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The Epistemological Implications of Asouzu's “ima-onwe-onye or being-in-control”

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INTRODUCTION

Professor Asouzu has done well not only in philosophy but the world at large. His ibuanyidanda philosophy or complementary reflection is applicable in all spheres of human endeavor to integrate, coexist, unify and create a mutual harmonious whole. This is because his ‘system of thought goes beyond the world immanent concomitant pre-deterministic immediacy and existential fragments to inculcate knowledge of oneself (ego) in relation to others knowing that whatever exists serves a missing link of reality. One can say that Asouzu’s approach to philosophy is one of self-realization and self-rediscovery mediated in a complementary horizon (ibuanyidanda) taking into cognizance all existing realities as the mind seeks to attain full liberation. Our country Nigeria is presently immersed in very serious crisis and I think that a cue can be taken from Asouzu’s philosophy towards addressing some of our most daunting problems. Thus, the habit of some personalities in embezzling public funds and sending their children abroad for studies only to come back to be kidnapped or be frustrated should learn from Asouzu’s philosophy of thought that “to be is not to be alone” (ka so mu adina). This entails that authentic living includes taking others into cognizance knowing that what exists serves a missing link of reality. Besides, whatever exists has head and tail-end. (ihe di nwere isi na odu).

1. The Epistemological World Immanent Pre-deterministic Concomitant Ego and Asouzu's "being-in-control (ima-onwe-onye)"

According to Ijiomah, epistemology can be defined "as the theory of knowledge and non-knowledge" (Humanizing epistemology, 13). This, in my understanding, implies that knowledge or truth devoid of ontological foundation is inauthentic and shaky. True knowledge therefore implies going beyond the region of mere experience and perception and taking into cognizance the other existing realities and thereby being conscious that whatever exists serves a missing link of reality. This consciousness of knowing that anything that exists serves a missing link entails what Asouzu means by ima-onwe onye (being-in-control). Asouzu uses the Igbo expression ima-onwe onye ("being-in-control" or "being self-conscious") in many ways. He uses ima-onwe-onye ("being-in-control") to designate the act of a thinking subject to be fully aware of the threats and challenges arising from all human ambivalent existential situations. Again, he uses the term to designate the capacity or state of a person who is fully consciousness of these threats and challenges - this is when he says oma-onwe-ya ("he is being-in-control" or "he is self-conscious"). In all these cases, Asouzu implies that the mind in quest for knowledge and truth should overcome commitment to world immanent pre-deterministic concomitant immediacy. This form of commitment, he sees as the human fundamental tendency to act in tune with what he calls the super-maxim, which state: "the nearer the better the safer". Thus, the notion of truth is more than correspondence of statements to facts. Truth is ultimately connected to meaning and such meanings, among other things, have supernatural absolute dimension. For Asouzu, there is an intricate relationship between ontological truths and truths as lived experience. Hence, one of the highest modes of being-in-control (ima onwe onye) is in the recognition, which the subject accords to other modes of self-expression of being, as missing links. Therefore, the criterion for truth and authenticity demands that we concede to the type of unity existing between world immanent realities and the foundation of all existent realities, knowing that every search for truth, meaning, knowledge and authenticity has an absolute dimension.

Asouzu highlights the fact that practitioners of epistemology often operate from the background of above named super-maxim of "the nearer the better and the safer" (Asouzu, Ibuanyidanda 19). With this, Asouzu simply means that in our actions we instinctively assume that those nearest to us are the safest and the best. One of the most severe consequences of this is a form of reduction whereby the thinking subject is focused only on those

things nearest to it and resists transcending beyond the immediacy. This is the root cause of all forms of world immanent pre-deterministic concomitancy. In the process of cognition, commitment to the super-maxim induces a form of circularity that hinders the mind from transcending beyond world immanency and reaching out for true and authentic knowledge. Thus, Asouzu opines:

“. . . , all forms of world immanent pre-deterministic concomitant ways of seeing the world have the capacity to focus the mind only on known causes, persons and events. When this happens, this way of seeing the world easily hinders the mind from attaining ultimate expression beyond what the immediacy can provide” (Ibuanyidanda, 19).

A typical culprit in this regard is John Locke, who in his diehard empiricism opines that true and reliable knowledge can only be obtained through sense experience (i.e with the aid of five senses). Bishop George Berkeley equally maintained that “to be is to be perceived” (*Esse est percipi*) a saying that is equated with Kwesi Wiredu’s notion of truth in African philosophy (Blocker , in *Philosophy in Africa* 55). For these empiricists therefore, anything outside the world immanent pre-deterministic concomitant perception, does not exist. This is what Asouzu says is occasioned by what he calls *ihē mkpuchi anya* or the phenomenon of concealment in our epistemological search for truth. But the moment the mind through *ima-onwe-onye* (being-in-control) becomes aware of the difficulties posed by the super maxims - “the nearer the better and the safer” – it has the capacity to attain true knowledge. This state of *ima-onwe-onye* or being-in-control is achieved through what Asouzu calls the “process of existential conversion” (Ibuanyidanda 327-332). Through this process, according to Asouzu, “the mind learns to see maxim for what they are and stops deceiving itself” (Ibuanyidanda 329). In this case, the mind realizes that the super-maxims have “only a limited range of application”. Hence, the ego at this point is fully equilibrated in its relationship to all missing links, such that all stakeholders start to see themselves as diverse aspects of that foundation of existence within the same ontological horizon (Ibid). In this sense any form of knowledge acquisition must proceed from the background of being-in-control of our existential situations. In this case knowledge acquisition must proceed from a mindset that seeks to include all missing-links in its calculation; it must aim at obeying general laws and not limited maxims.

The ego (mind), through *ima-onwe-onye* (being-in-control) shares much therefore with all missing links which are in the same complementary horizon (Ibuanyidanda) from which it draws its being and outside of which nothing can be thought of that has existence. As Martin Luther

King (Jnr.) could say, a man has not started living until he goes beyond individualistic confines. Equally Socrates, according to Ozumba in *Philosophy and Logic Today*, in his bid to offer philosophy a practical dimension, averred that “unexamined life is not worth living, and “man know thyself” (Asouzu, ed. *Philosophy and logic today* ,72). He added that error comes from ignorance. This also was a move against hegemonic mindset by some of the early philosophers in search for authentic truth.

Once the mind is fully aware of its ambivalent situation, as to be able to control the threat arising from all missing links, which in their ambivalence have to transit into the highest form of self-consciousness (ima onwe onye), it automatically regains full autonomy and harmony within the ontological horizon of being (Ibuanyidanda). When this happens, the mind (ego) is said to have gone beyond the world immanent pre-deterministic concomitant existence. When this happens, the thinking subject realizes that the quest for knowing or knowledge, is not just-knowing the immediacy or oneself, like Descartes -“being alone”, but being-in-control (ima onwe onye), in relation to others in a complementary whole.

2. Asouzu’s Being-in-control and Ontological Horizon of Truth

While defining epistemology as the theory of knowledge and non-knowledge, Ijomah purported that “the knowledge of ‘x’ involves not only the content of ‘x’ but also the limits of ‘x’. But to discuss the limits of ‘x’ is to find out what is ‘x’ and what is not ‘x’” (ibid).

As an ultimate science of truth, epistemology battles with the questions; what is truth and how can truth be known? We can glean from Ijomah’s analysis that to know a thing involves knowing the ‘thing’ and knowing what a ‘thing’ is not. This implies knowing the physicality of a thing and also knowing non-physicality of that phenomenon. This portrays that knowledge or truth has a certain type of ontological horizon within which it can be articulated. This horizon is provided by what Asouzu calls ‘Ibuanyidanda’ in the Igbo language or complementarity in English language. It is an “indivisible horizon of being, outside of which nothing has meaning that claims existence” (Ibuanyidanda 329). To be in control (ima onwe onye), the scientific truths, epistemological truths and whatever, serve missing links and share much with each draw their being from this complementary horizon (Ibuanyidanda).

Truth according to Asouzu “is more than correspondence of statements to facts. Truth is ultimately connected to meaning and such meanings have supernatural absolute dimension” (*The Method and Principles*, 164). He stated further:

“Truth consists rather in the sum-total of all the facts needed to demonstrate that a thing is what we claim that it is. It is not enough to prove that a person did not commit murder by producing empirical evidence based on spatio-temporal inferences. Such facts are important but must pass the ultimate test for truth and authenticity” (ibid).

This ultimate test is the articulation of truth claims within the ontological horizon through what Asouzu calls “the transcendent complementary unity of consciousness”.

For Pollock and Cruz, “the truth condition of the concept red is the condition of being red, and the truth condition of the concept blue is the condition of being blue” (Contemporary Theories of Knowledge 143). They illustrated this more by saying that “red = blue if and only if being red=blue” (ibid). This implies that substance and accident are interrelated and inseparable. For neither can there be accident apart from substance, nor can there be substance without accident existing independently. In this case authentic truth is transcendent, and complementarily mediated through the ontological horizon of being as Asouzu clearly holds.

In complementary reflection which provides the horizon for being-in-control (ima-onwe-onye), there is an intricate relationship according to Asouzu, between ontological truth and truth as lived experience. (The Method and principles, 311 cf. Ibuanyidanda 70-80). For something to be true Asouzu stated, “it has to supersede the mere claim concerning the harmonization of our perception of it with the actual state of the thing in question. What this means is that any truth claim must relate to the totality and comprehensiveness of being as the foundation of all existent realities” (ibid). Truth as Asouzu could say can never be had in fragments, it has to ensue in comprehensive complementary fashion in line with all the missing links of reality, through the ontological horizon of ibuanyidanda.

3. The Epistemological Human Ambivalent Tension-ladenness: A Quest for –ima-onwe-onye or being-in-control

Man by nature possesses the innate desire to know the unknown. It was this insatiable urge that made Thales, the first western philosopher to extricate himself from the traditional banalities of concomitant conceptions of Homer and Hesiod in attributing everything that happens including cause and its effects to God. Thales pushed by his agitation to know posited water as the primordial stuff of the universe. Yet even till date, the steps and postulations purported by the ancient up to the contemporary philosophers seem to have projected the heurism aglow. That is why Aristotle in his metaphysics said that “human nature is in bondage” (The works of Aristotle translated

by W. D. Ross 3). Why because there are some knowledge man sought that the possession of it might be justly regarded as beyond human power. “God alone can have this privilege” Aristotle stated. Thus, St. Augustine says that we remain restless until we rest in him (Omoregbe, philosophy 18). All these portray human existential limitations, ambivalence, tensions and intrinsic urge to be in control (ima onwe onye).

According to Asouzu, the ego strives to live beyond tension. Commenting on the difficulties and confusion besetting the new religious phenomenon in Nigeria, he avers that “here, the ego hardly strives to live beyond tension, since tension and confusion is the dynamism that drives, energizes and enriches it. Remove this tension, confusion and paradoxes that ensue from this new religious phenomenon, chances are that religion returns to its natural harmonizing and equilibrating foundation” (Ibuanyidanda, 348). It is this confusion and these paradoxes (ambivalent tensions) that keep man in suspense and struggle, leading to the desire to equilibrate the mind, the ego and the inner-man. This insatiable urge to be in-control (ima-onwe-onye) can be resolved by the mind’s (ego) participation in the common complementary horizon of being (Ibuanyidanda). Thus, Asouzu maintained that; “the issue of being-in-control (ima-onwe-onye) has a deeply human-dimension that cannot be ignored, the act of being-in-control is thus more than being in charge like a boss, or issuing dictates in the form of an omniscient being. On the contrary, this subsists in the capacity of the mind to be aware of its sharing a common complementary horizon (ibuanyidanda) with other units and missing links within a given framework, in the process of which “authentic idea of being and human action emerges” (Ibuanyidanda, 348).

This inherent multidimensional tension-laden character of the human condition made Rene Descartes to resort into doubting. Kant in his perplex vagaries of his ambivalence bifurcated reality into two, adding that the ‘numenon’ is unknowable. Plato on his own purported that the really-real lies in the world of forms. Aristotle who nearly hit the target later ended up in realism because of his Platonic elitist mindset. In Igbo adage it is said “imara nkaa ima nke ozo”, meaning if you know ‘this’(one) do you know the ‘other’. This implies nothing can survive or claim reality in isolation. This was buttressed by Asouzu when he claims that ‘to be is not to be alone’ (ka so mu adina).

In all epistemological quest to know or being-in-control, the tension-ladenness enshrined in ambivalent nature of human existence is often encountered. Hence, Asouzu opines; “all matters of ontology aim, not only towards being or the foundation on which all existent realities are erected, it

is more also an attempt, at laying out the conditions needed to empower and re-empower the subject or the mind in view of being-in-control in all existential situations, which are ambivalent and as such tension-laden, tempestuous and charged” (Ibuanyidanda, 56). He further maintained that “one of the highest modes of being-in-control is in the recognition, which the subject accords to other modes of self-expression of being, as missing links. It is this consciousness, which integrates all modes of self-expression of being into one framework of mutual interrelated units. Within this framework, all missing links are perceived as sharing the same horizon. To be therefore, is the capacity of the subject to be in control of its overhaul-worthy, tension-laden ambivalent existential situations” (ibid, 56-57).

4. The Absolute Dimension of Knowledge: The Water-Gurar of Being-in-control

Knowledge according to Ozumba, is considered by some people as “the adequate judgment of our perception in terms of a supposed agreement between what is out there and what we think we see” (A Concise Introduction to Epistemology, 53). He averred that “the problematic that has characterized the nature of knowledge is linguistic, metaphysical, psychological and epistemological” (ibid). This implies that the state or process of knowing involves agreement of reality correspondence to mental image and at times transcend what is. Knowledge justification requires an absolute (abstract) standard justifiability.

With unintended ethnocentric mindset coupled with the *ihe mkpuchi anya* (phenomenon of concealment) some African writers hyperbolically maintained that “nothing is absolute in African thought” committing a fallacy of hasty generalization. In *ibuanyidanda* philosophy or complementary reflection, Asouzu maintains that knowledge is absolutely founded and has a relative dimension at the same time. Besides, for Asouzu “the ultimate foundation of true knowledge and experience of reality is ontological founded in being, insofar being is that on account of which anything that exists serves a missing link of reality” (Ibuaru, 221). It is in view of this absolute future referential dimension of our experience of reality, according to Asouzu, that our genuine effort to seek harmony as contracting units gets full meaning and can be defended. “Take away this dimension of an absolute future reference, and this fundamental permanence becomes shaky” (ibid).

To claim that knowledge has no absolute dimension is to bring to loom light a back-dated archaic-defunct dispute of empiricism and rationalism. In this case Aristotle would ask, “must we say that sensible sub-

stances alone exist, or that there are others besides these?” (Ross, Book B 11). He further stated that “these” also cannot exist apart from the sensible things. “For if there are sensible things and sensations intermediate between form and individual, . . .” (ibid). Here, metaphysics becomes the science of intermediates. For substance and accident must mediate for reality to be grasped. It is for this reason according to Aristotle quoted by Asouzu “that the wise is the person who has knowledge of substances as the first principles or causes. Even if for him, substance cannot be grasped without their accidents, as matter cannot be grasped without form and vice versa, . . .” (Ibanyidanda 148). Since substance is inseparable from accidents it means that the act of knowing or gaining knowledge is absolutely dimensionally coupled with metaphysical undertone. Thus Asouzu writes:

“without this form of absolute indubitable commitment in future reference, which for complementary reflection is the ideal of reason seeking full authentication in history, both practically and theoretically, no certain knowledge would be possible, even at pure subjective level” (Ibuaru, 222).

The craving of the ego (mind) to possess truth in its purest form is an epistemic quest to be-in-control (ima onwe onye). Man is not satisfied with just knowing the empirical realities. That is why Aristotle maintained that the one who knows what makes fire hot is superior to the one who just knows that fire is hot. Science which claims to know all is bewildered with the perplexities of Bermuda triangle. This just indicates that truth, knowledge or reality can only be conceived in totality within the mutual complementary whole. That is to say for knowledge or truth to be authentic, it must transcend the physical nature for it to encompass the human person in the totality of his being, as a missing link, bearing in mind the uncertainties that need to be addressed.

5. Being-in-control and its Aftermath in the Quest for Knowing

Asouzu’s being-in-control (ima onwe onye) connotes the capacity to exist in full awareness of the intricate relationship between all existent realities. It is an idea about being that serves missing links in the process of which it upholds its existence in complementary reflection which states that “whatever exists serves a missing link of reality”. In sharing common complementary horizon (Ibanyidanda), the heavy burden (Ibuaru) is lightened when the ego (mind) is fully aware of other units and missing links within a given framework which leads to full affirmation of being. This affirmation of being becomes concretized in the process of ‘existential conversion during which the ego joyously enthuses *jide k’ iji* – this is the joy of being Asouzu is talking about.

Epistemologically, Asouzu unlike Socrates in his dictum- “man know thyself” went beyond self-knowledge or knowledge of self only. That is, not just knowing oneself but knowing oneself in relation to others. The implication is, the knowledge of self only (ie, to be, is to be alone) is insufficient for authentic living or existence. Descartes “cogito ergo sum” (I think therefore I am) and Berkeley’s/Wiredu’s “Esse est percipii” (to be, is to be perceived) are half-bake and lack absolute and authentic truth. This is because to know ‘x’ involves knowing what ‘x’ is and what ‘x’ is not. When the mind is anchored in the harmonization of differences via the ontological horizon of *ibuanyidanda* it becomes aware that whatever exist serves a missing link. This is when we say that the subject in question is being-in-control in the truest sense of existence.

Both empiricism and rationalism are complementary. But Kant is found wanting in saying that ‘numenon’ is unknowable. Well, knowing that “numenon” is unknowable is already a knowledge itself. But the obscurity of the object of our experience and ethno-centric mindset coupled with phenomenon of concealment (the *mkpuchi anya*) do prevent the mind from going beyond the confines of our world immanency. Epistemology and metaphysics are complementary. For ultimate truth is also the ultimate reality, because a truth cannot be truth without being real. In other worlds, substance and accidents are complementary. For without ontological foundation, truth or knowledge can never be in control. A knowledge or truth without metaphysical foundation, lacks authenticity.

The principle of complementary reflection which necessitates being-in-control (*ima onwe onye*) was equally adopted though not mentioned by the early philosophers. Heraclitus of Ephesus for instance, sees “the process of strife, which changes all things into their opposites as the foundation of all things” (Asouzu, *Method and Principles* 97). Metaphysical pluralists such as Empedocles of Agrigentum maintained that “the four basic elements fire, air, water, and earth combine in various proportions to form everything that exists” (*ibid.* 97).

Nicholas of Cusas used the expression “*coincidentia oppositorum*” to express the fact that all opposites find their unity in a one infinite God. In other words, God is for him the harmonious synthesis of opposites in an infinite and unique manner (Asouzu, 98). Spinoza reflected on this principle with his theory of coherence, that is the belief that all true ideas are ultimately interrelated in an integrated systematic whole that comprises absolute metaphysical reality (*ibid.*). Zen logic regards opposites as complements, is also form of complementary approach to the world (*ibid.* 98). Hence, the “*maxim anything goes*” dose not arise neither could the coherentists theory

of straight-jacketed truth rotation an issue.

The criterion for truth and authenticity according to Asouzu, “demands therefore that we concede to the type of unity existing between world immanent realities and the foundation of all existent realities” (Method and Principles, 320). Every search for truth, meaning, knowledge and authenticity has an absolute dimension or commitment. Knowledge or truth has to transcend beyond the region of experience and seek to have speculative, practical and ontological grounding for it to be in control. That is why Asouzu maintains that “the issue of truth and authenticity transcends the region of mere epistemology and logic to relate to the universal and comprehensive unity of being and consciousness in all areas of existence” (ibid, 301 – 311). That is to say that in ibuanyidanda philosophy or complementary reflection for the human subject (ego) to be in control, there is intricate relationship between ontological truth and truth as lived experience which has to supersede the mere perception of the senses.

6. Conclusion

Asouzu’s idea of *ima onwe onye* or being-in-control to a large extent questions the epistemological claims that true knowledge has no ontological foundation that is complementary. Commitment to knowledge without complementary ontological foundation has pushed some thinkers to be stuck to a one-sided epistemology. The consequence of this is their inability to go beyond the world immanent pre-deterministic concomitant immediacy in which the ego lacks the internal equilibration characterizing a being-in-control (*onye ma onwe ya*). Such a being in control (*onye ma onwe ya*) takes cognizance that whatever exists serves a missing link of reality. When the ego is thus in control of its tension-laden existential situations it has the chances of realizing that the ultimate foundation of true knowledge and experience of reality is ontologically founded in being. Thus, to think that the physical or concrete entities only are the real is thinking in a peripheral myopic pre-deterministic concomitant immediacy. Truths are complementary, what is ‘truth’ is beyond world immanent immediacy, because ‘to be is not to be alone’ (*Ka so mu adina*) which portrays the Igbo saying “*onye aghala nwanne ya*” (don’t by-pass the ‘other’ or neglect your neighbour). This is the true experience of what Asouzu calls “transcendent complementary unity of consciousness”.

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