

BOOK REVIEW:**A MONUMENTAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE GENRE OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY**DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v5i1.9>

A review of [Existence and Consolation: Reinventing Ontology, Gnosis and Values in African Philosophy].

Author: Ada Agada

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Reviewer: **Joseph N. AGBO**

Senior Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

Every now and again scholarly intellectualism tends to awaken us to the fact that the profundity of the human mind and the creativity of the human brain are inexhaustible. Perhaps, humankind would never be able to answer comprehensively, totally and with finality, the fundamental question of philosophy (which emerges from the fundamental problem of humanity): why is there being instead of nothing?

Every culture and people have made attempts to address this question, since it has become a veritable way for such cultures and peoples to justify their existence. The answers to this basic question have also appeared in various ways, in varieties of dictions and at various epochs. Unfortunately for Africa, partly due to the accident of history and partly due to the terminologies of colonial (mis)education, she has often been hunted with this question, and often times taunted with demand to provide an answer, an *original* answer.

Ada Agada's massive book, *Existence and Consolation*, steps into the fray and confronts the question in a manner similar to ridding a bull across the Atlantic. He posits a consolationist metaphysics that investigates the question of being and nothing in terms of the perspective of "human joy and sadness" (11, 69-105). It will not be possible to do a comprehensive review of this book here. For indeed, the work is a monumental contribution to the genre of African philosophy and addresses quite a lot of themes.

After the general introduction to the background, problem and scope of the consolationist philosophy (1-14), the book begins with an explorative overview of the old debate on the possible existence of African Philosophy). But the most interesting part of this ground-clearing exercise (as prelude to the Consolation Philosophy) is his dialectical discussion of the progression from the Egyptian principle of Mart to the denigrated "Ethnophilosophy" (which for the author is the foundation of authentic African Philosophy) and from there to Senghor's discovery

of the distinction between Black Emotionality and White Rationality up till the Rationalism of Asouzu (31-65).

Interestingly, the book's consolationalist philosophy is arrived at by the positing of the doctrine of mood as an emergent from the dialectical interaction between rationality and emotionality (100-105). As noted earlier, the author's intention is to provide an original and authentic philosophy that would tackle the fundamental question of existence, and it requires that such a philosophy must address this problem from an original and true African perspective.

Agada's book occupies a pride of place because of its many themes addressed with the consolationalist metaphysics and its doctrine of mood. Ever since the "Great Debate" on the existence or non-existence of African philosophy broke out in the 1970s and seemed to have reached a final settlement when the denialists could no longer sustain their logic, no work has appeared and attempted to weave several issues together and glue them with a doctrine.

Innocent Asouzu's *Ibuanyidanda* (Complementary) philosophies (2004; 2007; and 2013) as well as Mogobe Ramose's *Ubuntu Philosophy* (2005) have made progress in this direction. However, Agada's consolationalist philosophy makes a more daring and massive attempt. Although the general editor of the book, the dedicated and path-finding logician of philosophy in Africa, Jonathan Chimakonam, has correctly observed in his "Foreword" (xii- xxi) to the book, that Agada is not the first to employ the term 'consolation' in philosophical analysis, we need must note that the way consolation is employed in the work is genuine and to an extent, original. As a metaphysical doctrine, consolationalism addresses God and his existence, science, freedom, knowledge, theodicy, fatalism, the world, nature, existence, creationism, evolutionism, dialectics, power, logic, proof, justification, skepticism, humanity, individuality, community, the existence of the Other, language, communication, morality, life, relativism, death, immortality, comparative philosophy, et cetera . The implication of the variety of these themes is that - anyone who wants to do more than a general review can only select a part of the book to review for it would not be a mere hyperbole to say that each chapter is another book on its own.

The importance of the book is made manifest by the fact that it won the 2015 CHOICE outstanding Academic title Award, of the American Library Association. My interest in this book is on the fact that it seeks to investigate, from an African background, the fundamental question of philosophy (and of reality): "why is there something instead of nothing?" The work equally acknowledges the place of Heidegger in raising this question to the level of universality. Another reason for my interest in this book is its focus on human community (177-193). This is where my personal bias will be betrayed.

There would not be time here to examine the basis, nature and principles underlying and expressing the consolationalist philosophy but we hasten to say that it is a philosophy that seeks originality, rigor and universality of whatever has been culturally determined from, by and within the African context (22-23). Accordingly, the work avers:

Unlike Ethnophilosophy which is particular, our consolation philosophy, can provide us with the moral tool that would enable us to transcend particular limitations and arrive at truly universal values in its commitment to an elevated concept of humanity on the ground of the necessity of consolation, we speak of humanity, not just the African, the Westerner or the Easterner while Ethnophilosophy favors balkanization, with its obvious obsession with the narrow ethnic group, consolation philosophy seeks the reconciliation of group loyalty with the concerns of humanity, without discarding particular values. (32)

But what makes a philosophy universal? Is it when it is universalized or when it is in principle universalizable? If the former, does it not become an arbitrary activity that would depend on who is “doing” the “universalizing” and if the latter (when it is universalizable) how can it be transformed from the potential state of being universalizable to being universalized in actuality? At this point, all universalists usually return to where they began.

Having briefly looked at some of the prevailing (and then main) issues of the book, we must quickly move to chapter 8 titled “The Human Community” (177-193). This chapter has a bearing on our own investigation since it not only discusses the problem of the existence of the other, but equally that of the relationship between the individual and the community.

The work argues that western philosophy has had to grapple with the genuine problem of the existence of “my brother” because there has been an age long attempt to “prove” that existence when what can be achieved is a justification (177-178). As it is said, “a healthy mind does not demand for a proof of the existence of the other mind, it is enough that we seek to justify our own existence and the existence of others by creating positive values that unite the human community in which every neighbor is a brother and sister” (177-178).

From the stand point of consolationist philosophy, the faith in the existence of the external world is buoyed by the fact that the existence of my brother (the other) is the justification of one’s own existence. Thus, it is argued that “the factual necessity of my brothers’ existence makes him a being for others. He is the contribution for the existence of the one who stares at him” (179).

The book argues that because the demand for proof searches for certainty and exactness which is not realizable, the demand for justification is necessary and they are time realizable. The book seeks to “call upon consolationist metaphysics to help us construct an optimistic philosophy of inter-subjective interaction” (183).

The book hypothesizes that language was the class instrument for this constructions, and says that “language was born as the mind’s outpouring of the despair inhering in the intellect, the emergence of the language announced a friendly intention of one to the other” (185). The capacity as or ability of language to play this role on the author’s analysis of the relationship between solipsism, fatalism, optimism and especially the idea of mood, for him:

While Sartre's existentialism started with pessimism and extended with pessimism, our consolationist perspective started with pessimism and ended with optimism. This was possible for us because we pushed pessimism through immanent ontology to transcendental metaphysics. Tragedy is a reality and so pessimism is justified. But such a really too, is consolation. Thanks to the reality of consolation, optimism makes its appearance as a consequence of the dialectic of mood, the passage of cosmic fear in the mind from the sadness of the intellect (despair) to the joy of the intellect (love). (188)

It is from the above analysis that the author justifies the existence of the human community which is the space and time where solipsism becomes discredited and the existence of "my brother" is thus, justified. Following from this, the author avers that: "It is true that the individual is prior to the community, yet the community is superior to the individual" (188). Individuality, as the defining feature of the individual person, would be meaningless without the community in an obvious swipe at those who treat individuality as though it has no bearing at all on anything except what other individuals think or do, the author asks: "if social freedom is predicated on individuality, as proponents of the atomization of society claim, why does the same individual appeal to the community to help in the realization of this joy, way of being born and bred within the family, the beginning of the community...?" (199).

In answering this question, the author's position is that this appeal by the individual is inevitable because his/her freedom is an illusion. The claims of exaggerated individuality however, occur when the larger community becomes unjust and tyrannical. Yet whatever comes from the community to the individual, whether positive or negative, would always be what individuals interactively injected into that community.

We agree with the author that the community is the dearth of the solipsism because the community since it is not an individual need to be a sort of "appeal court" where the contradictions of existence, the dialectical interaction between joy and sadness, is resolved by the metaphysics of consolation. For indeed: "Being composed of more than one individual, the community cannot be less than the individual. The freedom of the individual is no more important than the stability of the community" (191).

We are worried by the fact that the book sees philosophy as something that we "do" or "form" for the purpose of what can be loosely called "universal approval". Of course, this "approval" rises to highest degree and perhaps obtains its garlands when it is provided by the "celebrated" philosophical systems and institutions from the west. This desire and hope for universal acceptance always run counter to what the author says about the Placid Tempel's inauguration of what has been denigrated as "Ethnophilosophy". Agada says that the excitement generated by Tempel's *Bantu Philosophy* seemed to have been somehow "exaggerated" because "it seemed to be making a big deal of something that should have been taken for

granted, the fact that as long as a people exist and share in humanity, they would produce philosophers, for they would have to justify their existence” (17).

Yet, in spite of this obvious truthful observation, that every people who share in humanity must have philosophers, the author continues in the “spirit” of philosophy as something that is either “done” or “made”, delivers the *coup d'etat* when he says that:

It is agreed that the only way an African can earn the appellation “philosopher” and then the hallowed title “African philosopher” is to make an original contribution to philosophy. Until this contribution is made, the African traversing the terrain of western philosophy remains a scholar; the dignified term for an intellectual license to plagiarize. Until African thinkers discharge their intellectual debt to philosophy, by making this original contribution, the world will not take African philosophy seriously. (31)

The world talks about “African philosophy in the strict and most proper sense” and argues that it is just beginning to emerge “in the aftermath of Innocent Asouzu’s work” and then a grand distinction is made between “Ethnophilosophy as merely the foundation of African philosophy” and “African philosophy itself”.

What should concern Agada’s readers could be couched in the form of questions: who and where was this “agreement” for what should not be African philosophy made? What does it mean to “make original contribution”? What kind of original contribution can an African philosopher make with an alien language, especially when we realize that we think with concepts with institutionalized meaning? When would Africans stop “writing” philosophical works for approval and judgment by the West and East and start writing what should or could be appreciated by anyone or any culture that so wishes? How can philosophy be the exclusive possibility of all human cultures yet “African philosophy itself” began to emerge from Asouzu, who is not up to 100 years yet? Does it mean that Africans of yore were not able to justify their existence until recently? Are all the concepts used in “formulating” the idea of “consolation philosophy” so original, so new as to warrant the claim that consolation philosophy is the authentic African philosophy?

Agada’s discussion of “community” and his subsequent view that freedom is an illusion because “I cannot be free if I cannot sustain my action in the face of external impediment” requires elaborate attention, which context and space render unfeasible here. Agada’s claim that the human “community does not bestow any new moral nature on the individual consciousness; the community serves to guide only the moral consciousness, to improve it or to pervert it” may be true but not in entirety, especially when it is recognized that the individual is the creator, as a being with others, of any community that is preceded by the adjective “human”.

Therefore, this book is a must read for all those who have been or will be interested in the future and progress of African philosophy. Like all great works anyone who wants to do a thorough analysis of the book can only approach it from

the perspective of some or few of the very many themes contained therein. Certainly, in the coming years consolationism will provide the new face not just for philosophy in Africa but for humanity's existence. A bruised and battered continent, a world breathing heavily under the weight of terrorism and unending violence sure do need a heavy dose of consolation.

Relevant Literature

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