

**QUESTIONS AND ENGAGEMENTS ON ARIBIAH DAVID  
ATTOE'S, *GROUNDWORK FOR A NEW KIND OF AFRICAN  
METAPHYSICS: THE IDEA OF PREDETERMINISTIC  
HISTORICITY***

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### **Introduction**

Aribiah David Attoe's central question in this book is the idea of what he calls in his subtitle "predeterministic historicity," which I want to focus on here. There is a lot else we could discuss, but it seems like a good idea to focus on the book's central project.

Anyone who has seen me engage with other scholars' recent work knows that my goal has always been to engage in a creative and constructive conversation, to see what might come out of a work when it comes in contact with difference. In other words, the goal is not generally to decide on whether I think the argument is right or not. I am pluralist enough to think that there are a lot of stories we can tell, including philosophical ones, that have weight and significance, and which enable us to see some aspect of existence or can make possible a set of individual or collective actions that we might not have seen as clearly previously. I am, in other words, always far more interested in what a piece of work makes possible than whether it is correct or not, whatever that means.

And so, the goal here will be to raise questions that I hope will lead to further clarification and perhaps some new ideas as well. I have seven questions for Attoe, grouped into three parts, that I think will do this. This seems the best way to engage an ambitious book like this.

### **Relationality and Causation**

One puzzle in this text is about the nature of causation. It is central to the argument of the book. And yet, perhaps more interesting is why it

is central to the book. As I read it, what Attoe really wants is relationality (and he basically says this on page 9 of the book: “Being part of a state of affair, these realities are necessarily part of a relation of things, and what binds them is not causality, in the conventional sense, but the interactive relationships that necessarily occurs between things-in-the-world.). This is why the version of causation here is framed as it is, as an overturning of “bifurcation” (ATTOE 2022, 42). He begins not by inquiring into causality itself but into the “first cause”, that is, the question of God.

It is important to note that even though the title of this book announces that it is about metaphysics, it is also about epistemology. That is true not just of this work, but most works that claim to focus on metaphysics, unless they are entirely speculative. The term “cause”, for instance, can be used in either sense – a cause as the reason for the existence of something, or as the explanation for something, that is, a reason for knowing something (and indeed, Attoe uses the term explicitly in both those ways on page 27). The reason that this is important, is because Attoe’s determinism (or “predeterminism” as he puts it) depends on the linked causal structure stretching back to a first cause and locking into place all subsequent occurrences. At the same time, the question of who this determinism applies to is also important and is the epistemological question. If there is a determinism, to the best of our knowledge, but we don’t know how it will work out, does this mean there is a practical and actionable determinism? What does this mean for human action? Does the determinism take into account our striving to make things different? Should we conclude that we should resign ourselves to the determinism? Such a resignation would be predicted by that deterministic structure, but so would action to change things. In other words, epistemologically determinism would not make any difference to how we justify our actions in the world.

Attoe follows Innocent Asouzu’s complementarity and his critique of the split between essence and accidents. Asouzu makes this case in order to deflate the hierarchy between these things, to recognize that there is a relation between all these predicates, including that which is supposedly the thing that holds the predicates together.

Attoe traces this path, in chapter 3, from Aristotle to Asouzu. I think it is important to make a stop in the European Middle Ages on

this path. And, it is not the path that we might think, through figures like Aquinas and others engaged in the debate between universalism and nominalism. I have in mind others like Meister Eckhart. Eckhart thought that existence depended on its linguistic roots as “standing out” (ex-sistere), in this case, standing out from a cause. It is why he said “I pray God to be rid of God” – the God he wanted to get rid of was a metaphysical being, metaphysically like us only more so on every scale of quality, and part of the same causal hierarchy. If something had no cause (and the only thing that qualified as such was God), that thing could not be said to exist because there was nothing to stand out from. This flattens the existence/essence question, I think because it brings epistemology into the discussion. We could rely on Aristotle’s (and Aquinas’s) four causes, of course, but that which one stands out from might just as well be the array of accidents, making them not much different from an essential cause.

The point here is, I think, that, like Attoe and Asouzu, relationality is important here. This is a minor note in the European tradition, not taken up until much later. There are others who emphasize relationality as well. In many of these cases, though, the goal is to diminish the emphasis on the individual in favour of what the individual might become in relation to something else. It is not, in other words, an attempt to flatten attributes to the same valuation or undermine the faculty of judgment.

And so this is the **first question** I have for Attoe: given what he says about not wanting to “sneak in benign bifurcations” (2022, 48), is there any place at all for judgment? Does it simply come down to personal preference, which would end up emphasizing the primacy of the individual over others, at least for the purposes of the individual’s own interests? Does one, or can one, act meaningfully within this framework, and what would be meaningful about that action?

A **second question** has to do with the nature of relationality. Later in the book, Attoe groups forms of relationality under a more general heading of “interactive relationships” (2022, 69) and discusses two forms, active and inactive relationality. One might see that his substitution of relationality for causation has to do with some notion of interactivity. Causality is not, after all, interactive – the causal arrow runs only one direction, and while a number of causes might combine to produce an effect, effects do not interact with causes

in a linear version of time. Relationality proposes to do something more. The interactive aspect looks like this:

Whenever we consider an outcome or effect, the reason for the coming to being of that particular outcome is the very interactions that existed in the state of affairs that preceded that outcome. In other words, rather than merely saying that A causes B, we must first consider, as much as we can, the nature of all the actors and factors (all the things-in-the-world) that exists or existed in the state of affairs that preceded the new state of affairs where B expressed itself. (ATTOE 2022, 72)

So in other words, there is an account here that tries to disrupt the linear version of causality, in which there is a single or a limited number of causes that produce an effect in a determinist manner. The interaction is not between us as knowers and the precedents to the phenomenon being accounted for, but between the phenomena themselves.

So here is the question: how does this interaction work? If we imagine ourselves as having complete knowledge of the interactions in question, does that mean that we would inevitably be able to predict the effects of those interactions? Is the problem, then, just our lack of knowledge, and if we solve that problem would we, for example, be able to reliably get rich in the stock market, or predict specific developments in the future of evolution, or know with certainty the trajectory of a hurricane or tornado? Or is there something else going on in this interaction, such that no amount of knowledge would give us the ability to predict these effects?

### **Incipient Individualism**

For a book that champions relationality, there's an underlying streak of individualism that is quite strong. When Attoe speaks of free will (in chapter 5), he is clearly focusing on the capacity of the individual to make a choice or start a series of actions outside of an existing causal stream. He argues (rightly, I think) that this is impossible. But he regularly returns to the question of the capabilities (or lack thereof) of the individual. "One question that might immediately come up,

with regard to my view, would be the question of human agency. How does this account of predeterministic historicity account for the human agency or free will?" (ATTOE 2022, 73). It is the individual who has or does not have free will.

But I think one avenue of investigation here appears when we focus not on "free", but on "will". In other words, what if we grant everything about the inability to act outside of a causal series, but start from the point of view of something other than individualism, that is, somewhere other than the capacity of the individual to initiate such a new series? What if there is something other than the individual? In African philosophy, we have often thought of this as the collective, but that collective has sometimes taken the form of a collectivization of the individual. In other words, "I am because we are" has started with the "I am", and the "we are" is the "I am" historicized or generalized (despite the clear causal pattern reflected in a statement with the word "because" at the center of it).

What if we turn that around and start with the "we" instead of the "I", as the statement actually suggests? Mogobe Ramose, who has come up in this book already, argues for an approach to Ubuntu which is quite distinct from the majority of formulations of it. In many cases, Ubuntu is little more than a body of collective wisdom and history within African culture, which is supposed to direct present-day actions, character, and institutions. Ramose imagines something entirely different from this. His conflation of being and becoming, which is shortened to "Be-ing" (mentioned earlier in Attoe's text), is not primarily a space of ethical or political direction or modeling, but it is a space of cognition, that is, a space in which the thinking of finite humans can encounter the uncertainties of the future and chart a course.

What might this look like? It would not take Ubuntu as the collective account of past causal necessity. That is not how African culture tends to treat it, at least. It treats it as a body of wisdom, one to be drawn upon to be able to act into the future. Sometimes (indeed, often) it is understood as the source of ethical or metaethical content, but in other cases (as I argue in an upcoming book Ramose does) it treats it as a space of thought, that is, a space in which action into an uncertain future is made possible.

None of this is possible in Attoe's text, of course. There is no uncertainty of the future, and therefore there is no charting a path

through it. Ramose, on the other hand, relies on metaphors like the musicality and the rhythm of order. We can understand rhythm, in music and in the world, but it is also not something that is determined, if only because these systems of rhythm work like networks, and networks when they interact with each other produce unanticipated and unanticipatable phenomena. Our task, then, is one made possible by the relationality that Attoe wants to establish, but by a different mechanism than predeterministic historicity – questioning. Questioning might be seen as addressing the epistemological side of this discussion by making available new ways of understanding causes. Attoe gives several examples in which causation is sketched out (see, for instance, his examples at the beginning of chapter 5, on pages 78-79, or the example of a gun killing on page 67). These examples of cases that have causal accounts can also be seen as answers to specific questions. The kinds of questions we ask can yield different kinds of causal accounts.

So this is perhaps a **third question** we might ask: what does questioning look like in Attoe's model, as a philosophical activity? Is it simply the establishment of knowledge that already exists but we personally don't have? Or does it build something more than that, as it does for Ramose? Does the search for the right question have a place in causal accounts, or is it just our human limitation of knowledge, which means that we do not automatically ask the right question in the first place?

### **From Newtonian Science to Complexity**

One thing to come out of the discussion of causality in this book is a question about the scientific assumptions at work. At one point, Attoe says that:

These ideas may not be, for some, the final say on the issue of causality, and indeed, I expect that this position will be conversed with in the near future. I am particularly interested in how this theory stands up, in relation to the world of quantum mechanics. (ATTOE 2022, 73)

This suggests that the model for causality being used here is pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Newtonian science, conducted mainly at the meso-level (i.e.,

not micro or macro) of interactions. The discussion connected to quantum mechanics would indeed be interesting, and, in particular, if some of the enduring aspects of quantum mechanics, such as complexity theory, are brought to bear on this.

What would the discussion look like in those conditions? Well, the Newtonian model assumes that we have something like a conservation of cause and effect. For anything that happens, there are causes sufficient to account for it. This was, in fact, the motivating idea of a famous debate in Western philosophy that goes back to ancient times and is identified with Spinoza and especially Leibniz, and in different ways with Hegel and Schopenhauer, known as the “principle of sufficient reason” (for a summary, see MELAMID & LIN 2016). The controversy around the principle has, in part, to do with the assumptions behind the metaphysics, specifically those that are shared with Newton.

What Attoe does is to broaden the conversation around causation, to include much more than just physical causation. Take this example:

To understand this better, consider the following analogy: three pounds of force are enough to pull the trigger of a gun. This, in turn, allows the bullet to leave the barrel of the gun at great speed, which in turn hits the flesh and bones of an unfortunate victim, which leads to death, then leads to mourning and then leads to a burial and so on. What this loose example implies is that each event is necessarily related to a previous event(s) or state of affairs, which in turn is necessarily related to other previous events and so on. It is necessarily related because, like I said in the previous chapter, any alteration to the defining event invariably leads to another outcome (which is necessarily related to that state of affairs plus the alteration). (ATTOE 67-68)

So, this looks like a Newtonian account, but a closer look gives pause. There are many different contexts of causation happening here. It is not just physical interaction of material objects in space. Some are social events. Some are psychological states. And, contrary to the

statement here, none seem necessarily related to anything else in the series, at least not if “necessary” means “impossible that it be otherwise”. And finally, while we might be talking about causation, it is inevitable that we are also talking about explanation. The metaphysics is inextricably linked to an epistemology. This is why the principle of sufficient reason is relevant here – while it is usually seen as an epistemological principle, when we have a deterministic model of causation we are also saying that there is always a metaphysical element as well.

In other words, the term “causal” is used much more broadly than we might see in other kinds of arguments for determinism. There is another way to handle this, which I talked about in analyzing Emmanuel Eze’s book *On Reason*. I gave the following example:

Suppose you witness a car accident at a street corner. You decide to wait until the police officer gets there, and the officer asks you to describe what happened. You have at least four choices of answers (more, of course, are possible):

1. ‘A two-ton piece of metal came down one vector, and another two ton piece came down another vector at time T1. They collided, T2, producing a certain number of kilojoules of energy. That energy had the effect of tearing apart the metal, in some cases on impact points and in others on pre-existing metal fatigue areas. The trajectories of the metal at T3 can be accounted for by the event at T2.’ Let’s call this the ‘physics’ account.
2. ‘Car A failed to stop for a stop sign, and car B seemed to be going very fast.’ Let’s call this the ‘legal’ account.
3. ‘I could see the driver of Car A distracted by swatting at something in the vehicle (I’m guessing it was a bee, but I couldn’t see it, obviously).’ Let’s call this the ‘intentional’ account.
4. ‘God called the person in Car B home (or, the spirits were angry with the person in car B



for having desecrated something sacred).’ Let’s call this the ‘spiritual’ account.

Now, which is the ‘right’ account? Depending on the context they are all at least potentially right. But we have to translate the question that is being asked – ‘what happened?’, asked by a police officer, probably was meant to elicit the legal account, or perhaps the intentional account. Notice, though, that all four accounts are forms of realism, in the sense that they all begin from empirical events and none of try to deny the empirical-ness of the empirical. They may differ on what populates the world (are there spirits? Do intentions exist, and if so do they matter?), but they are all attempts to account for empirically available events. (JANZ 2008, 306-307)

So, in explicating Eze, I made the case that his depiction of reason allowed for a range of possible accounts. He argued that reason is not one thing, and it is not apportioned by culture or geography. All of us have a range of forms of reason. What we also have is rationality, which is our way of weighing these forms against each other, deploying them in different circumstances, and providing for a socially robust basis for communication and agreement or dispute about how things happened.

I called our ability to move between these incommensurable forms of reason “forensics”. Our forensic ability is a function of our rationality, which is an emergent property of our socially sanctioned and historically supported forms of reason.

What this account takes seriously is post-Newtonian metaphysics, in particular complexity theory. In complexity, we no longer have anything like a principle of sufficient reason. There are no guarantees, either before the fact or after as we explain how something came to be. What there is, though, is the interaction of networks, and the emergent properties that come from those interactions.

So, this is the reason why I am skeptical of any form of determinism – it can only be held by looking backwards, and what is held by looking forward is a form of faith that the future will be like the past. But it never is. The story we tell in complex systems like

evolution, market behaviour, weather systems, climate change, or even fluid dynamics is one of stabilities and instabilities, periodic balances overturned by perturbations to systems. In this world, determinism tells us nothing useful.

Here, then, is the **fourth question**: What does metaphysics (and epistemology) look like if we do the investigation that he gestures towards, and take non-Newtonian physics seriously? What if complexity and all that comes with it are true?

And from this follows a **fifth question**: What problem does this theory solve? Again, what question does it answer? If we think of theories as solving a problem, how would that problem be articulated? Is it a problem of bad thinking, that is, the idea that people think they act freely but really don't, and that causes them to act badly? Is it a problem of policy that we make policies like the prevention of crime through punishment when those are at best useless and at worst harmful to individuals if they are caught up in a deterministic set of causes?

A **sixth question**: if I have sketched the idea correctly that causality is about both metaphysics and epistemology, does any of this matter to human action? Whether we strive or resign ourselves, both of these and any other action would have been in principle predictable by the causal sequence stretching back to the first cause. So, this could be a kind of nihilism, but it might also mean that the entire discussion is moved to a different place, the way the Stoics did in ancient Greece. Their determinism did not lead to the conclusion that they should do nothing or disengage, but rather that it was our job to seek ataraxia, or tranquility, by aligning our expectations with the world. So, is that the goal here?

Finally, a **seventh question**: Is there a futurity possible with this account? In other words, if we take everything that Attoe argues as true, is it possible to prefer one future over another? Is it possible to create, given that creating involves judgment? Given that the argument here is for predetermined relationships (ATTOE 2022, 69), does this suggest a form of what some mystics have called "quietism", that is, a disengagement from the world on the grounds that no form of engagement can possibly matter in any important way? And tied to this, is there anything like hope possible?

**Potentialities and directions for further research**

Here's what is exciting about Attoe's work. He raises some important questions. He hones in on relationality, and takes it seriously. He raises the question of what we become (ATTOE 2022, 91), whether or not the mechanisms of that becoming are adequate to the task.

I have raised a series of questions here with the intention of exploring further the issues that Attoe raises. Ideally, I would like to see his work as a point of inflection in discussions within African philosophy about causation. As he rightly notes, this has been thought to this point almost solely in terms of what seems to make Africa different from the West, at least according to many Western philosophers – a belief in metaphysical entities such as ancestors, spirits, and divine beings, along with an old version of vitalism that posits a flow of energy through all things. If we take away those elements, we are not then just doing Western philosophy. That is not the default position here. But if it is not the default, we have to think about just what trajectory this conversation might take. Attoe gives us a proposal which posits a form of determinism that does not depend on the supernatural agency for its force.

Furthermore, the idea of relationality and interactivity is an interesting one and worth pursuing. The nature of interaction is not well understood, even though (as I argued with the example of Ubuntu) we can find it within African philosophy.

This book is an excellent achievement for Attoe, and it will produce much discussion in the coming years, I predict. And, after all, could we ask for anything better than that in philosophy?

### **Relevant Literature**

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