

**AFRICAN METAPHYSICS OR AFRICAN
EXISTENTIALISM?: SOME CRITICAL REMARKS ON
ARIBIAH DAVID ATTOE’S “GROUNDWORK FOR A NEW
KIND OF AFRICAN METAPHYSICS”**

DOI:<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajct.v2i2.3>

Submission: November 15, 2022 Accepted: December 20, 2022

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Introduction

Aribiah David Attoe’s *Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics* is a bold, courageous, passionate, and controversial book. It is erudite, well-informed, well-written, and at times even poetic. It combines the scholarship of Western and African philosophers in elegantly yet naturally flowing language. The book is bold because it aspires, as the title states, to be a groundwork for a new (African) metaphysics, thus claiming to solve those problems which previous metaphysicians of both African and Western origin have been unable to resolve. This is where the book becomes somewhat controversial, which is hardly a surprise.

Some critical remarks on Aribiah David Attoe’s “Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics”

A cornerstone of the new kind of metaphysics is what the author calls *predeterministic historicity*. Attoe presents a quite sophisticated metaphysical-ontological theory stating that being is to be understood in terms of a conglomeration of singular realities. Attoe writes: These singular realities are the most basic or simple forms of reality, which interact to form more complex forms of reality. (ATTOE 2022, 9). This is a “cardinal thesis in the metaphysics of predeterministic historicity” (ATTOE 2022, 9). As a scholar trained in the West, these singular entities immediately reminded me of Democritus’s speculative physics and ethics. Attoe himself indeed refers to Democritus (see ATTOE 2022, 3). Interestingly, the foundational

ontological difference, according to Attoe, is between “complex and simple things” (ATTOE 2022, 3). Democritus found the foundational ontological difference between atoms and emptiness – ἄτομα καὶ κενόν (see DIELS/KRANZ 68 B9). Attoe, nevertheless, still presents a concept of nothingness – although one that is based on the traditional African view, which denies absolute nothingness. He explains, following Pantaleon Iroegbu, that “the idea of being-alone” is “the African metaphysical equivalent to nothingness”. Being-alone, not nothing or nothingness, is, according to Attoe, “the opposite of being” (ATTOE 2022, 28). In this way, absolute nothingness is thus disqualified physically and metaphysically. What remains is its approximate correspondence – and this correspondence is interesting because it is, or at least it seems to be, an existential category. This means that the metaphysical equivalent of emptiness is an existential problem, it is being in the way nothing should be, being without other beings, i.e. alone. This being-alone, this existential nothingness “expresses an undesirable mode of being” (ATTOE 2022, 52). However, there is “always something left” (ATTOE 2022, 56), there is never nothing. In this way, the *Groundwork* presents itself, in my understanding, as an existential groundwork.

This is also confirmed by something else. This new African metaphysics rejects all transcendent contexts and considers itself as materialism, confidently rejecting “being-in-control”. Attoe proposes “the idea that being-in-control is impossible” (ATTOE 2022, 10). And he goes on to state:

The ideas of intention and free will fail remarkably within the context of [predeterministic historicity] since all actions and decisions are predetermined by a previous state of affair(s). This rejection of free will and intention is at odds with the prevalent metaphysics in African philosophy, especially traditional African metaphysics. (ATTOE 2022, 10)

This is an interesting twist. We find an anti-transcendent, materialist metaphysics firmly rooted in an idea of God. Attoe claims:

The idea of God as a first cause is one property that I believe is necessary for a description of God. (ATTOE 2022, 7)

Furthermore, Attoe does not assume a ‘personalized’ God. Attoe goes on to argue:

The concept of God [...] need not be that of a personalized deity, so I refer to God as an *It* (expressing it as neuter or non-gendered). Since my idea of God is not spiritual or otherworldly, and since I showed that it was necessary for God to be an existent thing for reality to be, my very simple concept of God could only view It as a material being, and I often wondered whether enduring things like energy could not be an aspect of what I called God. (ATTOE 2022, 8)

Our author rejects all ideas of being in control, all ideas of making our destiny. He writes in the metaphysics that “free will is seen as incompatible with the hard determinism.” Furthermore, claiming that the “determinism that pervades the universe is sufficient in explaining the driving force beyond interactions, and that admitting will or intentionality is unnecessary and even misleading” (ATTOE 2022, 70), Attoe identifies a deeply rooted existential desire behind the long traditions of free will:

As humans, we desperately want to believe that we are not bound to such a debilitating determinism—we had been willed to survive by our creator, the supreme being. (ATTOE 2022, 80)

Attoe leaves behind the Akan or the Yoruba ideas on destiny (ATTOE 2022, 81), and he certainly rejects Ada Agada’s ideas on freedom which are implied in his consolationism. Attoe makes a very interesting observation in his fierce attack on free will:

The egotism attached to notions of free will is confounding. It is almost as if our self-worth is tied to the denial of determinism. (ATTOE 2022, 84)

And he goes on:

When an event becomes part of our story ...we are forced to see the predeterministic history that precedes that particular

state of affairs. However, seemingly random events are only seemingly random because we barely pay direct attention to them. Once we begin to pay attention, we become aware of that event's place in the current determined state of affairs and how that relates to other states of affairs in predetermined history. Once we do this, we become aware that the narrow stories that our brains tell us do not confound the truth of the determinism that holds reality together. (ATTOE 2022, 85)

This is an interesting observation. However, when Attoe points out that “[o]nce we begin to pay attention” to seemingly random events they metamorphize into non-random events, he seems to push aside the problem that the disappearance of randomness does not necessarily indicate that randomness does not exist. Could it not also indicate, for instance:

- [T]hat we, as human beings, are not able to endure randomness (an existential perspective) or
- that we, as human beings, are not able to comprehend randomness and thus replace it with determinism (one epistemological perspective), or
- that we, as human beings, determine the perception of an object and not the other way around (another, a Kantian, epistemological perspective), or
- that we, as human beings – by the powers of a higher authority – are not supposed to comprehend randomness (a metaphysical perspective)?

There are certainly even more perspectives. Attoe's observation that our understanding of phenomena changes once we pay attention to them certainly does not urge us to accept the existence of a deterministic reality, but only – if we agree with the observation in the first place – that phenomena might change if attention is directed towards them. Attoe's approach, again, seems to be an existential one, seems to be a call for the courage to commit to predetermined historicity as a good way of life! Even though he refers to God as an It, there is an entity ensuring that we can trust reality and that we can rely on the fact that reality indeed is exactly what it seems to be. Again, there is nothing wrong with this. It simply seems somewhat

unfair to disregard free will as a convenient illusion when one replaces it with a necessarily unprovable counter-statement, which also has its conveniences. Attoe's arguments are plausible, but would it not be possible, perhaps in the tradition of Pyrrhonic scepticism, to find equally plausible counter-arguments, to achieve what Sextus Empiricus called an equipollent dispute, *isostheneia* (SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, I, 12, 25-27)?

Let us take a look at the two problems that Attoe finds with the idea of free will:

First is the Illusion that what we may call a cause (or a prior state of affairs) is not, itself, an event (or state of affairs). This is the thinking that allows us to conveniently forget that every purported freely willed decision and outcome is itself a state of affairs, an event with a cause. (ATTOE 2022, 85)

And secondly:

[F]ree will, if it must not be determinism, would imply the possibility of, what I call, a dislinked effect—that is, the possibility of a state of affairs, which is not linked to a previous state of affairs. This further implies that freely willing involves the power to do any of the following two things: to change a necessary state of affairs and/or to will decisions/actions/outcomes that are non-relational to other actors and factors in the world. (ATTOE 2022, 86)

Attoe criticizes the “illusion that there is something distinct about ‘free’ choice that makes it different from determined events.” (ATTOE 2022, 85) He claims explicitly: “Unfortunately, this is not the case. Every expression of free choice is an event” (ATTOE 2022, 85). I do not wish to argue that Attoe's conclusion is wrong. I merely wish to point out, again, that he *cannot know* if it is right or wrong – at least not within the epistemological framework that he uses. It might be possible to determine the determining factors of something. And it might be possible to go through many iterations of this process of determination. However, as Attoe says in his Introduction, at some point one would need to argue that “it was necessary for God to be an existent thing for reality to be” (ATTOE 2022, 8). Something that

necessitated God to be so that reality might be what it is. This is an interesting idea. If this is presented as a philosophical idea, there is nothing to criticize. However, if this is presented in the style of irrefutability, it becomes problematic. Attoe does not present, as far as I can see, any argument as to why we *have* to believe this. He presents arguments as to why this is a reasonable way of life, or, in other words, he makes very good points as to why one should existentially devote oneself to this belief. This argument for an existential decision, however, is something very different from putting forward – perhaps a little too confidently – the idea that the reader would now be necessitated to agree with the author.

Furthermore, the sentence; “it was necessary for God to be an existent thing for reality to be” is not as clear as it seems to be. What we might add after this “to be” is important. We could say, “to be – what it is” or “to be – what it seems to be”, “to be what it seems for all humans to be”, or “to be – what ought to be”, and so on. These additions produce quite different meanings.

If we assume that the intended meaning is “to be what it is”, this would be a strong claim that we know reality as reality – i.e. we know it in the way that it is and not just in the way that we know it. If we say “to be what it seems to be”, we would claim reality is what it seems, but it could be different; we might form it, it might form us. If we say “to be what it ought to be”, we would assume a strong normative implication.

It seems to me that the arguments presented in the *New Groundwork* draw their strength from the insight that we – seemingly – need to make certain decisions to live. The *Groundwork* is reasonable, it makes sense. This is relevant not because it is in itself true, but because it can satisfy the existential need for sense. The only problem is that, for instance, the idea of free will was rejected because it merely made sense and was not also true. We find, as it seems, the same existential need for free will as in the rejection of it. I would argue that this is where philosophy needs to be humble and modest. Are there not certain things that we might not be able to know? Are there not certain things which you might know and about, which you might be right about, but I simply do not or cannot understand you? Can we perhaps not avoid, at some point, making a leap of faith, because we are able to ask more questions than we are able to answer? Perhaps we cannot be close to each other as human beings by making

the same leap of faith, but perhaps we can be close to each other by admitting that none of us can resist jumping.

Attoe's book is a brilliant new philosophical work. It makes one think, it is provocative and bold. As the reader might have noticed, my main problem is the confusion of necessitating truth and existential decisions. I admit, of course, that I am still unsure how much of this problem comes from the book and how much of it I may have created myself. I hope I will learn more about this new radical philosophy in order to find out more about myself... What more could one want from a philosophical book?!

Relevant Literature

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