

THE PROBLEM OF ONE AND MANY: ITS RELATIONSHIP TO AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY.

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ABSTRACT

The question bordering on whether things are the way they really are in actual reality has been an age long problem even from the very inception of philosophical engagements. The springboard to this philosophical riddle and enigma is the gradual recognition that things are not exactly the way they seem to be - noting therefore that appearances are not realities. The very fact of existence seen in birth; the coming into life and death- passing away from life informed questions not only about personal destiny but longer questions about how persons and things come into existence can be at different times and pass out of existence only to be followed by other things or persons. In an attempt to look at this problem of one and many as it bears it discussion in African context of philosophy, using the explanatory interpretational method, credence must be given to the Miletians, the birth place of philosophy. It is within this background that we consider the views of Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes who posited the elements of “water”, the “indefinite/boundless” and “air” as the material “unstuff” of nature- the one which accounts for the many appearances in reality. Finally for the Africans, their contribution to this philosophical question is based on the supreme force who accounts for seeming multiplicity of things in the universe- the metaphysical wholeness manipulating the entire reality, our lives inclusive.

Keywords: Problem, One and Many, Relationship, African Philosophy

Introduction

The very basis of philosophical thought, the springboard of all speculations and the bedrock of ancient philosophic curiosity is the very attempt to explain *the* problem of the one and the many, the singularity in the plurality. Stumph explains: Philosophy began with man's sense of wonder and curiosity expressed in the question: what are things really like?, how can we explain the process of change in things?

What prompted these questions was the gradual recognition that things are not exactly what they seem to be, that appearance often differs from reality. The facts of birth, death, growth and decay - the coming into being and passing away, evokes not only questions about personal destiny, but also longer questions about how persons and things come into existence, can be different at different times, pass out of existence only to be followed by other things and persons.

In trying to look at this problem of one and many in relation to African philosophy credence must be given to the birth place of philosophy - Miletus, on the

shores of India in Asia Minor. This is so because the metaphysical problems in question was first dealt with by the thinkers of this great Town. The wealth of this town made possible the leisure without which the life of Arts and Philosophy could hardly develop, and the broad mindedness and inquisitiveness of its people created a congenial atmosphere for the intellectual activity that was to become philosophy.

For a systematic approach of this intellectual work, we shall consider the contributions of these various philosophers in their different schools.

Against that background, we shall first consider the Milesians - Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, Pythagoras of Samos, Heraclitus etc. The Eleatics: Parmenides, Zeno, Empedocles, Anaxagoras etc. The Atomists consisting of Leucippus and Democritus. These were all the Socratics.

Furthermore, we see Socrates and the Sophists who shifted the concern of philosophy from the domain of nature to the study of man. Thereafter, we shall look at Plato and Aristotle's attempts on this problem, the modern thinkers on the appearance and reality of Deacartes, Spinoza and Leibniz and the positivism of Auguste Comte. Thereafter, the contemporary or recent attempts on the problem will be viewed and related to our present African situation, Nigeria for instance,

Mileians on Appearance and Reality:

The Milesians as we earlier saw are the prima-thrio (first three) consisting of Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes. After the great poets – Home and Hesiods, the Milesians considered not only the world and its relationship to the gods, but posed a philosophical puzzle *Es qua Materia Constitution Mundi* (what are the material causes or composition of things in the world like?) This became the springboard of all philosophies.

Thales novel inquiry concerned the nature of things. He was occupied with such cosmo-metaphysical questions such as: what is everything made up of? What is the ultimate reason for appearances? And so on. And so to satisfy his curiosity and wonder, he posited as an answer water as the material unstuff of things. As stumph puts it: He presumed that some single element, some stuff which contained its own principle of action or change lay at the foundation of all physical reality”. (1989:12)

Thales unique contribution to this metaphysical problem was his notion that in spite of the differences between various things, there is nevertheless a basic similarity between them all; the many are related to each other by the one.

Anaximander, a younger contemporary and pupil of Thales maintained that the basic stuff is neither water nor any other specific or determinate element. The primary substance out of which all these specific things come, is an indefinite or boundless realm. Thus for Anaximander, the one is the primary substance called the indeterminate boundless and the many becomes the specific and determinate things which pass away into the indeterminate boundless. Hence, while actual things are finite, the original stuff is infinite or boundless.

Anaximenes, last of Milesian school of thought and younger associate of Anaximander considered his predecessor's notion of the boundless as vague and

intangible. To combine Thales notion of the definite substance water and Anaximander's new concept of the boundless in continued motion, Anaximenes designated air which as boundless and is spread everywhere. Unlike the boundless, it is specific and definite and thus can be identified.

To account for the one and *many* using the substance of air, Anaximenes explains that the differences in quality are caused by differences in quantity. Thus the contraction and expansion of air represents the quantitative changes and accounts for the multitude of different things.

Pythagoras being interested in mathematics saw it on a religious under-tone. For Pythagoras all things in reality are numbers. Apparently, he built number out of individual units by using pebbles. This suggested of the Pythagoreans the relationship between numbers and multitude.

The Pythagorean's contribution to the problem of one and many to philosophy is built on "form". For Pythagoras, form meant limit, which should be understood in numerical terms. From this limited form, various structures are built, squares, spherical objects, triangular shapes and so on, The one from which the many come and go into.

Heracilitus made a remarkable contribution in this philosophical riddle.

Whereas his predecessors focused on the description of what things consist, Heracilitus directed his attention to a new problem, namely; the problem of change. As his principal idea, he postulated that all things are in a perpetual flux. He elucidated concisely this postulation in his famous paradox; "You cannot step twice into the same River" (1989:15)

Against this background then, the concept of river must be understood to be applicable not only to rivers but to all appearances of things, including the soul of man. For Rivers and men exhibit the fascinating fact of becoming different and yet remaining the same. For example, the man is the same as the boy. For him, the things change and thereby take on many different forms, yet they contain something which continues to endure throughout the flux of change.

Between these seeming multitude of forms and the single continuing element, between the multiplicity and the singularity, there must be some basic form of unity. By this novel and influential postulation, this noble genius described the process of change as a unity in diversity.

Eleatics on Change and One:

For Parmenides, founder of the eleatic school of thought, change was a fact of reflection. He thus speculated that although there is only one basic stuff in the world, this stuff is the source of a variety of things and the process by which the one becomes many is the process of change. Parmenides according to Helvin Recker as quoted in his book "Hans, the Problems of Philosophy" maintains that; "A thing cannot come into being from non-being, for if you can think of an "it", it always and already exist . . . change simply is

an illusion or a confusion of appearance with reality."(Melvin R. 1961:102)

For Zeno and Parmenides, one does not only look at the world, but must also think about it in order to understand it. Reality then for Zeno is a logical relation of thoughts to each other. He illustrates his arguments with four instances of races; the race course, Achilles and the tortoise, the arrow and relativity of motion.

Zeno holds that reality consist of spatial points which are indefinite. If an arrow is shot into space it is motionless, because it does not transverse even the first spatial point which of course is ad infinitum. So also is the case with Achilles the athlete in a race course with the tortoise; what a seeming contradiction. Zeno elucidates that if the tortoise begins the race before Achilles, there is no way that Achilles will eventually overlap the tortoise bearing in mind the fact of the indefinitude of spatial points. Permit me here to quickly add that the possibility of this comparisons is only tenable logically but practically impossible.

Empedocles argued for and against motion and that change had some merits. With Parmenides he holds that being is uncreated and indestructible, but differs from Parmendes in the fact that being consist simply of the one. Reason being that objects we see come into reality or being and thus destroyed, but that their particles do not change but are. For him then being is not one but many. These particles are the elements of earth, air, fire, water which become and disappears (motion is brought about) by the separation of natural forces of love and hate, light and darkness and so on.

Atomists:

In this group or school of thought we have Leucippus and Democritus. According to these two, the nature of things consists of an infinite number of particles or units called atoms. To these, they ascribed characteristics of the Parmenides one, namely indestructibility and unchangeability, thus eternity. Democritus speculated that the atoms are responsible for the different appearances, accounting for the forms, shapes and sizes of existence.

Complementing Democritus' position, Leucippus held that appearances of things as they occur in their various *sizes* and shapes are accounted for by the coalition of the atoms to each other resulting in shaping things.

The Classical on One and Many:

The classical Greek philosophers are Plato and Aristotle, in them, the Greeks ingenuity was realized with an extraordinary completeness.

Plato for instance systematized by way of unification the varying opinions and arguments of the Milesians, Eleatics, Heraclitus and Pythagoras, the atomists into two by positing the dual world of things - the physics and the world of forms or ideas.

The world of forms according to Plato is real. The ideas that therein exist have an independent existence. The physics are appearances we perceive immediately, while the ideas are the "real" things that are things in themselves.

For Plato, the material things (the many) have their origin from the ideas (the one). They serve as mere copies or imitations to ideas or forms, such that the table we see here is a representation of the real table in world of forms. Therefore he explains that the essence

of the table is the tableness of that table. The ideal bird exist in the forms so that the birds are mere representations or copies.

For Plato again, the forms seems to have existed in the mind of God

Who is the Supreme principle of rationality Udoidem explains: "... the soul had existed in the world of ideas before imprisonment in the body, what we call knowledge is a shadowy remembrance of what the soul knew when it existed in the world of ideas which is the real world" (Udoidem S.I, 1992:20). Plato did not go without being questioned; Stumph registered his uncertainty by this question: "There is a problem here still, where do the forms exist?" (1989:22,

In Aristotle, the problem reached its climax. He spoke of this one and many in terms of universals and particulars.

Aristotle elucidates that our minds have a better knowledge of things close to our senses than of things farther from our senses. For this reason, our minds move from a knowledge of particulars discovered by observation to universal or class ideas, which we do not as much sense. For example, we observe particular men and then for a general idea of man. This culminated in his theory of Genera and Specie.

Here a starting point for reasoning comes to play. This premise is a product of induction hence cause and effect. In this regard, one must specify- the subject matter he is dealing with or discussing the specific kind of thing he is dealing with. To this, he must add the properties and causes that are related. He then coined his doctrine of the categories which explains how we think about things. Whenever we conceive of a subject and its predicate or of substance and accidents, we think of subject and predicate as in appearance and reality. That is when we can think of the word man and also connect the word man with such predicates as tall and able. For him then man is the substance. With this, he classified nine categories.

We should be made to understand that in our thinking we arrange things into these categories. He did not consider these categories as mere figments of the mind or minds constructs; he saw them as having actual existence outside the mind especially in things. A house for instance is thought of as a house because it has predicates (properties) common to other houses.

He also used the terms, "Substance and essence" to explain his concept of one and many. Here again Aristotle tells us that reality is substance which is the primary essence of all things. To illustrate this, he maintains that we know a thing better when we know what it is than we know the, colour, size or posture, its essential nature. Aristotle again uses the concept Change to explain his view on one and many. In the world around us, we see things constantly changing. Change for Aristotle is one of the basic facts of experience. Consequently therefore, change meant growth, decay, motion, generation and corruption.

He also embarked on the use of the concepts of matter and form. Though Aristotle distinguished between matter, he nevertheless held that they have independent existence. He argued against Plato's idea of form in their mode of existence and operation, mainly that the forms or ideas have a separate existence. But

Aristotle emphasized that everything that exists in some concrete individual thing, is a unity of matter and form. There is no separation between them in their mode of existence. Perhaps by separate or independent existence, Plato meant to show us how there could be many individual things that all have one and the same universal or nature or essence while still being individual.

Aristotle on the other hand argued that Plato's concept complicates issues and does not aid us in knowing things any better, since for Plato the forms are motionless. Everything in reality is motion bound, as we see them moving towards an end - teleology - potentiality and actuality.

Medieval on Universals and Particulars:

Unhappiness, dejection or sorrow are caused by a too limited way, of looking at things. We must raise ourselves to see things from a wider perspective, as God sees them. The task of philosophy is precisely to broaden man's horizon and raise his vision beyond this limited and narrow perspective to divine perspective. To understand any particular event, it must be placed within the total scheme of things. It cannot be understood in isolation, but only within the framework of things – that is, within a class. Philosophy then provides man with such an understanding of things, which the confusion and seeming contradictions there is in reality would be accepted and even enjoyed. “The problem of universals was one such miseries of life which became a subject of much controversy during the middle ages as started by Beethius, opined by Omoregbe”. ((Melvin R. 1961:116)

At this point however, there was a restatement of the early problems often one and the many, which took the major dimensions of universals and particulars earlier stated by Aristotle and Plato. It had resolved itself into whether a universal is a real thing or not.

Basically there were three different views about the universals, namely, exaggerated realism (or ultra-realism), moderate realism and nominalism. Exaggerated realism. Ultra-realism is the view that universals are existing realities distinct from particular things to which they refer. Omoregba J. thus wrote “. in ultra-realism, particular things are what they are because they share in the universals. For example, particular men are because they all share in humanity which is an existing reality independently of particular men. Men or humanity is an existing entity in which all men share”. (Omoregbe J. 1991: Vol 2)

Such men who held these views are John Scotus Euriugenna, Remigius of Auxe, William of Champeauk and St. Anselm who tried to use it to explain the doctrine of the trinity.

The direct opponent of exaggerated realism is nominalism according to which universals are mere words which they term voce (voice) or nomen (names), A major criticism here is Roscellinus who holds that the mind is capable of doing two things, namely forming concepts with philosophers like Plato, Socrates etc and forming universals such as man. For Roscellinus, the concept of individual is clear, while that of universals is blurred.

Modern Thinkers On Appearance and Reality:

It is very clear from experience that appearance and reality are not the same. We understand that things are always what they seem, that reality is often quite different from appearance. For we know from the popular maxim that "all is not gold that glitters" even though what glitters appear to be gold. The sun appears to move round the earth, rising in the East in the morning and setting in the West in the evening every day. This of course is appearance, but the reality is quite different. It is rather the earth that revolves round the sun and not the reverse.

Omogbe J, attested to this same fact when he cited more examples as in the analogy that when we look at clouds they appear to be thick smoke but the reality is different. Clouds are not smoke but evaporated water. Again he further illustrated, when "we look at the sky, it appears to be blue substance covering the earth like a dome, while the earth itself appears to be flat. The reality we know is quite different.

It is therefore on the basis of the truism that appearances deceive and that our senses often deceive us that the rationalists metaphysicians like Descartes, Spinoza, Hegel, Leibniz and others questioned the senses as sources of acquiring real knowledge. If we are to depend entirely on our senses, we might be misled and we would never know the nature of things. To this regard Omogbe quoting Russel says "we assume as certain, many things which on a closer scrutiny are found to be so full of apparent contradictions that only a great amount of thought enables us to know what it is that we really may believe." (Omogbe J.1996:127)

More often than not we observe that things appear different to different people. For what could appear cold to one, may seem hot to another man. Similarly what appears to taste sweet to one man could be bitter to another man. What appears yellow to a man suffering jaundice may appear black or red to another man. For example, the empiricist like Locke, Berkeley and Hume conclude that the secondary qualities such as colour, taste, odour, size are not reality or things as they appear to have them, they are not really inherent in things as appear to be. In reality they are in the minds of those who think they perceive them.

The rationalist emphasized upon the rational capacity of the human mind, which they now considered the source of truth both about the world and man. For Spinoza, Schelling, Hegel and Bradley appearance of things seem multifarious with enormous varieties and differences, in reality there is no such variety, but just ultimately one, the whole of reality for them is one unfragmented totality. There is thus no division in reality, no multiplicity. But according to Bradley, it is only the metaphysical that takes us beyond appearance and ushers us into beholding reality the way it really is - an indivisible whole.

For Descartes, reality is a dualism consisting of two basic substances - thoughts and extension. Similarly, Leibniz explains that what appears to us as physical objects are in reality spiritual entities which he calls monads. Kant comes in with his doctrine of the two worlds - the noumena (things as they are in themselves) and the phenomena (things as they appear to us). All Kant is trying to make us understand about this postulation of his is that we

can only know appearances and that is all we know, for the- realities behind these appearance can never be known as against Bradley's position that metaphysics only can lead us to perceive this reality behind physical things.

There are certain doubts and questions we must ask at this point. In the first instance, what can be added to the claims of these metaphysicians?. As Omoregbe puts it: "Once we accept that appearance is often different from reality, then we are faced with the problem of going beyond appearances to get at the reality" (Omoregbe J. 203)

Thus we ask, how then can we know the true nature of things? What exactly is the world really like? Is the physical universe, really a manifestation, in various forms, of a single entity as Spinoza, Hegel, Bradley and other idealist tell us? In sum then, what the metaphysicians seem to put across to us is that there is more to reality than we can see,

Contemporaries on Unity in Diversity:

In this era, there was a reforming of the old problem based on the views of the ancient Greek scholars. For one of the earliest problems in western philosophy is the problem of change and permanence, unity in diversity.

The early philosophers noticed that in spite of the changes taking place everywhere; there is a binding force in unity keeping things in place.

Prominent among philosophers in this period are, Quine, Williams James and Bergson. Quine expressed his own view through his concept on universals and particulars. Particulars and universals here should not be misconstrued with the medieval view. For Quine all proper names should be eliminated in language and represented in variables in mathematical form. Arnold Guiller a contemporary philosopher accepted with Quine by opining that all there is in reality are mathematical axioms of geometry. That these axioms of geometry are arranged in their order of importance. So also is reality understood So that universal ideas manifest themselves in particulars in a hierarchical order: Angels, spirits, man and other tangible realities.

William James actually considered the problem, in the many in which the Ionians viewed or identified it, precisely as one and many or the unity in diversity. Through William James' views, we will understand that in spite of obvious fact, "the unity of things has always been considered more illustrious, as it were than their variety". (Omoregbe B.M 1996:13)

To explain this problem of unity in diversity of reality, William James uses eight different views. In the first instance he held that the world is at least one subject of discourse. In this William James means that if the world was so much in parts without a union, then even the mind would not have conceived it. Secondly, he tries to analyze the problem based on continuity (that is "time"). Space and time are thus vehicles of continuity by which the world's parts hang together.

Thirdly, he holds that there is a magnitude of influence among things, the greater influencing the lesser to co-operate. Fourthly, there is the influence of the world's casual unity- In the fifth, way, he explains that the most important sort of unity or union that obtains amongst things pragmatically speaking is their generic unity. That is, things existing in their kind, such that one thing implying for a particular specimen implies for

every other specimen of that kind. In the sixth approach, William James talked about purpose, our Different purposes which are at constant clash with each other, crush each other, but where this cannot happen, they compromise into one. He lastly elucidates or illustrates his position in the harmony of nature which he termed the Aesthetic union. This is very analogical to a teleological union. Things tell a story. Their part hang together in order to work out a climax. Retrospectively, we can see that although no definite purpose presided over a chain of events, yet the events fell into a traumatic form, with a start, a middle and a finish.

Its Relationship to African Philosophy:

There had been an uncreditable assertion by the westerners that Africans have no philosophy. But we are all aware that contemporary African philosophies, recent researchers and thesis in the wisdom of the Africans, though may not cut across geographical boundaries have proved this assertion inauthentic. Thus, the debate whether or not there is an African philosophy is at its best an abandoned heap. This proof is better expressed by Uduigwomen, A. F thus: ... “the debate or controversy on whether or not there is an African philosophy is dead and buried, at best, it is a matter of historical interest”... (Uduigwomen A.F, 2001)

The African would view of reality is nucleused on the supreme force and creation. This of course, is viewed along the pinhole or spectrum of myth. For this myth after all, is pre-Philosophic and at best embedded in philosophy. For myth and philosophy serve a complementing purpose to each other.

There is the wisdom in every average African that the process of change and reality is based on the supreme force who accounts for the seeming multiplicity of things in the universe.

The African sees the metaphysical wholeness as manipulating the entire reality, our lives inclusive. For the Africans see appearances as coming from the different gods. The earth for instance has its god, the rains, thunder, moon, water and so on. Little wonder sacrifices and dedications are made to such deities. This is what the Ibos in the words of a contemporary African philosopher –Panthalion Uregbu will refer to as "the *Uwa* ontology"¹⁴ (that is, the world and its relatedness to the supreme force).

This conception of plurality of forces responsible for the many or appearances affect us (Africans) a lot, both in our thinking and the way we relate to each other. For instance, the issue of polygamy in Africa - Nigeria in particular. Due to the multicreational gods, the Africans thus belief so much in taking to so many wives and procreating many siblings. This of course is for the greedy purpose of getting rich perhaps through the off springs or sexual satisfaction from the litany of wives.

Again, the Nigerian situation comes to mind. Each administration comes and goes. But some like Abacha will see themselves as the one in which others in the country should have standard from, this is the problem of one and many (Daily Times, Volume 2, 1995, P.10) still living on. Community leaders, bosses in offices and departments and so on are not free from this enduring puzzle.

Critical Evaluation and Conclusion:

The problem of one *and* many has endured throughout the philosophical epochs in the history of philosophy. The pre-Socratics fell into greater confusion rather than solving the problem. The question here is; if there is the point of this relationship between appearance and reality, where is the point that this relationship lie? Plato tried but landed in idealism that is the positing of two worlds.

Aristotle in his own bid to figure out the point of relationship landed in realism, the medieval philosophers such as Odo Tounine landed in Pantheism as extreme exaggerated realists.

Moreso as this problem progressed, the modern philosophers saw themselves in various camps, Descartes ended up in dualism; while Leibniz in monism and Spinoza in pluralism. Though in contemporary African context like Nigeria, the problem presented itself as that of part and whole.

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, it is worthwhile to comment that the problem of one and many at best is an intellectual enterprise, directed to every wake of philosophy past, present and future.

Though the Greek or classical western philosophers systematized the problem, it does not mean that the Africans are free from it. For within the African context, the problem of one and many singularity and plurality, parts and whole, universals and particulars presents itself as a difficult knot to untie. Though in a standard African society, to be is to be with others, that is an individual should be defined by the community, the reverse is the case in Nigeria where the individual wants to give meaning to the entire citizen, This is exemplified in Abacha and Babangida's government who turned themselves to autocrats or demi-gods the one, leading majority political party given meaning and directives to the many (other political parties) the oppositions, as exemplified in the ruling party APC and opposing party PDP as it is in today's political arena. This originated in the 90's, and has lingered on and found its roots in the democratic government of today – one major ruling party into which others fuse into one as opposition. Hence this has given rise to unheralded bureaucracy where the wealthy few become the one/part that should give meaning to the less privileged who are the many.

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