

BEYOND THE POSSIBILITY QUESTION: THE REALITY AND NATURE OF AFRICAN LOGIC

By
Elijah Okon John

&

Patrick Achong Anoh
Department of Philosophy
University of Uyo, Nigeria

Abstract

This work on “Beyond the Possibility Question: The Reality and Nature of African Logic” seeks to go beyond the argument about the possibility of African Logic by affirming the reality of African logic and then elucidating the nature of African logic. There was a point in time, and there was a debate about whether or not there is an African philosophy. With that debate settled and the affirmation of the reality of African philosophy, Udo Etuk tries to fly a kite of the possibility of African logic. Arguing that since logic is a discipline in philosophy, and given that there is an African philosophy, he concluded that there must be an African logic. The crux of the doubt about the existence of an African logic seems to stem from the belief that reasoning and thus, logic is universal and cannot be a matter of cultures. Through the method of analysis, it will be the contention of this research work that given the role language plays in thinking and ultimately in reasoning and also given the limitations and nature of African languages, there is a particular nature of African reasoning. This work ends with some specific practical examples of the nature of African logic.

Keywords: African Philosophy, African Logic, African Reasoning, Udo Etuk, Universal Particular.

Introduction

According to Alexander Getmanova (11), logic as a branch of philosophy examines thought as a means of cognizing the objective world, its forms and laws in which the world is reflected in the process of thought. In the consideration of Getmanova, since the process by which the world is cognized in its entirety is the subject of philosophical studies, then logic represents a philosophical science. Egbeka Aja (9) defines logic as the study of reasoning, of how to think clearly, how to reason validly, and how to argue soundly. From Aja’s point of view, logic deals with the methods and privileges by which one distinguishes good from bad reasoning. Logic can also be used to denote the science of the rules of reasoning and the forms in which it occurs. Thus, it is common to consider logic as a term that denotes the laws governing the objective world. This is always the case when one talks of “logic of things” or “logic of events”. (Ozumba & John, 10).

As a branch of philosophy, logic shares in the characteristic nature of philosophy, this essentially includes that of a reflective activity. Accordingly, logic reflects on the nature of thinking. Still again, logic can be defined both as a science and an art of correct reasoning. Indeed, logic can be said to be a science in that it is a body of knowledge that is systematically studied for the purpose of evaluating kinds of arguments and predicting the phenomena. This may be the reason that Runkle (9) is of the view that logic is the science of

sciences because its principles, by their very generality, are indispensable to all sciences and indeed to every endeavour where truth is the object.

Logic as an art concerns itself with the critical and constructive business that can be considered in terms of tactical human skill or creativity (Okafor, 4). In defining logic both as a science and an art, Duns Scotus is said to have defined it as “the science of sciences and the art of arts” (Onyeocha, 215). Furthermore, logic is defined as “the study of the methods and principles used in distinguishing correct from incorrect reasoning” (Copi, 3). Similarly, Howard Kahane (2), a contemporary of I.M. Copi, defines logic as an attempt to distinguish between correct or valid and incorrect or invalid arguments. According to Jacques Martin (115), logic is all about the study of reasoning as the tool of knowledge. This means reasoning as a process and an activity must be engaged in conformity with the appropriate rules of rationality that brings about valid knowledge. (Ozumba & John, 11).

Let us also posit that logic provides man with rules of correct or rational thinking, that is to say that logic prescribes the way and manner in which one ought to think more critically, constructively, persuasively, productively, rationally and/or reasonably. Thus, logic can be said to be a critical thinking about thinking itself. From the above, one would discover that these various definitions of logic have something in common one with another. That is to say that all these definitions demonstrate some basic ingredients of logic, which invariably tilt the mind into one and the same direction of thinking. Consequently, it would be seen that each of these definitions obviously and sublimely points one to what logic entails.

Whether from a weak or strong sense, logic can be defined in any of the following ways and would still be acceptable: “the study of reasoning”, “the science of proper thinking”, “the science of argument”, “the art of intelligent thinking”, “the study of philosophical science”, “a systematic study of thinking”, “the art of reasoning”, “rational thought or thinking”, “a critical thinking”, “a critical evaluation”, “a logical reflection of thoughts”, etc. Logic as a discipline can be classified into two basic areas, namely: formal and informal logic. Formal logic is concerned with the methodology, meta-logic (that is, the metaphysics of logic), and logic proper. Issues covered in logic proper include monadology, logic of propositions, logic of predicate, logic of terms, logic of classes and logic of relations. Mathematical or symbolic logic is that area of formal logic that is set to eliminate the ambiguities and other logical inadequacies of ordinary language philosophy. Consequently, symbolic logic handles this task by means of a formalized language or calculus.

Expectedly then, formal logic tackles issues affecting the modes or forms of mental action, rules of reasoning and the forms and inner structures of thought in order to discover if they are valid or not. Logic is the systematic study of the valid rules of inference. That is the relations that lead to the acceptance of one proposition on the basis of a set of other propositions. More broadly, logic is the analysis of arguments. There is no universal agreement as to the exact definition and boundaries of logic, but there is agreement of analysis in human reasoning. However, it has traditionally included the classification of arguments, exposition of the logical forms, the validity and soundness of deductive reasonings. It is also interested in the strength of inductive reasoning and the study of formal proofs, including paradoxes and fallacies. It also studies the syntax and semantics of logical statements.

When logic originated, it seemed to be a universal discipline. But with progress in philosophy in the West, we started noticing that logic was beginning to take regional dimensions. Instead of having a universal, we started having particular logics. On the strength of the above an attempt was made by Udo Etuk to think of the possibility of an

African logic. But in this paper, it will be argued that to think of the possibility of African logic, it will appear like Africans have no rationality till recently.

The Question of the Universal and Particular in Philosophy

It is necessary to begin this discussion by looking at the nature of philosophy in general. From its inception at Greece, philosophy was an attempt by man to understand and give meaning to his world. As Wiredu would say, “the function of philosophy everywhere is to examine the intellectual foundation of our life using the best modes of knowledge and reflection for human well-being” (62). From this statement, we find the essential elements which constitutes the general conception of philosophy. The first consideration is the conception that much of philosophy consists of conceptual elucidation. It is axiomatic that action by an individual or a group of individuals needs to be guided by ideas, and what philosophy does is to attempt to elucidate the most fundamental of such ideas. Thus, the primary task of philosophy is the pursuit of understanding. However, the task of understanding the world is not an end in itself, but rather it is for the practical good of man.

The second point we need to note about this conception of philosophy is that although philosophy is conceived of predominantly as a theoretized activity, we cannot be oblivious of its practical functions. Philosophy is meant to solve human problems. After all, we do not philosophize in void or vacuum. So philosophy is not simply a function of what form its practice would take, but it is more significantly a reflection on its functions within the context of the challenges, both theoretical and practical facing the world. Now, let us expatiate on these points by characterizing the nature of philosophical problems and the kind of understanding which attempts to tackle them can yield. Philosophical questions like other sorts of questions which engage the human mind arise within the context of the interactions between human beings and their social and physical environments between human beings and themselves. However, unlike other sorts of issues, philosophical questions are not directed at particular issues, for example, whether a certain kind of social arrangement is just or not. Philosophical questions, unlike this kind of questions have a special kind of generality. They are abstract questions such as the general nature of values, and that of the question of the general criteria for the correctness of our claims to knowledge. Included also are questions that centre on the issue of the origin of the world, the stuff of which the world is made of, the meaning of life and the destiny of human beings.

These questions are fundamental because we cannot derive them from other questions. Although they appear not to have a link with the down-to-earth affairs of the world, they nonetheless have a practical motivation. It is worthy of note that no meaningful orientation in life is possible, if we do not pay serious attention to these questions. Though philosophical questions in general are abstract, they are, however, indispensable to human existence. Now, having described the nature of philosophical problems, let us now consider the question of how these questions are investigated. Philosophers proceed to answer these questions by analysis, generalizations and synthesis.

In philosophical analysis, the philosopher deals with concepts but uses philosophy in elucidating these concepts. This conceptual elucidation here is not merely an explanation of meaning like the lexicographer, but show the problematic concepts to be equivalent to certain organization of numbers which are less problematic in nature. This position about the nature of philosophy may be disputed by students in philosophical discourse because there is no agreement about what constitutes the exact nature of philosophy. For if there was any such agreement, then philosophy would cease to be philosophy as a dialogical

activity. There is hardly any issue for which philosophers are in agreement completely. Thus, this raises the problem of the universal and the particular in philosophical discourse. This has to do with question of what minimum character a thought pattern should have, to be a candidate of philosophy and what is the account of the peculiarities of thoughts of individuals and groups. There have been an age long habit whereby many philosophers classify philosophy from different perspectives and shades; some philosophers classify philosophy according to the method used and focus of a particular philosophical system and a few others classify philosophical systems according to geographical regions, religions, cultures and so on. That is why as Onah would have it thus:

Indeed for a long time, was quite harmless to attach adjectives to philosophical systems in an attempt to classify them. Thus, one reads about Greek philosophy, Christian Medieval philosophy, British empiricism, German idealism, American pragmatism, etc. Any of these classifications evolves the problem of the universal and the particular in philosophy. There has to be something common to all systems for them to be regarded as philosophy; and each system must have some features that distinguish it from other systems (64).

This classification of philosophy according to geographical locations, epochs, religions and cultures can be misleading because when speaking of African, Asian, Christian, Indian and Western philosophies, it gives the impression that there is a way of reasoning common to a group of people by virtue of the fact that they inhabit a particular region or profess a certain faith. But this can be understood because if we examine the issues and methods of some philosophical traditions, we would notice that religion and culture provide the ingredients for each philosophizing and this can only be appreciated by those who belong to such cultures and profess such religious beliefs. But the danger of this is that we would inevitably slide into relativism in philosophy which is not accepted in logic.

But what is wrong with relativism in philosophy? Philosophy though is universal in the sense of employing the method of analysis and criticism, it should have local relevance in the sense that it solves particular problems affecting a people. Philosophy, it is said, does not thrive in vacuum. If all these are accepted, then the idea of this classification could be reasonable. Thus, we can say that there can also be a kind of reasoning common to a people. It is in this, that we can talk of African philosophy and ultimately African logic.

The Idea of Logic and the Humanity of Man

Having discussed the universal and particular in the philosophical discipline, let us now turn to another subject which is a precondition for any discourse to be tagged as philosophical. That means such a discourse must be logical. So we have to look at logic as a discipline in philosophy. Logic is one of the disciplines called philosophy. Its main concern is reasoning. As Etim would put it etymologically, logic is “derived from the Greek word ‘Logos’ which is the Latin equivalent of ‘ratio’” (42). The etymological meaning of logic is reason that is why when you reason well, your reasoning is described as logical or rational. But as Anoh would put it, the “subject matter of logic is argument” (166). Also, Bello believes that “in logic we are primarily concerned with arguments” (3). But for him, this concern with arguments as a science is multifarious from any angle, logic is concerned with reasoning; and the reasoning pattern can be described as a logic. Thus, the reasoning pattern of a people can be said to be a logic of such a people.

Logic or reasoning is essentially a human activity. Arguments are indispensable in human life since human life includes the processes of choosing, decision-making, willing and acting. It is the belief of many philosophers that the essential defining attribute of man is rationality. That is, the capacity of man to reason. Without reason, man's humanity is called to question. As Bello would put it, rationality is "one of man's essential attributes, such that the humanity of any group is in doubt if it lacks rationality" (243). Most times human behaviour is purposive, that is, man behaves for a reason. That is why it is said that human life is impossible without arguments. That means, man behaves in a way that he can justify his actions, his decisions and choices he makes by providing reasons why he acts, decides and chooses in such a manner. This explains why Graham describes human actions as rational. He sees rational action as behaviour alone for reasons or purposes of the agent. Citing an example, Graham says:

Suppose it is a hot steamy summer day, in Birmingham, Alabama. You and I have just finished weeding from my favourite patch of background Okra. I ascend the porch and open the door to my home. I want an ice cold beer supposed not to be left out in the heat, you too, need an ice cold beer. However, while I walk to the refrigerator, you drive to the supermarket. Why do we travel to different directions? I walk to the fridge because I believe that cold beer is located there, whereas you drive to the supermarket because you believe that the fridge is empty, the market stocks beer (109).

He continued that walking to the fridge is something he did for a reason and your driving to the market is also something you do for a reason. So to act rationally, is to behave for a reason, as such reasons make actions rational from the agent's point of view. Thus, reasons produce action and also causally explain actions. But can we say that all actions produced or backed up by reason are rational? Can there be a distinction between actions performed by man which are rational and those actions which are non-rational and irrational? Of course, there are distinctions. Just as rational actions contrast with mere rational movements, they also contrast with irrational actions. People no doubt, get irrationally, that is, they act for reasons but the reasons themselves may be bad. When action is performed for bad reasons, then the action is an irrational action. Rational action is one that is performed for good or rational reason.

Udo Etuk and the Possibility of African Logic

Udo Akpan Etuk, a professor of philosophy at University of Uyo, has demonstrated strong interest in logic throughout his academic career and has been a teacher of logic in the University of Uyo and a prolific writer on many logic themes. In a published essay, Udo Etuk explored the possibility of a distinct reasoning pattern of the African which shapes the uniqueness of the African, since the African is a member of the global human community. He decides several examples in this essay to show how some reasoning patterns which the Whiteman thinks are irrational, are considered by the African to be rational. First is the African conception of time. According to him, the Westerner introduced the notion of African time pejoratively to give the impression that Africans do not keep to time. But he explains that while for the whitemen, time is determined by the exact-time on the clock, the African conception of appointed time is determined by the event and the principal actor in any engagement. The African does not see himself controlled by time as against the Westerner; rather, he (the African), controls time, because time is made for man.

The second issue for him is the status factor in which the African values relationships. That is, if one commits an offence for instance, what the African does is to look at his relationship to the community whom the offence is committed against. If the offender is an in-law or grandchild for example, the penalty may be waived for him. The African arrangement of seniority goes against Western culture where seniority is used in determining the merit of anything and who gets a share of things distributed especially at the village settings. It is the senior who first makes a choice before others in the African rationality. That is why in inheritance, the senior makes the choice first, because, he is considered to be the father of the family in waiting. On the basis of the above explanations, Udo Etuk, basking in the euphoria which characterized the settlement of the debate about whether or not there is an African philosophy, has attempted to fly a kite about the possibility of African logic. For him;

Some years ago, there was a long debate over the status of African philosophy. The lines in this debate appeared to have been drawn between those whom we shall call the purists who appeared to set themselves up as gate keepers to maintain the purity and integrity of philosophy and guard them against being compromised and a much larger number of scholars who thought the gate should be kept wide open for many more enterprises to qualify as philosophy (98).

He recalls that the debates between the purists and ethno-philosophers have settled and applying the methods of analysis of this philosophy to issues and concerns which are peculiarly African, we now have a body of work which can be called African philosophy. As such, he maintains that “this paper is clearly riding on the crest of what I take to be the success story in African philosophy” (99). He equally states that philosophers know the centrality of the role of logic in the study of philosophy because it is an exacting and rigorous philosophical activity. Basking from the classification of philosophy into German, British, Indian, American and Islamic philosophies, he argues thus:

So philosophy, though a universal quest, had boundaries. This is convincingly shown by the existence of Chinese, Indian, Islamic, British, European and other particular philosophies. Since this is so of philosophy, what about logic which forms an essential part of philosophy? Either we are prepared to say that whatever is true of philosophy as a whole is also true (of) logic or we must say that logic is an exception (103).

Drawing examples from the Polish, Chinese and Indian philosophical traditions which show some peculiarities of their logical traditions, Etuk notes that the Polish appeared to have done more work in requiring the technique of symbolic than other groups, wondering whether their obsession with formalization in abstraction was the driving force since it was a national thing. Through the Polish, formalization has been raised to a point that the forms have become the measuring rods by determining which reasonings are valid and which are not. He also notes that in line with Chinese and Indian logic, then there is nothing to rule out the possibility of an African logic.

Nature of African Logic

Africans as rational beings begin to act from reasons. They make choices and decisions which follow extensive deliberations. People who have doubted the rationality of Africans

had described African thought patterns in different ways, for example, by describing African mentality as pre-logical or that Africans do not care about contradictions, and are emotional. We need to assert that no human group with a language can be said to be prelogical. This is because at the base of every language lies the process of classification, for example, of foods and provisions, or plants, animals and minerals. The classification takes the logical principle of identity and non-contradiction, two of the laws of thoughts, for granted.

No human group can ignore the distinction between foods and poison and survive. The classification of food and poison is based on the logical principle of induction. There are other folk items or beliefs based on induction, experience or keen observation of phenomenon – in medicine and agriculture, of animals, plants and the elements. The medicinal uses of plants, the typology and symptoms of diseases, rotation of crops, migration to more fertile lands, hunting and domestication of animals and description of animal behaviour. All these, abound in traditional African culture and is an indication of rational procedure.

But there is this supposition that Africans hold superstitious beliefs that they believe in re-incarnation, in the existence of ancestors, and in the existence and operations of witchcraft. These beliefs are the reason that they are considered to be prelogical and non-philosophical. It is worthy to note that philosophy is cultural entity that has cross-borderline marks, that is, some unconsciously, rooted in assumptions which Ijiomah calls “root paradigms” which serve as the criteria for determining which, propositions should be included and which should be excluded from the African epistemology.

For Ijiomah, every part of philosophy is coloured by the root paradigms of the culture in which the philosophy is domiciled and every explanation has a logic base and every logic has a correlation with the structure of the reality combination within its culture. Logic in this sense explains the structure of reality without distorting what reality is in itself (v). The problem of the denigration of African thought system seems to have come from the development of formalism in logic which seems to make us feel that formal systems are sine-qua-non in logic. But formal systems do not have eidetic meaning and cannot serve as a statement of ontology. Thus, it only leads to a valid and not a sound argument because they do describe reality of the world of experience.

The idea that there is only one logic originated from Immanuel Kant who claimed that there is only one logic which is the logic of Aristotle, which is adequate for all cultural explanations. But there are some ethnocentric logicians like John Dewey who posited that every analysis and explanation presumes a logical standpoint which is justifiable in the logic of that culture. To buttress the point of a cultural logic in Africa, Anyanwu posits:

What the love of God, ancestors mother earth, family and community means to the African can neither be reduced to scientific truth nor improved upon by science. Rather, the meaning, value of personal experience require personal commitment and concern, and this means that a person has to be involved in it in order to become aware of its relation and thereby know it... All forms of African experience (political, religious, economic, moral, aesthetic, historical, etc) are rooted in life and all permeate and penetrate each other... as a result, we cannot talk of myths, religion, philosophy, etc in African cultural experience as if each exists independently of each other. (86).

This explains why Africans recognize ancestors, re-incarnation, witchcraft, etc as realities. However, African mode of thinking has striving similarities with Western logic. Let us take these few examples about how African mode of reasoning have some similarities with Western reasoning.

It can easily be imagined how African would argue in accordance with the rules of inference in modern propositional logic, for example, the rules of simplification, disjunctive syllogism and modus tollens. Imagine a meeting of kingmakers of a kingdom whose immediate past King has only recently joined his ancestors; imagine also that there are many ruling houses in the kingdom, each fully qualified to produce the future king, but in succession. One of the King makers might argue thus: The next King may be from the house of Ekpát, Akpan or Udoh. He cannot come from the House of Ekpát because the immediate past King was from there. He cannot be from the House of Akpan the last but one King was from there. Therefore the next King must come from the House of Udoh”.

The above reasoning follows the rule of disjunctive syllogism which is a valid argument form even though it does not mean that the conclusion of a valid argument is always followed in practice. Let us consider another example, this time a proverb: “If I worship a deity then it should make positive difference to my fortunes. This deity does not make a positive difference to my fortunes. Therefore, I should stop worshipping the deity. This is a clear case of *modus tollens*. And there are folk tales of people and individuals abandoning the worship of an old deity and adopting a new one. Furthermore, it is wrong to claim that Africans were not worried about contradictions. Since contradictions, by their very nature, cannot be true it would indeed be amazing if Africans or any group would consciously embrace them. Thus, it would not be possible for our kingmakers to accept the contradiction: “Ekpat’s family should produce the King and Ekpat’s Family should not produce the King” with catastrophic political consequence(s). Or, would it be possible for them to believe the contradictory position; the palace is full but empty?

Conclusion

Logic is a discipline that studies reasoning. Philosophers have claimed that humans are rational. But many philosophers especially of Western extraction, claim that Africans are prelogical, while accepting that the West is logical in this paper, we have said that unlike Udo Etuk who held that there is the possibility of African logic, that there is actually an African logic by showing some instances of the nature of African logic. Udo Etuk’s position is concealed in probability, presumption and over hope. But our position is anchored on certainty, reality, actuality and factual in the question of the nature and reality of African logic, that means, the existence of African logic is accurately true.

Works Cited

- Aja, Egbeka. *Logic and Clear Thought: An Introduction to Good Reasoning*. Enugu: Oak Publishers, 1992.
- Anoh, Patrick A. “Fallacious Reasoning: An Introduction” in Udo Etuk and Idorenjin F. Esikot (Eds). *Philosophy and Human Existence*. Uyo: Robert Minder International, 2013
- Anyanwu, C. K. “The Meaning of Ultimate Reality in Igbo Cultural Experience” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*. Vol.7 1994.
- Bello, A. G. A. “On Rationality and Communalism in African Scholarship” in Olusegun Oladipo (Ed). *The Third Way in African Philosophy*. Ibadan: Hope Publishers, 2002.
- Bello, A. G. A. *Introduction to Logic*. Ibadan: University Press, 2002.

- Copi, Irving M. *Introduction to Logic*. New York: The Macmillan, 1968.
- Etim, Cyril. "Logic" in Udo Etuk (Ed). *Invitation to Philosophy*. Uyo: Minder International, 2003.
- Etuk, Udo. "The Possibility of African Logic" in Olusegun Oladipo (Ed). *The Third Way in African Philosophy*. Ibadan: Hope Publishers, 2002
- Getmanova, Alexandra. *Logic*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989.
- Graham, George. *Philosophy of Mind*. Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 1993.
- Ijomah Chris O. *Harmonious Monism: A philosophy Logic of Explanation for Ontological Issues of Supernaturalism in African Thought*. Calabar: Jochrisam Publishers, 2014.
- Kahane, Howard. *Logic and Philosophy: A Modern Introduction*. Belmont California: Wadsworth Publishing House, 1968.
- Maritain, J. *Introduction to Philosophy*. London: Sheed and Ward Publishers, 1979.
- Onah, Godfrey. "The Universal and Particular in Wiredu's Philosophy of Human Nature" in Oladipo Olusegun (Ed) *The Third Way in African Philosophy*. Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2002.
- Onyeocha, Izu Marcel. *Introfil: A First Encounter with Philosophy*. Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1996.
- Ozumba, Godfrey O. and John, Elijah Okon. *Logical Thinking*. Uyo: Scholars Books, 2009.
- Runkle, Gerald. *Good Thinking: An Introduction to Logic*. New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1978.
- Wiredu, Kwasi. *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.