

FREEWILL AND DETERMINISM: THE AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE AND EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: *Whether Freewill and/or determinism has been an age long heated debate in the history of Western philosophy. The African metaphysical enquiry attempts a resolution by establishing a complementarity parlance between the two. Reality then becomes a paradox of harmony of opposites. In the midst of this harmony, a realization comes that the more a society turns modern, the more freedom is identified, subjecting deterministic tendencies to the periphery. As Africa is on the process to modernity, the system of communalism that had hitherto served Africa now gives way to individualism. In the same vein, there is need for a conscious change from unorganized but effective brotherhood to corporate and efficient governance to synergize this paradigm shift*

KEYWORDS: Freewill; Determinism; Communalism; Individualism; Free-Determinism.

INTRODUCTION

The philosophical argument on freewill and determinism which dates back to the ancient period still takes the front burner in our philosophical discourse today. How free are our actions and the choices we make? This question becomes pertinent when we juxtapose it with the long assumed assertion that every effect has a cause. If our actions as effects are all caused, then how morally responsible are we in our actions? This is usually the major paradox in the discourse on freewill and determinism and this is the major rationale behind the insistence on the heated debate. When we assume that our actions are caused and therefore determined, it poses a moral question of both temporal and eternal punishments for our perceived wrong acts. On the other hand, if we assume that our actions are not caused and always free, the moral question is addressed but the existential experience of Cause and Effect relationship is raised again. And so any strict adherence or pitching of tents to any of the camps raises either an ethical or an epistemological question. The debate has always portrayed the two concepts as two opposing lines that can never meet. This raged debate has now metamorphosed into a new inquiry whether the two extremes: freewill and determinism can co-exist. Are they mutually exclusive or mutually inclusive? This is the angle from which the African perspective will tackle the issue. Lending her credence to the established philosophical debate on freewill and determinism, the African perspective and experience goes a long way to proffer a solution.

This paper will discuss Freewill and Determinism: The African perspective and experience. As the topic suggests, it will discuss freewill and determinism, from the African perspective and experience. There has always been an argument whether the word, ‘Africa’ connotes homogeneity whenever it is used to express a cultural content of a tiny section of the continent. However one looks at it, inasmuch as a tiny cultural setting within Africa – say, the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria is used to represent Africa, it suffices to use their cultural experience and tag it African. This is because their cultural experience, as far as it is African, will have a similitude with other African cultures. By this, the clarification is made that though Africa is used here, the cultural perspective and experience of the Igbo

of South-eastern Nigeria is what is subjected to x-raying. Before delving proper into this discourse from the African perspective, it would be pertinent to give a general highlight of the definitions of the terms – freewill and determinism.

FREEWILL is the ability of agents to make choices unimpeded by certain factors. Such factors include metaphysical constraints, physical constraints, social constraints, and mental constraints. Generally, we intuitively hold that we have freewill given our common choices and self-decisions concerning those choices. However, debate has been raging through history on how true and to what extent our wills are indeed free. The most historical constraint of dominant concern to freewill has been DETERMINISM. According to Reuben Abel,

This is an important problem because freewill lies at the intersection of two fundamental but perhaps incompatible convictions: the subjective or inward phenomenological certainty of freedom: and determinism, the insistence that every event has a cause. (1976, p.243)

DETERMINISM on the other hand is the philosophical position that for every event, including human action, there exist conditions that could cause no other event. Those who define freewill as freedom from determinism are called incompatibilists. They hold determinism to be incompatible with freewill. Those who believe in determinism here can be called thorough determinists. J. C. Agbakoba on the thorough determinists thinks that:

We do have some good reasons to agree with the thorough determinists... in our everyday interaction with fellow human beings, we do ensure the operation of causality and law-like regularities... we thus generally presume that choices and decisions don't just happen, but have causes and effects and thus determined. (2003, pp.8-9). However, there are those who define freewill otherwise, with no reference to determinism. These are called compatibilists as they hold determinism to be compatible with freewill. Conducting a discourse on freewill and determinism in the African (Igbo) perspective, it is pertinent to observe from the onset, that the African world is a world of religion, gods, spirits, ancestor worship and the likes. Viewing freewill from this African spectacle, two extremes on freewill can be identified: the deists and the occasionalists. MPH Edeh, discussing on this matter echoes:

Two extreme positions can be identified on this: that of the deists who practically exclude God from the world; and that of the occasionalists who deprive man of all causal influence. (1999, p.163)

In the deist camp, we have philosophers like Voltaire, David Hume, etc who try to suppress the causality of God. Voltaire for instance believes that God is the cause of things in the universe, but nevertheless insists that human freewill still prevails. God for him, having finished His creation should remain in heaven and allow man or probably natural forces to pilot the affairs of man. The modern scientific thought has followed this trend and attempted to banish God and freedom from the world. Alexandre Koyre aptly put it thus:

Newton had a God who 'ran' the universe according to his free will and decision, (but) the Divine Artificer had ...less and less to do in the world. He did not even need to conserve it, as the world, more and more, became able to dispense with this service. Thus the mighty energetic God of Newton ...became in quick succession, a conservative power, an *intelligentia supra-mundana*, a "*Dieu fainéant*"...The infinite Universe of the New Cosmology...inherited all the ontological attributes of

divinity. (1957, p.276). This mentality is against the African knowledge of God as “Chineke” – one who creates and is actively present in all his creatures.

The occasionalists like Malebranche and his Cartesian followers went to the other extreme and conceived God’s infinite causality in such a way that they emptied finite being of all causal effectiveness. So for them God does everything. Even when you think you have made a choice, it is God who moves you towards the choice you have made.

For Edeh,

Both the deists and the occasionalists cannot give any satisfactory explanation of human freedom because both accept basic determinism either by God or by natural physical laws. In fact, with the expansion of modern science, it has become even increasingly difficult for philosophers to find any place for human freedom. Apparently man has become a hostage in the evolution of the universe, bound by its laws as the solar system is bound by the laws of motion. (1999, p.164).

Placing human freewill in a logical convincing manner has eluded philosophers. As an alternative, many philosophers now admit a common-sense type of freedom without having to justify it metaphysically. The thought of admitting a mutual coexistence of the two seemingly contradictory principles – freewill and determinism is hardly entertained. Gilbert Ryle clearly puts it thus:

The fears expressed by some moral philosophers that the advance of the natural sciences diminishes the field within which the moral virtues can be exercised rests on the assumption that there is some contradiction in saying that one and the same occurrence is governed both by mechanical laws and by moral principles. (1960, p.80).

Finding a solution to the problem of freewill remains difficult. According to Edeh,

There are two alternatives. The first is to reject the reality of freedom. Should we do this, then we have to join the determinists and say that there is no paradox of divine and human causality. The second alternative is to accept the reality of freedom and then attempt to solve the paradox. A possible way of solving the paradox is to demonstrate that the affirmation of both divine and human causality is not a contradiction. (1999, p.165).

It is the opinion of this paper that the African perspective of freewill is an alternative to the paradox of freewill and determinism. It is a perspective which adopts the second alternative which was posited by Edeh. The extent to which this African perspective of freewill resolves the problem of freewill and determinism remains to be explored.

THE METAPHYSICS OF FREEWILL

Existence has one metaphysical explanation. This has been the age old philosophical conviction that set the Ionian philosophers into searching for the basic stuff of nature. Thales predicted water, Anaximander predicted boundlessness, and Anaximenes predicted air. Even after the Ionian philosophers, subsequent philosophers continued the search for that basic stuff. Thus Heraclitus sought his own in fire while Pythagoras saw numbers as the basic stuff. However erroneous they might be, the

basic fact remains that man is convinced that nature can be explained in one metaphysical instance. Whether this one instance is known, knowable or unknowable is a different issue to be discussed.

Without being conscious of it, the problem of freewill and determinism is set in such a way that the case for freewill is made impossible by the very form of the question raised. Herbert Wildon Carr made this explicit. We usually ask, can we choose indifferently between two alternatives, or must the strongest motive prevail? Carr on this asserts,

...there is no other test of the strongest motive but the fact that we choose it. The freewill supposed in a choice that is indifferent to motives is also absurd in its ethical aspect, for the moral responsibility of the agent which it is supposed to establish is clearly destroyed. (2004, p.58).

So when we ask the question, 'are we really free?' what we actually mean to ask is 'when we act, do we really create or is creation impossible?'

Employing the metaphysics of Henri Bergson, existence runs as a process or a becoming. This is his concept of duration. Real time which is the true duration is "...not a succession, but, like life or consciousness, an existence in which all reality is the actually present, moving, changing, now" (Carr 2004, p.59). What makes us see cause and effect and thus think of determinism is when we see life or events, not as a process but as segments. This view of life as segments is the mechanism the human mind employs to be able to interpret life. It is only this view of life as segments that would give credence to Zeno's argument that there is no motion between the Achilles and the tortoise as any distance between them is subject to infinite divisions. But in real life, we know that there is motion and that the Achilles would overtake the tortoise suppose such pictures as Zeno created were to be executed. Thus, creation is possible because life is creation and the reality of the universe is incessant creation. There is motion because life is a continuous creation.

Furthermore, causality is a scientific creation and science is an intellectual view of life based on segments. But Henri Bergson insists that life itself as known in intuition is not like the intellectual view of it; it is a becoming in which there is no repetition and therefore, prediction is impossible as it is a continual new creation. Thus;

Freewill is only possible, therefore, if the intellectual view is not absolute. There is no place for it in the world as physical science presents it. And consequently to prove that the will is free is to prove that we have a spiritual as distinct from a material nature, that we are not merely mechanical arrangements of parts in a block universe, but living upholders of a universe that is open to our creative activities. (Carr 2004, p.63)

AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE OF FREEWILL AND DETERMINISM

Indeed, Africa sees life as a continuum, a process or a becoming. But the African life is that of a continuum or process that has a beginning. This beginning that is recognized by the African explains the African view of determinism. Life itself is caused and therefore determined. This explains the concept of "Osebuluwa" (God the creator and sustainer of the universe) in Igbo (African) cosmology. Every life has a beginning and therefore is determined. From this determined beginning flows a free flow of existence in a continuum. This explains the African (Igbo) concept of destiny (Akalaka). The mere fact that you are born in a determined style creates an 'akalaka' for you. The Igbos believe that the one who discovers his 'akalaka' excels in life while one who does not, keep doing trial and error

without much success in life. What is actually determined in 'akalaka' is one's origin which gives one certain unique features. One discovering his 'akalaka' simply implies that one is able to discover the features his determined origin avails him and is able to use such features to his advantage to create life for himself. Once this is achieved, the Igbos believe that one has arrived or has discovered his destiny (akalaka). Thus, African (Igbo) metaphysics recognizes a determined beginning but a free living. In order words, effects are not necessarily the results of causes. That there are causes does not necessarily mean that the effects that follow are necessarily as a result of the causes. Thus there must be a clear distinction between causes and determinism. Prof. Joseph Omoregbe's analogy clarifies this. He submitted that, "to say an action is determined by its cause means that once the cause is present, the action necessarily follows and the doer would be unable to prevent or avoid it" (2009, p.51). This position is the strong argument pressed forward by the advocates of determinism, but rejected by the advocates of freewill. Omoregbe then draws an illustration to explain the position. If one is thirsty for example, one may decide to take or not to take water. The action of taking water to quench the thirst is caused by the thirst. The act of drinking water is not a free action. This is due to the fact that one may not necessarily drink water to quench thirst. You may be thirsty, but refuse to drink water. In this instance, freewill intervenes between thirst and drinking water. This, in his opinion, means that, if I decide to drink water when I am thirsty it is a free action, the result of free decision, even though it has a cause (thirst). It is not determined by its cause, but brought about by my free decision, and that is why I am responsible for it.

The dialectic process of Hegel's triadic movement of THESIS, ANTI-THESIS and SYNTHESIS, can be adopted to explain how Africans see the dialectic movement of life with regard to freedom and determinism. The African sees the thesis of life as determined; the anti-thesis of life as freedom which he experiences. This freedom is not a complete one as it is already diluted by the determined beginning. The synthesis is experienced at the end of one's sojourn on earth when a freedom par excellence is experienced.

This means that the African believes in compatibilism. Freewill and determinism are compatible. Both can and do co-exist in the African viewpoint. Thus for Jim Unah, It is conventional and in fact convenient to describe the ancient African view of the world as 'one of the synthetic unity and mutual compatibility among all things. (1995, p.107).

Arguing further on this point, Chidozie Chukwuokolo asserts:

It is obvious from our experience that there are elements of mechanism, teleology, freedom and determinism in our universe. Nonetheless, any of them taken in exclusion of the other creates the problem of explaining reality as it is not. This has been the responsibility of the kind of human nature that was created by a rigid adherence to any of these positions in exclusive terms. Our position is that these positions are mutually inclusive. Man was created by his maker in a teleological – but determined-free universe. (2013, p.194)

The African life is determined in its inception. It is however free to make decisions as it sojourns through life despite the determined beginning and occasional interference of the gods. This is clearly exemplified in the sacrifices believed in, and carried out by Africans to appease the gods to change an already determined life for one. Africans believe that those who used their freedom in an ethical manner in spite the deterministic tendencies will have their synthesis form into thesis as they through re-incarnation, start the continuum of life's journey again. So Africans believe in what may be called free-determinism and not any of the extremes: deism or occasionalism.

THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE OF FREEWILL AND DETERMINISM

It is a major establishment of this paper that the more a society turns civil and modern, the more the realization of individual free-will is achieved against deterministic tendencies. Change is what we experience all the time and on the African experience, there is a movement from the life of primitivism to the life of modernity. This has a corresponding movement from the life of communalism to the life of individualism.

Living a life of communalism in the African setting inhibits the freedom of an average African. The African takes his decisions and is responsible for his actions. But his decisions are more or less defined by the choice of the community. His freedom is still there because he can choose to act otherwise and even face the consequences. But being a communalistic society, he acts in accordance with the unseen dictates of the community. This means that the average African has a more determined life when compared to those in Europe and America. Coming from a communalistic environment, the average African thinks more of determinism than freedom. Though he believes he can act freely, he still believes what happens to him are determined. Even in this determinism, he can still change things by appeasing the gods in sacrifices.

As already established in this paper, life is a continuum or a process. The attempt to break life into segments in order to analyze and understand it is what causes the problem. As the African life is a continuum, the intermingling of his free-deterministic life is also a continuum. Life begins, grows into maturity and then ends. This means that life begins in determinism, grows through soft-determinism (free-determinism) and terminates in freedom. When life begins, the extent to which this freewill is realized lies on the environment the life finds itself.

The African experience of life is still at its early stage of growth. It is however a paradox that life started in Africa. However, the truth is that unlike Europe and America that have advanced in life in terms of modernity, Africans are still toddlers in terms of advances in modernity. As a result of this, the communalistic life being practiced in Africa goes a long way into reducing the freedom experienced by Africans in Africa. In Africa, the community decides for you implicitly or explicitly. But in the west, individualism reigns and so people are freer to take their decisions. This implies that individualism advances freedom more than communalism.

The African experience is a communal society of spirits, living and non-living beings interacting within and among each other. It is a society where the occasional interventions of arbitrary gods are experienced. The African self is defined by social interdependence or a network of relationships. So the African experience of freewill has a great chunk of determinism and this is as a result of the fact that she is still a toddler in self- realization and growth.

EFFECTS OF THIS EXPERIENCE

There are both positive and negative effects of the level of freedom experienced in Africa due to the extent of the unfolding of the African life (communalism). From the positive perspective, the life of communalism breeds humanity where togetherness and being one's brother's keeper is enthroned. The African community is a synergistic community where one's headache is the headache of all. It is a

community of brotherhood or Ujamaa according to Julius Nyerere. This is good especially where the weak is helped.

From the negative perspective, communalism has embedded in its system, the characteristics that set individuals back from progressing to the next level. Because the individual needs to get in touch with how the community wishes him to behave, the progress and development (sometimes, radical thoughts) experienced in the West is found lacking in Africa. This limited freedom caused by communalism is responsible for the arithmetic progression of the African states as against the geometrical progression of the West informed by the individualistic life they live which encourages freedom more.

THEORY OF CHANGE IN AFRICA'S EXPERIENCE OF FREEWILL

The only permanent thing under the sun is change. Life is a process and so the African is improving in all aspects of life. However trickling this process of change is, the movement is also characterized by a paradigm shift from communalism to individualism. No wonder Hegel opines that the dynamic unfolding of history represents the progress in the consciousness of freedom. Africa's history as a people is unfolding. It is unfolding into the consciousness of freedom. Today, we have urban centers and people leave the rural areas for the cities, living their lives the way it suits them.

Then comes the challenge of this paradigm shift in Africa: there is need for a body to synergize the new experiences embedded in the shift. Here the role of the government can never be over-emphasized. This is the period the African states need responsible and responsive government. Government should strive to put thing in place to absorb the experiences of the paradigm shift from communalism to individualism. As this paper is being compiled, Nigeria is being heat-up by political rallies, manifestos and jingles as elections are around the corner. It is hoped that the one to emerge as the next president of the country should be abreast with this unique challenge of synergizing the energies of Nigerians as they unfold through a process that individualizes and frees them.

CONCLUSION

Two things stand out clearly in the development of this paper: First, the African perspective on the issues of freewill and determinism assures us of a coexistence of both concepts as a solution to the long heated debate on freewill and determinism. Second, in the African experience on the issue of freewill and determinism we realize that the more a society turns civil and modern, the more the realization of individual free-will is achieved against deterministic tendencies. Life is a process, a becoming and a continuum. The experience of freewill from the African perspective is a continuum from a determined beginning through a free existence to terminate in total freedom at death. Presently, there is an obvious gradual shift in Africa from the life of communalism to the life of individualism. This is a movement necessitated by modernity. This gradual shift has also caused a gradual movement from soft determinism to more freedom. With this dialectic movement, what the spirit of communalism earlier achieved is now left in the hands of states to accomplish. No wonder Taylor describes the three malaises of modernity: "individualism, adoration of instrumental reason and the socio-political consequences of the individualism and adoration" (1991, p.5). Thus, Government should synergize this shift by establishing functional institutions to address the challenges embedded in the process of change prominent among them is the individualism that is gradually creeping into the African societies. For example, the establishment of a functional old people's home by the government will take care of our

aged ones who are now being abandoned in the villages for a life in the cities characterized by busy schedules of modernity.

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