

African Ontology as a Basis for African Existential Practices: Implications for African Education

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Abstract

A branch of metaphysics, ontology is the study of being or reality. The way people perceive and understand reality usually shapes their day to day life and activities. The reality of existence is a fundamental issue in all human societies and affairs. There are differences in people's world-views, based on their convictions about the nature of beings. These convictions greatly inform, influence and guide their every-day life and activities in relation to one another and their environments. In other words, people's ontology is a basis for their existential practices. In this regard, this paper explored African ontology and its implications for African education. Using philosophical approach of conceptual frame and critical analysis of contents and contexts, the paper argued convincingly to establish that African ontology is holistic, hence the integrated African world-view, with high premium placed on the sanctity of human life. For the African, life is a continuum, with all beings, though hierarchical, in constant interaction. Some of the implications of this for African education were highlighted, such as the need for the integral education of the person and holistic character formation for the purpose of order, unity and progress in the African society. It was recommended, among others, that African ontology be strongly re-emphasized through seminars, workshops, and so on, and that the school curriculum should accord prominence to those African values that enhance unity and peace, such as truth, love, honesty, cooperation and sanctity of human life.

Key words: Africa, Ontology, World-view, Human Nature, Educational Implications.

1. Introduction

In African philosophy, ontology occupies a central position. The way reality is perceived in the African world influences the African life and activities, both as individuals and as groups. The recognition of the existence of hierarchy of beings and the interaction of these beings determines the structure of events in traditional African communities and manner in which people behave in their relation to one another and to their environments.

This paper is an attempt to bring to a clearer understanding this African ontology and its underlying driving force in the African life situations. This understanding is hoped to lead to a better appreciation and application of the African world-view, especially with regard to education and real life situations. To achieve this purpose, the paper will investigate the concepts of ontology and African ontology. It will then examine the African understanding and existential practices. African understanding of human nature and African existential experience are the foci of attention here. This will lead to exposition of the implications of African ontology for education in Africa. The outcome of the entire discourse will form the basis for the conclusion to be arrived at, and some recommendations for improvements where necessary.

2. Conceptual Frame

2.1. Concept of Ontology

Ontology is a sub-branch of metaphysics. It is derived from the Greek words *onta* and *logos*. *Onta* means existence, while *logos* means study or discourse. Ontology, therefore, means the study of the meaning and nature of existing reality or being. It deals with the reality of existence. It is the science of being as such – being as being (*ens qua ens*), man as man (*homo qua homo*). It is a general metaphysics which is concerned with the meaning and nature of every reality. In the words of Onwuka (2010:5), “All sorts of questions about beings are raised here. Such questions include: What is a being? What do you need for a change to occur?”. Both material and non-material beings are within the domain of ontology.

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In other words, ontology studies both physical reality and mental reality. This is in agreement with the view expressed by Uche and Njoku (1989:31) that “ontology deals with reality and its role is determined by what is real about things and all aspects of the world and beyond it”.

Ontology is concerned about everything that is in existence. Its interest is in the essence of things, that is, entities that there are in the universe, and even beyond the universe. Questions regarding the existence, kinds, nature, modes of operations and meanings of all things that are, fall within the domain of ontology. In the context of ontology, anything that exists is a being or reality.

Material or physical realities are those beings that we can see or perceive with our senses, while non-material or mental realities are those that we cannot see or perceive with our senses. Examples of the one include man, animal, tree, sand, and the other include God, Angels, spirits. It is pertinent to note that although many ontological questions are posed, such questions do not require ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers. They rather evoke critical thinking and reflection, going beyond the factual to the abstract.

2.2.African Ontology

African ontology refers to the traditional African metaphysical convictions about the nature of beings that inhabit the African world. The African world-view is generally based on this ontology. It is the bedrock of every other activity and interpretation of events. There are categories of being in African ontology. According to Ogugua (2005:68), in Igbo-African world, “reality can be subsumed under these seven categories: Spirit, human, things, place, time and modality”. Everything that is must locate itself within any of these categories, and is not conceived as substance but as force. For the African, therefore, force is the nature of being. For Nwala the categories fall into three: Spirits and forces, human beings and things. Although Nwala was writing about the Igbo-African in particular, the same concept of ontology cuts across the whole Africa. For instance, even some decades back, Temple (1969:52) had this to say about the Bantu people of Africa:

It is because all being is force and exists only in that it is force, that the category force includes of necessity all beings: God, men, living and departed, animals, plants, minerals. Since being is force, all beings appear to the Bantu as force.

The focus of this paper does not include going into details about categories of being; so suffice it to note that there is a hierarchy of being in African ontology, and that the recognition of this hierarchy influences and even determines the organizational structure in the African traditional communities. Despite the perceived hierarchy, there is an interaction of all beings and forces. The idea of separate substance is alien to African ontology. Describing this interconnectivity of forces, Temple (1969:60) brought in the analogy of the spider’s web, saying that “the world of forces is held like a spider’s web of which no single tread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network”.

Following from the above, it can be said that the Africans have a unified world-view. In this regard, Keita (1984:72) maintains that “African world-view is essentially holistic in the sense that it accepts the material world as given, thus making possible empirical science”. The Africans believe in, and offer, a dualistic explanation of reality, but in contrast to the Western understanding of reality, there is no radical distinction between the body and the soul. For instance, they believe that man is a composite of body and soul, yet there is no separation between the two, not even in death, since the two are always a unity.

The African world-view is ontologically integrated. This integrated and holistic nature of African world-view “is not simply a coherence of fact and faith, nor of reason and contingent facts, but a coherence or compatibility among all the disciplines” (Adesanya, 1961:69-70). In this sense, even African theories of reality find themselves so tightly linked that any attempt to separate one from the whole leads to the paralysis of the entire structure.

3. African Understanding and Existential Practices

3.1.African Understanding of Human Nature

The thought pattern of the African is grounded on his ontology. The African ontology gives rise to the African anthropological frame of mind. In fact, human being, generally speaking, is a constant point of reference in the scheme of things about reality. So, any consideration of the African ontology should, as a matter of necessity, take cognizance of his anthropology. Human nature gives rise to human behaviour, which is vital to development. The traditional African philosophy is essentially that of the person, and it is inextricably connected with life.

For the African, human beings are the centre of creation, and are the main actors in the drama of existence and life. Their actions evoke reactions from the gods and have deep implications for human beings themselves, the lower beings and forces. Man is also endowed with reason. The soul is the life principle, and is believed to be the basis of equality of all human beings and human dignity. The soul cannot die, since it is the principle of immortality.

It is the belief of the African that man does not live in isolation. He is always under the protection of the spirits as well as the ancestors. He also lives in his culture, in his community, among his peers, and in close interaction with the lower beings. The African concept of man is integral. In the traditional African society, for one to be a person, one must identify with one's community. This makes for unity, respect and progress.

Man is regarded as the most important aspect of creation. He is also superior to created beings in this world. The Africans strongly believe in the sacredness of human life. Human life is inseparable from blood. Life for the African implies an existence in which a human being still functions in his natural mode. Hence life principle is the animating force of his activity. Life and action go together, and so to be alive is to be active. Nwala (1985:44) put it thus:

To be alive or to possess life means to be active and effective, thereby fulfilling one's roles (those roles expected of him by virtue of the communal values and ideas)... If he is physically existing but ineffective, then he becomes living that is worse than dead.

Life, for the African, is a continuous process. Life does not end, and death is just a change of the mode of living. Both life and death of a member of the community are interwoven with the others' through the common blood which they share, and through the web of economic and social interdependence which practically exists in the community (Nwala, 1985).

The evident truth is that the African world-view is solidly anchored on life. Whatever gives life, supports, enhances, reveals, saves, protects and enriches life, is highly valued by the African. Again, for the African, life is not limited to the physical. It has spiritual, religious, economic, political and social dimensions as well, all well integrated. Even the life of lower animals, plants and, indeed, everything that exists, life of the past, present and future, is an integral part of African world-view, hierarchically structured.

3.2. African Existential Practices

Africans believe strongly in reality of existence. Existential experiences or practices in this context refer to all those activities that are carried out in day to day living in the African world as manifested by the Africans. In his day to day activities, man usually goes through certain experiences. Regarding this, Iroegbu (2003:7) states that:

There is a background to every experience. Nothing springs from nowhere. All experiences, including religious ones, have a foundation and springboard which we may call the mother that gives birth to the experiences. Equally experience itself is also a father of basic tenets, including the metaphysical convictions and religious credo of persons and peoples.

Reflecting on the above, Ogugua (2006) is of the view that these experiences are interpreted based on one's perception of reality which no doubt is based on a metaphysics for culture and world-view that are outcrop of an ontology. It is said that action follows being (*agere sequitur esse*). In the African ontology, every being is a being onto others. There is no being that exists in isolation. There is always an interaction of beings of all categories.

Due to his integrated ontological perspective, the African, from the practical point of view, integrates all the categories of reality in all his undertakings. Care is taken to see that order is maintained among all realities and not bring disorder. This is because the Africans believe, as Nwala (1985:34) notes:

That even natural objects possess dynamic forces which can be tapped for their medicinal values. Thus the medicinal value of plants (roots, herbs, leaves, etc.) is linked with their spiritual contact in the sense that they are effective for a certain purpose or not.

The point being made clear here is that, based on his ontology, the African has regard for all categories of being, and this is made manifest in his actions in relation to these beings. Some of the African existential practices include hard work, care for the family, living in freedom, contribution of ideas, money and other material goods to the development of the community, satisfaction of needs, especially those of feeding, shelter and clothing, pursuit of knowledge, discussions, storytelling, etc.

In all these and other activities, each category of reality or being has its due place recognized and protected in the scheme of things. It is obvious that the African existential practices are founded on the African ontology. Consequently there is an integration or coordination of activities in such a way that there is a continuous flow of life in thoughts, words and actions, bearing in mind the interconnectivity that cuts across all the dimensions of reality.

4. Implications of African Ontology for Education in Africa

It has been seen that in the traditional African ontology, there is a unified world-view. Based on this, life and actions of the African are interconnected, embracing all realities in a hierarchical manner. This has some implications for education in Africa. Africa has already been infected by the Western style of extreme individualism and rigid compartmentalization. This Western style came with the Western education. Now that we are Africanizing our education, it is imperative that our unified world-view be brought to bear on our education. Since in African ontology there is no radical distinction between the body and the soul, there is an integrated African world-view.

In our education system, there is need for stronger emphasis on educating all the dimensions of the person: intellectual, moral, emotional, social, political, economic, religious and vocational. When individuals are sound in these aspects of their lives, evil traits such as stealing, robbery, calumny, economic sabotage, selfishness, favouritism, sycophancy and other forms of corrupt practices would be eliminated or reduced to the barest minimum. This corroborates the argument by Nwabuisi (2000:116) that “the person who acquires a value integrates the value in question into his life system. That value becomes, as it were, part of him”. This will give rise to the exhibition of holistic characters for the purpose of order and progress in the society. In this way we show that we value our African ontology.

Our education should stress the value of life, based on the African integrated world-view. Thus education will positively influence other aspects of life. Politics will then be seen as a means of uniting the different segments of the society: Ethnic groups, religious affiliations and social statuses. A situation where politicians engage in violent or anti-life activities should not be encouraged any longer. In social life, individual and group activities should be carried out in ways that would produce and promote harmony and peaceful coexistence, not only among persons, but also among all the categories of reality. This is because man’s behaviour is very crucial to the stability of the whole array of the universe of beings, since he is the centre of creation. Equally, religion should not be separated from practical life, as is the case in many African societies today.

5. Conclusion

In the light of what has been said in this paper, one can confidently assert that African ontology remains the basis for African existential practices. This is clearly manifested in the African world-view, which is holistic and filled with the interactions of all categories of being: material, spiritual, animate, inanimate, etc. This comingling of beings enriches the African world, since the daily activities of the African are always centred on life, people and the supernatural. One can conclude with Marie De Paul Neiers (1965:117) that in African ontology, “the being and its milieu form a totality of which the break would leave the being vent and mutilated”.

6. Recommendations

Based on the conclusion that African ontology is the basis for African existential practices, the following recommendations are put forward:

1. African ontology needs to be strongly re-emphasized through seminars, workshops, conferences, and so on, which can be organized by the African philosophers and scholars.
2. In the school curriculum, those African values that enhance unity, peace and mutual understanding should be given positive considerations and spread across all levels of education. Such values include, but not limited to: truth, sincerity, love, cooperation, accountability, interest in the common good of all, and sanctity of human life.
3. It is necessary to re-orient the mindset of the Africans, especially the young ones, on the sanctity of human life over and above money, influential positions, power and other material acquisitions. This will curb the spate of killings pervading most of the African countries today.

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