

THE PLACE OF FREEDOM IN BEING HUMAN: THE IGBO PERSPECTIVE

Ogugua Ifunanya Clara and Umeogu, BonaChristus
Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

This work is an attempt to dig out the place of freedom in Being Human. It was occasioned by the observed behaviour of many people in the society which tilt towards the negative pole or immorality. It is the onus of this work to point to the fact that Being Human is a choice, a decision one makes for himself or herself. The method of study adopted is analysis. The work discovered that freedom in Being Human can be expressed in multiple ways, in every aspects of human existence; it found out that there are challenges to being human and depicted ways freedom in Being Human can be sustained.

Introduction

Being Human is related to happiness but happiness doesn't reflect it, likewise human flourishing. It has some applications with human wellbeing. Religions tend to point towards human wellbeing; as they mostly insist or are concerned with justice, truth, good works, love, etc. This is because people require to be guaranteed a degree of wellbeing required for their realization of their personalities. Religious sects insist that: "Human wellbeing and dignity are the basic principle and goal of human ethics. Human beings act to preserve life, maintain and transmit life¹".

Human wellbeing is an angle of being human, and there are basic needs that make for such. Self interest tends to reflect these concepts though it doesn't capture them appropriately; it has something to do with my own interest and not that of another. Philosophically speaking, these concepts encompass both the positive and negative aspects of how someone fairs in this existential journey.

Being human in Igbo world envelop, incorporate, and incorporate concepts and themes from Igbo thought system and tradition which entail (involve values, virtues, schemes, dispositions, prudence, norms and even practical reason which act as guides extrapolated from customs, traditions, culture and beliefs of the people matched with lived experience.

My being human just like my wellbeing is dependent on how my life goes for me, though I can allow my being human to depend on yours, yet I do not mean that my being is constituted by yours as we have norms which guide our code of conduct. Being human has to do with virtues, good life, and values, it has to do with both moral and prudential values, but has very little to do with aesthetic value. It concerns actions which promote being human, these acts are performed with intention and goals and they in turn have consequences.

Once we make a value judgment that an action is right or wrong, we uphold a consequentialist view. We don't subscribe to the utilitarian doctrine of greatest happiness to the greatest number, which dismisses any dependency on God, common sense or tradition, for all these are constituents of being human in Igbo thought system. Our actions should be geared towards enhancement of human good, flourishing and well being which lead to being human. Good is defined in terms of an end.² Well being is seen as concerning health, otherwise welfare, so they are tied around physicality, physical wellness.

In the bid to 'being human' in Igbo world, the concepts of 'chi' – guardian spirit and 'akala aka' are not downplayed. The concept of 'Onatara Chi' – the gift of destiny comes into play. Ikenga Metuh holds: “The idea of destiny so pervades Igbo life and thought that it is reasonable to assume that it is an ancient and basic concept in Igbo... Every event in man's life whether it is success or failure is 'onatara chi' – a gift of destiny”.³

This 'akala aka' is “the parcel of destiny, and the guardian spirit who chooses the destiny parcel”.⁴

Although there exists this 'onatara chi', the individual is not a passive agent in the course for the realization of his destiny; he does so via hard work. Little wonder, Maroux says that “man shapes his own being daily....”⁵ Ikenga Metuh adds that the goal of man's life is to achieve his 'akala aka', the very destiny that has been imprinted on his palms⁶, and these lines of destiny are permanent, cannot be washed away by soap and water.

It is based on the input of an individual in his 'being human', that the title 'freedom in Being Human.....’ was conceived. Man must play his role in the drama of being human. Reuben Abel writes: “A motive which I should always share is so to choose as to anticipate and direct my future choices and to expand the unknown scope of my ability; in brief, to grow”.⁷

Experiential perspective shows that we need our individual attitudes to realize our 'onatara chi' gifts of destiny (fortune), so the relative pluses and minuses, we see in life flow from our actions and inactions. Obiajulu notes:

...that what one may hope to get out of life is only what has been predestined, the scope of which is unlimited. But what one actually gets is his own responsibility.

He adds:

...no height is passively attained without a resolute effort. In other words, where a person is not resourceful, a particular fortune in his destiny package may be lost; since no one knows the contents of one's destiny, one must keep trying as if what one wants is there⁸.

Background to the Study

The Igbo society has come in contact with other 'cultures' and as such has floundered for decades now. As years go by, more harm has been added to human welfare and wellbeing. There is today very noticeable loss of or disregard for values; things are in turspy -turvy frame, and we know that as values are swept under the carpet, the society is about to collapse for values are of universal relevance to every society if not for virtues, values, how do we talk of 'being human', human well being or welfare? Misplacement of values affects efforts towards being human. What are values? Ignacimuthu, S. writes:

Values give direction and firmness to life and they bring life the important dimension of meaning which adds joy, satisfaction and peace to life...they identify a person, giving him a name, a face and a character. Without values one would be floating like a piece of driftwood in the swirling waters of the river... They bring quality to life⁹

The Igbo society doesn't function today in a way that uplifts the life of the people so as to promote human wellbeing, welfare or flourishing; this births frustration. This lifestyle was birthed by philosophy of expediency which many Igbo people have titled towards and embraced due to the enormous influence of utilitarian, pragmatic and hedonistic theories on the people. This influence drifted them away from their pristine attachment to noble and worth while values and land crashed them on the vogue calculus of practical relevance, utility and worthiness based on the subjective interests of the individual, relegating intelligence and morals to the background, believing in the matrix of the very things that are most accessible as they are available.

Obiajulu Mulumba remarks:

Having been preponderantly incarcerated by the empirical immediacy and influence by the philosophy of expediency orchestrated by the colonialist empiricism and utilitarianism, Igbo African feels satisfied in anchoring his fate on the result-oriented principles, denigrating the erstwhile conviction that God's time is the best.^{10a}

He reiterates:

The morbidity that is attached to the plan of setting the best, provided it takes some time, has precipitated to his acceptance of the mundane philosophy of 'ebeano', 'egwueji', and 'akanchawa' which are trade – Igbo African theories on which he targets his justifications^{10b}.

Most Igbo people who are affected by these mundane theories and philosophies now tend to accept success as being determined by the value of actions irrespective of whether the values are positive or negative; acceptable or not.

Being that most Igbo people today seem to appreciate a civilization subsumed within the purview of empiricism of consciousness and empirical immediacy oiled by the indices of pragmatism, instrumentalism and anchoring on utilitarianism which tend to replace their old and pristine values, due to their being tied to philosophies of expediency and conformity to the modern trend known for its massification of negative values and trends, that the researcher decided to carry out this research.

Freedom: Meaning

The issue of freedom is not foreign to us, though an emotive and very complex issue, it is widely discussed in philosophy. Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw assert: “Freedom. Everybody wants it. Poets praise it. Politicians promise or proclaim it. Some people have given their lives to win it for themselves or others”.¹¹ Judith Ollington collaborates them thus:

'I want to be free', is a cry dear to the heart of most people. In the past man have considered it worthwhile to die for freedom's sake....' “Freedom” has been called a 'hurrah’ word. A word that arouses our emotions, that makes us want to cheer and support a cause.

She adds:

'Freedom' is a 'trouser-word', Trousers without legs have no shape: “Freedom out of context is equally empty.”¹²

Matters of public concern in one way or the other raise the issue of freedom. It is very continual in all that we do. Ekwutosi points out thus: “Even people who consistently and flagrantly violate the most elementary precepts of freedom feel obliged at least to pay lip-service to the idea of claiming for themselves one kind of freedom or the other”.¹³

The word freedom is omnibus, very porous hence it is open to multiple interpretations. Little wonder, it is often misinterpreted and misunderstood. Freedom has many different meanings. Jacques Maritain observes:

The word freedom, like all big words for which men are ready to die, and which are latent, not only with the rich of the object, but with the desires the dreams, and the supreme generousities of the subject, the word freedom conveys a great number of meanings, yet these meanings, though widely different have something in common¹⁴.

It does seem that freedom suggests generally lack of physical restraints, or the possibility to make a choice. For Grisez et al “it can signify that state in which individuals are able to form their own lives – in a sense their own selves – through their choices”.¹⁵ Freedom is predicated in different ways of a being with human existence, whose freedom is limited by human relationships, even though he cannot isolate himself from others, yet his freedom is valid with self determination. In the words of Max Muller: “Such a being is positively free in- so far as it is in possession of itself and possesses in this relationship the

sufficient condition for its being and relation”.¹⁶

Freedom draws the cord of self possession, relative self-sufficiency and presencing. According to John Locke freedom is “a power in any agent to do or forbear any particular action, according to his determination or that of the mind, whereby either of them is preferred to the other”¹⁷ Freedom is one of the elements that make an act by a human being a human act and not an act of man, as such it designates the power of an intelligent being to act without compulsion or coercion. S.I. Benn concurs thus: “Freedom is that power or condition of an agent which enables him to act or refuse to act, and do so in ways which he determines without compelling restraints from forces external or internal to his own personality”¹⁸.

Once one is free to act, it simply means that such a person is both laudable and blame worthy for one's acts, as such responsible. Grisez et al hold: “The freedom to determine one's self by one's own choices is the freedom most proper to a human being. It is the freedom with which ethics is most concerned? According to one's conscience”.¹⁹

J.C Donceel asserts in reference to freedom thus: “Man is free not because he can do what he wants to do (many animals have that power, and the determinism admit that we have it), but because he has it in his power either to want or not want to do it”²⁰.

In the same vein, an existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre states that “freedom is the freedom of choosing. Not to choose is, in fact, to choose not to choose”.²¹

There are many types of freedom, the simplest type is the absence of physical coercion and restraint, objects, animals and human beings exercise or have this type of freedom. Here, the meaning of the action of behaviour comes from the culmination of that activity, ie, getting at something, etc Grisez et al opine:

This kind of freedom is always a matter of degree some measure of physical freedom is essential if one is to act morally. (Acting morally here does not mean doing what is right. It only means acting in a way that counts as right or wrong in moral forms).²²

Freedom could mean doing as one pleases due to the absence of social demands and/or restrictions; this is a particular sort of action. This kind of freedom is proper to action performed as a means to some end which is separate from the performance itself, an end not included in the culmination of behaviour...At this level of action persons are free to do as they please to the extent that they desire the end to be achieved and that certain means are necessary to achieve the end”²³.

Acting at this level requires high level of intelligence, caution and character, as it will entail high level of calculation and reflection to ensure that means employed for an action are capable of achieving the goal or end in view. The truth is that this sort of freedom is not in agreement with responsibility. Realizing the difficulty of this position Grisez et al state:

Some degree of freedom to do as one pleases is certainly essential to moral responsibility. However, unlimited

freedom of this sort is impossible – and would be undesirable even if it were somehow not impossible – for anyone living in social relationships with others.²⁴

Freedom is not necessarily and essentially what we desire or want, it is what we are; yes it is equally what we have. We cannot be without freedom.

There is the ideal freedom, the sort of freedom individuals and societies have to pursue their dreams, visions and missions and get at their goals. It is not in disagreement with doing as one pleases, they are indeed compatible. The trouble is that ideals are many, for we don't have a way of getting to our goals, but we are required to act ideally as we ought to. Ideal freedom holds that “the individual is not blocked from doing what ought to be done; freedom to do as one pleases means that the individual is not blocked from doing as he or she wishes to do”.²⁵

Another type of freedom is creative freedom. It is resident in the agent, present when circumstances which tend towards repetition have been welcome, and something distinct from the agent, new, now emerges, these could be principles, theories, laws and even ideals. Political freedom is another sort of freedom, it has to do with both individuals and peoples, as in when individuals struggle to take part in directing the efforts of their states and when a group of people revolves and fight for independence.

Freedom eventual to man is not

... advances in the primitive society, which confuses freedom with license to do anything whatever and which in the name of freedom proclaims a kind of general morality. It is a caricature of freedom to claim that people are free to organize their lives with no reference to moral values. Such an attitude is destructive of freedom²⁶.

Freedom all said and done means responsibility. Freedom no doubt too, means self determination: it is in this aspect that we can meaningfully raise questions of morality. It is to the very extent we can shape our lives by ourselves – the choices we make, to that extent we are indeed responsible for our lives. Grisez et al state:

Self-determination refers... to the state of affairs in which, despite external pressures and prior causes which can and do influence one choices, we retain at least some options of choosing or not choosing, or choosing one thing rather than another.²⁷

Being Human

Being human is a goal of every reasonable individual; but the endowment of each one with freewill shows that each one will follow his own pattern to realize it. There is no straight jacket or common course to it. There is equally no guarantee that each of us will always choose rightly, we cannot logically separate fallibility from the concept of creature-hood/ finitude.

The freewill man has, he exercises it freely but it ought not to be exercised arbitrarily, he should operate within the values of his society and not just values he creates for himself, for he lives within a society and within a milieu. William Derek holds thus:

Man is a cultivator, not a collector; in the creation narrative; he is given the responsibility of caring for the physical environment and developing its resources. He is given dominion over everything else, he is God's deputy ruler in the world.²⁸

John Macquarie states “the highest reach of humanity is creativity, a sharing in the power of God the creator. Creativity is the mystery of freedom”.²⁹

Being human requires freedom. John Macquarie avers: “Freedom seems to contain in itself the seed of its own destruction, so that the mystery of the origin of freedom runs together with the mystery of the origin of evil”³⁰.

Being human necessitates being finite centre of freedom being a self directing agent in one's operations and actions, quite responsible and accountable for one's decisions and actions; which may be positive or negative.

In Africa, man doesn't claim absolute freedom as would be seen in some statements by some humanists, for he knows that absolute freedom if claimed will result to man's ruination and total decomposition due to lack of morals and values.

Being human exalts freedom which urges man to work hard to actualize the possibilities of his existence by countering/counteracting with whatever stands as a barrier against his realizing himself. It is not fully in support of Paul Edward's perspective where humanism is seen as: “Any philosophy which recognizes the values of dignity of man and makes him the measure of all things or somehow takes human nature, its limits or its interests as its theme”.³¹

It doesn't equally agree or romance with Peter Angeles opinion that humanism is

A philosophy that regards the rational individual as the highest value, considers the individual to be the ultimate source of value; and is dedicated to fostering the individual's creative and moral development in a meaningful and rational way without concepts of supernatural³².

Being human in Igbo – African conceptual scheme is more inclined to Frolov's rendition of humanism, which sees it as a:

System of views based on respect for the dignity and rights of man, his value as a personality, concern for his welfare, his all round development, and the creation of favourable condition for social life...It proclaimed the freedom of the individual, opposed to religious asceticism, vindicated

man's right to pleasure and the satisfaction of earthly requirements³³.

Being human suggests that man though a creature of culture becomes a creator of culture at some point in time. He determines most of the determinable remaining in his life, outside those already determined by nature, as he is a being of nature and nurture. This he does with the matrices of knowledge, understanding, values and hard work. It is slightly related to Sartre's position which holds that:

Man first of all exists, encounters himself, emerges in the world, defines himself afterwards...Man...if he is indefinable, it is because he is first of all nothing and will be nothing until later on, and he will be what he will make himself³⁴.

The Igbo-African self doesn't engage in any revolt against God; as such it doesn't create one's value, as he doesn't see the existence of God as harmful or incompatible with his freedom. The Igbo-African in as much as he agrees he is free, knows that there are some 'givens' in his life, so he adjusts well with causal determinism, but doesn't ascribe everything to God as he knows that he is responsible for his life, for he is an active agent involved in shaping his destiny, his concern with being human. The Igbo don't shift the burden of accountability to God, as that will mean escaping from the reality of the human situation which is tied to responsibility.

It is by living existentially, and reshaping or restructuring these 'givens' in human existence that man makes effort at being human each has his own particular existential situation, and we start operating though humans but as different people with different endowments, aims and goals, there is little reason for the difference in our accomplishments. Reuben Abel remarks:

...so the individual person is an unfinished animal. He is never complete while alive. Of all the thousands of lives which are open to him, he becomes only the one person he finally chooses to create. His future is free not because it is uncompelled, or unpredictable, but because he has a core of freedom if he insists on it, what he has become is only instrumental to his future growth. Every man is self-made.³⁵

In 'Being human' the Igbo know that one out of hard work can break out of the blind enclosure of causal determinism, breaking out of the boundaries of the already "givens". This is due to the fact that the Igbo are against fatalism, which tends to the possibility of man remaking himself and projecting himself to different heights in life after all Shakespeare said that some have greatness thrust upon them, while some earn it. If fatalism is accepted "people would fatalistically sink into a state of futility, laziness, and indifference....." and if determinism is accepted "the great fighters against injustice in human history would give up raising their voices in protest, since the truth of determinism would allegedly make such efforts useless"³⁶.

If determinism were believed then, man must be then, a passive agent.

Some influences from the environment, even if they are unconscious can still affect one either way. It is not a must that we be conscious of everything that influence or affect us. Enoch Stumpf asserts:

Our preoccupation with the future may show why we are not aware of the constraints acting on us and hence why we do not feel bound by them; it does not explain why our sense of freedom persists after the constraints are disclosed to us³⁷.

It is equally the case, that holding tenaciously to determinism makes nonsense of moral responsibility. It makes praise and blame meaningless, punishment brutal, remorse pointless, amendment hopeless, duty deceit³⁸.

The Igbo are not totally in support of either anthropocentric or theocentric anthropology, but oscillate around both freedom and determinism, which birthed a comprehensive and dynamic vision of man in Igbo cosmology. The Igbo understanding of being human revolves around fatalism, determinism, more appropriately, soft determinism and freedom. It is with the aid of one's guardian spirit that one shapes his destiny or being every now and then. Little wonder, Ikenga Metuh states: "The idea of destiny so pervades Igbo life and thought that it is reasonable to assume that it is an ancient and basic concept in Igbo....Every event in man's life whether it is success or failure is 'Onatara Chi' – a gift of destiny"³⁹.

Man is the agent that (who) wills his fortune, so he is an active receiver of this parcel of destiny and works hard to realize it. Man has unlimited access to reality but what he gets eventually is based on his activity, attitude and responsibility. He must use resolute resourcefulness to get what he wants in life realized. Nothing comes sandy, an individual must use his freedom, time and available resources to prod on and achieve any feat in life. Reuben Abel holds: "A motive which I should always have is so to choose as to anticipate and direct my future choices and to expand the unknown scope of my ability, in brief, to grow"⁴⁰.

Man has the faculty of concept formation, he uses speech, this aid him to think articulate in order to function rightly in life. He knows that no position is attained in life without struggle or resolute effort. The Igbo say 'aka aja aja na ebute onu mmanu mmanu' – only the "soiled" hand will birth an oily mouth. If one doesn't work, such one will not eat, for there is nothing to eat. It then boils down to the fact that if one doesn't pursue his destiny package aggressively and resourcefully, such package may be lost, as nobody knows the content of his destiny, so to realize it, one must work hard and tirelessly. J.C. Echeruo corroborates this thus: "Akara aka (good luck or success) can be achieved by the full exercise of personal Ikenga...the spirit of determined purposeful honest drive towards over all success in life"⁴¹.

When one is unable to realize his destiny, he is seen as one with an 'ajo chi' – bad spirit and qualified as 'onye chi ojoo'. The Igbo say that 'Onye chi ojoo ka mmiri na afa na eze' – one

with bad spirit has water in between his teeth. That means, he needs tooth pick to bring water out of his teeth. George Uchechukwu Dine holds; “This misfortune is not created by Chukwu but exists in a person as a result of neglect, lack of initiative and hard work on the part of the person”.

Pope John Paul II laid credence to the need for an individual to work hard in the bid to realize his destiny remarks:

At birth everyone is granted in germ, a set of aptitudes and qualities for him to bring to fruition. Their coming to maturity which will be the result of education received from the environment and personal effort, will allow each man to direct himself towards the destiny intended for him by his creator. Endowed with intelligence and freedom, he is responsible for his salvation. Each one remains.....the principal agent of his own success of failure.⁴³

It is destiny that is worked out in 'being human' which is a project, though some people may have the same percentage, their destinies differ/vary. That is why the Igbo say 'ofu nne na amu, mana oburo ofu chi na eke' – one mother may give birth to some people, but they don't have the same 'chi' – guardian spirit.

We are not equally gifted, so there are inequalities in talents, no doubt, there are disparities in fortune. There is no gainsaying that in the project of 'being human', the individual must be disposed to play his own role. Little wonder, the Igbo assert, 'onye kwe chi ya ekwe' – when one agrees, his Chi agrees. Ikenga Metuh presents it thus; “He is at same time a victim of restriction imposed by destiny and the architect of his own future. He is both innocent and responsible”. From what we have said above Ikenga Metuh reiterates: “...human destiny in African thought is both unalterable and alterable viewed as package sealed by God and given to man, it is unalterable. Viewed as a resource to be exploited, it is alterable”.⁴⁴

It is especially and essentially this alterable aspect of destiny that we are concerned with in the project of 'being human'.

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