

## COGNITION IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLS: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION

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### Introduction

The question of knowledge is not about whether we can know at all as it is about the source of our knowledge, for “nobody doubts that we know. But how do we know? This is where disagreements come in”.<sup>1</sup> Although this may not go down well with the skeptics, yet one basic thing is that even the one who doubts is at least aware that he exists; for he has to exist in order to doubt. The knowledge of his own existence is enough to counter his skepticism. However, this does not entirely rule out the fact that we can doubt certain aspects of human knowledge, though man can achieve certain knowledge. Even at this, the task of philosophers through the eras has been more of determining how we know what we know. History of inquiry shows that scholars are divided into opposing camps in this regard; rationalists, empiricists and others, insisting that certain knowledge can only be grasped through the reason and senses respectively.

More pressing issues that philosophy raises are what inform the object of our knowledge or consciousness. How do our senses or how does the mind generate what we know? In what form is our knowledge generated? How do we communicate what we claim to know? And even understand what we express? It is fact that man is a being in language, yet prior to language formation man had always interacted with one another in some pattern or form. That is, “way before communication as we know it was conceptualized and contextualized, man has always communicated with symbols. This means that from time immemorial, symbols have played communicative and interactive role to man in general...”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, whether knowledge is gathered through the senses or reason alone, this can only be possible when there are symbols. The object of man's consciousness is symbolic and through this he conceptualizes and contextualizes his world. Symbols are forms of cognition as without this man cannot properly communicate his consciousness or experience. Knowledge can only be transmitted through, in and with symbols.

### Clarification of Terms

#### Cognition and Cognitive Science

The word cognition is derived from the Latin, '*cognosco*' which means I know or perceive, and it shares this meaning with the Greek, '*ginosko*'. Another cognate is the Greek '*gnosis*' which literally means knowledge or the ability to conceptualize. Thus cognition is the ability or faculty of the mind to recognize or adopt an object to its own structure. This implies the internalization of the object of knowledge, such that the object becomes one with consciousness. This according to Norbert Okoye is what is “becoming

aware” or “coming to know”.<sup>3</sup> As such, cognition is a mental process or all the process that lead to knowledge acquisition or the state of knowing. “It is associated with knowledge acquisition and the end product of perception”.<sup>4</sup> Cognition brings to mind “such abstract concepts as mind, reasoning, perception, intelligence, learning, and many others that describe numerous capabilities of human mind and expected properties of artificial or synthetic intelligence”.<sup>5</sup> Cognition can be conscious and unconscious, concrete or abstract, intuitive as in knowledge of language, and conceptual; it makes use of existing knowledge as well as generate new knowledge.

Knowledge or to say to have acquired knowledge means different things to different people. However, Hamlyn defines it as a “justified true belief”<sup>6</sup> which for Eboh, “involves a kind of claim to certainty”.<sup>7</sup> But for this claim to be certain Hamlyn lists three basic conditions that must be met. Thus, “I know a thing if I believe it to be the case, have a sufficient ground on which to base the belief and if the belief is actually true”.<sup>8</sup> Once this is achieved, we have a clear indubitable state of mind which according to BonaChristus Umeogu, is perception, understanding or knowledge. In his description, cognition is a function of reality and consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

Reality and consciousness meet at the universe of knowledge. When knowledge occurs between reality and consciousness, reality is no longer just reality, it becomes the reality of knowledge and consciousness; and consciousness is no longer just consciousness, it becomes the consciousness of knowledge and reality.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, cognition or the act of knowing is an integrative process between the subject and object or between consciousness and reality. That is “in knowing, there is a union of the object and subject, possession of or unity of the knower and the known...”.<sup>11</sup> But for this to be possible, the subject or mind structures the object according to its own form or mind symbols, such that the object is known as part of the subject, according to its mode of existence. It is at this level that we have cognition or knowledge. The study of the mind and these processes is known as cognitive science. Its scope embraces not just knowing what cognition is and how it works but equally how this translates to behavior in humans and also how information is represented, processed and transformed in computers, that is artificial intelligence. Cognitive science embraces multiple disciplines such as psychology, artificial intelligence, philosophy, neuroscience, linguistics and anthropology.

### **Symbol and Symbolism**

Symbol derives from the Greek *Symbolon* which is formed from joining the prefix, *syn-* together to the suffix, *bole-* a throwing or a casting together. Etymologically, symbol implies the idea of throwing things together, contrasting, comparison or token used in comparison to determine if something is genuine. Implicit in this is the idea of relatedness between the things under comparison or the fact that the idea of one leads to the idea of the other. Therefore, symbol is an expression of something or something which stands for something else. This something could be an idea, language, object, conventional or non-conventional but it does not represent itself rather it does stand for something outside itself. Dukor, agrees that symbol “refers to that which expresses, represents, stands for,

reveals, indicates or makes known another reality”.<sup>12</sup> In same vein, Umeogu opines that “symbol is not a symbol that is a symbol for itself; a symbol is a symbol for another”.<sup>13</sup> That which reveals another, that is its essence lies in bringing out another reality which is beyond the symbol itself. Umeogu further adds that “the symbol is something for something; that is, something that stands with something, for something and to something. The symbol begins from something and ends towards something for which it is the symbol”.<sup>14</sup>

Symbol is a sign but conveys ideas and beliefs that go beyond mere signs. It reveals deeper aspects of reality which transcends mere signs. Symbols have implicit meaning hence Ricoeur argues that symbol gives food for thought unlike sign. Also, while signs are direct and precise, symbols are multi-referents; open the door to a very deep philosophical inquiry. In other words, they are signs with complex referents which are often associated with man's emotions and sentiments.<sup>15</sup> Though symbols reveal deeper aspects of reality yet interpretation of this is subjective, depending on each cultural perception and experience. That is:

Symbols are subjective realities whose objectivity is metaphysical while that of science is physical. Hence the objectivity of symbols could be defined in terms of inter-subjective objectivity. This inter-subjective objectivity implies that we as individuals in a society or culture agree on certain things based on our mode of living and religious experiences; that object of agreement or belief becomes for us an objective reality.<sup>16</sup>

Symbols according to Onwubiko in Dukor are divided into direct, indirect and non-material or linguistic symbols. For Isiguzo, there are just two kinds; abstract and concrete symbols. Irrespective of these classifications, the essence of symbol is its qualities of revealing and representing reality. Symbol, presentation, revelation, representation and communication are inseparable concepts; they are all related and go together. “There are many different ways of knowing reality, but symbolism has it as a primary objective to reveal the real; in other words, to reveal the truth-the reality. Therefore, symbol is nothing more than authentic truth”.<sup>17</sup> Symbolism is the act of using symbols to represent or reveal ideas, beliefs and experiences. Symbolism for Dukor belongs to the realm of the esoteric, mystical and supernatural since unlike symbol it is not tangible. “Every symbol looks beyond itself, it looks to its symbolism; as it involves a conversion to a meaning beyond, and this meaning is its good for, outside this meaning, this symbolism, no symbol is good”.<sup>18</sup> Signification is the need of symbols, outside which they have no importance. Thus, symbolism is the truth and picture of reality. It “is the source or origin of most scientific knowledge”.<sup>19</sup> Symbolism is the basis of man's experiences and perception.

### **Symbol: Foundation of Knowing or Cognition**

What does man know? What constitutes the very act of knowing? How does man know? Whence proceeds man's knowledge? These questions are pertinent to establishing the basis of human knowledge. Responding to the above, Umeogu submits that:

Knowledge is always knowledge of symbol. Knowledge of symbol is always knowledge of symbolism. Knowledge of symbolism is always knowledge of symbolismic expression. Knowledge of symbolismic expression is always knowledge of symbolismic

disposition.<sup>20</sup>

In agreement with him, Dukor also opines that “man's understanding of the world himself and the environment is characterized and associated with symbol formation. The evolution of human mind was accompanied simultaneously with the evolution of symbols and concepts”.<sup>21</sup> Knowledge is symbolic for man perceives and thinks in symbols, with symbols, from symbols and of symbols. As Ricoeur observes, “...symbol gives rise to thought”<sup>22</sup>; It opens door to immense philosophical inquiries. Therefore, human knowledge or consciousness proceeds from symbols as its spring board or basis. The fact that the early human communities were able to relate their experiences and even live along side each other is a very concrete instance.

How does knowledge happen then? Ben Eboh explains that in the process of acquiring knowledge three elements are necessary; the knowing subject, the known object and the mental act of knowing or cognition.<sup>23</sup> Knowledge results as a product of interaction between the knowing subject and the known object; that is consciousness plus reality equals knowledge. This union is such that the subject perceives the object (symbol) as part of itself and not as something external to it. The object presents itself as object to the mind not as object in itself. In this case, it exists as part of the mind not as something existing outside the mind. Thus:

(The object or symbol) enters into a certain relation with mind not according to the object's own being of nature, but according to the being (symbol) of the mind, according to the intentional being. The very act of knowledge demands this sort of presence of the object in the subject; otherwise no union would take place between the subject and the object; and knowledge would not be possible.<sup>24</sup>

This according to Immanuel Kant is how the synthetic apriori knowledge is possible. Kant's Copernican revolution insists that in knowing, it is the object that conforms to the structure of the mind, not the mind to the object; otherwise it will imply that all human knowledge derive from experience. But this, for him, is not so. Rather “what we see in things or ascribe to them are not really in things but come from our mind that makes them appear to us with forms and qualities we see in them”.<sup>25</sup> This is possible by the mind or subject imposing its own symbols or categories on the categories of the sensory object, thereby structuring the object according to its concepts. In this form does perception take place. Perception, in Kant's position, takes place in the framework of space and time. “Space and time are the form of our own perceptive faculty. They are the creation of our mind. It is we who impose space and time on things and not things which impose space on our mind. They are our way of perceiving (sensory objects)”.<sup>26</sup> Based on this then, human knowledge results from the joint operation of sensibility and understanding. Sensibility is the capacity to receive the representations of the object while understanding is the active thought on or analysis of the data of sensibility. Perception of the sensory data takes place in space and time, which are the categories or conditions of sensibility; and understanding or judgement has quality, quantity, relation and modality as its categories and these direct its operation. So while sense perception receives sense data or phenomena, the function of understanding is to synthesize the data or content of sense perception into knowledge. This is only made possible through the application of the mind's categories of understanding. Omoregbe states:

The categories reveal the structure of the understanding since they are the apriori principles according to which human understanding or the faculty of thinking operates. Before anything can be known or understood, it must be subjected to the categories. In other words, the categories must first be applied to anything before it can be known or understood. This means that nothing can be the object of understanding as it is in itself but only as it becomes when the categories have been applied to it. But the categories can only be applied to objects of sense perception since it is only phenomena that appear in space and time.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, symbols reveal knowledge or knowledge are symbols of the human mind. Symbols ground our perception and understanding. They are the source of and representation of the human knowledge since they are indispensable in the search for revelation of truth. In this regard, Dukor surmises that “symbols are inseparable from the evolution of mind or (cognition)”<sup>28</sup>; that is why even the deaf and dumb are able to communicate and make senses of their experience of the world. For Umeogu, “symbols represent knowledge. Knowledge is made through symbol”.<sup>29</sup> Citing Cassirer's view he concludes that human inventions like scientific laws, religion and language are symbols the mind produces in attempt to represent reality or fashion knowledge.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, symbols are basis for grasping reality which is the object of consciousness.

### **Symbolism: Picture of Reality**

The essence of symbol as earlier stated is to reveal the deepest aspect of reality. This Dukor refers to as the psychical function of symbol. He points out that “there are many different ways of knowing reality, but symbolism has it as a primary objective to reveal the real; in other word to reveal the truth- the reality”.<sup>31</sup> This implies that symbols stand in for reality or is the form of reality or as its definition goes, something for something that is that which stands in place of reality. This is what Umeogu calls representative philosophy. Umeogu emphasizes thus:

The philosophy of symbolism bothers much on what can be called representative philosophy. Representative in the sense that it represents a people; represents words; represents action; and represents thoughts because there is no way a person's thought can be carried out. Every philosophizing works on that and if that “working” is systematic, rational and analytic, that is philosophy.<sup>32</sup>

For Dukor, this is the logic of symbols and symbolism; that fact that there is a logical connection between symbol and the symbolized. This is even in cases where the symbol bears no direct resemblance to what is signified. Symbols represent consciousness; consciousness is always the consciousness of reality, hence picture of reality.

Wittgenstein elucidates the logical connection between symbol or proposition and the signified in his *Tractatus*. He argues that symbols or proposition share logical internal form with reality; hence a symbol is a picture of reality. As cited by Dukor, Wittgenstein view is that:

A proposition is essentially connected with the situation it represents, and this connection is precisely that it is its logical picture. If a fact is to be a picture, it must have something in common with what it depicts. There must be something identical in a picture and what it

depicts, to enable the one to be a picture of the other at all. What any picture, of whatever form, must have in common with reality in order to be able to depict it correctly or incorrectly in any way at all is logical form, i.e, the form of reality.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, the structure of the world corresponds with the structure of symbol or proposition for Wittgenstein. He opines that the structure of the world on analysis can be broken into simple objects, and that these correspond to the atomic units of which proposition is composed of. "...simple names, the atomic units of language (or proposition) correspond to simple constituent parts of things in the world. Just as a simple proposition is composed of a combination of simple names, so is a state of affairs in the world composed of combination of things. A simple proposition thus pictures a state of affairs in the world".<sup>34</sup> It is also on whether a proposition corresponds to or fails to correspond to the state of affairs in the world that determines its truth or falsehood. Therefore, that symbol pictures reality implies that the symbol bears logical form to reality. Also, since language is used to speak of and about reality, it means that there is a direct correspondence between language and reality. This is how the two are internally attached or connected.

### **Symbol and African Philosophy**

The search for authentic African philosophy has been the search for meaning, representation and wholeness shrouded as it were in obscurity before now. This reiterates the earlier attempts to deny Africa and indeed, Africans the ability to philosophize. However, the views are different now; African philosophy is now counted alongside Western, Indian, Asian philosophies etc. In Umeogu's rumination "...if philosophy is big enough to accommodate Continental, American, Indian or Chinese philosophies, then there ought to be room for African philosophy".<sup>35</sup> Equally, the fact is that;

...every philosophy is a cultural philosophy. Here cultural is used in the sense that it bothers on the realities, traditions and thoughts of a particular society. So in Africa, if there are such things like aspect of culture, tradition, thoughts that has been subjected to that kind of level of analytic, rational and intellectual scrutiny, that can pass as philosophy.<sup>36</sup>

This said and accepted, all effort now is turned to making sure that African philosophy continues to claim its rightful place alongside other philosophies, since like others it is an on-going activity to represent the truth of the universe. Equally, it has the task of perpetually representing African experiences and position which are the authentic African reality and existence.

In this regard, all the efforts so far in writing African philosophy are efforts to critically and rationally represent African consciousness, experience and understanding of the African universe, which for African scholars involve reasoning with, by and through symbols. This for Dukor reads man can't do without symbols, so is prone to its formation. His understanding of his world, himself and his environment is characterized and associated with symbol formation.<sup>37</sup> Umeogu understands this to imply that symbols have always had a communicative role for the African in particular and man in general. African universe is replete with symbols and these reveal or are sources of deep insight into

reality as it concerns the African universe and experience. As earlier stated, the philosophy of symbols and symbolism is the philosophy of representation; as such symbols in African conception serve to communicate African reality and experiences to receivers. Symbols are replete with meaning; they open up horizon of critical inquiry, thought and understanding in the African universe. They provide bases from which one can inquire into and understand the truth of the different experiences of the African. In other words, without symbols we cannot arrive at such truths or representations of the African experience. "Symbols represent knowledge. Knowledge is made explicit through symbols".<sup>38</sup> In this case, the African universe and consciousness are made explicit through African symbols. They are the basis of African philosophy and its progress or growth is dependent on sustained inquiry into, with and from these symbols.

Unlike the Western materialistic universe, reality for the African is spiritual and esoteric. In this regard, symbols in Africa represent multi-facet reality which can only be perceived on a very deep critical inquiry. Symbols in African conception are not material but mysterious and esoteric. As such "(African) symbol opens the door into a larger world. It goes beyond what is visible and tangible. It opens the door especially to the world of mystery".<sup>39</sup> This is because African experience goes beyond the mere visible to include the invisible, the mysterious and the spiritual. There is an interpenetration of life and existence in the African universe. That is why "they are often able to see a symbolic or spiritual meaning in events like sickness, death and disasters".<sup>40</sup> Religion permeates the African world as such the African attaches religious undertone to all forms of consciousness and experience. This explains why the African has been variously called incurably religious; Dukor calls him theistic pansychic. He explains "theistic pansychism as the metaphysical super structure of the black African philosophy characterized by symbolism, symbolimysticism, monism and monadology, all of which individually and severally presuppose digital consciousness; the digital human mind or consciousness is the digital world-writ-large".<sup>41</sup> For the African, symbols serve to connect reality-the physical and spiritual; this is the communicative expression of his unitary conception of the universe. The Psychic expressions of the African posit wholeness in African universe, and the unity of African being or reality. Symbols and symbolism, therefore, are the gateway to wholly comprehend this.

### **Concluding Reflections**

The growth of African philosophy through the twentieth century is a marked path to African self-discovery and re-discovery. This is obvious from the presentation of African consciousness and experiences through symbols and symbolic representation; a reason why African universe is replete with many symbols. Symbols and symbolismic representation has been with man since time immemorial; they have played the role of historical and self-identification for man down the ages. Umeogu argues that this is true of even the highly developed civilizations, as they could not just have climbed to their high pedestals overnight. Consequently, "symbols are inseparable from the evolution of man".<sup>42</sup> In other words, the evolving of the African consciousness from its former relegation and denigration is necessarily tied to the philosophy of symbols and symbolism. The presentation of the African identity, that is his authentic personhood is as

such the representation of African consciousness espoused in and through symbols.

Peculiar to the African is the fact that symbols in the African world represents the unity in the African conception of reality. Existence for the African is communal; symbol pictures this communalistic existence. “An ancient (African) believes that everything is a force and all forces are interrelated, in a theistic pansychic necessity. Here lies the origin of (African) communalism or socialism”.<sup>43</sup> This differs sharply from the Western understanding of individuated existence and the Kantian or Wittgenstein's understanding of symbols and symbolism. For Kant and Wittgenstein, symbols represent reality in so far as they are physical, that is as they are given in experience. It is for this reason that Kant denies the existence of the noumena and posits metaphysics as mere exercise of reason in futility. But for the African, symbols open door to immense inquiry and into the deepest aspect of reality. This is because “the question of symbol revolves around order that is ontological. Therefore, symbol is nothing more than authentic truth”.<sup>44</sup> For this reason the African world is symbolic; things and occurrences or events are not merely taken at their face value appearance. These are usually adjudged to contain implicit meaning needing further expression. Stinger remarks:

People in the Western world who are influenced by an unconscious materialism often equate reality with physical, measurable reality, whereas Africans often see the symbolic meaning of things and events because they are convinced that reality is more than what can be seen and measured. They are often able to see symbolic or spiritual meaning in events like sickness, death and disasters....<sup>45</sup>

So, Africans through symbols represent their world as consisting of two aspects. These are not separate or disjointed but intertwined, interwoven and a union. And since philosophy as an activity is a continuum, it behoves on the African the task of furtherance of the universal recognition and acceptance of African philosophy through more critical investigation of symbols. Here then lies the true essence of symbols and symbolism to the African; since symbol represents knowledge and as such the gateway to the truth of the African life and experiences. No wonder Umeogu opines that symbol will always occupy a permanent place in the African world since it tightens this union.

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