The Problem of Being in Metaphysics

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Abstract

What is being? This was and still is one of the fundamental questions within the area of metaphysics. The researcher in this piece studies the dynamics of the problem of being in metaphysics. A historical approach is adopted to this study. The researcher goes through the Ancient, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary Periods to understand the development of the concept of being. The researcher also explores the understanding of the concept of being by African thinkers. In this regard, Emmanuel Edeh's development of Igbo concept of being, Pantaleon's philosophy of belongingness as being, based on Igbo ontology, and the use of Chi to designate the notion of being in Igbo metaphysics by some African philosophers is also explored. Not minding the developments of the concept of being by various philosophers, the researcher discovers that the original concept of being as that which exists is retained.

Key words: Being, Metaphysics, problem, African, philosophy

Introduction

The question, 'what is being?' is one of the fundamental enquiries within the parameters of metaphysics. This becomes very important since metaphysics

as a branch of philosophy is concerned with the totality of being in its nature and structure. And since metaphysical problems are perennial ones, which cannot be obviously solved dogmatically, it is not surprising that the question of the nature of being has been there right from the period men and women began to philosophize to the present time. In this piece, the researcher is burdened with the understanding of the problem of being in the historical development of metaphysics. This would lead through the Ancient to the Medieval, Modern, Contemporary Epochs, without leaving out the concept of being by contemporary African philosophers.

Being in the ancient era
This enquiry about the nature of being was first set in an articulated motion by Parmenides when he argued that whatever is, is being. He further said that being is one, eternal and unchanging, meaning that whatever changes is not being (Omoregbe, 2002). This notwithstanding, Heraclitus of Ephesus was chiefly famous in antiquity for his doctrine that everything is in a state of flux, as such, being is characterised by flux (Russell, 1975). Plato, while disagreeing with Heraclitus on his doctrine of flux, agrees with Parmenides that reality is eternal and unchanging, however differs from Parmenides in arguing that being is multiple rather than one; and these are the forms in the Platonic World of Forms. The ultimate source of all the Forms, for Plato is the Form of Good. It is the source of the being of other Forms. Aristotle who defines Metaphysics as the study of 'being qua being' identifies being with God; it is therefore not surprising that in Aristotle, Metaphysics becomes theology (Omoregbe, 2002). He defines being as the foundation and unity of all things. His definition of being leads to identification of being with God. This was a view that Aquinas would adopt in the Medieval Ages, and which Dons Scotus and William of Ockham would oppose.

Being in the medieval epoch
The emergence of the Medieval Epoch did not alter the centrepiece of metaphysical enquiry (Onyeocha, 2009). St Thomas Aquinas followed Aristotle in identifying being with God. For Aquinas, God is being while other creatures are beings in an analogical sense. Contrary to Aristotle who defined being as the foundation and unity of all things, Dun Scotus opines that being is indefinable, this is because it is the simplest and all embracing of all the concepts. Reacting to Aquinas, Duns Scotus rejected and proposed that creatures are beings in the real sense of the word and not in an analogical sense as Aquinas had taught (Omoregbe, 2002). As such, infinite beings are beings in the same way as finite beings are. As such, for him, being is

univocal and not analogical. With this argument, he destroys the ground for attributing 'beingness' solely to God. This was a view that William of Ockham, another eminent medieval philosopher agreed to. From the foregoing, if we define being as 'that which is', it is reasonable to say that Duns Scotus and William of Ockham are correct in saying that being is a univocal concept.

Being in the modern and contemporary periods

During the Modern and Contemporary Periods, the problem of being did not feature prominently as philosophers were more concerned with the problem of substance. The problem however emerged in Hegel. He understands being as something in a dialectical process. He contrasted being with non-being, as thesis and antithesis respectively. The dialectical encounter between the thesis and antithesis is a synthesis, which is a process of becoming. Thus in Hegel, to be is to be in a process of becoming. Martin Heidegger was hugely interested in the concept of being. Being for Heidegger is not a particular being, as Aristotle and Aquinas have identified with God. For instance, you can't call a chair or a man a being. Being goes beyond particular things, it is rather the ground of all beings and the source from which all beings derive their being. Jean-Paul, as an existentialist defined being from this perspective: being is whatever is, not something hidden or mystical. He objects to any understanding of being from the perspective of derivation, participation or creation, this is because no reason can be given for its existence. He goes further to argue that the foundation of being is nothingness, for it emerged from nothing. In Jean-Paul, the religious concept of being found in Aristotle and Aquinas is discarded pointing to the natural and atheistic approaches that would dominate the Modern and Contemporary Eras. For Gabriel Marcel, a Catholic existentialist, being is a mystery and not a problem: a mystery in which we are all engulfed since we are all beings (Omoregbe, 2002). From all these definitions through the different ages of the development of philosophy, whether being is conceived as God or a mystery or a process, being still remains that which is.

Being in African metaphysics

African philosophers like their Western counterparts have also tried to understand being in such a way that it corresponds to the African spirit. In this area, the researcher would discuss the concepts of being in Emmanuel Edeh, Pantaleon Iroegbu, and the proposal of *Chi* as an African concept for being.

Edeh's presentation of Igbo philosophy of being

Edeh's presentation of the concept of being in Igbo metaphysics, as one would expect was derived from Igbo ontology. He posits a notion of being that is derived from dual loci*:* from the Igbo language and the Igbo concept of the human person (Pantaleon, 1995). As regards the derivation of the Igbo concept of being from the concept of the human person, Edeh says that it is born from the fact that human beings are the principal focus of the Igbo physical world, basically comprising the human and non-human. This is expressed in Igbo names and proverbs: *madu-ka* (Human beings are the greatest) *madu-bisi* (Human life is the first) (Edeh, 1985). From the foregoing, one becomes aware of *what is* through an awareness of the human person as a visible concrete instance of what exists. But this would not be the area of concern in this piece. The researcher is primarily concerned with the derivation of being from the Igbo language.

From the Igbo language

Edeh's presentation of being in Igbo metaphysics reveals a deep search by a pioneer African thinker of an African concept that would equal the concept of being employed by his Western contemporaries. And since the Igbo language has no exact equivalence of being in English as he argues "The Igbo language has no word that exactly translates the English word" (Edeh 1985, p.93), he draws out two hypotheses that approximate this notion: the *onye* and *ife* hypothesis.

The 'onye' hypothesis

Edeh employs the concept of *onye* in Igbo language to test-denote the concept of being. But he discovers that *onye* hypothesis is basically applicable to human beings only. What then becomes of non-human existence that cannot be described as *onye*? The concept of *onye* has three applications:

1. *Onye* as a pronominal clause: as a pronominal clause it means 'who', as in "Jonathan who is the president of Nigeria" (Jonathan *Onye bu* president Nigeria).

2. *Onye* as an interrogative adjective: as an interrogative adjective, *Onye* is used to introduce interrogative statements. '*Onye?'* For instance, if someone knocks at your door, you can ask, *onye?* That is 'who?' Then the person responds, *obu Kanu* (It is Kanu)*.* One can also speak of '*onye ma echi?'* (who knows tomorrow?)

3. *Onye* as a noun: 'In this category, its nearest but not exact English equivalent is person'. *Onye* in this sense refers to all living entities, both human and superhuman. However, each time it is employed, it is always precedes an adjective or another noun. For example, *onye okike* (creator)*, onye uko (*Intermediary)*, onye nzuzu* (fool)*, onye mmuta* (scholar)*.

Although most of his informants prefer the use of *onye* to speak of being in Igbo language, especially since it conveys the idea of human beings and designates spiritual beings, Edeh realizes that it cannot be employed to adequately designate the Igbo notion of being. This is based on the principal defect that *onye* cannot include inanimate objects, vegetation or nonhuman animate entities. Things like stone, wood, house, book, pen etc cannot be referred to as *onye.* If for instance a piece of stone falls on my roof or a vulture lands on my roof, I cannot use *onye* to make enquiries. The limitedness of the *onye* hypothesis makes Edeh to seek an alternative concept for the designation of being in Igbo ontology (Edeh, 1985).

From 'onye' to 'ife' hypothesis
Having understood the limitations of *onye,* Edeh in his indefatigable spirit moves on to make further investigations on a more appropriate concept for being. In his investigation, he arrives at *ife.* According to Edeh, "the Igbo word *ife* primarily means thing, anything material of immaterial. It is used to refer to a happening, an event, an occurrence. *Ife* can also be affixed to any adjective to mean specific things" (Edeh 1985, p.95). For instance, *ife obuna* (anything), *ife ebube* (thing of wonder), *ife ojoo* (bad thing), *ife oma* (good thing). After a wide and profound investigation, Edeh realizes that there is no word in Igbo language outside *ife* that approximates the Igbo concept of being (Igbo notion of being covers all categories of being).

And thus, he subscribes to the *ife* hypothesis for the following metaphysical reasons: the Igbo notion of being embraces all categories of being. The *onye* hypothesis on the one hand, already fails in covering all dimensions of being since it only concerns human and spiritual beings, leaving out inanimate, vegetative and non-human animate beings. *Ife* on the other hand, although it primarily refers to inanimate things, by expansion can include human and suprahuman beings (Edeh, 1985). For instance, Edeh says that if an elder asks the question: *kedu ife kelu madu?* (what thing created human beings), any person conversant with the language knows that *ife* in this context refers

to *Chineke,* the Igbo name for the highest of the suprasensible being, the unmade maker of all things.

From 'ife' to 'ife-di'

Having arrived at the *ife* hypothesis, Edeh realised that *ife* as a concept does not bring out all that being means.

> However, we must note that *ife* does not bring out completely all that being means. *Ife* does not emphasize the important aspect of being, namely, the fact of existence. *Ife* standing on its own can be used to refer to both existent and non-existent entities. Hence we have to search for a way of using *ife* to highlight the fact of existence and exclude the possibility of nonexistence(Edeh 1985,p. 96).

To find a solution to this problem, Edeh combines *ife* and *idi* to get *ife-idi. Idi* is the Igbo verb *to be.* It can be used as an adjective and can also be suffixed to anything to show that it exists. For example, *okwute di* (the stone that exists), *Nkita di* (the dog that exists), *Kanu di* (Kanu who exists). Edeh does not end here, he goes further to bring out the categories of *ife-di* that corresponds to different kinds of being.

1. The suprasensory category: in the suprasensory category are beings like *Chineke* and *Ndi muo* (spirits).

2. The human category: the human category is subdivided into *Ndi din du* (the living) and *Ndi Nwuru* (the dead).

3. The thing category: the thing category is divided into three major groupings: *anu* (which means animals), *ife nkiti* (this covers all inanimate entities), and *ogu* (beings that have no existence of their own).

With this understanding of being by Edeh, the researcher would evaluate it in relation to the positions of some other African philosophers who have proposed other concepts for being in Igbo traditional thought.

Pantaleon's presentation of an African concept of being

Pantaleon (1995, p.374) defines belongingness as 'the synthesis of the reality and experience of belongingness'. In this case, the recipient-subject of belonging is involved: something belongs and it belongs to something. Belongingness is a special noun from the verb 'to belong'. It means to be part

of, or to be a member of a group. For Instance, I belong to Arondizuogu community, this gives me rights and privileges that others who do not belong to this community do not have. There is also a possessive nuance of the verb 'to belong'. I can say that the soap belongs to me. In the first nuance, to belong creates a situation of participation and in the second, it creates a situation of possession. There is an ontological nuance of belongingness, which specifies that a thing is because it belongs. To be is to belong and to belong is to be (Anah, 2005).

The Igbo principle of *Egbe bere Ugo bere* (let the kite perch, let the eagle perch) re-enacts the contents and significance of belongingness as the essence and hermeneatic core of reality (Pantaleon, 1995). Pantaleon believes that what a being is, is its activity of perching (belonging). To perch is to be. To be is to perch. To be is to belong and to belong is to be. When *Egbe* perches and *Ugo* perches, they come face to face with each other. They are with each other. They are present to each other. They relate to each other deeply and directly as well as have relationships with other inhabitants of *Uwa* (world). To relate is to share something: to give and take. They have common projects, needs and desires. Together they struggle to overcome their difficulties and share their joy (Pantaleon, 1995).

Obviously, the idea of 'To be is to belong and to belong is to be' may sound tautological, but it is the definitional circle involved in any description of being as being. This circle will however be clarified as the four Pantaleonine analytic connotations of belongingness is explored.

Be-(I)-on (Be on)
In this case, 'to belong' involves 'being on' in the *Uwa* (Uwa is the world in English, but in Igbo it takes up a meaningful depth. It is the entirety of existence) from which all concrete realities derive their being. To be on in this sense is to escape the contrary of being off. For either one is on or he is off (Pantaleon, 1995). To be off is to cease to exist and to be on is to be.

Be- (l)-on-going
Having been given existence in the *Uwa*, this aspect of belongingness speaks of the being now going on in its *Uwa* and *Uwaness* (Pantaleon, 1995). In this case, Pantaleon suggests that *Uwa* is the underlying principle in Igbo Metaphysics. This particularly speaks of the process of being, for to remain in being is to proceed in being and not out of being. In this process of being, Pantaleon (1995) makes a difficult synthesis of change and permanence. As the being goes on in being, it maintains its identity even though something in

it changes. In ancient philosophy, change and permanence was a bone of contention between Heraclitus and Parmenides, but in Igbo Metaphysics it is no problem at all. For *uwa naeme ntughari* (the world changes), even though, in the midst of the change *Uwa bu otu* (the world does not change).

Be-long

To be-long for Pantaleon (1995) means to abide, to stay or live long. In this case, it means that belongingness lives long. As such, the subject of *Uwa* lives long. This brings in the issue of space and time, for belongingness is expressed in space and time. Be-long extends into eternity in Igbo ontology; it goes beyond the present dimension of the *Uwa* to the *Uwa* of the ancestors, such that to be and not to be-long is not to be at all. While *on-going* belongingness may be open-ended, *being-long* belongingness stretches into everlastingness. As such, in Pantaleon, one becomes through being-on so as to be-going, in other to be-long.

Be-longing

This speaks of being and longing to be. It stresses the longing for life and being. It is founded on the awareness that nothing is higher a value than life. Expressions in Igbo bring this home: *nduka* (life is greater); *Ndubuisi* (life is the principal thing). To long for life is to want to be, not in the abstract *Uwa* but in the concreteness of what *Uwa* offers.

Each of these themes of belongingness addresses the significance of being, and thus summarizes the essence of being as belongingness. From these analytic themes, we also come to learn that once one is tuned in being; there is no going back from its beingness. One continually goes on in being and not even death can stop one's ongoingness of being (Pantaleon, 1995).

Chi as designating the notion of being in Igbo metaphysics

Njoku (2010), Okere (1983) and Abanuka (2003) have proposed *chi* as an alternative concept for being. Njoku went further to criticize Edeh's concept of being and proposes *Chi* as a replacement for Edeh's *ife*. If the purpose is to address the limitations *ife*, it does not seem to work. The idea of *chi* has created more problems than it set out to address. Njoku's argument is that *chi* is preferable because everything in Igbo, whether animate or inanimate has a *chi*. Njoku forgets here that what we are looking for in Igbo metaphysics is not a name for a thing that is contained in everything in the Igbo world. *Chi* would better serve as an underlying principle in Igbo metaphysics than as a name for being in Igbo. The idea of *chi* takes us back to the arguments of the Ionian Philosophers who speak of water and air and fire as the underlying

principle in every reality. There isn't enough ground to conclude from here that reality is water or air or fire. It is difficult to conclude that because a thing, say 'A', possesses another thing inside of itself, say 'B', that 'B' is now 'A'. For instance, as human being possess blood in their veins, it is not a sufficient reason to conclude that because every human being has blood therefore every human being can be called blood. *Chi* cannot stand as a concept for being. That 'all things possess *Chi*' does not easily translate into 'all things can be called *chi*'.

Conclusion

The above study about the problem of being in metaphysics has led us through the different ages of the development of metaphysics, revealing the character of metaphysical problems as a perennial one. A cursory glance at the earliest definitions of being from the ancient philosophers, through the scholastics to Descartes and Kant as that which exist, it would be discovered that their concept of being has remained abstract and unsubstantiated. Although they have answered the question of what is being, they are yet to answer the question of what being is substantively. During the development of the concept of being by African philosophers, being assumes a more operative concept; it became something concrete and substantive. This notwithstanding, the concept of being through the ages has remained that which is. No matter how much light future thinkers may shed on this concept, it would still remain that which is.

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