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THE ONTOLOGY OF DESTINY
AND FREEDOM AMONG THE IGBO-AFRICAN:
A DISCOURSE IN EXISTENTIAL METAPHYSICS

Preamble

The tripartite issue of determinism, freedom and destiny are topical and recurrent issues of wonder in African philosophy. This is predicated on the premise that the African has his origin and existence deeply rooted in the world *beyond*, that is, the metaphysical world. It is however pertinent to state here that there are three world in the African worldview namely; *the ancestral world, the world of yet unborn and the world of living are interconnected*. This explains why forces and divinities play critical role in their mode of existence. In view of the reality of the interplay and relationship that exists between the African and his worlds, at times, the African is in dilemma whether his life-actions and end has been destined/predestined even before birth by a higher being either to succeed or to fail. Okolo exploring this crisis of identity of the individual person in African philosophy poses the question, “How free and autonomous is the individual in African metaphysics?” (Okolo 1993, 28). In a seeming response

Marett came up with the belief that there is an impersonal spiritual power or life-force pervading all things and probably accounts for all things (Marett 2006, 54). Edwin Smith (quoted by Njoku 2002, 128) preferred to use the word *dynamism*, "...That is, the belief in, and the practices associated with the belief in the hidden, mysterious, supersensible, pervading energy, power, potencies and forces. This highlights again the philosophy of an impersonal force, *a force* that underscores reality in African as espoused by one of the earliest writers on the ontology of being in Africa, Placid Tempels. Flowing from Tempels and writing about the same people and issue Jahn posits that forces are the underlining reality in the interactions that exists among beings in Africa (Jahn (1961, 100). Therefore, if metaphysical world for Africans is the ultimate reality for all existential being, there ought to be impersonal forces that guide and augment man's existence, which outlines and details man's mode of operation. This blatantly puts the issue astake in proper context; determinism, freedom or destiny, which way?. Also, it leaves one really at sea in any attempt to comprehend whether man is really and truly free to mould his *world*. In context, are the Igbo-Africans free to chart and actualize their dreams in life? are they solely culpable when their endeavours fail or succeed? or is it the case that their *modus operandi et Vivendi* have been determined/destined by metaphysical forces or is been manipulated by the impersonal forces that underlie their world and also interact with the metaphysical world?. It is consequent upon this that this paper aimed at appreciating and finding the *locus* of individual freedom among Igbo-Africans, especially against the backdrop of the seeming activities in the metaphysical world.

Conceptualisation

Destiny. Destiny is from the Latin word *destinare*, meaning, to decree beforehand, to determine, to settle. Destiny is the power believed to control events that happens to somebody. It is the idea that somebody has been determined in advance by a superior power, e.g., either by God, fate or a person.

Destiny is sometimes personified as a power, which cannot be resisted (Angeles 1981, 60). This power is invisible and metaphysical as it controls the activity of individuals in such a complex unfathomable way that we think of it as determined in advance either by God, fate, or a person. This power controlling events comes not from the physical but from the metaphysical world, which is the world of ultimate reality. Describing these two worlds, Iroegbu observed that "...For the African, nothing occurs in the physical that does not root itself in the spiritual (*metaphysical*). But the spiritual dimension of reality holds as the foundation of the physical world" (Iroegbu 2006, 69). The inhabitants of the spirit world are more powerful because of their superior knowledge, strength and might. Depending on their disposition towards human beings, they can bring about good or evil in the human physical world, foster human life or hinder it, give success or undermine it and even sabotage human efforts.

Determinism and freedom

Determinism appears to be the foundation for destiny. This is because when something is determined, the thing is said to be destined towards its determined end. Determinism is the view that every event has a cause, that things are dependent upon and necessitated by causes. The thesis has as its core the idea that everything that happens is fully determined by what has gone before it; every event has antecedent causes, which were sufficient to ensure its occurrence. Philosophical discussion of determinism has often been motivated by the question whether human freedom of action is possible if the universe behaves as a deterministic system. Philosophers who agree that there can be no free action in a deterministic world are known as *incompatibilists*. Those who posit the existence of free action and infer that the actual world is indeterministic are known as *libertarians*, while those who consent to determinism i.e., that human freedom is illusory are known as *hard determinists*. Compatibilists assert that freedom is possible under determinism and if they also affirm determinism, they are known as *soft determinists* (Mautner 1997,

138). There are a plethora of determinism but the one that suits the intent of this study is metaphysical determinism.

Destiny in Igbo-African metaphysics

Destiny is the life-line pattern of an individual. Destiny is that which comes your way after you may have tried your best. In other words, any success, progress or failure that comes your way in life is seen as your destiny. Among the Hausa people of Northern Nigeria, your destiny must come your way whether you are striving for it or not, this sounds more like fatalism. This belief is contained in their adage that the toad's luck does not go up; even if it goes up it must surely come down because the toad does not climb. Most of what is known about destiny are articulated in Igbo philosophy through proverbs and adages. For instance, it is said that "destiny can be delayed but it can never be changed", and "there is no competition in destiny". Destiny is also contained in Igbo-African culture as vivid in their songs. In African worldview, every child from birth has been destined to fulfill a purpose on earth, as each individual is unique in destiny. A person's destiny is the person's talent spiritually ordained, determined and ratified in the metaphysical world by impersonal spirit through metaphysical forces. In Igbo land, it is called *Akarakachi* – akaraka anaghi eme nhicha. (Destiny does not change, or it cannot be cleaned). Akaraka onye n' edu ya (one's destiny guides the person). Exclusively, this akaraka is bestowed on a person by the god(s); in effect, it is the Chi that determines each person's lot. Iroegbu seems to be reasoning in this direction when he writes, "Palmistry, also called fate in your hand (akarachi) is a common practice. Each person's palm (obo aka) is marked differently and it has something to say about the current and future event in the life of the person whose palms are being examined" (Iroegbu 2006, 15).

Patently, destiny is not a choice; it comes your way whether you like it or not. However, the problem surrounding destiny is how to discover your own destiny. Discovery of destiny is a major duty of each person. One who has not

discovered his destiny wastes energy doing other things apart from the one the person is destined for. The obvious questions to be asked are, have you discovered your destiny? How does one know his destiny? These questions showcase destiny as a philosophical concept in Africa therefore, in a bid to answer these questions there arose misconception between talent, destiny and determinism. Igbo metaphysics recognizes the phenomenon of causality in nature. This is based on the principle of sufficient reason, namely that whatever exists must have justification for its existence. The adighi eme na efu (something does not just happen), it must be propelled by a force. Aristotle in his metaphysical causality puts it thus; whatever moves is moved by something else (Nwigwe 2004, 4). This lends credence to why Aristotle did not endorse the concept of a historical origin of the world, rather he affirms instead the eternity of the world order. This accentuates Aristotle's use of the word *entelechy* as the ideal explanation for nature as a whole. *Entelechy* means that things do not happen by chance but according to natural design, which flows with world order. However, for Aristotle, there is a creative drive.

Therefore, since individual beings were dynamic composites of a material substrate and an immaterial and eternal form (*eidos*), the accidental differentiation of the substantial form in individuals did not affect the metaphysical endurance of the species (Aristotle *Physics*, Bk 2, Ch. 8, sec. 199b). Particularly, Igbo metaphysics uses teleological consideration to analyze the existence of being. It is instructive to state that Nwala like Edeh distinguishes three broad categories of being. First are: spirit and forces, which are to be found in descending order, (i) the Supreme Deity (Chukwu / Chineke), (ii) Powerful Spirit (agbara), (iii) Ancestral Spirit (Ndichie), (iv) Spirit of the Dead, (v) Human Spirit, (vi) Spirit associated with the personality of all things, (vii) Forces which may be phenomena, or related to certain human endeavors, (viii) Forces which are immanent in natural objects, (ix) Evil Spirit – devil (akala ogoli, ogbanje) (Anikpo, 2005, pp. 137). Nwala mentioned human beings and things as second and third in the categories of beings and unequivocally stated that the power that control events is believed to be rooted in the first category of beings. This informs Nwigwe's, three levels of forces/deities which are; Chi,

Earth deity (ala) and Ikenga. Chukwu (chi), is the great creator of all things, The Earth Deity (ala) serves as the custodian of moral conscience and as protector and provider of human society. Alusi stands for the invisible supernatural forces that serve all forms of functions; some good, some bad; and the Ikenga relates to a man's rights or left arm, depending on which he uses more or better (Nwigwe 2004, 7).

Ikenga therefore stands for man's talent, strength, enterprise and achievement. Ikenga is a vital Igbo cult, which represents a man's ancestors and the ancestors are custodians of the moral and social order. A person must constantly offer daily sacrifice to the ancestors and show readiness and interest in keeping the laws and customs of the land, without which neither his life nor wellbeing would be assured. The concept is that a man's Chi bestows on him peculiar talents and skills and the man's Ikenga through the exploits of his right or left arm, supports and protects him in forging and creating his way to achievement and success in life. It is expected of a man for continued success in life that he maintain good relationship with both his Chi and his Ikenga. Therefore, there is a close relation among Ikenga, Chi and earth goddess. If one's personal god (Chi) is awake or active and one keeps oneself unpolluted from abominations one gets on well in life; but if one's Chi is replaced by Agwu – a trickster spirit, then misfortune and failure is inevitable.

Destiny and determinism

Just as living in a society models man by its laws and custom, everything is determined by the laws of nature. Genetic heritage and psycho-social influences of environment show that man may have been determined in all his action. This supports the viewpoint of the historicists that events determine the history of the world. The environment in which you are born determines you thus, in the words of Iroegbu "The baby, still asleep in its cradle has its being, performance and destiny already partly enshrined and construed in the Igbo world of common origin, worldview, language, historical experience, destiny, shared

culture, race, colour and habit” (Iroegbu 1995, 346). Hence, there are some relatedness between the philosophical concepts of determinism and destiny. Destiny includes everything about determinism but not every determinism is destiny since the latter portends power-controlling events. A person can be politically, religious or even socially determined but destiny is a force or power controlling events, which are thought of as determined in advance by (god) God or fate. Meanwhile for Aristotle, there is only one possible history of the world, which began from some definite source, and is going and is being directed by some definite end. Aristotle’s metaphysical determinism scarcely gives room for human freewill and responsibility.

Destiny as metaphysical determinism

To be destined therefore means that one is metaphysical determined by a supernatural power. But just as we have already mentioned, the interplay of earth goddess, Chi and Ikenga affects one’s destiny. Thus three basic factors that determine the success or failure of an individual in Igbo worldview are; the benevolence of one’s Chi; secondly, one’s own effort symbolized by the Ikenga and thirdly, one’s conscious effort to maintain the law and customs of the community. However, to ensure that things go on well, constant libation has to be made to the ancestors for intervention. According to Onwuejiogwu, if one’s chi is active one’s energy and actions are well directed and so one’s Ikenga becomes effective. When one’s Ikenga is effective, through hard work, one makes social and economic progress as can be seen in the acquisition of knowledge and wealth. Wealth and knowledge have to be transferred into social status and prestige by the social titles (Echichi). Destiny when seen from the purview of metaphysical determinism is destiny in a strict sense. According to this view, an individual’s destiny can be determined to be good or evil even before the individual’s birth; a man can be of good destiny (onye uwa oma) or of bad (onye uwa ojoo). There are vivid saying to show this in Igbo Language. Onye uwa oma jiri ekete kuru mili (a man of good destiny fetches water with a

basket). However, despite his frantic efforts, a man of bad destiny is doomed to failure- Onye uwa ojoo gara nku na uguru mmiri ama ya (a man of bad destiny goes in the dry season to fetch firewood and gets drenched by the rain).

An existential elaboration on metaphysical determinism is vivid in Chinua Achebe's very well celebrated African novel *Things Fall Apart*. In this novel, he typically presents the life of Okonkwo the hero. Okonkwo like his father was destined to fail. Despite his frantic effort to succeed, he navigated from one tragedy to the other. The first tragedy that stood beyond his control was the killing by accident of the sixteen-year-old son of Ezeudu and the killing of Ikemefuna under circumstances in which he would not have acted differently. In Okonkwo's effort to ouster the white man, he committed another unfortunate incident by killing the messenger and eventually taking his own life. Really, events around his life seem to suggest that he was destined to fail despite his efforts to the contrary. In line with this, Achebe writes regarding Okonkwo, "He could not rise beyond the destiny of his Chi (based on the understanding that one's chi, his ikenga and personal efforts do guarantee success). He was a man whose chi said no, in spite of his own affirmation. On the other hand, there are others, who are destined to greatness even if they make very little personal effort. They are those, "...Whose palm kernel had been cracked for them by a benevolent spirit" (Achebe 1964, 9). Explaining how the gods can gratuitously favour anyone of their choice and bestow good luck on the person, Achebe in another novel *Arrow of God* writes "... The deity Eru ... when he likes a man, wealth flows like water into his house, his yams grow as big as human beings, his goats produces three and his hen hatch nine".

Apart from these two analysis (which borders on one's chi and ikenga) which seem rigid, there is a flexible form of destiny in which one can through one's own freewill, energy plus the cooperation of one's personal god achieve success and wellbeing in life. It is to this type that people refer when they quote the dictum: *Your destiny is in your hand*. Nevertheless and interestingly too, there is an example of a man whose god is benevolent but through his freewill and laziness became a failure. His name is Unoka, a character in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Unoka was lazy and improvident, a debtor and a coward who could

not even bear the sight of blood. Rather, he likes and prefers drinking or playing on his flute, believing erroneously that he worked as hard as everyone else did; hence, he was supposed to excel like others. Paradoxically, he went to the gods (intending to appease his chi if the need be) to ascertain the cause of his failure in life. To his dismay, the oracle screamed at him with these harsh words:

You have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. You Unoka, is known in all the clan for the weakness of your Machete and your hoe. When your neighbors go out with their axe to cut down virgin forests, you sow your yams on exhausted farms that take no labour to clear. They cross seven rivers to make their farms. You stay at home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil. Go home and work like a man (Achebe 1958, 13).

Had it being that Unoka worked hard, his destiny would have been that of success, because *onye kwe chi ya ekwe* (when one says yes 'to life', one's personal god – chi, say yes too). Thus supporting the saying that; if the hand is not soiled, it cannot bring about a mouth that is smeared with oil. However, this does not deny the fact that some persons fail despite their efforts. Meanwhile it is commonly believed that man is free and that he makes use of his freedom the way he likes and is therefore held morally responsible for whatever he does. However, the theory of determinism denied that man is really free. It gives several reasons why man is not free; hence, there are various kinds of determinism each depending on the reasons given why man is not free.

Destiny and the problem of freedom

With the above observations, suppositions and postulations on determinism in its various shades, the notion of freedom in one's destiny becomes a controversial issue, which has left philosophical quiddity an open-ended question. This is because freedom though commonly used by man, is subject to widely different interpretation. Therefore, to speculate on how free a

destined person is, if he is free at all, we must to some extent know what freedom is and what freedom is not. Most definitions on freedom are based on ability to act or not to act, or make choice voluntarily without coercion. According to Ibekwe, freedom is "...The power of an intelligent being to act or not to act, to act this way or another way, without compulsion from within or coercion from without" (Ibekwei 2003, 81). Flowing from this, John Paul II, in his message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1981 says, "...To be free is to be able to choose and to want to choose, it is the ability to live according to one's conscience". Defining freedom from an ontological African perspective, Osuagwu made it clear that, "Man is born or created free. To be naturally or divinely created means to be basically liberated or made free. To be, means to be free – to possess rights and responsibilities" (Osuagwu 1999, 206). Nevertheless, the real meaning of freedom is so porous that it is easily misinterpreted. It is a caricature of freedom to claim that people are free to organize their lives with no reference to moral laws. As a philosophical concept, there is no unanimity regarding freedom.

However, two principal ideas of freedom prevail in its history; the liberal view purports a negative conception of freedom and perceives it as the absence of constraints to the attainment of our desires. The other is the positive view of freedom. This view makes constrains a condition for the realization of our freedom. This is the view of the philosophical metaphysicians who see freedom as a means of self-actualisation. As it concerns our present discourse, two thinkers presents themselves as good examples. Sigmund Freud adopted the negative conception of freedom. His basic contention is that culture restricts freedom through ethical code. For him, the only measure of true freedom is pleasure and happiness, which aims at the maximization of our instincts. He contends that people tend to adopt an attitude of hostility towards culture because; "...It (culture) is to blame for a great part of our misery and we should be much happier if we were to give it up" (Freud 1987, 290). On the other side of the divide is Malinowski who subscribes rather to the idea that culture is a condition for man's freedom. He subscribes to the positive conception of freedom, which is a utilitarian view of freedom, and this viewpoint subjects the

idea of individual freedom to the collective aspirations of the community. He rather sees culture as the basis of emancipation of the human species. For him therefore, culture accords human race the freedom of survival, which enables man to conquer nature in its many ramifications (Malinowski 1960, 37).

The concept of choice, voluntariness, knowledge, free to act or not to act and responsibility are the major challenges for the ontological status of destiny in Igbo-African metaphysics. Has a destined person choice to make since a being or force has destined all his actions? How will the person know that a particular life pattern is his destiny and not the other? Will he be held responsible for a success or a failure that has been determined for him, as in the case of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*? These and many other questions make us to re-examine the issue of freedom in destiny. Man is born free and he likes freedom. Man's desire to be free makes man to choose one thing and leave the other. Man lives and decides what to do out of many alternatives. If man therefore makes choice and takes decisions about his life as he always does, what place has destiny in his choice? Is his choice and decision taken succinctly under the same propelling force of destiny or in absence of it? If the force of destiny guides his choices and decisions, then he has not made any choice or taken any decision in the first place; although within him, he believes a choice and a decision has been taken by him. Paradoxically, such a man is not free. His freedom is deceptive because he thinks himself free but his freedom has been limited and determined.

More still, knowledge is essential to the concept of free and voluntary action. This is because no action can be free or voluntary if the doer is not aware of what he is doing. If an individual is ignorant that he has been destined to either failure or success in life, that person is not free because he lacks the basic knowledge of what he does. That is, ontologically, the person has no personal leverage to act. In all these cases, we can perceive that the concept of freedom in destiny is a coin of double faces. Freedom hence is contextual. In the words of Okolo, "...Individuals general see themselves as subjects, independent and free rather than as objects, dependent and unfree" (Okolo 1993, 29). This interpretation of freedom is physical because, if we are to take cognizance of the

notion of destiny we will arrive at the conclusion that the same individual who is physically free is metaphysically unfree and ontologically subservient. Therefore, there is nothing like total “freedom”. Hence, like Jean Jacques Rousseau, man is free but everywhere in chain because, “...Fundamental ontological freedom is that by which Africans are and should be destined, identified, differentiated, or unified in their humanity and Africanity” (Osugwu 1999, 206).

However, the physical and metaphysical freedom is a mere speculation since the only known world is the physical world. Realists hold man responsible for all his action whether destiny or not. Freedom thus means for realists the natural destiny and potentiality, the right and duty of a being to be unique and different amongst a plurality and relativity of like and unlike. According to this interpretation, only a destined person is free. One finds his freedom in his destiny. He claims responsibility for all his action being aware that he knows what choice and decision he is making. Hence, he is free, though destined. In line with this thought, Osugwu avers that, Africans have assumed direct and immediate responsibility over all their African and human destiny. With full consciousness of the moral demands and expectations, they demand and take up their place as authors, architects, masters, custodians, advocates of their existence (Osugwu 1999, 211). From the analysis made so far, it seems palpable that the two major camps in the problem of freedom in destiny are the idealists and realists. The realist proposes that man though destined is free and should assume direct and immediate responsibility of all his action whether success or failure. While the idealists contend that man is metaphysically determined and destined, hence there is no issue of freedom.

Culminating reflections

Destiny is a force, which control events and individuals in a way unknown to them. In Igbo-African metaphysics and ontology, nothing happens without a cause. Everything that moves is moved by something else and man has both

physical and metaphysical origin and the metaphysical aspect of man is superior to physical (in the ratings and rankings of personal/impersonal beings and forces). It is a truism among the Igbo-African that man's destiny is in the hands of his personal god – chi. Igbo concept of chi can be likened to the Bantu concept of vital force. If one behaves well with sacrifices to his chi his destiny is augmented and refined. The level of one's destiny depends on how benevolent or malicious one's personal god is. What we call destiny stands for a man's talent, strength, enterprise and achievement. The Igbos call it *Ikenga*- meaning a man's right or left arm. When a person focuses all his effort and ability in such aspect of life, he is destined and success is sure. In fact, a seeming problem becomes a foundation stone from which his success is built. It is for this purpose that people strive to know what their destiny is. However, if you are destined to be great, you have to work towards it. That is why destiny goes hand-in-hand with the determination to work (with *ikenga*) and obedience to the moral order. From the foregoing, it can be stated unequivocally that the ontology of destiny and freedom in Igbo-African metaphysics aligns with that of the compatibilists. So, since one's destiny lies in the person ultimately, there is no other way to act towards its realization than by acting (Ajayi 2004, 83). This is bearing in mind that "Freedom is hardly ever given, but (it is) taken" (Irele 1993, 23). Hence, the Igbo-African despite the permutations and the activities of metaphysical forces, takes his destiny indeed in hands and this is only by acting accordingly so that the person does not end up like Unoka the lazy man who blamed the gods and his ancestors but refused to blame his hands and his head for his failure.

Summary

From an existential and metaphysical standpoint, the African world is dualised into the physical and metaphysical world. This is bald-faced in the dynamics of the relationship that characterizes the African worldview. In praxis, the metaphysical world is seen to be higher in the scheme of things because, it is from it that the impersonal beings/forces operate and superintend

on the physical world of man. It is based on this that the twin issue of destiny and freedom is topical and recurrent in Igbo-African metaphysics. The concern is whether man can be free in the physical world, which seems to be a manifestation of the will/wishes and/or the whims and caprices of the beings/forces in the metaphysical world. It is consequent upon this that this paper undertook an existential analysis of these contending issues of freedom and destiny within the Igbo-African context. From the analysis, it was palpable that, though there can be manipulations from the metaphysical world which can bring about luck (*good or ill*), the Igbo-African is expected to make effort to excel and work responsibly with his *chi*; because, a man can have a good or bad luck but his/her practical effort is still expedient.

Key words: destiny, determinism, freedom, forces, metaphysical world, Igbo-African

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