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The African Treatment of Being: An Epistemic, Ontological and Scientific Inquiry

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A publication of Department of Philosophy Madonna University, Nigeria
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Abstract

Traditional African understanding and treatment of being has symmetry among Africans of all tribes and ethnic polarization perhaps with few “insignificant” variations. Hence, in the discussion of the hierarchy of being, there is God at the apex, down to plants and animals. Man occupies a prominent position in the whole scheme of things as he is at the middle of it all. This understanding of being with its fusion of the physical and spiritual dimension opens up a vista of interpretation of the whole gamut of reality with the spiritual given so much prominence by Africans. This preference affects the emphasis and outcome of reality for the Africans in matters of knowledge (epistemology), the nature of reality (ontology) and the structure and behavior of matter (science). As a consequence, this creates a problem of imbalance by the holistic assessment and interpretation of reality from a spiritual point of view thereby stifling the scientific spirit which sought to unveil nature’s mystery through observation, systematic experimentation, building of hypotheses and theories. The philosophical method of critical analysis was employed in the study to redirect the focus of Africans to the need for a balanced interpretation of reality with much attention paid on scientific inquiry because of its practical utility and gains in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Being, knowledge, science, method, balance, utility, reality, comparative advantage

Introduction

Being has been viewed differently by different thinkers influenced by the prevailing tradition and culture of the time. It is the most pervasive and fundamental aspect of reality that is intricate and difficult to grasp. Some cultures hold being to be monistic; for others it is dualistic or pluralistic. For the Africans, being is pluralistic with some very interesting features. By being, the general idea is actually meant:

“What is” or as that which exists, or simply as reality...Aside the fact that being can be said to be the subject of metaphysics, it is also the first grasp by the human intellect, the first concept formed by the mind. If man knows anything at all, he knows being (Wallace, 1970, p. 8).

The above quote is very deep and profound and gives great insight into the nature of being. Various thinkers all through the ages have polarized being to either be monistic, dual or pluralistic. Being is therefore, inextricably tied to existence in its form. By existence here is not meant only physical existence since matter (anything that has weight and occupies space) seem to be pervasive when the subject of existence is discussed. As Ewing (1951) opines, “there is nothing more obvious, at least to the non-philosopher, than the existence of physical things,...” (p. 68). However, upon a closer examination, matter raises a lot of philosophical difficulties that can equal the problem of the proof of God’s existence.

Admittedly then, the totality of existent reality and that which has the possibility of existence falls under the broad spectrum of being. Being therefore cannot be reduced only to physical realities as it has other dimensions that are non-physical or inferential. A human, who is a thinking being, is part of the whole process of being so that he doesn’t become the sole determinant of being or existence. In this study, the focus shall be on the far reaching nature of being, and the emphasis on the physical or material dimension by Africans.

What is Being?

It will not be out of place to take a little more excursion into the meaning of being though it might not be an easy concept to define. However, it is easier to understand being when it is viewed from the lenses of existence or that which has the possibility of coming into existence. This said, being covers all of reality whether the material, metaphysical or supra-physical. Aristotle (1926) sees being as “the main object of metaphysics i.e. being *qua* being (pure being)...being is the underlying principle, foundation and unity of all things....Being is identified with the unmoved mover” (pp. 34-36).

Before Aristotle’s postulation of being, the Ionian thinkers have been preoccupied with the subject matter searching for that one underlying principle by which all other things are made. For Thales, “it was water, for Anaximander it was the *apeiron*, for Anaximenes, it was “air” (Archibong & Usoro, 2017, p. 122). Parmenides is at the fore of the determination of the true nature of being. For him, “whatever is”, is being. Being is one, eternal and unchanging. Non-being to him does not exist (Russell, 1945, p. 48). Plato also sees being as many, eternal and unchanging and can be found in the world of form. And of course, the medieval church fathers as Aquinas, Augustine, Anselm and so on equated being with God. Others have seen being as a contradiction, and for others, a mystery. In all, western thinkers like Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, Marcel have all theorized on the meaning and nature of being from the point of view of their prevailing cultures.

It must be stressed at this juncture that being is very deep and profound a subject-matter, and very vast and all encompassing too. Being is eclectic, eccentric cutting across the nature of God. For instance, it is believed that God has a being that is in need of unraveling. Being as a reality can be perceived by the human senses or it cannot. In other words, perception does not determine the existence of being. Being therefore must be delicately inquired and handled else humans make the mistake of leaving out other realities that constitute being especially when humans are the ones who thinks it wise to determine what should pass for being. For the purpose of this study, it will be safe to approach being from the perspective of the physical and supra-physical via knowledge possibility. The study now examines the knowledge angle to being.

The Epistemic Angle to Being

Epistemology is that branch of philosophy that is concerned with the scope, limit, extent and possibility of human knowledge. It is otherwise called the theory of knowledge because its major preoccupation is in the determination of what can pass as existing insofar as it can be known. It also tries to situate knowledge within the realm of two broad areas of empiricism and rationalism. Consequently, being must be encountered through a knowledge process for being to be being. Stumpf (1957) must have had this point in mind when he conceives epistemology as:

concerned with the scope, nature, extent, limits of human knowledge. It deals also with the certainty and reliableness of human knowledge. It was John Locke who in his theory of knowledge declared that his mission (or object) was to “enquire into the origin, certainty and extent of human knowledge (p. 24).

Epistemology then would be seen to be concerned with the discovery and ordering of human knowledge. This knowledge is as it has been discovered by the apparatus and logic that humans have delineated. Thus, in apprehending being, humans set the criteria for what can pass for being and its subsequent acceptance or rejection. These would point at two discoveries: the one trying to know, and the things out there to be known. How much can humans know of being or reality since their sensual faculty is limited and inadequate? Should they make do with the limited knowledge of being known and stop the search? How can humans know with certainty, realities that are not given in experience? John Locke avers that “there is nothing in the human intellect which was not first present in the senses” (Mbat, 2003, p. 24). This position decapitates idealistic knowledge and reduces it to a mere reflection of what is out there in reality. But to deny that nothing is real except it is to be experienced is to commit a fallacy in reasoning because it is not all of physical reality that is given to the awareness of the senses.

The quest to know is one of the needs of humans. Even if a God were to reveal himself, he must come into direct contact with humans using any medium available or necessary. The experience is wholly that of man as he is the one who does the knowing. Inadvertently then, being has an epistemic (knowledge) basis or foundation. It must be apprehended by direct experience or through some ratiocinative process. Being is knowable and describable even though often times, words seem limited in capturing some aspects of being or reality. But in all, being can be known in so far as it exists or has the possibility of existing and this will lead us to looking at the nature of being.

The Ontological angle to Being

Ontology technically is the study of being in its most authentic form. It tries to grasp the nature of being as well as its underlying constituents. Being ontologically must permeate the very rubric of reality with the purpose of grasping its true unchanging nature. Imperatively then, being ontologically focuses on being as being. Ontology is primarily understood as deriving ‘from “the Greek word for being, but a 17th century coinage for the branch of metaphysics that concerns itself with what exists” (Blackburn, 2004, p. 21).

The categories of apprehending being like time, space and so on are an attempt to break through the kernel of reality. So what is known of being is not only the description or behaviour of being but its enduring nature too. Bah (1997) opines that:

Metaphysical knowledge, if at all possible, would be that knowledge which should overcome the weaknesses of common sense knowledge and limitations of scientific knowledge. The aim of such knowledge is absolute reality (p. v).

This kind of knowledge is what Aristotle calls “First Philosophy”. It goes deeper into the knowledge of causes and effects, principles, self sufficient causes, causes which are not the effects of their causes; with propositions from which other propositions are derived.

There are *apriori* arguments that the world must contain things of one kind or another; simple things, unextended things, eternal substances, necessary beings and so on. Such arguments often depend upon some version of the principle of “sufficient reason”. On another hand, the principle of causality which suggests that “every cause must have an effect” falls under the principle of sufficient reason and has been used to explain the origin of the universe and life both in science and religion.

Knowing the internal constituent of being is no way an easy task. For knowing the effect of a phenomenon doesn’t really tell us what that phenomenon is in itself. But the corollary of the knowledge of the parts can sum up the whole. Consequently, ontology as a branch of metaphysics is that discipline that can give a clear light in the breaking through of substance (what is standing under) with respect to reality or phenomena. Even science employs this paradigm in its inquiry succinctly. Ekanem and Archibong (2014) assert that:

Science and technology it must be stressed came out of a culture of intellectual inquiry. This inquiry is colored by the understanding of “being” or reality. It is a systematic manner of making incursion into the workings of nature through the aid of the senses and reason that the human mind is capable of (p. 282).

The ontological angle to being in a nutshell deals with how reality can be apprehended, via knowledge with the understanding of its internal workings and external features. The study now examines the science of being or physical angle to being.

The Science of Being

Being as it is understood in the context of postmodernism, arising from the western tradition of science is seen as physical, material or natural. Its emphasis and focus is on what can be apprehended through the senses. Science as a systematic discipline arose from this tradition with its novelty and fascination. This culture of science without doubt, has liberated man from poverty and has made life comfortable for him with the credit on the discovery of the laws and workings of nature. The science of being therefore as used here is in the context of natural or physical science. Science therefore is defined as “an earnest attempt to pull away nature’s veil. It is “a systematic enterprise that builds and organizes knowledge in the form of testable explanations and prediction about the world” (Lacey, 1976, p. 191).

The physical world is here seen as ‘being’ and the process of knowing the working of this physical world is science. This science was developed by Westerners alongside its accompanying philosophy with a primordial focus on matter (whatever has weight and occupies space). This science does not investigate any other reality or phenomena outside the scope of experience and nature is its sole object of inquiry. Science wants to understand the natural, material or physical dimension of being. It is not interested in idealistic knowledge, claims or presuppositions. Bunge (1973) avers that:

This home-spun philosophy, extremely popular in the physical profession since the dawn of our century, goes by the name of *operationism*. It holds that a symbol, such as an equation, has a physical meaning only to the extent to which it concerns some possible human operation (p. 1).

The undistracted focus on nature or physical phenomena in the world has seen to the advancement in scientific knowledge in all spheres of human life, whether in the area of health, agriculture, building, infrastructure, standard of living and so on. Hitherto obscure countries are doing very well in this area of scientific knowledge especially in the continent of Asia.

The emphasis on apprehending or knowing the physical or material dimension of being does not in any way mean that the Westerners or Asians have a culture of science *ab initio*. They had earlier held and still hold beliefs in the metaphysical, supernatural or religion in varying degrees. In fact, philosophy and religion emanated from them. But they have the wisdom of striking a balance between the two modes of being. This has actually paid off as nature seems to have been conquered and is still being conquered by them. It is not within the scope of this study to ascertain if the tilt towards one area of being could have affected the other adversely. But the study is majorly concerned about how focusing on the material aspect of being with explanation of/from same has revolutionized knowledge of the material world with high yields.

The science of material being is a possibility by man as seen in the feat recorded so far. This is owed to “inquiring minds” who desire to break through the kernel of material reality. All men have this inquiring mind and can achieve the same results. But the difference would be whether anyone would want to painstakingly study material being or be rest content with other modes of explanation in investigating being. This is so because any one who must have knowledge of material being must note that:

(i) Observation is the source and concern of physical knowledge (ii) Nothing is real unless it can become part of human experience...(iii) The hypotheses and theories of physics are not condensed experience i.e. inductive syntheses of experiential items (Bunge, 1973, p. 2).

A thorough going inquirer of material being then must know these rules and others and must be ready to go all out to ensure that such reality is clearly understood. This seems to be one area where traditional Africans have not fared well because they have not invested their intellectual energy and capacity in that area, accounting for why the continent is still backward in terms of human capital and infrastructural development.

Africa and the ‘Being’ Question

African interpretation of being is predicated more on the supernatural or religious. Its hierarchy of being begins with a Supreme Being at the apex with man at the third row and plants, rocks and animals at the lower rung of the ladder. This shows the emphasis placed on being by Africans and by extension, the reason why she resorts to supernatural explanation for physical phenomena. This has not really aided progress from an epistemic, ontological and scientific mastery of the physical dimension of being as is the case with the Westerners. The enormous benefit of science and technology ought to make Africans begin to look inward in striking a balance between the material and supernatural dimension or make a shift to the mastery of the material so as to enjoy its benefits.

These she can achieve without losing her value and love for the supernatural. However, what is the defining feature of being in Africa? Mbiti (1959) gives us an insight:

Because traditional religion permeates all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non/religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life (p. 2).

This lack of clear distinction between the spiritual aspect of being and the material has really stifled the growth of knowledge of the material in traditional Africa. This is because, material phenomena would be interpreted from a supernatural basis and this will not square well for development, growth and progress. This is one serious concern of African thought that has not allowed her to develop her own unique science of material being nor engage that of Westerners.

African understanding of being is a traditional cum cultural issue. It is handed down from her forebears to posterity. It categorizes being, having accepted same as a reality crafted solidly in her “belief system”. This cultural hegemony can form a stronghold which may account for why it may be difficult to think outside that box, since reality of being has been colored to be metaphysical or spiritual. But this in itself is not a minus nor is it a weakness. Yet, over dependence on that singular mode of viewing being to the exclusion of others is where it becomes one sided and untenable.

The need for a shift from overemphasis of the spiritual or (mind) over matter becomes necessitated by the benefits, gains and utility that science has brought forth to humans, as this is quite enviable and something that is desirable and worth furthering. But the fundamental question is: what procedures are to be followed? Do Africans need to learn the art of science or forge a new course for themselves? The former seem very much on point as against the latter. This is because the emphasis is on the acceptance of the material mode of knowledge in contra-distinction to the spiritual which only serves to take care of such issues as morality, soul salvation and the hereafter.

Nations that are ahead of others are so because of proficiency and mastery in science which is focused wholly on material being. These nations have been able to map out a better life for their citizens through the exportation of the products of science. Science in this case becomes like a culture to them and they invest everything to furthering its course. These nations did not become great because they import scientific knowledge and products, but by exporting them. But this is not to say that a nation cannot begin by importing scientific knowledge and products and then in turn become scientifically independent to a certain degree.

To achieve scientific development for the African continent, there would be need for a robust programme that can be initiated on a regional or trans-national basis. This is where the Africa Union (AU) can come into the picture since it houses other Nation states under her umbrella. Associations such as the (AU) should be moved by a strong ideological/philosophical imprint that will see to the collective progress of the African continent on all fronts. Beyond these, each member state of Africa should as a matter of policy encourage the study of science (however crude or refined). Efforts must be geared towards supporting knowledge that bequeaths practical benefits and gains. Since science is universal, it would not be difficult for Africans to make sense of some aspects that are unique to Africans one area of which is the “orthopedic method of treatment”. The Chinese have “Acupuncture” which they have incorporated into a corpus of knowledge unique to them. As Ojong (2008) opines,

“no human society can be comfortable in stagnation, at least not in the era of scientific progress” (p. 2).

Evaluation

Traditional treatment of being has not really been of much value and utility to Africans. The right thing to do then is to evolve a way by which Africans can focus more on the physical plane of being without downplaying the supernatural. In doing this, there must be a conscious dialectics of fusing both the epistemology and ontology of material being in order to achieve its full benefits which will aid and speed up development in the African continent.

One would wonder if by these, the study is suggesting a complete abandonment and break away of the African attachment to her metaphysical culture of being. The prevailing situation in the African continent which cuts across economic, infrastructural and technological deficit require that Africans begin to move away from over dependence and reliance on the supernatural interpretation of being as that has not fared well with the continent. This will not be the first time such shift will be necessary. Hegel saw being in his dialectics from a metaphysical point of view. It was the absolute with a triadic movement of ‘thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis’. But Karl Marx brought the abstract connotation of being as postulated by Hegel down to earth giving it a materialistic posture in his ‘dialectical materialism’ enclosing it on an economic basis.

Even though “reality has a cultural dimension that shapes or color the way being is perceived” (Archibong, 2012, p.407) it doesn’t erode the need for critical reflection with regards to its functionality or utility. Africans must not hold on tenaciously to what has not really benefitted her continent because she don’t want to lose her identity. In today’s globalized world, utility of ideas is key and in high demand. The United States of America operates by the cultural philosophy of pragmatism. Despite how roundly developed and rich the country is on all fronts, it is not resting on its oars. It is still stretching its frontiers and looking out for opportunities that will bring more wealth to the nation. Little wonder, the American government spends so much on research in the area that will bring about wealth and prosperity to the nation. The United States of America has a policy of shopping for first class brains anywhere in the world. They lure such persons with the best offer comparable anywhere in the world just to have them do their bidding.

Apart from the political will of African leaders investing in the importation of science, they can also begin by harnessing the areas where Africans have a comparative advantage in the knowledge of the workings of the natural world. The area of medicine, weather and agriculture can be explored for a start. With a mix of the scientific procedure, Africans can carve a niche that will aid in the overall development of the people and continent.

Scientific inquiry or investigation using the scientific method has opened up new vistas in terms of understanding how nature works and that has seen to the overall development of humanity. The practical utility of scientific research is such that should make all (both nations, continents and individuals) to build interest and be active in learning the rope in order to get the gains accruing from it.

Conclusion

This study has been an attempt to critically investigate the concept of being in its truest form from the standpoint of practical knowledge. It was discovered that the concept “being” cuts across the material and immaterial dimension of reality. While these modes of reality are good and useful, some aspects are more materially beneficial than others. It is from this perspective that this study examines being from the most prevailing acceptance in traditional Africa. However, it is the position of the study that only a shift from an overt or covert overdependence on the supernatural by Africans over and above material explanation will fast track Africa’s development. Thus, the study gives a prompting for an urgent wakeup call that must be taken and pursued vigorously since science and by extension technology is the major driver of human development.

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