

Back to Home Page: <http://www.frasouzu.com/> for more essays from a complementary perspective

Kant's Metaphysics of subjectivity and Asouzu's idea of joy of Being

By Enyimba Maduka

Posted on the internet on August 24, 2006

Introduction:

Subjectivity is a philosophical view that denies the existence of objective knowledge or truth. It holds that truth is dependent on the individual or the subject and not on the object. It is also against realism, which holds that truth, is out there independent of mind. According to Lacey, subjectivism is that view which claims that what appears to be objective truth or rules in certain spheres are really disguised commands or expression of attitudes. For him; "... subjectivity says that certain utterances do express objective truth, but only about human minds, wishes, beliefs, experiences etc. whether they be of the speaker or of people in general" (333). The subjectivity implied in Kant's metaphysics is occasioned by his notion of truth, which defies ordinary perceptions on the subject. Kant gave the human mind such a large role in his philosophy that it constitutes truth and authenticity criterion. This is the pivotal issue upon which Kant's metaphysics of subjectivity as found in his Critique of Pure Reason is rested. On the other hand, Asouzu's principle of complementarity appears to be at opposite pole with Kant's subjective metaphysics even though both are geared towards the understanding of reality in its most authentic form. Thus, for Asouzu "complementarism is a philosophy that seeks to consider things in the significance of their singularity and not in the exclusiveness of their otherness in view or the joy that gives completion to all missing links of reality" (Method and Principles 39).

Following this, this paper attempt to x-ray the kernel of Kant's metaphysics and Asouzu's joy of being and expose their similarities or dissimilarities in their attempts to understand or make sense of reality. The point is

made that, Asouzu presents a detailed approach to understanding of reality, which recognizes the relativity or dependence of being in their existence. While Kant, though recognizes the subjective/ relative tendency of the human mind, accords to it the power to categorize and restructure reality according to its very nature. Thus, giving itself (the mind) an absolute place in the quest for truth or knowledge of reality.

An Overview of Kant's Subjective Metaphysics:

In his preface to the first and second edition of the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant emphasizes the major problem of metaphysics.

According to him, the chief problem of metaphysics and of human reason in general are, the three great themes of God, Freedom and Immortality. In his words; "metaphysics has as the proper objects of its inquiries three ideas only; God, freedom and immortality" (Kant 15).

Immanuel Kant was dissatisfied that metaphysics appears to be an area of endless disputes which has not found any scientific method which would enable it solve its problems. This in-conclusiveness of metaphysics and its inability to find a reliable method that will lead to certain conclusions, convinced Kant that the fundamental question for philosophers of his time must be the question of whether metaphysics itself is a genuine subject. Kant was therefore interested to find out whether metaphysics is capable of extending our knowledge of reality by giving us sure knowledge of the existences and nature of God, of human freedom and immortality of soul. Kant subjected metaphysics to the critical investigation of pure reason, Kant's major aim was therefore to provoke the downfall of all dogmatic metaphysics, to limit every considerable scope of a prior speculation and to establish the limits of metaphysical inquiry.

Kant's answer to the question "is metaphysics possible?" was that it is impossible as a science, but as general disposition or falling of the human mind, it is nevertheless real. What is implied here is that in spite of Kant's rejection of metaphysics as impossible he recognizes its possibility in the natural tendency of human reason towards metaphysics. Kant believes that human reason has the natural inclination to step beyond the boundaries of experience to entertain such issues as God, freedom, immortality. So that even if we cannot know the things as they are in themselves, we can at least know them as things in themselves. Kant believes that many of the problems philosopher have entertained stem from the application of their reasons to the questions that are beyond the phenomenal world. And when this is the

case, that is, when we apply our knowledge to matters beyond experience, we fall into the antinomies of reason, which are propositions that make opposite claim but for which we can provide equal justification.

As a result, Kant declared that “our forms of intuition, first of all restrict us to what can be experienced in a spatial and temporal context namely empirical objects, our logical forms and our categories are organizing principle within this context” (Popkin and Stroll 137). Only phenomena (things as they appear) which are object that are related in time and space can be known by the human mind; while the noumena (thing as they are in themselves) which are object that are not related in time and space cannot be known by human reason (mind). Following this, we do not see things as they are in themselves but only as the structure of our mind makes them appear to us. In other words, the human mind restructures objects and makes them appear to us in certain ways and it is only in these ways that we can perceive them.

The subjective nature of Kant’s metaphysics is therefore evident in his theory that the world of our experience, the so-called phenomenal world, is the product both of something which we are presented with, and the a priori conditions supplied by the mind. The mind is viewed as something like a vast blank form which determines the kinds of answer that can be given and the categories fix the necessary conditions of both experience and knowledge, but the actual content arises only from something independent of us.

Joy of Being in Asouzu’s Complementary Reflection:

An adequate grasp of Asouzu’s philosophy of complementary reflection is dependent on the understanding of two major principles upon which complementarity is based. These are the principle of harmonious complementation and the principle of progressive transformation. The former states that “anything that exist serves a missing link of reality”. By missing link it is meant the diverse component or entities of which any existing reality is constituted. In line with this principle, Asouzu avers that “a system can only work when the diverse components of which it is constituted serve each other complementarily and authentically as aspect of it’s’ existence”,”(Effective Leadership 58). What is meant here is that, if different components that make up a system are viewed in isolation and singly, we can say that they are missing in relation to one another in a way. They are missing in the sense that, as discrete entities, each can be viewed in isolation to each and in total disregard to each other. When this happens, a unit can be unaware of the other, and in this moment, the one that it is unaware of is

missing. Thus, as a system these component parts ought to be brought in relation to each other, such that they become aware of themselves and serve each other in the most authentic and harmonious way.

The principle of progressive transformation on the other hand, is a completion of the principle of harmonious transformation. The principle state thus; “allow the limitation of being to be the cause of your joy” (Asouzu, *Effective Leadership* 60). What Asouzu means here is that, a thing serves a missing link of reality if and only if in the process, it can also gain its authentic legitimization. That is to say that, all human acts including the act of knowing or the act of metaphysical speculation must be directed to their authentic source as a condition for them to be source of our joy. For instance, those who perform negative acts derive some negative joy from it, but this joy which the limitation of being provides must be transformed to authentic joy to have its meaning.

Thus, complementary reflection is “a philosophy that seeks to consider things in the significance of their singularity and not in the exclusiveness of their otherness in view of the joy that gives completion to all missing links of reality” (Asouzu, *Method and Principles* 39). Complementary philosophy aims at allowing being assume its natural completeness as the joy that unifies all relative entities to a common foundation of meaning and legitimization in a universal and comprehensive perspective.

Essentially therefore, Asouzu’s complementary reflection is a life philosophy seeking to understand reality from the preceding conditions of its African background, without committing itself uncritically to these preconditions. In other words, it seeks to outline the conditions for understanding and interpreting human life and situation with a view to providing the tools necessary for harmonious co-existence.

Asouzu refers to his idea of joy of being as the driving force of our lives made evident in conscious attempt to live authentically through mastering our situation. Thus, a person is said to have allowed the limitation of being to be the cause of his joy, if he participates in the joy embedded in the ultimate foundation of being, and this is made evident in authentic living and in the conscious attempt to choose the positive side of this ambivalent interest. Asouzu contends that there is a joy that is constitutive of our existence of being and it is known to us proleptically and referentially in all those moments where we make honest commitment to experience it authentically in our existential situations.

Kant and Asouzu: Subjective Metaphysics vs. Joy of Being:

In making sense of the nature of reality and our knowledge of

it, complementary reflection demands that the different roles of the different aspects of reality including the subject of knowledge is of utmost importance, and must be so recognized in order to uphold a harmonized complementary unity among them. In doing so, all aspects of reality are placed in a relationship of intricate mutual joyous complementary services to each other. Hence, all aspect of the human person must work together harmoniously and complementarily in order to understand clearly the nature of reality in general. And also, all aspect of reality must be viewed in isolation of each other. This enables them to function as missing links of reality and as such be transformed into the authentic source of joy.

The point being made here is that, the human person must live from the deep awareness of the relativity and fragmentation of the world and must not consider this arrangement a disadvantage in any way. Based on this, the human person could feel and think into this world and allow this to affect him positively, such that there arises a fusion of the subject and his world (object) so that a more intimate relationship is established between them. This is an activity of the mind seeking its fullness and authentication through the unity of possible relations that it finds in all existential situations.

Asouzu in his idea of being tends to show that, one of the greatest difficulties that complementary reflection has to contend with is the thought that we can never truly overcome the challenges posed by our relativity. This, one must state was the case with Kant, Kant was unable to overcome the challenge of human subjectivity and so he cast doubts on the ability of the mind (reason) to know truth objectively, that is to know what Kant called the noumena. According to Asouzu, “in a situation of this nature, unhealthy doubts easily supplant the type of certitude that derives from the necessity conferred by a transcendent complementary unity of consciousness about the world” (Method and Principle 497).

Kant gave the mind (reason) such an autonomous self-subsisting and independent role that it becomes the arbiter and decider of truth and authenticity criterion. Hence anything the mind, by means of its categories presents to us as the nature of reality is truth and knowledge. The human mind does not depend on the world nor does it conform to the structure of the world for it to arrive at truth and knowledge of reality or being. Instead, it is the mind, which restructures the world and presents such to us as truth and reality. By this, Kant unwittingly takes recourse in subjectivity by which he creates the problem of noumena and phenomena, where the human mind cannot grasp reality in the world of noumena (things as they are in the themselves). This culminated in his rejection of metaphysics as

impossible. What Kant does here is to project his individual subjective understanding of the world as authentic knowledge of reality. And this occurs when one is unable to overcome the challenges of his relativity, and when instead of appreciating reality from the angle of its comprehensiveness, the limitations of one's personal interest influences one's appreciation of a given reality.

On the contrary, Asouzu argues that authentic knowledge does not reside in the individual's subjective projection of his understanding of the world. It is rather a moment of scepticism about the world and the necessity to be aware that one can be in error and that our essential situation is ambivalent and as such can be a danger to what we want. In his words:

“Authentic knowledge has to do with the anxious and frantic efforts we make to be acquainted ultimately with all the meaning we share with all Missing links of reality in the process of transcendence of fragmentary meanings we give to common sense experience. In the process of authentic knowledge acquisition, the mind seeks to know things as they in themselves and learn to distinguish appearance from reality (Methods and Principles 407).

From the above, this comprehensive authentic knowledge is the one that has its foundation in being, and such authentic knowledge is the only one that can form the foundation of human action. Authentic knowledge therefore consists in the conscious mental activity in the process of which we come to appreciate the world from the angle of its comprehensiveness and not from the limitations imposed by our personal interests. It is the process by which the mind rids itself of those interest that threaten it.

Thus, Asouzu's idea of joy of being is understood to mean that no meaning taken singly can be comprehensive enough; all ideas acquire their actual significance only in a complementary framework, yet in a manner that makes us conscious of the significance of the thing in question. It is for this reason that Asouzu believes that all acts of knowing are object oriented and are as such focused on something outside of the subject or at least it is the capacity of the mind to be above the thing known or be conscious of it. In many actions therefore, including the act of knowing, the mind is not only drawn by the good that sustains it but also in evident insight of the joy that drives it. It is therefore not enough to say that an act is good or right, but such an act must also be a source of joy for the actor. A joy is authentic if it offers the actor reasons to believe that the criterion of truth and authenticity is upheld in his action.

It is at this point that one seems to find fault with Asouzu's idea of joy of being. From the forgoing exposition, it appears that Asouzu

concentrates more on the doer or perpetrator of an action and the joy he, derives from his action, while neglecting the “other” person (i.e.) the receiver of the action in question. For instance, in any given human action there is a subject and an object. The subject is the one who performs the action, while the object is the one who receives the action. For Asouzu to aver that an act whether it be good or bad must be a source of joy for the actor, presupposes a neglect or an unawareness of the other constitutive aspect of the given action – the receiver or sufferer. Thus, if this is the case, Asouzu’s idea of joy of being is one sided and lacks the comprehensiveness which complementary reflection demands.

However, Asouzu seems to agree with Kantian postulation that the possibility or the reality of metaphysics is found in man’s natural tendency to apply reasons beyond experience or phenomenal world of space and time. According to him the question of metaphysics is a very important one. He calls it the question of certain knowledge of the nature of the ultimate foundation of human action and cognition. This question, he believes will ever remain relevant to all forms of complementary philosophical reflections. Whenever we attempt to answer this question, Asouzu argues that we sense a tension within us and one that connotes a type of natural and compelling intuitive insight into the nature of the reality that sustains this quest. According to Asouzu;

This insight entails both guesswork and certitude, yet we have a premonition into the impelling character of the type of certain answer, which we anticipate. It is not a limited, relative answer but an absolute, comprehensive one, which we cannot fully render due to the relative and fragmented nature of our being. This is why we sense this type of answer even in our natural tendencies to intolerance, exclusiveness, unmitigated egoism, to dogmatism, to absolute possessiveness, which are moments when the mind seeks to be fully committed to something absolute and ultimate. (Method and Principle 332)

The point Asouzu makes in the foregoing is that our ability to state the true and authentic nature of things depends on our ability to identify them in their relativity and absoluteness. This approach is important when it comes to saying what things are in themselves as the central concern of metaphysical reflections. We find ourselves in this metaphysical commitment sooner than we imagine due to the natural tendency of our being to seek absoluteness and comprehensiveness in existential situation in life.

Conclusion:

What we have attempted to show in the foregoing pages is that, the metaphysical dimension of complementary reflection has a very strong practical aspect since the being that gives legitimacy to all missing links of reality is the same-being that confers legitimacy to human action. This being manifests itself in action as service.

We however, identified a shortcoming in the idea of joy of being. It was shown that the other person in a given action who receives, seems to be neglected. His action, which is a reaction to the action perpetrated on him must be considered adequately so as to attain the comprehensiveness which complementarily demands. We therefore suggest that the painful reaction of a receiver or sufferer of an action to the unjust or evil act perpetrated on him, must be considered as a constitutive and concrete aspect of reality. Efforts must therefore be made, in the spirit of complementary reflection, to show how such a person can possibly transform such action to serve as a source of joy for him. Otherwise, the question that will continue to loom large at the doors of complementary reflection will be; "How can one realistically turn an extremely ugly situation or experience to be the source of his joy when he is at the receiving end?"

It was also shown that it is very necessary in all existential situation always to inquire into the authentic nature of things in themselves. Thus metaphysics is the study of being as being and for this reason it concentrates on the nature of reality in its most authentic and true form as against Kant's view that human mind can only attain knowledge of the phenomenal world, while that of the noumena is unattainable, Asouzu's complementarism insists that by means of transcendent unity of consciousness, the mind can know not only the things as they appear (Phenomena) but also things as they are in themselves (noumena) in a proleptic and future referential manner.

Works Cited:

- Asouzu Innocent I. *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection in and Beyond African Philosophy*. Calabar: University of Calabar Press, 2004.
- Asouzu Innocent I. *Effective Leadership and the Ambivalence of Human Interest*. Calabar: University of Calabar Press, 2003.
- Lacey, A. R. *A Dictionary of Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1996.
- Kant, Immanuel *Critique of Pure reason* (second edition) trans. J. M. D. Meikle John, Guersey Press, 1995.
- Popkin, Richard, H. and Stroll, Avrum, *Philosophy Made Simple* London: W. H. Allen, 1969.