Igwebuike as a Hermeneutic of Personal Autonomy in African Ontology

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Abstract

Autonomy is derived from the Greek word "autos", which means self, and "nomos", which means rule, governance or law. Generally, it means the power or right of self-government. However, in relation to persons, it means freedom from interference by others and limitations that prevent meaningful choices. The autonomous individual acts freely in accordance with a self-chosen plan, analogous to the way an independent government manages its territories and establishes its policies. A person of diminished autonomy, by contrast is in some respect controlled by others or incapable of deliberating or acting on the basis of his or her desires and plans. One of the cases against the structure of African societies is that the African individual has a diminished autonomy. This perspective is based on the misinterpretation of the African universe which is characterized by common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny, the sense of community, etc. Contrary to this perspective, this work argues that the individual African has autonomy, and the argument is built on the Igbo-African concept of the self. While remaining within the scope of autonomy in African ontology, the hermeneutic and phenomenological methods of inquiry would be employed for this research.

Keywords: Hermeneutic, Autonomy, Freedom, ontology, African, Community, Destiny.

Introduction

The human person is a highly dynamic reality. Although Mondin (1998) observes that a certain dynamism is evident everywhere in the universe, the moon, the sky, animate realities, lower animals, etc., the human person's dynamism in the midst of these dynamisms is superlative and enormously superior. And one discovers this as soon as a person steps into the mysterious profoundness of the being of the human person. He is distinguished on various fronts: knowledge, self-consciousness and objectivity, language, work, culture, etc. And these are prerogatives of the human person, therefore, common to

human beings everywhere, no matter their race or color.

Another prerogative of the human person, a title of human excellence and nobility, which reveals the mysterious profoundness of his being, with which he distinguishes himself from animals and other creatures is freedom. This goes beyond the sensitive and instinctive inclinations of the human person and resides at the cognitive level, the intellectual level, where he commands an unlimited parameter for action. Related to this is the appetitive level, where the will resides and which gives the human person the space to choose and thus, be responsible for his or her actions. Notwithstanding the glaring autonomy of the human person, is has constituted a very serious issue in the development of African philosophy. Many scholars argue that the external spaces of social and cultural intricacies do not correspond to this prerogative of the human person. In the African worldview, the African is denied autonomy as a result of three factors: his relationships in the community, the African concept of destiny, and the interactive nature of the African universe. This work argues that in the midst of these factors in the African society, that the African has autonomy. This work connects his autonomy to his humanness, and to deny him of his autonomy would have diminishing consequences on his humanity. However, before entering into a discussion of this perpetual problem, it would be useful to agree first on the meaning of autonomy.

Understanding Human Autonomy

Autonomy is derived from the Greek word autos which means *self and nomos* which means *rule, governance or law*. Generally, it means the power or right of self-government, in relation to persons, it means freedom from interference by others and limitations that prevent meaningful choices. In medical law and ethics, Chima (2008) writes that it refers to "self-determination or freedom of choice" (p. 1). According to Beauchamp and Childress (1977):

> *The autonomous individual acts freely in accordance with a self-chosen plan, analogous to the way an independent government manages its territories and establishes its policies. A person of diminished autonomy, by contrast is in some respect controlled by others or incapable of deliberating or acting on the basis of his or her desires and plans. (p. 99).*

Ngari (2008) articulates the principle of autonomy thus:

> *The principle states simply "allow rational individual to make free informed choices". Always ensure freedom and self-determination to enable the client to choose his/her own direction in life, namely, create a conducive environment, encourage growth and development and always avoid dependent medical practice relationships. (p. 77).*

The UNESCO Universal Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights (2006) affirms the autonomy of individuals and calls for its protection:

> *The autonomy of persons to make decisions, while taking responsibility for those decisions and respecting the autonomy of others, is to be respected. For persons who are not capable of exercising autonomy, special measures are to be taken to protect their rights and interests. (Art.5).*

Shannon (1993) defined autonomy as "form of personal liberty of action in which the individual determines his or her course of action in accordance with a plan of his or her own choosing" (p. 5). From the foregoing, it can be concluded that autonomy involves the capacity to deliberate about a plan of action. This involves examining of alternatives and distinguishing between them, and the possession of the resources to put such a plan into action.

Stating the problem of Human Autonomy

The denial of autonomy to the African is based on three arguments that have been advanced. These arguments are based on the African sense of community, the idea of the universe which is interactive and the concept of destiny. These different perspectives that have constituted a problem to human autonomy would be discussed as first, second and third arguments.

1. The First Argument

The first argument against human autonomy in African social structure is based on the African idea of community. Mbiti (1970) classically proverbializes the community determining role of the individual when he writes, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 108). Tempels (1952) expresses the African strong sense of community thus:

> *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… He knows himself to be a vital force, even now influencing some forces and being influenced by others. (p. 49-50).*

Iroegbu (1995) describes the African worldview as one characterized by a common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny. 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. 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). As a result of this strong relationship between a person and the community, it has been argued that the African lacks autonomy.

2.   The Second Argument

A second argument advanced for the denial of human autonomy is based on the interactive nature of the African universe. Nnamdi (2009) observes 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, and other material things reside. The second is the land of the spirits, *Ani muo*, which is the invisible world. There is a third world called *Igwe,* the sky. It is quite up and only *Chukwu* and the deities live 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. Thus, Idowu (1962) avers that 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) inquires:

> *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 all the powers that exert their forces on the universe, scholars have argued that the African has no autonomy.

3.   The Third Argument

The third argument against human autonomy in the African world is based on the African concept of destiny. 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). 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 even before birth. The Yoruba 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 it why he is always consulted before undertaking an action. This implies that the life courses of human beings have been charted and fixed by God. Thus, when something happens in a person's life, especially among the Igbo, 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. 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.

Locating Human Autonomy in Igbo-African Anthropology

The word which the Igbo uses to speak of the self is *onwe,* and so the Igbo can talk of *onwe gi* 'yourself', *onwe ha* 'Themselves', *onwe m,* 'Myself', *onwe ya* 'Himself or herself'. Okere (2015) describes the onwe- the self as the:

> *Core subject of identity, perduring and enduring all human experience. It is not describable and has no name and no function except as the ultimate author of all the functions of the individual, the carrier of all experiences. It is the link between the experiences of yesterday and today, the basis of that proprietorship by which these fleeting multitudes are one and are mine. (p. 164).*

The original root of the word *onwe* can be traced back to *nwe* that means 'to own'. Thus, *onwe gi,* would mean he that owns himself, *onwe ya*, would mean he or she that owns himself or herself. The idea of ownership over the self introduces the idea of independence from the other and stamps the strong sense of autonomy. The *onwe,* therefore, introduces not just the idea of identity of the individual, but also the autonomy of each individual. To own oneself would imply that a person knows, is in control of and is responsible for all the action that the person is performing. Thus, in Igbo ontology, autonomy is conceived as ownership of the self, and, therefore, a free person is said to own himself.

The Universality of Autonomy

Human autonomy is an all-inclusive enterprise. It is not cultural or time bound. Autonomy points to the human person as a rational entity. As a universal experience, it is not limited to whites or blacks. What may be called into question is the degree of autonomy, which can be limited by a retinue of factors. If Africans are agreed to be human persons of a rational nature, it follows that they do and are capable of autonomy. The denial of autonomy to the African cannot really be accepted. The reason is that freedom, as an intellectual activity, is universal; it cannot be assumed to be confined to the peoples of the West and the East. In other words, although the people of the world live in different cultural environments, there is nevertheless a common ground of shared human experiences, and hence there certainly are some basic questions relating to their existence on this planet that might commonly be asked by them, questions that are bound to exercise their minds as humans. Such questions, I believe, may be universal, transcending, cultural and historical frontiers.

Conclusion

With God, the deities and spirits exerting their power on human beings and the African universe, is the human person really free. This work has argued that the African human person is free. 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 human freedom. If God has a power that is 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.

In relation to the argument based on the structure of the African community, the idea of community in the African world does not take away the place of individual freedom. Although the community gives the human person 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.

As regards the argument based on the African concept of human destiny, it can be argued that the life of the African is not completely predetermined by his destiny. A human being can better the conditions of life through prayers and sacrifices. In this case, a person

is not changing his or her destiny but trying to do something about 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, 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 impertial 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 wright 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 impertial 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 weal 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.

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, autonomy and the African concept of destiny, community and the universe, are linked together in meaning.

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