

## ENGAGING WITH ARIBAIH ATTOE'S PREDETERMINISTIC HISTORICITY

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### Abstract

In this essay, I critically engage with Aribiah Attoe's new book on African Metaphysics, *Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics: The Idea of Predeterministic Historicity*, by reflecting on some of the philosophical issues that it provokes. Attoe contests some basic assumptions undergirding the philosophical approach to metaphysics within the African episteme in this book. His contestation leads him to a materialistic conception of reality in African metaphysics. While noting the original contribution of Attoe's book, such as singular complementarism, and predeterministic historicity, I identify and discuss some issues in the book that deserve critical philosophical engagement.

**Keywords:** African metaphysics, complementary relationship, ethnophilosophy, God, Predeterministic historicity

### Introduction

The assumptions that the African worldview is made of spiritual reality and that there is a relationship between spiritual reality and physical reality<sup>1</sup> in African metaphysics seem to be taken for granted without critical analysis (see ATTOE 2022). This relationship between spiritual reality and physical reality appears in different forms, one of which is the

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<sup>1</sup> Attoe uses "spirit" and "matter" throughout the book to capture what I believe to be spiritual and physical realities.

“vital force” (TEMPELS 1959; KAGAME 1989) that attributes all that exists in physical reality to spiritual reality. Vital force is seen as an attribute of the supreme being, God, in the pyramid of beings in the African worldview, or what is often referred to as the hierarchy of beings, which includes ancestors, humans, animals, plants, and the environment. God is said to have caused everything to exist. It is often claimed that there is a complementary relationship among these beings. Attoe’s book questions and contests these assumptions.

*Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics: The Idea of Predeterministic Historicity* advances a novel metaphysical system in African philosophy that is anchored on the ideas of relationality and complementarity salient in Africa south of the Sahara. As a system builder and a conversationalist, Attoe draws from the works of Innocent Asouzu to formulate his theory of “Pre-deterministic Historicity of being,” which offers a materialistic understanding of the African metaphysical worldview. As such, this is another original voice coming from the conversational school of philosophy aimed to advance knowledge that is at one with Africa and universally relevant. It charts a new path for African metaphysical discourse and perhaps a clear direction that African metaphysicians can legitimately follow.

My aim is to engage critically with Attoe’s book. I begin by offering a summary of chapters of the book to present an understanding of his main ideas. While doing so, I discuss the theoretical, logical, ethical and social issues that raise some philosophical concerns that should be taken seriously.

### **The Issues with *Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics***

In chapter 1, Attoe contests the basic assumptions underlining African metaphysics. The first assumption is the belief that spiritual reality<sup>2</sup> interacts with physical reality (ATTOE 2022, 3). The second assumption is the belief that there is a “harmonious communal relationship among various beings in the world” (ATTOE 2022, 4).

He argues that African metaphysicians give primacy to the spirit over the physical, thereby making the spirit the key component

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<sup>2</sup> Attoe might want to distance himself from my use of spiritual reality. He might argue that there is no such thing as spiritual reality and what I refer to as spiritual reality is merely physical reality. However, I employ the term spiritual reality to unpack the ideas such as God, ancestors, of the Anonymous African philosophers.

of reality. Attoe's contestation is that most African metaphysicians have undermined materialistic orientation that explains reality as purely material. For him, the reason is that the African worldview is often explained through a spiritualistic orientation that posits reality as spirit. In other words, God, humans, the universe and the entire reality are construed as having spiritual essence. He cites scholars like John Mbiti, Alex Kagame, and Noah Dzobo, who believe that spiritual reality permeates physical reality within the African worldview. These scholars consider God, who is at the apex of the pyramid of beings, to be a spiritual supreme being that causes everything to be. Attoe argues that contemporary African metaphysicians have failed to go beyond recounting the belief of the African worldview. As he argues:

[M]uch of what has been presented over the decades as African metaphysics has been more often an *ethnophilosophical rehash* of the thoughts of anonymous traditional African philosophers. In a bid to show the uniqueness of African metaphysical thinking and in a bid to show that ancient Africans did think philosophically, contemporary African metaphysicians have become more interested in *writing expositions* about the views of anonymous traditional African philosophers rather than building new ideas on the already laid foundation and/or interrogating that foundation. It is not that these expositions are not useful—indeed they are—but African metaphysics has barely moved forward from its pre-colonial rendering, with only a handful of metaphysicians moving the discipline forward by a couple of steps. (italics mine, ATTOE 2022, 4-5)

In the above quotation, Attoe claims that many contemporary African metaphysicians engage in ethnophilosophical exercises by offering an exposition of the African worldview. He maintains that such ethnophilosophical exercise lacks critical interrogation and rigorous engagement of the African worldview. For him, this ethnophilosophical exercise has stunted the growth of the discipline.

However, this line of argument is not uncommon in African

philosophy, although Attoe fails to acknowledge it in his book. Professional philosophers like Pauline Houtondji (1996), Kwasi Wiredu (1980), Peter Bodunrin (1984), Kwame Appiah (1992), and recently Bernard Matolino (2019), argue that ethnophilosophy lacks the critical rigour and analytic precision definitive of what might be called African philosophy proper. It is not just Attoe's failure to acknowledge the existing arguments that are worrisome, but also his taking for granted the term ethnophilosophy. He did not question this term, which makes one wonder whether Attoe is not falling unto the same blade he uses against African metaphysicians that he alleges to engage in the "exposition" of African worldview; since he deploys the term with the same meaning that it exists within the literature in African philosophy. However, careful examination of ethnophilosophy seems to imply a contradiction: 'ethno' that characterizes exposition and rehashing of African worldview negates 'philosophy' that characterizes critical engagement, and interrogation, of the African worldview. Attoe might want to argue that the ethnophilosophy debate in African philosophy is beyond the chapter's scope. This kind of argument does little to overcome these worries because a footnote would have sufficed to engage them.

Moreover, Attoe's demarcation between the ethnophilosophical exposition of the African worldview and interrogation of such worldview invites its own problems. Drawing such clear lines might falsely suggest that African metaphysicians deploying ethnophilosophical approach do not engage in "interrogation" of African worldview (see ATTOE 2022, xvii). This is hardly the case. Fainos Mangena has shown that ethnophilosophy involves the "collection" and "analysis" of African worldviews that are based on both inductive and deductive reasoning (MAGENA 2014, 26, 31). In this way, the ethnophilosophical approach to metaphysics involves the interrogation of the African worldview. Kagame's and Dzobo's ethnophilosophical approaches, Attoe cites in his book, do not merely rehash the idea of spiritual vital force within the African worldview; they engage and interrogate the philosophical "problem of man" within the Bantu worldview. The problem with his demarcation is that it becomes very difficult to sufficiently separate the ethnophilosophical exposition of the African worldview from the interrogation of such worldviews since both cut across each other. Although Attoe's defence would be that ethnophilosophy could be

valuable and useful to African philosophy, it does not constitute genuine African philosophy since it lacks interrogation, rigour and criticality (ATTOE 2019). I believe that he has not sufficiently shown that the ethnophilosophical approach in African metaphysics is “writing exposition” and “rehashing” of the African worldview. Until he does that, this demarcation carries less weight than what he is assigning to it.

But what is the big deal about this demarcation? The big deal is that this demarcation prepares the ground for Attoe’s theory of predetermined historicity in African metaphysics (I will discuss and interrogate this very important theory later in this essay) in two ways.<sup>3</sup> First, he maintains that the ethnophilosophical rehashing of the African worldview resulted in many African metaphysicians’ uncritical attitude towards the belief that spirit permeates reality in the African worldview. In his words, “[o]ne such notion is the preponderance of “spiritual” entities in African metaphysical thoughts.” He further argues thus; “[f]rom God to lower deities and then to ancestors, the belief in otherworldliness is shockingly taken for granted” (ATTOE 2022, 5). Second, he believes that interrogating the African worldview would usher in his materialistic account of African metaphysics. As he poses, “[i]f this change in trajectory offers new insight rather than the rehash of traditional views, wouldn’t it be worthwhile to explore African metaphysics from a logical, scientific and materialistic perspective?” He responds, “I believe it would be worthwhile to do so, and that is what I intend to do in this book” (ATTOE 2022, 6). To offer such logical, scientific and materialistic perspective, he draws so much from the axiological resources of African metaphysical tradition, like relationality and complementarity, to shed new light on the concepts of being, freedom/responsibility/determinism, causation, death and God. Attoe’s book has been the first to take such a bold step towards materialism in African metaphysics, explaining concepts like God and being in purely materialistic terms.

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<sup>3</sup> It is either he owns this demarcation since he insists on drawing a line between ethnophilosophical exposition and interrogation or denies it. If he accepts the former, then he has not provided convincing argument to support it and if he accepts the latter, then this demarcation collapses and the aim of the chapter is undermined.

In chapter 2, he engages with the concept of God and *its* existence. The question of whether God exists has been hotly debated within the western philosophy of religion. On the one hand, theism, deism, pantheism, and panentheism grapple with establishing the existence of God. On the other hand, atheism attempts to disprove the existence of God. Finally, agnosticism is sceptical about the belief in the existence of God. Attoe does not aim to dislodge God's existence or show scepticism about God's existence. Instead, he intends to prove God's existence as a material, depersonalized, enduring and non-conscious entity, thereby adding a crucial voice to the discourse from an African perspective.

To prove that God exists, he enquires into the question of where things in the world emanate from. He responds that things in the world cannot possibly emanate from nothingness since it implies a lack of existence. As he argues, “[I]f nothingness implies a lack of being or things-in-the-world, then the interaction necessary to allow the emergence of something new—in this case things-in-the-world—would be absent since things must first exist for interactions to occur” (ATTOE 2022, 26). What this means is that things-in-the-world must have emanated from something that has always been existing, that is “regressively eternal.” This something that has always been in existence is God. “If it is truly the case that nothingness is impossible, and that some-thingness is not only inevitable but eternal, then we can surely causally trace being to God” (ATTOE 2022, 29). He conceives God as an enduring first cause that is foundational to the things in the world. Attoe claims that things in the world emanate from God's relationship and interaction with itself as a complex reality or between it and its environment as a simple singular reality. For him, this relationship and interaction are “more powerful” than the concept of God (see ATTOE 2022, 8).

He postulates four attributes of God: the first attribute is that “[t]he thing which we call God is the enduring entity from which all other entities emanate” (italic original, ATTOE 2022, 29). “The thing which we call God is a material entity” is the second attribute (italic original, ATTOE 2022, 34). The third attribute is that “[t]he thing which we call God is not a conscious entity” (italic original, ATTOE 2022, 37). And “[t]he thing which we call God is not a creator in the intentional sense of the word but the ultimate expression of a being becoming” is God's final attribute (italic original, ATTOE 2022, 37).

With these attributes, he stripped the concept of God of all spiritualistic and religious attributes, such as omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and gender notions like he, she, etc. The preceding idea of God was already signalled in chapter 1, where he depersonalized the concept of God as non-gendered, “It”— a great shift from the belief of God as either he or she in African metaphysics/religion.

Attoe’s conception of God has been criticized by Ada Agada (2022) and JO Chimakonam and AE Chimakonam (2022). Agada argues that his materialistic conception of God logically leads to atheism by “unwittingly eliminating the very idea of God” (AGADA 2022, 4). JO Chimakonam and AE Chimakonam charge that he fails to provide a convincing argument to justify his claim that God is the first cause other than appealing to our emotions. Moreover, his conception of God raises some theoretical issues. The theoretical issues are hinged on his claim that God is a purely material being. One would argue that such a conception of God appears to be more at home with the materialist theistic tradition of the West, specifically “Unitarian materialism,” that construes God as a purely material being, “matter” (see STEGMANN 1635, PRIESTLEY 1777, SALATOWSKY 2020, WUNDERLICH 2020),<sup>4</sup> despite his claim that the complementary relationship that exists between this being and other things makes it African. This becomes more pressing when we consider his fourth attribute, that God is an unintentional creator of the word. For him, the things we see in the world result from the complementary relationship within God and between God and its environment. Also, he gives primacy to relationship and interaction over God. In that case, it becomes very unsettling how this is African, since the anonymous African philosophers conceive God to be more powerful (see IDOWU 1962, ABIMBOLA 1978, BEWAJI 1998, FAYEMI 2012, DASAOLU 2019, AE CHIMAKONAM 2022, JO CHIMAKONAM & AE CHIMAKONAM 2022). Come to think of it,

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<sup>4</sup> Attoe might throw this argument to delink the relationship I sort between his conception of God and that of the theistic tradition of the West. He would argue that no materialist in the West conceives God the way he does (as a purely material being) since most materialists in the West deny the existence of God. However, materialist theistic tradition in the West construes God as a material entity. This would probably be an area of further discussion between Attoe and I in our future encounter.

I am wondering if the anonymous Africans would agree with him on this.

Put differently, if he is saying that God can be conceived independently of the spiritual reality that the anonymous Africans strongly believe in, the choice of describing it as African might be misleading. I suspect one might celebrate his position as another victory for Western theistic materialism in African philosophy. Attoe might insist that relationality and complementarity make his theory African as well as differentiate it from the Western materialistic tradition. This response has not shown how he will convince Anonymous African philosophers that God is a material being and that relationship and interaction are *more powerful* than God.

Furthermore, Attoe discusses the idea of Predeterministic Historicity (PDH), a metaphysical theory based on the complementary relationship and interaction between beings, things, and entities in physical reality, in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6. Central to his theory of predeterministic historicity is the notion of being. For him, being is a “singular complement” (ATTOE 2022, 43) made up of singular realities. Singular realities are the most fundamental aspects of reality, which conglomerate to form more complex realities. Complex and singular realities are all part of a state of affairs and it is the relationality that exists within this state of affairs that *necessarily* produces new things in the world. The necessity here is what Attoe refers to as “Predeterministic historicity”. This predetermined relationship, he calls “singular complementarity” (ATTOE 2022, 11), results in a predeterministic world. He claims that the world is predeterministic “because all events emerge as a result of a previous state of affairs, down to the coming to existence of the reality, finally resting on the first cause—the thing which we call God” (ATTOE 2022, 60). It implies that God causes series of events in a rigidly predetermined manner through complementary relationship and interaction. He maintains that causality represents the relationality and active interaction among series of events. The first interaction and complementary relationship involve a predetermined series of events, with subsequent future series of events being rigidly determined. He claims that there is no freewill and its accompanying responsibility in such a predetermined world since “all actions or choices are determined” (ATTOE 2022, 86). Here lie both the ethical and social issues.



Although Attoe claims in his book that his metaphysics is “descriptive” and “not normative” (ATTOE 2022, 95), I believe that there is a need to stretch this theory ethically. The ethical issue arises from his position on freedom and responsibility when he categorically pronounced the death of free will and responsibility. The death of free will arises because there is nothing like free will and responsibility since our choices, actions, and responsibilities have been predetermined. When we act, we only express and execute our predetermined thoughts: “There is no *willing* (in the sense of the expression of rationally considered free choice) only the expression and execution of predetermined thoughts” (ATTOE 2022, 92). If this is the case, I suspect morality would become trivial in such a deterministic world. At least, ordinary morality requires freedom, no matter how small it is, to choose between right or wrong alternatives, and if this freedom becomes non-existent, then morality becomes insignificant.

Also, Attoe’s theory of deterministic historicity seems to pose serious practical challenges to both conflict resolution and women’s liberation if we are to incorporate such metaphysics in Africa, for instance. On the one hand, Deterministic historicity could be invoked to justify socio-religious conflict in Africa. Perpetrators of socio-religious conflict might claim that they have been predetermined to stone, kill and set ablaze anyone that blasphemes their religious beliefs. The killing of Deborah Samuel in the Northern part of Nigeria is a recent example of socio-religious conflict. She was beaten, stoned and burnt to death for blaspheming Islamic beliefs. The perpetrators claimed to be carrying out the inductions of Allah, and many Northerners protested in solidarity with their actions. One might say that following the inductions of Allah means that their action has been determined regarding the killing of Deborah, which seems to reflect deterministic historicity. On the other hand, deterministic historicity seems to suppose that women’s oppression and suppression have been predetermined, making the subsequent outcomes of suppression, denigration, patriarchy, etc. to be rigidly conditioned. This means that in Attoe’s deterministic world, women’s liberation may or may not be a mirage, depending on outcomes that have been predetermined (of which we have no control).

Sadly, those dishing out such oppression might claim that oppressing women is influenced and determined by their predeterministic history. Attoe would maintain that in such a predeterministic world, punishment is part of the predetermined order of sustaining communal living, thereby actions that bring about disharmony inevitably attract some punishments. As appealing as this may sound, the problem remains that they would be those who would insist that their actions are a result of their predetermined circumstances, which they do not have control over, and therefore repel being held accountable. In other words, the dangers of conflict and oppression would seem to multiply in such a world since people could also be predetermined to repel being punished for their predetermined actions. Although Attoe anticipated similar objections in his book, I believe that he should engage more about the social implications of his predeterministic historicity along this line.

Finally, there seems to be logical inconsistency in his theory. The logical issue has been well discussed in the Conversational School of Philosophy (CSP) forum, but I still want to reflect on it in this essay. At the substructure of his theory is predeterminism and at the superstructure is complementarity. The substructure implies the absolute laws of the Aristotelian two-valued logic since determinism states that “a proposition is either necessary or impossible” and bivalence stipulates that a statement is either true or false. These absolute laws ground his theory of predeterminism, which appears not to ground the superstructure, making the superstructure hang without any logical footing. The absolute laws of determinism and bivalence tend to seal the fate of Attoe’s theory in the Aristotelian two-valued logic and abort his attempt at making it truly African. Although he claims that the superstructure is what makes his theory African. But the superstructure implies African logical principles of complementarity and relationality that transcend bivalence and determinism, so they cannot be mapped in a two-valued logic (CSP 2022, N.P).

So, instead of binary contradiction, as per the two-valued logic in Attoe’s theory, one might argue that he ended up talking about what can be called *binary complementarity*. There seems to be no difference between binary complementarity and his preferred notion of singular complementarity, except that the latter complicates things. But how? The idea of relationship presupposes an interaction. The least

arithmetical expression of relationship is  $2 = \text{binary}$ . So even if he wants to argue that by singular complementarity, he means multiple individual entities complementing, it is still the same thing: binary is only a starting point: the gateway to multiple. When two singles complement, you have binary<sup>5</sup>. He might have to explain how a deterministic and bivalent theory can ground the idea of complementarity (CSP 2022, N.P).

I guess, at the end of it all, Attoe's overall response might be that I have been predetermined to raise these philosophical issues!

### **Conclusion**

Aside from these issues, I highly recommend this book. I strongly believe that the ideas presented by Attoe in this book are not ends in themselves. Instead, they serve as a foundation for further research. And I encourage us to read, stretch and extend these ideas in our various fields of research. Also, those of us who are lecturers should incorporate this book into our teaching texts and teach the ideas to our students.

Finally, we should cite this book in our research. This point is very crucial because I have observed that we contemporary African philosophers do not read and cite each other's work; we prefer to cite older African philosophers or the West. Please, no one should get me wrong. I am not saying that there is something wrong with conversing with older African philosophers, but we should do so in relation to the contemporary ones, showing that our knowledge of such issues has advanced. I then call us to engage with this book. Let the conversation begin!

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<sup>5</sup> There are so many definitions of binary, but my favoured definition here is, according to Merriam Webster online dictionary, "something made of two things or part (n)."

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