

Freedom and Determinism in African Ontology

Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony (OSA)
Department of Philosophy, Augustinian Institute, Makurdi

Abstract

Scholars from different fields of enquiry have tried to proffer answers to the question: Is man the captain of his fate to any degree, that is, is man free? This piece addresses this question from the African perspective. In proffering an answer to this question from the African perspective, it is discussed from three dimensions: the community and individual freedom, destiny and freedom, and the nature of the universe and freedom. This enquiry is taken from this dimension because the emphasis on community, the concept of destiny and the interactive nature of the universe have been accused of denying freedom to the African. Employing the expository and critical method of enquiry, this study arrived at the understanding that both elements co-exist in such a way that they do not contradict themselves, but work together as counterparts towards the making of a human person.

Keywords: Freedom, determinism, ontology, African, Community, Destiny, Universe.

Introduction

Kanu (2013) observes that philosophy has been concerned with the task of providing answers to fundamental questions, to which however, no conclusive answers are given. In relation to the problem of freedom and necessity, a cursory glance at the historical development of philosophy reveals a retinue of perspectives. From the ethical department, Stumpf (1966) avers that Socrates and Plato argue that it is ignorance that makes people do evil, insinuating elements of determinism in human actions. Even though Thomas Aquinas argues for human freedom, Omoregbe (1991) observes that he still taught that just as the intellect is made for the truth, so is the will made for the good and is not free to reject it. This perspective suggests that people's actions are determined by what they see to be good?

Some protestant reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin (cited in Omoregbe, 1991), taught that God had predestined some people for salvation, as the elect or chosen ones. He gives them grace to live good lives. If grace is given only to a few to live the good life, could it not be understood that some would be excused for their sinfulness since they have no grace given them? From the materialist point of view, Russell (1975) argues that man is part of physical nature and is determined by the physical laws of nature. Some thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and Sigmund Freud hold that man is not free because his actions are determined by psychological factors.

Amidst all these attempts at handling the problem of freedom and necessity, the question still lingers at the horizon of human enquiry, if man is the captain of his fate to any degree. How can this enquiry be answered from the African perspective? In proffering an answer to this question from the African perspective, it would be

discussed from three dimensions: the community and individual freedom, destiny and freedom, and the nature of the universe and freedom. This enquiry is broken into these dimensions because the emphasis on community, the concept of destiny and the interactive nature of the universe have been accused of denying the African his freedom.

a. Community and Individual Freedom

Mbiti (1970) had classically proverbialized the community determining role of the individual when he wrote, “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am” (p. 108). This sense of kinship is priced even above money. Achebe (1969) wrote, “He that has a brother must hold him to his heart, for a kinsman cannot be bought in the market, neither is a brother bought with money” (p. 123). Its value is stressed even in Igbo-African proverbs: *To live closer to the palm tree gives the eating of its nuts a special flavour*. The community therefore, gives the individual his existence and education. That existence is not only meaningful, but also possible only in a community. Tempels (1952) expressed this thought when he wrote,

Bantu psychology cannot conceive of man as an individual, as a force existing by itself and apart from its ontological relationships with other living beings and from it connects with animals or inanimate forces around it. The Bantu cannot be a lone being. No; he feels and knows himself to be a vital force, at this very time to be in intimate and personal relationship with other forces acting above him and below him in the hierarchy of forces. He knows himself to be a vital force, even now influencing some forces and being influenced by others. The human being, apart from the ontological hierarchy and the interaction of forces, has no existence in the conceptions of the Bantu (p. 49-50).

It was from this background that Iroegbu (1995) developed his concept of belongingness. He argues that the African-Igbo world into which a child is born crying *abatala m ya* (I have come into it) is made up of seven characteristics: common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny. Without any choice of its own, with neither interrogations nor dialogue, the child is made to be an Igbo in its prolixities. Even as the baby sleeps in its cradle, it already has its being, performance and *akaraka* (destiny) partly enshrined and construed in the Igbo world. The communal individuality of the Igbo is expressed in proverbs such as, *Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya* (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). This expresses the indisputable and inevitable presence of, not just the family, but the community to which the individual belongs.

The Igbos, like the Akans of Ghana believe that “when a man descends from heaven, he descends into a community”. The community rejoices and welcomes his arrival, finds out whose reincarnation he is, gives the person a name and interprets that arrival within the circumstance of the birth. As the child grows, he becomes aware of his dependence on his kin group and community. When the time comes for him to get married, the community determines where he marries from; even when the lady is

married, she is married by the entire community. With his birth, man also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group (Uchendu, 1965). With all these involvements of the community in the life of the child, from the time when he is born to the time when he dies, the question is asked if the child is really free. A cursory glance reveals that the idea of community in the African world does not kill or take the place of the individual and individual freedom. Although the community gives him a name, the name spells his individuality; he makes his own contribution to the kin as an individual. Although his community name defines him, his successes and failure based on the use of his freedom hugely defines him. While the community has rules and regulations, the individual has a right to keep them or not to. Thus, Kanu (2012) maintains that while the community has great influence over a person, it does not take away the freedom of individuals. He believes that African ontology strikes a balance between the individual and the community.

b. The Nature of the Universe and Freedom

Nnamdi (2009) maintains that there are basically three worlds in the African universe. The first is the earth which is the visible world, *Uwa*, in which human beings, deities and other material things reside. The second is the land of the spirits, *Ani muo*, which is the invisible world. The ancestors as well as other spiritual beings inhabit the invisible world and from there they influence the activities of human beings and other things in the world. There is a third world called *Igwe*, the sky. It is quite up and only *Chukwu* lives there. And from there he cares for and directs things in *Uwa and Ani muo*. These three worlds for the African are interconnected. It is believed that the finger of God is manifested in the most rudimentary element of nature. Idowu (1962) avers God is the absolute controller of the universe. The Igbo would refer to him as *Osebuluwa* (the sustainer of the universe). He did not just create the world but actively sustains it. It is in this regard that Edeh (2007) enquires,

If God has a knowing plan for all creatures and directs them to this end, does it mean that he has already determined his creatures to follow his plan? If so, how could any creature be said to be free in their actions? In other words, if God's activity embraces the height, depth and breadth of created reality, is there any place for a finite activity which belongs to the being from which it comes? Or is it God rather than man, in the case of human activity, who acts as the centre of man's being? (p. 163).

As God exerts his power on all beings, there are divinities that also exert power on the universe. In the spiritual world, there are benevolent and malevolent spirits. They also determine failure and success in the world. Sometimes they possess people and act through them. With God, the deities and spirits exerting their power on man and his universe, is man really free. The African human person is free. For instance, when God or the divinities punish or reward a man for performing an action, they are reacting to an action that was performed freely and conscientiously, and that is why there is reward and punishment. The presence of God, the divinities and spirits in the world of human beings does not take away the freedom of men. If God has a power that is really unlimited, as the African believes, this unlimited power does not exclude

the possibility of God creating human beings who can cause free activities. According to Edeh (2007), the divine causality and human freedom are not contradictory, but rather meet in a paradox of cause and effect.

c. Destiny and Freedom

Gyekye (1987) defines destiny as “that which determines the uniqueness and individuality of a person. Thus it is your destiny ... that makes you you, and my destiny that makes me me” (p. 107). As regards how human beings have come to the knowledge of what we refer to as destiny, he avers that human life itself provides the setting for thought on destiny. Thus, he writes,

Patterns of individual lives, habitual or persistent traits of persons, fortunes and misfortunes, success and failures, the traumas and enigmas of life; the ways in which propensities, inclinations, capacities and talents show themselves in individuals; the observed uniqueness of the individual – all these suggests to the Akan that there is and must be some basis or reason for this individuality. That basis is destiny. For the Akan, the striking features of these phenomena do much to clinch the idea about destiny. These features include the repetition and persistence of particular actions of the individual, the apparent unalterability and inexplicability of elements in one’s character, the inexplicability of events in the life of an individual, the apparent irremediability of particular features in the life of an individual, the constancy of one’s good fortunes, and so on. It is the existence of such features of their experiences that, in the view of Akan thinkers, suggests the reality of a concept of destiny. (pp. 106-107).

Although human experience provides the setting for the belief in human destiny, general, the belief in destiny is based on the belief that human beings were created by God. Thus, in the African world, it is believed that the destiny of people as regards success and failure has been apportioned to them by God before birth. The Yoruba’s have a divinity called *Ifa* or *Orunmila*. They believe that after God had made the human soul and sealed its destiny, *Orunmila* was present and knows its secrets, that is why he is always consulted before undertaking an action. This implies that the life course of human beings have been charted and fixed by God. Thus when something happens in a person’s life, especially among the Igbos, Gregory (2009) observes that it is traced to his *Akala aka*: his destined lot. When a person dies among the Hausa speaking people, you would hear those who have come to condole with the bereaved say: *Haka Allah ya kadara* (that is how God ordained it) or *haka Allah ya nufa* (that is how God intended it). This implies that God intended it to happen the way it has happened.

The Igbos belief in what is called the *Chi*, which each human being derives from the great *Chukwu*, who is the creator of all. This explains why the Igbo would say: *Chukwu-nwe-ike* (all power belongs to God); *ife oma nine di Chukwu na aka* (all good things are in the hand of God); *madu nwaa oke ya, ndiozo dili Chukwu* (when a man has done his best, the rest is left to God). At the point of creation, Chukwu gives the human person the *Chi*, which is a part of his divine nature. From this perspective, Ilogu (1974) argues that whatever abilities, good or bad fortune, success, failure,

weakness etc., possessed by a person is attributed to the person's Chi. Every individual in a family has his or her own Chi, explaining why there are differences among people. A lucky person is said to be *onye chi oma* and an unlucky person is said to be *onye chi ojoo* (Kanu, 2012). With this understanding, Gregory (2009) avers that the African has sold his freedom to act to supernatural forces. If man is not free, it means that he should not be blamed for any failure or mishap in the course of his life journey. Equally, guilt to crimes committed should also not be punished as man wouldn't be responsible for his actions.

While we may accept the idea of destiny in the life of the African, his life is not completely predetermined. A man can better the conditions of his life through prayers and sacrifices. In this case, a person is not changing his or her destiny but trying to do something about his human condition. In fact even when a man has a good destiny and he does not work hard, there is no guarantee of good fortune coming his way. The Igbo would say: *onye kwe chi ya ekwe*: if one says yes, his personal god will say yes too. The African would also say that if the hand is not soiled, it never brings about a mouth smeared with oil. From these sayings, it means that an individual's freedom is guaranteed, since a person's success or failure depends on the degree of the person's cooperation with nature's endowment. It is not just enough to offer sacrifices and prayers and to work hard, Abanuka (2004) argues that a person also has to make proper use of his God-given theoretical and practical knowledge *ako na uche*. The angle from which man is adequately morally responsible was spelt by Ginsberg (1957) who wrote,

The freedom that is required as a minimum condition of moral accountability is the ability to make an impartial estimate of the relative worth of the alternatives open to me and of acting accordingly. If I am not capable of any measure of impartiality, If I am unable to know what I am doing, or whether what I am doing is right or wrong; or again if having such knowledge I have not the emotional or cognitive energy to act in accordance with it, then I am neither free nor responsible. (pp. 81-82).

Since the African has the minimum condition of moral accountability and the ability to make an impartial estimate of the relative worth of the alternatives open to him and to act accordingly, then he is free and responsible.

Gyekye (1987) writes further,

Determination therefore does not negate the effectiveness of human beings as causal and therefore moral agents. The spirit of a person is held to be developable: a weak power or capacity can be improved or strengthened, moral failures then, which are in fact spiritual defects, can be rectified. Therefore, neither, the Akan deterministic conception of the world nor Akan moral psychology is fatal to human free will and responsibility. (p. 121).

From the foregoing, human character is reformable. Thus, if a person does the wrong thing, he should be held responsible because he or she had the capacity to do the right thing.

Moreover, the concept of destiny used here is that of a general destiny. The idea of general destiny, according to Gykye (1987) “determines only the broad outlines of an individual’s mundane life, not the specific details. It follows that not every action a person performs or every event that occurs in one’s life comes within the ambit of his destiny” (p. 114). Another question that arises is to what extent can we know the generality of a person’s destiny? Well, I will answer that it can be known to the very extent that a person’s destiny can be known.

Conclusion

At the question of determinism and human freedom, the African is faced with two options, either to deny the existence of human freedom or to accept its existence and work towards solving the paradox therein. Having conducted this study, putting into consideration the interplay of the elements of community, destiny and the interactive nature of the African universe, this piece asserts that the African world is one in which there is both freedom and determinism; and the both co-exist in such a way that they do not contradict themselves, but work together as counterparts towards the making of a human person. For only the man who is free truly arrives at the land of his destiny. It is in this regard that Buber (1970) writes,

Destiny and freedom are solemnly promised to one another. Only the man who makes freedom real to himself meets destiny... destiny confronts him as the counterpart of his freedom. It is not his boundary, but his fulfilment; freedom and destiny are linked together in meaning. (p. 53).

Thus, in the Africa universe, freedom and destiny are linked together in meaning.

References

- Abanuka, B. (2004). *Philosophy and the Igbo world*. Onitsha: Spiritan Publications.
- Achebe, C. (1969). *No longer at ease*. Greenwich: Fawceth.
- Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou*. Trans. W. Kaufman. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons.
- Edeh, E. (2007). *Towards an Igbo metaphysics*. Chicago: Loyola University Press.
- Gregory E. A. (2009). *Igbo issues: Values, Chi, Akala aka, Ikenga, Magic, Agwu and manipulation of divinities*. Onitsha: Midfield.
- Ginsberg, M. (1957). *On the diversity of morals*. New York: Mcmillan.
- Hume, D. (1902). *An enquiry concerning human understanding*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Idowu, B. (1962). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief*. London: Longman.
- Ilogu, E. (1974). *Christianity and Igbo culture*. Onitsha: University Press.
- Iregbu, P. (1994). *Metaphysics: The kpim of philosophy*. Owerri: IUP.

- Kanu, I. A. (2012). Being Qua Belongingness: The provenance and implications of Pantaleon's concept of being. *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research*. 9. 3. 227-234.
- Kanu, I. A. (2012). Towards an Igbo Christology. In E. Ezenweke and I. A. Kanu (Eds.). *Issues in African traditional religion and philosophy* (pp. 75-98). Jos: Fab Anieh.
- Kanu, I. A. (2013). The compatibilism of freedom and necessity in David Hume. *The Leajon: An Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*. 4. 2. 16-23.
- Mbiti, J. (1970). *African religions and philosophy*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Nnamdi, O. (2009). *Three worlds in Igbo traditional religion*, Enugu: Delta Publications.
- Omoregbe, J. (1991). *A simplified history of ancient philosophy: Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers.
- Omoregbe, J. (1991). *Metaphysics without tears: A systematic and historical study*. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers.
- Russell, B. (1975). *History of western philosophy*. London: Unwin University Books.
- Shakespeare, W. (1852). *Twelfth night*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Stumpf, S. E. (1966). *Philosophy, history and problems*. London: McGraw-Hill Book.
- Tempels, P. (1952). *Bantu philosophy*. Trans. Colin King, Paris: Presence Africaine.
- Uchendu V. C. (1965). *The Igbos of south east Nigeria*. London: Rinehart and Winston.