

BOOK REVIEW

Title of the Book: *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection In and Beyond African Philosophy.*

Author of the Book: Reverend Professor Innocent I. Asouzu, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy, University of Calabar.

Publisher: University of Calabar Press, 2004.

Reviewer: Udo Etuk, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy, and Dean, Faculty of Arts, University of Uyo.

REVIEW

There is an African saying that in trying to burn a snake, one need not make the fire as long as the tail of the snake. The book under review is a very long work by any standard; a 529-page book, starting with an analytical Table of Contents, followed by a brief Introduction; then a rather unusually lengthy Dedication and Acknowledgements. The main text covers about 464 pages of material; while the rear is brought up by a very impressive and imposing Bibliography and an Index. In my attempt to review this book, I shall endeavour to keep the review short, in order not to make the fire as long as the snake.

The main body of the book is divided into four long divisions: they are not called chapters or sections by the author. In fact, he left them simply as four large divisions, each of which contains many sub-head, which add to give the book a rather complicated outlook. But before delving into an overview of the divisions, it is very important to do two things: one, explain the key concepts which constitute the theme of the book which will greatly heighten your reading interest and also hopefully facilitate your grasp of the issues raised herein.

The key concepts are “complementarity”, “complementarism”, and the adjectival form “complementary” which occurs everywhere to qualify such terms as “reflection”, “attitude”, and many others. The author explains complementarity as a certain characteristic, which obtains “wherever human beings understand that their survival depends on their ability to reach out to others like themselves” (23- 24). Let us reduce that to saying that complementarity is the spirit or fact of mutual help, readiness to work with others for the overall benefit of all; it is, as he puts it elsewhere, “a paradigm of cohabitation in society” (49).

Thus, complementarity is a fact, or rather, a force of life. Like love, you cannot seize it and put it in your pocket. But it is a very potent force, and wherever it is operating, you can see its effect. The author thinks that this force was much more present in the traditional African society than in the “Africa that we know” Complementarism, as you may surmise from the suffixed -ism, is a doctrine, a philosophy which the author is trying to promote. He says that it is a “normative practical philosophy” which seeksto tell us the proper method we should adopt towards realizing our goals. In other words, it is meant to set standards and guidelines which can help anyone tutored by it to achieve “the type of harmony which is all - inclusive, comprehensive, and universal in all aspects of life” (46-47). That, in summary, is the book; the rest is philosophical elaborations and adumbrations replete with scholarly citations and arguments.

What led Asouzu to see complementarity at work and then to conceive it as a philosophy, or a normative practical philosophy? This is where the lengthy “Dedication and Acknowledgements” throws a great deal of light. For the 14-page section turns out to be the History of Asouzu’s village and its founder. It was here that the young boy Innocent saw and experienced the exceptional spirit of complementarity and mutuality, which he says, had always been the foundation of the survival of his people. His community was exceptional, in that it absorbed people from all over Igboland; that way exemplifying the land of tolerance. Furthermore, in his father’s textile business with partners from Iceland, the spirit at work was “you help me preserve my interest and I help you secure your interests”. That was the basic rule of human co-existence in society, as he saw it then; and it is clear the marks it made have been truly indelible. So, don’t go into the book without reading this background. The problem or burden of the work, then, is how to inculcate in Africans a mind-set or characteristic that would experience and practice this complementarism. For there can be no doubt that this complementary way of life is the way of Nature and is what sustained the African past. The author takes great pains and goes into a great detail to discuss what he calls “the ambivalence of the human existential condition”. Put in a less elaborate way, the ambivalence is a manifestation of the human predicament noted much earlier by the great Apostle Paul, when he said that he could not do the good that he would; instead, the evil that he would not, that he did. The author’s method and principles of inculcating the complementary mind-set are shown exhaustively in the many sub-sections of the book dealing with

complementary ontology, complementary epistemology, complementary ethics, and so on.

Having given this general over-view of the book, let me give you a brief idea of the contents of each division of it, before I conclude with a critical summary. You have heard about the Introductory materials contained in the Dedication and Acknowledgements. This is very informative. The first division tells you that the fundamental human drive is that of self-interest and self-preservation. However, man soon grows out of this primordial tendency, when he discovers that in many directions, he needs to complement his efforts and contributions with those of others. To quote from the book: "what this shows is that in the deep experience of his finitude, man as a creature comes to the realization of his insufficiency and dependence and from here, he concludes also that he needs others to live a contented life" (105). This idea is trans-cultural; but among the Igbo of Nigeria, it is exemplified in the attitude, which says *ibu anyi danda*. It was the wise King Solomon who said, "You, sluggard! Go to the ants!" It is in this second division also that we learn that complementarity is ontological. That is to say, it belongs in the order of things, in the nature of things, that nothing can survive and thrive alone and apart from every other thing. In the third division of the work, the author provides a reformulation of the principles and method of complementary reflection. Concerns with "truth and authenticity" dominate this section of the book. Truth and authenticity, says the author, are not merely categories of logic and epistemology; but they must characterize the mind that wishes to regard the human condition in complementary terms in order to attain comprehensiveness and universality.

In the fourth and final division of the book, the author seeks to elevate the principles of complementarity to a new level, where they might become a universal or global canon. For the joy of being and living to be full realized, we must reach a point where everything we know theoretically and abstractly about complementarity of all existence must be translated into positive action. Only when this takes place does our consciousness of complementary unity begin to go beyond itself and bring joy to both the actor and to others.

So far my very skimpy review. Now let me come to a few critical remarks I have on the work, since no book review would be complete without the reviewer taking a critical look for and against the work. Let me present the positive picture

first; which, of course, by far outweighs any adverse remarks I may have about the book. This work is a very important work, and not knowing what the author has in his plans and God giving him the strength and long life to philosophize more, I consider this his *magnum opus*. The author studied in Austria and publishes in German; and so the deep long-winded thinking of his continental heritage is there all over for all to see. But clearly he is still very much at home with the ambience of his Igbo communities and of Nigeria generally. He is mostly concerned with African philosophy in the first instance; but he shows how this would become a universal paradigm.

Complementarism was not Asouzu's discovery or invention; but he has raised it in this book and in his other work *Effective Leadership and the Ambivalence of Human Interest* (2003) to the level of a philosophy and doctrine. If philosophy is to be seen as the fundamental normative science that addresses the ends of human action, and also as the discipline which formulates principles and methods for dealing with them, then this book by an eminent philosopher and cleric must be seen as philosophy at its best. Having said that, it should also be said that this book is not easy reading at all, even for professional philosophers. I think that it was the eminent British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, who said with his characteristic tongue in cheek, that the task of Philosophy is to make simple things difficult. Indeed many continental European philosophers seem to share this view. Perhaps Father Asouzu was imbued with their spirit. Let us just say that you may need to read and re-read many of his statements before you know what he is talking about.

For these days and for our economy the book is rather lengthy. This not only makes it intimidating; but will probably put its cost higher than most paperbacks available; and we know the problem of publishing philosophy books – the market is not that wide. The author got carried away in many places by his Igbo ambience; such that when he used Igbo expressions, such as the Ibu Anyi Danda work-song, he ignored to provide a translation. The book was not meant exclusively for Igbo consumption; and even if it were, it might stray into the hands of non-Igbo readers. A few technical matters needed to be looked into, which when left undone, betray the technical inadequacy of the editorial staff of the printer. For instance, the style of paragraphing whereby each new paragraph is indented is easier on the eye than the one used here which appears to be the printer's originality. All book titles wherever they appear in the text should have

been clearly identified by being italicized. In the event of a second edition, these things should be looked into.