

Pencil in the Hand of the Creator? An Igbo Hermeneutic Rebuttal of Wale Adenuga's Concept of the Human Person

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The thesis of this paper is a refutation of Wale Adenuga's claim that the human person is nothing but a pencil in the hand of the creator. The paper adopts a hermeneutical approach from an Igbo conception of the human person. It posits that in Igbo worldview, the human person occupies a central position because mankind is at the very centre of existence; hence is seen as the goodness or beauty of life (*mma ndu*) or the good or beauty that is (*mma du {di}*). While conceding the plausibility of a pencil being capable of doing great things when guided by a good hand, the paper maintains that from the point of view of Igbo ontology, the human person is distinctively more than a mere pencil in the hand of the creator because mankind is endowed with high intellectual capacity, freedom, and creativity on the basis of which it seen as both the beauty that is (*mma du*) or the beauty or goodness of life (*mma ndu*). Thus, the paper concludes that the fact that the human person is endowed with these attributes provides rational grounds to render Wale Adenuga's concept of the human person as "nothing but a pencil in the hand of the creator" futile.

Keywords: human person, Igbo, pencil, freedom, creativity

Introduction

Inquiry into the nature of the human person has remained an issue of great concern to philosophers since the ancient period. John Ekei seems to have agreed with this point when he noted that the answer to "the question, what is man has remained central and elusive to philosophers down the years" (2001, p. 92). This quest has led each culture around the world to establish its own conception of man in relation to his essential nature. From an African perspective, the human person occupies a central position in existence. Mbiti affirmed the centrality of the human person in African worldview and opined that "African ontology is basically anthropocentric: mankind is at the very centre of existence, and African people see everything else in relation to this central position" (1982, p. 92). However, contrary to the perceived prime position mankind occupies in the scheme of things in Africa, Wale Adenuga, the producer of the famous Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) Thursday drama series, "Super Story", viewed the human person from a rather constricted point when he averred that we "are nothing but pencils in the hand of the creator" (2001).

Arguably, Wale Adenuga's assertion could be interpreted from many perspectives. It could be viewed as a humble submission to the Divine Creator as the inspiration for his numerous story lines. Similarly, it could also be viewed literally to mean that the human person is merely a pencil in the hand of the creator, i.e., that the creator solely determines the fate of man on earth. It is this last interpretation that is the concern of this paper. If the

claim that the human person “is merely a pencil in the hand of the creator” is accepted to literally mean what it seems to be communicating, then, the validity of the claim that the human person distinguishes himself at the cognitive level from other inferior beings by virtue of his intelligence, creativity, and freedom hangs on a balance.

Succinctly put, this paper is a critical response to Wale Adenuga’s claim to the effect that we (humans) are nothing but pencils in the hands of the creator. The paper seeks to respond to Wale Adenuga’s claim by evaluating the nature of the human person from an African perspective with special focus on his place in Igbo ontology. In order to make sense of this discourse, let us first establish the terms and concepts that are critical to understanding the issues at stake.

Conceptual Clarification

Human Person and Human Being

In order to put our usage of the term “human person” within a context, it has become imperative to clarify why this paper uses the term man synonymously with human person and not human being. The terms human being and human person cannot be used synonymously in our context because as Matravers clarified, in ordinary language, we can sometimes distinguish between a human “person” and “human being”. For instance, as he suggested, when someone suffers some catastrophe that has put him/her in a permanent coma (a persistent vegetative state), we can still say that his/her biological classification has not altered; hence he/she is still a human being. However, philosophically speaking, the individual has lost something which defines what a person is; hence can no longer be described as a human person.

Human Person and Man

The term human person is used synonymously with the term man in this paper because as Mondin (1991) rightly put it:

when we wish to give a comprehensive name to man’s being, a name expressing his entire reality in a precise and unequivocal way, we say that he is a person. This is a term we never use for plants or animals but only for man. (p. 243)

In other words, man can correctly be substituted with the human person. Blackburn (2005) listed the central phenomena of personhood to include: “rationality, command of language, self-consciousness, control or agency and moral worth or title to respect” (p. 273). These attributes are no doubt, attributes of man. Supporting the above position, Bogliolo (1987) remarks that “man is the carrier of being, the place where it is possible to rediscover this being in its relative totality” (p. 120).

Human Person in the Western Tradition

Discussion about the nature of human person has received central attention in western philosophy. Indeed as Bogliolo noted,

the human person occupies the supreme place in the history of particular existents: he contains in himself (in virtue of the dialectical rapport between the particular existents) everything positive and everything of value found in the inferior grades. The other existents before the human person, rest as the part rests before the whole. (1987, p. 120)

It is on account of this that many western philosophers devoted substantial energy to espousing ideas about the nature of the human person.

In this regard, it must be noted that the nature of the human person received special consideration in the writings of Boethius. In his view, the human person is “an individual substance of rational nature” (*rationalis*

naturae individua substantia)”. Implicit in this perspective on the human person is that not every human being is a person, “since not every human being is (to employ the philosophical terms of Boethius) an individual substance of rational nature”. When one loses his rational nature, he becomes depersonalized. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* re-emphasized this point when it highlighted that “the most important part of his (Boethius) definition is the expression ‘of a rational nature.’ This serves to indicate that person is predicated only of intellectual beings”.

Later philosophers like Thomas Aquinas and his successors devoted substantial attention to dealing with the issue of the nature of the human person. For instance, Copleston (2002, p. 181) quotes Aquinas as saying that a disembodied soul is not, strictly speaking, a person, since a disembodied soul is no longer a complete human substance; but every complete human substance is always and necessarily a person. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* explains that a person in this Thomistic view will mean, “a substance that is complete, subsists by itself, and is separated from others”. Furthermore, it adds that when the remainder of Boethius’s definition is added to this, there are five notes that go to make up a person:

1. Substance—This excludes accident;
2. Complete—The person must have a complete nature, and thus that which is but part of a nature, either actually or aptitudinally, does not satisfy the definition;
3. Subsistent by itself—The person exists in himself and for himself, being the ultimate possessor of his nature and all its acts, and therefore is the ultimate subject of predication of all his attributes;
4. Separated from others—This excludes the universal notion of second substance, which can have no existence apart from the individual; and
5. Of a rational nature—This excludes all supposita that lack rationality.

Human Person in Igbo Worldview

The Igbo word for the term “human person” is derived from a combination of two words “*mma*” which means good or beauty and “*ndu*” meaning life. The two words can be joined together in two ways to give two interpretations of the meaning of the human person in Igbo. The first combination *mma + ndu* loosely means “the goodness or beauty of life” while the second which drops the first consonant n in *ndu* to form *mma + du* means “the good or beauty that is”. This last combination can still be translated to mean “good or beauty exists”.

From the foregoing, it could be stated that the human person in Igbo world view is considered to be of absolute value; hence he is equated as the beauty or good that exists or the beauty or goodness of life. Beauty and goodness are absolute values even in the western metaphysics and truth which is also another absolute value is said to be the essence of life (*eziokwu bu ndu*). Isiguzo, Ukagba, and Otakpor (2004) affirmed this point when they remarked that “*Mmadu* literally means the beauty of life or the goodness of life or the crowning point of life” (p. 233). They quoted Okafor who equally affirmed that “to the Igbo the very generic name of the only rational animal is a celebrative affirmation of life”. Hence, the above positions also support the claim that the human person occupies a central place in Igbo worldview because he is viewed as the beauty or good that exists and the beauty or goodness of life.

Pencil

The Cambridge Dictionary defines a pencil as “a thin, usually wooden, tube-shaped device for writing or drawing which has colored material in the center and a point at one end”. On his part, Da_Slimmie (2012) identified the following as qualities of a pencil:

1. Capable of great things when guided by a good hand;
2. It needs to be sharpened to bring out the best;
3. The mistakes done by the pencil could be cleared with an eraser;
4. What does the job is not the wooden exterior but the graphite inside;
5. It leaves a mark.

We shall later consider how much of these qualities of the pencil are found in the human person.

Why We Are More Than Pencils in the Hand of the Creator

Following from the issues discussed above, this aspect of our discourse will advance grounds for the claim that the human person is much more than the pencil in the hand of the creator. Some of the grounds for this claim are:

Human Intellectual Capacity

It is unarguable clear that man, the carrier of being, is a human person in so far as he is gifted with intellect. This implies that man is a person in the measure in which he is intellective. Intellectivity as Bogliolo (1987, p. 122) further highlights implies ontological self-possession. It implies self-transparency. Everyone is endowed and blessed with natural capacities and abilities. Primary here is the ability to reason and decide freely. Therefore, if man is the human person in so far as is intellective, it implies that he cannot be limited to more objects like pencils as Wale Adenuga suggested. For in his intellectivity, man has mastery of self, psychological mastery of self or self-consciousness and moral mastery of self, attributes that pencils do not possess. Again, the act of being which we have earlier on made reference to gives the person the property of incommunicability suggested by Bogliolo. As Mondin (1991, p. 248) quoting Thomas Aquinas concurs, "The person enjoys three-fold incommunicability".

1. The individual who is a person cannot communicate with other things as a part, being a complete;
2. He cannot communicate as the universal communicates with the individuals in that person is something assumable, because that which is assumable passes in the personality of the assumer and no longer has its own personality and;
3. The person distinguishes himself clearly both from essence and nature; in fact, the concept of person allows that what is being spoken of is something distinct, subsistent, and inclusive or all that is in the thing.

Furthermore, Battista Mondin introduces another dimension to the consideration of the nature of man (human person). In his view, a group of contemporary philosophers in a bid to unravel the nature of human person have resorted to the dialogical perspective rather than the earlier ontological argument. Among these thinkers include Mounier, Ricocier, Buber, and Orlega. Mondin (1991) outlines the following as the prominent properties of the dialogical group:

Vocation. Every person has such a meaning that he cannot be substituted for in the place he occupies in the universe of persons. Surely a pencil has no such unique position; thus man is more than a pencil in the creator's hand.

Action. The life of the person is incessant action. It is the research until death for an anticipated longed for unity that is never realized. This certainly is not applicable to the pencil.

Communication (Encounter With Others)

The first movement revealing a human being in the prime of infancy is a movement towards others. The person is the only one who can be himself. From the African perspective of the human person, Edeh (1985) writes

that man is “good that is” (*mma-di*). Ekei (2001), sharing a similar view, remarks that the human person is “the goodness of life” (*mma-ndu*). Thus, from the point of view of the nature of human person, it could be argued that man “who is the beauty of life” and “the beauty that is” from an African perspective is gifted with an intentional aperture that carries him to a systematic self-transcendence in all directions. This supreme quality coupled with his subsistence makes man a distinct creature apart from other animals, plant, and objects (including pencils).

From what have been considered about the nature of the human person, it is obvious that he is in no way a mere object (pencil). The human person as Bogliolo (1987) writes is the point of encounter of all reality. As he beautifully summed it,

In man, being becomes the subject, it becomes logos, it transforms itself into self-transparency and self-consciousness; the infra-human existents held back by the limits of matter and quantity recover their liberation in the relatively infinite dimension of the spirit where the singular makes itself universal... The person is in present communion with all men. (p. 120)

Conscience

Everyone comes equipped with an existential conscience that calls them to live authentically. For Guibilini (2016), “when we talk about conscience, we often reflect about ourselves as moral persons and our moral conduct”. Hence he saw the conscience as self-knowledge and self-assessment. On its part, the *New World Encyclopedia* opines that “the conscience refers to a person’s sense of right and wrong. Also, it elucidates further that in philosophical, religious, and everyday senses, the notion of conscience may include the following separable elements:

1. Firstly, conscience may refer to the moral principles and values that a person endorses.
2. Secondly, conscience may refer to a faculty whereby human beings come to know basic moral truths.
3. Thirdly, the conscience pertains to self-scrutiny, i.e., the conscience involves a person’s examination of his or her own desires, and actions, and connects with sentiments of self-evaluation, such as guilt, shame, regret, and remorse.

Thus, with one’s conscience, it is possible to grasp all the opportunities presented to the human person for self-definition. The options one has are structured by the historical and cultural world one is born into. Hence, we realize that we cannot make all the possibilities available to us a reality. Given the fact that man has a conscience which aides him in self-assessment and knowledge, he cannot just be a pencil in the hand of the creator.

Human Freedom

Another point of view from which we can evaluate the logical and factual consistency of the claim that “we are nothing but pencils in the hand of the creator” is to examine the implication of the claim on the idea of human freedom. Various philosophers have at different times argued on the fact that the man is a being endowed with freedom. For instance, Mondin (1991) writes:

Man distinguishes himself at the cognitive level from animals and the other infers beings by virtues of the intelligence which allows him a total aperture (be it towards the world or towards himself) and at the appetitive level he distinguishes himself by virtue of will with which he freely chooses within the space of the aperture that which he retains as more opportune for the realization of his own being. Man, beyond intelligent, is also highly free. Freedom is, therefore another title of his excellence and nobility, and represents another great window for looking into the mystery of man, with a goal of acquiring a more correct, more complete, more adequate comprehension of him. (p. 101)

The above comments indicate that man enjoys the faculty to determine himself to an action and to be the cause of his actions taking into cognizance the implications of such actions for his life. From the foregoing, it

follows that “freedom is the faculty which man has of being master and author of his own actions” (Mondin, 1991, p. 117). Going further he explains that freedom is a sublime but also very dangerous power in the hands of man. It is a weapon of dual stature; it can be adopted either for good or for evil. It can serve man for cultivation, the promoting, the elevation, and the full realization of his own being. But, it can also serve to obtain opposite effects: to decrease, humiliate, and annihilate his own being.

Indeed, when one considers the fact of moral decision, one would come face to face with the reality of the fact that freedom must be part of man’s essential attributes for as Adler (1958) remarks “the ethical judgments and evaluations...presuppose freedom, especially the freedom of the will” (p. 410). Ekei (2001) also reiterated the same view when he insisted that “for a meaningful ethical judgment, a certain mental disposition ought to be guaranteed. This seems to help the moral agent to enjoy a certain liberty in making up his mind in the choice of alternative course of action” (p. 230). In a related development, Readon (1976) adds that: “to act is to do one of the three things: to decide, to choose, or to consent. The human person, as actually doing any of these, or as having a disposition in respect of any of them, is what is meant by the will”.

The implication of the above points is that without the freedom to choose or consent, actions remain acts of man and not human acts. Also, another point which is important in the determination of the matter at stake is the issue of responsibility which is a necessary follow up from man’s freedom. Omeregbe (2000) averred that “responsibility is inseparable from freedom, for to be free is ipso facto to be responsible. There can be no freedom without responsibility” (p. 36). From the foregoing, it follows logically and undoubtedly as Mondin (1991) argued, “that man is not only simply the master of his own acts, but also of himself: he is the master of his own becoming, more precisely, of that which he will become” (p. 119). Thus, if the above assertions are correct then, man cannot just be a pencil in the hand of the creator. For, though he cannot work against the creator and nature, exercising his freedom is in fact living in harmony with creator and nature. Man is therefore in the strict sense more than a pencil in the hand of the creator.

Therefore, if “freedom is part of man’s very nature as a rational being, and to lose man’s rationality...is to lose one’s freedom” (Omeregbe, 2000, p. 36), if responsibility is inseparable from freedom, if man, the morally responsible agent, ought to enjoy a certain liberty for a meaningful ethical judgment, then, it follows that he cannot be restricted to mere pencil in the hand of the creator. This is based on the fact that being free (more than a pencil) is part of the creator’s design for man in order to suit man’s nature as a free agent. For as Kierkegaard writes “each person possesses an essential self which he or she ought to actualize” (Stumpf, 2000, p. 461). Arriving at what he calls “authentic existence” requires the individual to be committed in a continuous process of choice in the presence of varieties of either-or “the pencil in the hand of the creator”; no doubt is not capable of making this choice.

Human Creativity

The last perspective from which an evaluation of the assertion that we are nothing but “pencils in the hand of the creator” would be made is that of human creativity. For Paul and Kaufman (2014, p. 6), the term “creative” is used to describe three kinds of things: a person, a process or activity, or a product, whether it is an idea in someone’s mind or an observable performance or artifact. Going further, they clarify that “there is an emerging consensus that a product must meet two conditions in order to be creative. It must be new, of course; it must also be of value”. Human creativity is therefore the vehicle for self-expression and an important factor that defines

the human person. If the human person is therefore gifted with the ability to freely express himself through some activities, he can therefore not be the pencil in the hand of the creator but the creator himself.

Conclusion

Following from the foregoing, it is argued that from the Igbo African concept of the human person, man is the goodness, fullness, and beauty of life. Given the prime position he occupies in the world, the human person endowed with freedom, intelligence, and creative abilities is much more than a pencil. In order to arrive at this conclusion, we note that the qualities we have ascribed to a pencil could be found in a human person, but the human person is much more than these qualities.

For instance, although like a pencil, the human person is capable of great things, he is a being who is endowed with freedom to choose which path to follow in life. Also, while like the pencil, he needs to be sharpened by training and education to bring out the best, it must be noted that unlike the pencil, his mistakes cannot be completely cleared with an eraser. Again, despite the fact that actions of the human person leave a mark just like the pencil itself, it is also true that unlike the pencil which must be guided by a gifted hand to make a mark, the human person's creative capacity and his freedom as a moral agent make him solely responsible for his actions.

Hence, man "who is the man is the carrier of being; the place where it is possible to rediscover this being in its relative totality" is much more than a pencil because in Igbo cosmology, he is the centre of existence. Despite sharing almost all the attributes of a pencil, the human person is uniquely far beyond a pencil because of man's creativity, freedom, and intelligence.

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