man. It is the least or the beginning of reality in Annang metaphysics. Though these entities are diverse they are sensual and can be comprehended through the senses, within them there are also hierarchy representing each of the classes of its members. For instance; among the classes of trees there are hierarchy of trees in their sizes and values beside their developmental stages of growth (from seed level or nursery to maturity of fruiting and subsequently death) which in itself represents another hierarchy.

Reality in Annang metaphysics takes hierarchical form. Any existence that cannot manifest in hierarchy is not real (Umotong *exploration of metaphysics* 155). Hierarchical manifestation of reality is endless as everything that exist, exist in various degrees of gradation.

Conceiving reality in this measure provides a better understanding of the nature of being other than the Western holistic conception of being. By segmenting being into various shades of

existence it therefore show that entities could be understood if properly placed on the right perspective.

Another problem to be considered on the scale of the Western philosophical issue is the relationship between the material and immaterial substance which is popularly known as mind body problem.

African Understanding of Mind- body problem in Western Philosophy

Within the Western thought, one of the oldest problems is the Mind- body problem. Moses Udo posited that man is known to be a composite being of body and mind. According to him. Some also claim it is tripartite (52). There has been serious problem as long as western philosophy is concerned and the problem lies on how the two separate entities interact. Descartes is the key proponent of the school of thought known as interactionism. According to Descartes, the mind (immaterial) and the body (material) has their interaction at the pineal gland located at the left side of the brain. Beside, the pineal gland is sandwiched between the cerebrum and cerebellum halves of the brain.(Essien and Chidiozie 250).

Geulinex and Nicholas Malebranche Descartes followers disagreed with Descartes. These two argued that mind and body do not interact; rather , God is the link between them. They called this idea occasionalism.

After the theory of the human mind and body relationship, there has been series of theories such as pre- established harmony which is identified with Leibniz, Parallelism or double aspect theory, identified with Spinoza. We also have identity theory or *epiphenomenalism* identified with Armstrong and Smart. There are many other theories which are reactions towards the problem generated by the mind-body interactionism. The failure of these Western reactionary theories towards solving the mind-body problem leads us to the adoption of African approach to the problem.

Asouzu in his book *Ibuanyidanda New Complementary Ontology. Beyond World immanentism, Ethnocentric Reduction and Imposition*, maintains that the conceptualization of being is an important starting point of every philosophy that is worth the name. As of Being and Missing links says all matters of ontology begin with providing the enabling horizon within which the idea of being can be creditably articulated (10).

For the new complementary ontology, to be, is the capacity to be in mutual complementary relationship with all things that exist. The idea of being is captured as the moment of mutual intrinsic complementary relationship in service of all existent realities. It is an attempt to transcend the idea of trying to bifurcate being into being and non being or seeing being as indefinable. Being becomes a continuous conceptualization of what momentarily is and all other things that may not be immediately seen but which serve as a missing link for all things that exist. For Asouzu, non-being will mean to be alone and to be, is to be in complementary relationship with others (*ka somu adina*) – Hence, leads to the position that anything that exists serves a missing link of reality (10-11).

Going by Asouzu's complementary ontology, we realized the issue of mind body would not be much of a problem because the two substances though material and immaterial are originally meant to complement each other. The mind (spiritual) is meant to complement the body (physical). Therefore, it will be out of place exerting so much energy trying to identify their gradation. Rather if we conceive the two as working together to produce harmony for the two; the problem will quietly vanish away.

The problem of Epistemic Justification

Another issue in Western philosophy is the JTB problem. The contemporary understanding of knowledge as Justified True Belief as that which guarantees knowledge has continued to spark so much arguments as for the adequacy of JTB to provide the basic and reliable form of knowledge. Notable of the problem is what is known

as **Gettier's problem** which points out that Justified True Belief may be a necessary condition for knowledge but not a sufficient condition. It is on this premise that we present the ontological conception of knowledge in African perspective.

Chris Ijiomah in his work, **Humanizing Epistemology (1996)** states that knowledge has a moral dimension. According to Ijiomah, knowledge has a moral dimension in so far as it has significance for human realization or actualization. This dimension concerns itself with the qualitative rather than quantitative nature of knowledge (23).

In a Pragmatic sense, the quest for knowledge begins at the cradle of problems. Without this nativity there will be nothing like knowledge. In other words, every knowledge has an end, the solution of the problem that generated it. It is this problem solving that justifies it. This problem must however be seen from a communal point of view. One may argue that some problems are personal and could be the selfish interest of an individual. But we know that an individual becomes meaningful only in an organic, complementary social realm. No man is *ego solus*. Therefore, whatever experience a man has as an individual, invariably affects his social order. From this perspective, knowledge per excellence is established when the end of knowledge serves a social purpose, Put in a positive formular, it becomes that "the degree of any knowledge is directly proportional to its social services."(Ijeoma 160). He further posits that If the purpose of any 'knowledge' is thinned down to an individualistic or parochial scheme, it loses its effectiveness and educativeness and it becomes **unknowledge**. The point here is not that knowledge has no function for an individual, It does have, only in-so-far as the individual serves as a means to social welfare. Ijiomah noted here that this is where Africans have parted ways with Western contemporary epistemologists.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be said that there are lots of issues that pose a problem to the Western philosopher but does not to the

African philosopher. The paper addressed the issue of Being through the hierarchical categories of being in Annang metaphysics to showcase the fact that this issue does not pose any problem to an African unlike his Western counterpart. We see clearly that the issue of Being can be addressed, without seeing it as a problem, by placing entities in their proper perspectives thereby enhancing understanding of the nature of an existent entity and its particularities. The paper also addressed the issue of mind -body interactionism which has been one of the oldest problems in Western philosophy. This problem is addressed using Innocent Asouzu's Complementary ontology, which posits that every existing thing is the missing link of reality. Asouzu maintains that things were meant to complement each other. Whereas the Western philosophy looks at the problem of mind body relationship from the perspective of hierarchies or supremacy, on the other hand, from an African perspective, it is seen as complementing each other. The paper also addressed the issue of epistemic justification. Going by African approach we noticed that knowledge as what the Western tradition conceives it to be is not what it ought to be. From an African perspective, knowledge as conceived and understood has moral and pragmatic import and plays a social function.

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