

IGWEBUIKE AS AN IGBO-AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY OF HUMAN WELLBEING

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Abstract

The Igbo world has the understanding that we are all related- each aspect relates with the whole: the dynamics of reality are based on the relationships and experiences of interrelationships and interconnections. And this to a great extent determines the Igbo-African understanding of human wellbeing. The major distinction between the western and Igbo-African conception of wellbeing is shaped by this interrelationships of reality. At the anthropological level, this piece argued that it is not enough to think of human wellbeing within the context of an individual's state. An individual's wellbeing is understood within the parameters of his or her relationships with other metaphysical unities within the community of forces that make up the whole of reality. At the ontological level, wellness goes beyond a person's physical health to encompass his or her spiritual and physical relationships. At the ethical level, the researcher further observed that the character of the metaphysical unities that make up the human community determines the quality of wellbeing realizable. This research would study the Igbo concept of wellbeing. Igwebuiké philosophy would be employed for the interpretation of the Igbo concept of wellbeing. The wholistic approach would be patronized for the purpose of this inquiry.

Keywords: *Igwebuiké, Igbo-African, Philosophy, Human, Wellbeing, Hermeneutics*

Introduction

The question of human wellbeing has been an area of concern for scholars of various epochs, geographical backgrounds and schools of thought. These scholars over the years have preoccupied themselves with attending to questions that have arisen within the parameters of wellbeing. Questions such as: what is the nature of wellbeing in relation to the human and non-human subjects of wellbeing? What are the individual, group and collective subjects of wellbeing? What are the relations between one's wellbeing at a time, and one's wellbeing over time, including over one's lifetime? What is the place of culture and social

forms or practices in wellbeing? Are there variations in the conceptions of wellbeing? Does a people's philosophy affect their concept of wellbeing? Is there any relationship between wellbeing and the ontological order? Is there a relationship between wellbeing and morality? Is there any connection between human wellbeing and human relationships? These questions are critical to consider when we are considering the philosophy of wellbeing.

While this piece is principally concerned with an African perspective of human wellbeing, it would also engage a study of the different perspectives of human wellbeing that dominate the discourses on wellbeing in the western academic hemisphere. This study would, therefore, cover the hedonist, the objectivist, the subjectivist, desirist, welfarist and virtue conceptions of human wellbeing. The advantage of such a study is that it would better help the categorization of the *Igwebuiké* Igbo-African hermeneutic of human wellbeing. The concept *Igwebuiké* is very significant to this study. It is a compound of three Igbo words: *Igwe* is a noun which means number or multitude, usually a large number or population. The number or population in perspective are entities with ontological identities and significances, however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power* (Kanu 2016a). *Igwe*, *bu* and *Ike* put together, means 'number is strength' or 'number is power' (Kanu 2017a). However, beyond the literal sense, it means *otu obi* (one heart and one soul) – *cor unum et anima una*. It captures the relational engagement in the world, accomplished in solidarity and complementarity, and the powerful and insurmountable force therein (Kanu 2017b). The closest words to *Igwebuiké* in English are complementarity, solidarity and harmony. From the foregoing, An *Igwebuiké* philosophy of human wellbeing is an effort at understanding human wellbeing within the Igbo-African complementary framework.

Conceptions of Human Wellbeing

A cursory glance at the different conceptions of wellbeing reveals that they can be categorized according to the following perspectives:

1. Hedonism Concept

Hedonists hold that wellbeing is a matter of having pleasure and not having pain or displeasure. This perspective is drawn from the belief that human beings do things that would give them pleasure over and above pain. In ancient history, this concept is found in Plato's Dialogue, the *Protagoras* (Plato 1976, 351b–c) in

which he premised Socrates' final argument on the doctrine that the pleasant is the good; and also in the work of the Greek philosopher Epicurus who understands wellbeing as a life of pleasure and freedom from pain and distress. However, Epicurus does not advocate pursuing each and every pleasure or seeking instant gratification but to work out a sensible long-term policy or approach in order to maximize pleasure. Thus, the life of pleasure coincides with a life of virtue, which brings pleasure. Epicurus' basic doctrine is clear: a life of virtue is the life which generates the most amount of pleasure, and it is for this reason that we should be virtuous.

Bentham (1989) of the modern era holds that the human person is under two laws: the laws of pleasure and pain. Implication being that the more pleasantness one can pack into one's life, the better it will be, and the more painfulness one encounters, the worse it will be. The problem with this perspective is that there does not exist a single common strand of pleasantness running through all the different experiences people enjoy. Going deeper on this, Mill (1998) speaks of 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures, introducing the concept of 'quality' in the analysis of pleasure, and arguing that some pleasures, by their very nature, are more valuable than others. He cites the example of the pleasure of reading Shakespeare, which by its very nature, he argues is more valuable than any amount of basic animal pleasure.

2. Desire Theory

The Desire theorists hold that it is in fulfilling one's desires that a person finds greater wellbeing. Thus, people are better off to the extent that they are able to have their present desires fulfilled. While this theory presents difficulties, the comprehensive theory of desire provides a broader basis for the consideration of the fulfillment of one's desire as a source of wellbeing. It avers that what matters to a person's well-being is the overall level of desire-satisfaction in their life as a whole. The implication of this position is that the more a person is able to fulfill his desire, the more ranked his or her wellbeing Parfit (1984). This perspective also holds that pleasure and pain are inside people's heads and, therefore, very difficult to measure, especially when more than a person is involved. This relativises the concept of wellbeing.

3. Objectivist Concept

This conception argues that whatever makes a person happy or gives him or her joy should be enlisted as the sources of human wellbeing, whether it gives pleasure or not. Wellbeing is by it claims objective, external, and portraying universal notions of wellbeing, such as basic needs. Aristotle expressed this

perspective thus: 'We take what is self-sufficient to be that which on its own makes life worthy of choice and lacking in nothing. We think happiness to be such, and indeed the thing most of all worth choosing, not counted as just one thing among others' (p. 1197b). A modern objectivist perspective influenced by Aristotle is that of Hurka (1993). He argues that what makes things constituents of well-being is their perfecting human nature. Therefore, whatever perfect human nature would be included in the list of the sources of human wellbeing. This list is not only dependent on a person's personal testimony of the goodness of an item on the list, as certain things are good for people, even if those people will not enjoy them, and do not even want them. It is objective because it goes beyond personal likes and dislikes.

4. Subjectivist Concept

Although Diener (1984) coined the term 'subjective well-being', Fromm (1981) argues that they include those needs that are only subjectively felt and whose satisfaction leads to momentary pleasure, and which are rooted in human nature. Peters and Tesar (2019) aver that this position was advanced by thinkers and psychologists in the later part of the 20th century like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers who emphasized the uniqueness of human beings, potentials and psychological growth. Their ideas evolved into the study of what makes life experiences pleasant or unpleasant, and studies of feelings of pleasure and pain and relevant concerns, and notions of binaries such as interest and boredom, joy and sorrow, and satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

5. Welfare Theory

Focusing on morality, Raz (1986) in his 'humanistic principle' posits that 'the explanation and justification of the goodness or badness of anything derives ultimately from its contribution, actual or possible, to human life and its quality' (p. 194). Act-utilitarians would argue that any deviation from the maximization of wellbeing must be grounded on something distinct from wellbeing, such as equality or rights. But those defending equality may argue that egalitarians are concerned to give priority to those who are worse off, and that we do see here a link with concern for wellbeing. Likewise, those concerned with rights may note that we have rights to certain goods, such as freedom, or to the absence of 'bads', such as suffering. Questions about wellbeing were further explored in the work of Gough (2004) in relation to welfare and social policy. In his contention, welfare relates to the 'faring well', to happiness or prosperity in the sense of 'wealth'.

6. Virtue Perspective

This perspective holds that a person's wellbeing is in some sense constituted by their virtue, or the exercise of virtue. This perspective was adopted in subtly different ways by several ancient thinkers. Among them was Plato who gave room for the rationality of moral self-sacrifice in the *Republic* (519–20). Aristotle believes that he could defend the virtuous choice as always being in the interest of the individual. He avers that virtue both tends to advance the good of others, and our own good. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is taken up with portraits of the life of the virtuous and the vicious, which supply independent support for the claim that wellbeing is constituted by virtue.

***Igwebuike* Pluralist Philosophy of Wellbeing**

Igwebuike perspective of human wellbeing is a pluralist perspective. It is considered pluralist because of the various factors involved in its consideration of human wellbeing. At the anthropological level, wellbeing is attained within the context of relationship with others; at the ontological level, it is in relation to the ontological order which involves different forces of being that wellbeing is attained; at the moral level, it fundamentally involves character which is expressed in human relationships.

1. Ontological Perspective

Wellbeing from the *Igwebuike* perspective is about maintaining the balance of the ontological order. The African universe has the physical and the spiritual dimensions (Kanu 2013). At the spirit realm, God represents the Chief Being, and seats at the apex of power. In the physical world, human dominate, occupying the central position in the scheme of God's creation. The African cosmos is like an isosceles triangle with God (the Supreme Being) at the apex. The ancestors are at the base of the triangle, with the human being at the centre. The primacy of the human being in the African universe is due to the central place he or she occupies within the universe. The triangular imagery suggests that human beings form a "microcosm" on which converge the innumerable forces that inhabit the other arms of the universe.

The African worldview, therefore, consists of both spiritual and physical realms, which despite their separate existence interact. This division does not in any way negate interaction of the forces in these different spheres. In this interaction, the

human person communes with God, the divinities, the ancestors and vice versa. The African world is, thus, an interactive universe. From the *Igwebuike* perspective, the wellbeing of the human person lies in his or her ability to maintain the ontological order of the universe in which he or she lives. Once the order of his or her universe is disrupted, his or her wellbeing is automatically threatened.

2. *Igwebuike* Anthropological Perspective of Wellbeing

Human wellbeing within the *Igwebuike* perspective is not about the betterment or the wellbeing of an individual person. It is about the wellbeing of the entire community. If a person has a positive wellbeing and others don't have, such a person cannot claim to have wellbeing. This is because his or her wellbeing is dependent on the wellbeing of others. When a person is sick, then the whole community is sick.

Igwebuike understands life as a shared reality. And it is only within the context of complementarity that life makes meaning. Life is a life of *sharedness*; one in which another is part thereof; a relationship, though of separate and separated entities or individuals but with a joining of the same whole (Kanu 2017c). It is a relationship in which case the two or more coming together make each a complete whole; it is a diversity of being one with each other. Thus, to put the other away removes the balance of your being. Kanu (2018) avers that this presupposes a tailor-made-cloth, measured, cut and sewn to fit into the curves, contours, shape and size, peculiarities and particularities of a being- thus, every being has a missing part and is at the same time, a missing part.

It is in this regard that the Igbo would refer to the 'Other' as *Ibe*, which means 'a piece of' or 'a part of', as in *ibe anu* (a piece of meat) or *ibe ede* (a piece of cocoyam). The Igbo would, therefore, refer to the 'other person' as *ibe m* which means 'my piece' or *mmadu ibe m* (my fellow human being). This is the concept employed in reference to relationships and reciprocity: love one another (*hunu ibe unu n'anya*), help one another (*nyere nu ibe unu aka*), respect one another (*sopuru nu ibe unu*), etc. Since the 'other' refers to my own piece (which is a piece of our common humanity), it would mean that to love the other is to love oneself, to help the other is to help oneself and to respect the other is to respect oneself. Put the other way round, to hate the other is to hate oneself, to refuse help to the other is to refuse help to oneself and to disrespect the other is to disrespect oneself (Kanu 2017d&e).

3. Wellbeing and Character

The *Igwebuike* approach to wellbeing extend past the notion of how the human person feels and locates the idea of 'being happy' or 'happiness' within the context of his or her individuality. It links the person further to the ethics and practice of a good life which is realized within a community of persons. Thus, rather than focusing on the wellbeing of the individual, it addresses a way of being part of and within communities.

Igwebuike makes a significant connection between virtue and happiness. The link between virtue of character and happiness was one of the central preoccupations and theses in ancient ethics, as it is evident in Aristotle. Socrates also postulated that virtue is not only sufficient, but necessary for conceptualizing human wellbeing. Aristotle and Socrates have argued that all virtues, such as self-control, courage, justice, piety, wisdom as well as other qualities of mind and soul which are related, must be present if a human being aims to experience wellbeing.

Considering ethics from the *Igwebuike* perspective, a person is said to be ethical only in relation to his or her relationship with the other. This explains why the concept for ethics in African ontology refers to character- how a person relates. If someone behaves in such a way that he or she advances the being and happiness of the other, such a person is said to be ethical. Thus, it is not surprising that if a person shows love and understanding and shows compassion, he or she is regarded to be of good character. However, when there is a moral failure, it is seen as the absence of good character. Among the Akan of Ghana, when a person wants to say, 'You are unethical', he or she would rather say, 'You have no character' (*onni suban*). Among the Ewe, the word is *nonome mele* (he or she has no character); among the Yoruba, Shona and Igbo the words used for morality are *Iwa*, *hunhu* and *agwa* respectively, which means character. This makes character very central to African ethics, because character is at the heart of good or bad relationships (Kanu 2016b). And it is only where you find persons with good character that you can talk about human wellbeing.

Conclusion

Igwebuike as a key to the understanding of African traditional religion, philosophy and culture captures the Igbo-African world that understands reality as complementary and interrelated. It concatenates the dynamics of the African reality which is moved and sustained by a spirit of relationships and experiences

of interrelationships and interconnections. And this to a great extent determines the Igbo-African understanding of human wellbeing. The major distinction between the western and Igbo-African conception of wellbeing is shaped by this interrelationships of reality. At the anthropological level, it is not enough to think of human wellbeing only in terms of an individual's state. His or her wellbeing is understood within the context of his or her relationships with other metaphysical unities within the community of forces that make up the human community. At the ontological level, wellbeing goes beyond a person's physical health to encompass his or her spiritual and physical relationships. At the ethical level of the understanding of wellbeing from the *Igwebuiké* perspective, human wellbeing is determined to a great extent by the quality of the character of the human persons that make up a particular human community at a particular time. This is strongly connected to the virtue perspective of human wellbeing. The major contribution that *Igwebuiké* makes to the understanding of wellbeing is the introduction of relationships in the understanding and measurement of human wellbeing.

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