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“HUMAN FREEDOM: ITS ONTOLOGICAL BASIS” – A RESPONSE

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In “Human Freedom: Its Ontological Basis”,¹ Rev. Sister Nkechi Ezeanyino maintains that as human beings “We are aware of our deliberate choices and actions; of our being ourselves whenever our self-determination is achieved”.² According to her, the purpose of her paper is to “demonstrate as far as possible that freedom is nothing extraneous to man but rather part of his essence as man”.³ She further states that the paper “does not pretend to offer the final solution to the controversy but to provoke thoughts for further reflections”.⁴ It is on this ground that I have decided to express my views on the problems of human freedom.

The problem of human freedom could rightly be said to be one of the most important issues in philosophy which has received the attention of many philosophers and theologians, yet no solution seems to stand out superior or satisfactory. What appears a plausible solution at one age many seem riddled with hideous difficulties at another age. What makes the problem paramount in philosophical inquiries lies in the fact that it involves the question of moral responsibility to which neither ethics, theology nor metaphysics can remain indifferent. Before further discussion let us briefly review the article.

A Brief Review of “Human Freedom: Its Ontological Basis”

According to Ezeanyino, the problem that is uppermost in her mind is to “excavate into the fundamental or ontological basis of human freedom... to demonstrate that freedom is nothing extraneous to man but rather part of his essence as man”.⁵ This according to her, is premised on the fact that “man is a being who is aware of his deliberate choices, actions, of being himself whenever self-determination is achieved”.⁶ She maintains that human freedom is in consonance with our experience, knowledge and understanding of human nature, and that man, through his acts of

deliberation, judgement and decision is aware of his freedom.⁸ Thus the concepts of right and wrong, good and bad, praise and blame are indications of human freedom.⁹ Her definition of freedom runs under three perspectives:

- i) physical – where there is absence of external obstacles to impede human volition;
- ii) moral – where neither threat nor moral obligation prevents self-determination; and
- iii) psychological – where no psychic pressure may act as internal constraint.¹⁰ Thus freedom for her is a reality because the 'will' by nature is rational appetency.¹¹

Rev. Sr. Ezeanyino argues persuasively that man, as a rational being, is a composite of body and soul;²¹ that human soul is intellectual in contradistinction to the vegetative and the sensitive souls of plants and animals. As an intellectual part of man, she argues, the soul constitutes the substantial form of man which actuates the body.¹³ Hence there is a real substantial union, between the body and the soul that when we talk of man as a species, we neither refer to his body nor his soul but man as a composite of body and soul.¹⁴ She locates the point of contact of the body and the soul at a point in the brain known as the pineal gland. For her, apart from this point of contact, each of them – the body and the soul – is autonomous.¹⁵ She then maintains that the ontological foundation of human being is his spiritual nature, which is the soul. Her conclusion is that, if the free act is the act of both the intellect and the will, then human freedom is ontologically grounded in the soul of man which transcends all temporality.¹⁶

It is to her credit that she faces the problem of human freedom uncompromisingly by attempting to establish the root of human freedom in human soul. She, however, indicates that the problem of human freedom is inexplicable "the paper does not pretend to offer the final solution."¹⁷ By this assertion, the author is simply suggesting that the problem of human freedom is a subject without a proper object – an implication that the problem has no solution. Of course, philosophical issues are generally problematic, for once they are resolved or solutions offered, then the problem in question ceases to

be part of philosophical inquiry. This, however, does not suggest that attempts should not be made to offer plausible explanations to such philosophical problems. This I think, and rightly so, is precisely what Rev. Sr. Ezeanyino attempted to do in her article. However, on close examination of the "Human Freedom: Its Ontological Basis", one can easily discern, first the use of an erroneous approach in the analysis of freedom and secondly an obscurity in articulating the nature of the soul.

(i). The Use of Erroneous Approach:

The author approaches the issue of human freedom by employing the conceptual apparatus of the scholastic paradigms: "I have set out to approach the above problem from the scholastic metaphysical standpoint".¹⁸ The author here employs scholastic metaphysics to analyse a contemporary issue. More recent philosophers abandon scholastic models because they do not appeal to the taste of the time. It is important to note here that in medieval era, philosophical inquiries were heavily loaded with deep sense of theological reflections which was latent with idealism in which importance was placed on intangible essences. From the age of enlightenment, philosophical inquiries took a new dimension for philosophers no more leaned on revelation as the basis for their speculations. This of course is no agreement with Kant's view that philosophical inquiry is the articulation of the spirit of the age. If Kant is correct, which I think he is, then it is not appropriate to employ scholastic models in analysing human freedom. That is to say in our philosophical inquiries we must aim at developing new insights which must acquire new objectivity that will enable us to perceive with more judicious acumen, the total problem of humanity. Failure to explore new model of inquiry may make it impossible for us to sharpen our focus on the conception of ourselves and our reactions in the universe in which we find ourselves.

In the medieval world, the issue of human freedom was limited almost exclusively to metaphysics. It was linked to ethics only in order to impute blame for man's wrong doing. In other words, the claim that man was free to do something was, for the Scholastics, the belief which was to impute upon man the responsibility of evil in the world. The issue of freedom was therefore addressed in

relation to ontology rather than to morality. Hence, this sense of the use of 'freedom' had much bearing to substance rather than to a function in rational beings. But in contemporary usage, human freedom has more bearing to morality than to metaphysics. For, in morality we meet with demands that human beings are creatures whose acts are genuine expressions of individual purpose, while on the side of metaphysics freedom is limited to the discourse about the essential nature of man's finite experience. However, we may not rule out the fact that one cannot treat the moral problem of responsibility without recourse to the metaphysical issue of freedom because the problem of human freedom has been historically linked to extra-ethical discourse especially to some theological considerations. This is true in the sense that some scholars of moral philosophy are still of the view that ethical science cannot begin its inquiry without some preliminary justification of freedom as a postulate.

(ii) Obscurity in Articulating the Nature of the Soul:

The soul, according to the author, is spiritual: "...this soul being spiritual in nature does not depend on the body for existence".¹⁹ Again she mentions that the soul is said to possess parts:

*The soul...is not just part of man but his substantial form which actuates the human body. There is real substantial union between the body and the soul, that when we talk of man as a species, we refer to man as a composite of body and soul.*²⁰

The impression which the author conveys in this passage is that the soul is like a physical object which possesses parts or an element which forms part of man. Again it can be argued that the idea of the 'real substantial union' may convey the impression that the union of the body and the soul may be similar to the chemical combination of two substances like hydrogen and oxygen ($2H_2 + O_2 \rightarrow 2H_2O$) to produce water or that of sodium and chlorine ($Na + Cl \rightarrow NaCl$) to produce table salt. The question that may be raised here is: did these two substances which are different in nature, (that is the body and the soul) exist as separate entities before they formed the 'substantial union' or some kind of force brought them together to form a

substantial union?

It is not the purpose of this paper to give a detailed analysis of the relationship of body and soul, but it suffices to mention that the soul is a life-giving principle in man. That is to say, it is a property that makes man a living organism. In other words, the soul functions only as a life-force in man as in other living organism. It is the property in man which keeps life going and once it ceases to perform this function, then the living organism ceases to operate as a living organism. If the function of the soul is life-giving, as in other living organisms, then it is not proper to ascribe to it the intellective and volitional property. The property that is responsible for the intellective and 'volitional' activity is the mind. Most writers either confuse or identify the mind with the soul. The mind and the soul are two different and distinctive properties in man. While the soul on the one hand functions only as a life-giving principle (just as it functions in other living things), the mind on the other hand constitutes the basis of rationality in man and thus confers personality on man.

The mind is what bestows on man the intellective power. This intellective power leads to conscious activity which embodies not only thinking and deliberation but also memory. The whole process of thinking, deliberation and memory leads to rationality or the working process of the mind. When we say that a person is thinking, we are simply saying that he is performing some mental activity. The relationship of the thought in the mind to the body is just bodily process in mental activity. This is what Herbert Feigl means when he says that conscious experience are effects of brain processes or cerebral activity.²¹ Therefore mental activity goes hand in hand with bodily activity. That is to say without the body there is no mind and without the mind there is no personality. This leads naturally to the question as to whether the mind continues to exist after bodily disintegration. If we admit that the mind, as an essential ingredient of the human person, survives death then how does it perform any mental activity in the absence of the body? Can the mind have conscious experience without the body? An attempt to answer this question may lead to the mind-body impasse which is beyond the scope of this work. However, it would suffice to suggest that this issue be left for individuals to decide but for now let us examine how the mind operates.

Assuming the mind to be the basis of a person's conscious state or rationality, how does it work in the process of deliberation? Here we have to borrow from St. Augustine's analysis of the concept of the will. St. Augustine was interested in the will as a faculty of deliberation. According to him, the will is an essential constituent of human nature. Augustine maintained that moral character is determined by the choices a person makes. Accordingly, something precedes moral choices as a necessary condition. This necessary condition, according to Augustine, is an object of desire which entices the will to action:

*Whoever, will something. He cannot exercise will unless some hints come into him from outside through bodily senses or some thoughts come into his mind in some secret way.*²²

The point that St. Augustine is stressing is that knowledge is an essential ingredient that moves the will to action because for one to will, one must know what he is willing. That is to say, some sort of knowledge is required before any claim to genuine willing. Thus the act of deliberation is accompanied by full knowledge.

St. Augustine further stresses that the will can make choices by what he calls 'free choices'. How do these 'free choices' come about? St. Augustine, in answer to this, says that if we form good habits and delight in good results then we can make 'free' good choices.²³ The implication here is that our choices depend on our habits, orientations or environments in which we are brought up. That is to say, it is the habit which impels the will in the process of choosing. St. Augustine's contention here is that although we have the power of willing freely he, however, believes that we are unable to choose freely. E. Gilson describes this as 'the Augustinian Paradox':

*...although our will and choices are free in the sense that we are responsible for them, yet without the intervention of God we are bound to be evil which we cannot escape.*²⁴

Augustine's belief is that we are 'free agents' only in the sense that we are responsible for our acts, but we are not free until God intervenes because we are in the bondage of sin. That is to say unless

we are helped by the grace of God, our freedom of choice is only freedom to sin or as J.M. Rist puts it "man is free from virtue but slave to vice".²⁵

St. Augustine's view on human freedom is in consonance with the contemporary view in the sense that true freedom implies that one's outward act is an expression of an inward consistent purpose. It means that there is no established or habitual reaction that makes a person mechanical or limits set by one's powers, environment or orientation. A person is not acting freely when the circumstances are not such as to admit of the formation of a purpose at all. Automatic or habitual acts are impulsive and therefore not free acts. Man does not even have the ability to think freely and consequently cannot act freely. That is to say, there is no such thing as truly free act because we have been conditioned to think and behave in a certain manner by the total configurations of our past life and previous experience as well as influences exercised on us by our socio-cultural environment. This is why we refrain from performing certain actions owing to the fact that we were told at childhood that it is wrong. Our intellectual activities are, therefore, conditioned, at least, by our conscious feeling process or by elements in our consciousness, of which we are unaware, as well as by our family situations.

Is Man Free?

The traditional belief is that man is endowed with 'free will'. This belief is so orthodox that no one denies it and feels comfortable. But detached philosophical reflections may show this to be irrational because 'free will' without 'freedom to act' may be a barren endowment. We may possess the 'will' but may not be free to act. It is important here to note the distinction between 'freedom' and 'will'. One may 'will' (that is have desire) without being free. I may will or have a desire to walk across the Presidential villa at Abuja but I may not actually be free to walk across it. Therefore, to equate freedom with 'will' involves a distortion of ordinary language. Let us examine the Biblical passage in which God told Adam:

You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat for in the

day that you eat of it you shall die.²⁶

Also in the book of Deuteronomy, God pronounced:

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I shall set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live.*²⁷

These passages obviously do not suggest human freedom. They point to the view that man chooses even when he refuses. In consonance with this, Jean Paul Satre asserts that 'man is condemned to freedom' – an indication of a complete negation of freedom. With these views we are rationally forced to admit that our existence is completely contingent. We might not have been. We were never consulted whether we would choose to come to the world but we simply found ourselves here. This corroborates Heidegger's contention when he says that we experience ourselves as 'thrown' into the world and that it is only in this arbitrary situation that we must assume responsibility for ourselves. This view also finds support in Richard Taylor's assertion that "I am not responsible for being a man rather than a woman...I was never asked whether these should be given to me".²⁸ In the face of these views one cannot rationally admit that freedom is ontologically grounded in man.

The problem of human freedom can best be examined in the face of the questions; can a finite creature who is dependent on an infinite creator possess any significant autonomy in relation to that of the infinite creator or can anything claim autonomy in an environment where an infinite and omnipotent being exercises his authority? However, Benedict de Spinoza seems to supply an answer to this when he says that man as part of the universal order cannot be free because man cannot be the free cause of his actions since he is constrained to activity by compulsion of the universal necessity.²⁹ Nelson Pike in line with Spinoza argues that if God exists and the right collection of theological assumptions concerning His nature are true, then no human action is free. According to him, of central importance in the collection of assumptions is the doctrine of omniscience: if God exists at a given time and holds infallible beliefs concerning what human beings will do (for instance Judas will

betray Christ) in future relative to that time, assuming that the notion of omniscience is subsumed in that of omnipotence, then the actions of those agents are not free.³⁰ The implication here is that the idea of divine omniscience connotes that at any given time, God knows what will take place and this necessarily follows. This means that God knows in advance what will take place and this necessarily takes place, hence there is no human freedom.

Conclusion

However, some authors have been convinced either by faith or by means of arguments, that human beings are free. However, no matter the degree of conviction the experience of causation cannot be effaced. The belief that we can deliberate independently has been conditioned by our mental attitude. This belief is virtually an epiphenomenal or non-efficacious by-product of some other dimensions of experience. A person's conscious experience may conflict with what is known to be true at a pre-reflective level. The real freedom consists not in thinking that we are free to deliberate or decide but in the exercise of that which is desired.

We must make a distinction between abstract and real possibility of human freedom and between 'will' and free acts. Thus our working definition of freedom should rest on the power or the ability to do what one wills and not that the will is free in itself. That is to say freedom implies that there is no limit set on one's ability. Given this, human freedom is a transient phenomenon or a derivative element of experience and not ontologically grounded in the being of man as claimed by Ezeanyino. Freedom, therefore, is for all finite beings an infinite distant ideal.

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therefore not merely one of the ancestors but the proto-ancestor who bears in a transcendent form the primitive "vital union" and "vital force", which is possessed partially by other ancestors (see p. 81)

Bujo thinks, and I do believe his arguments are convincing, that seeing Jesus as proto-ancestor allows us an expression of the christian mystery of incarnation in African category (see. p.83). Moreover, the new morality that follows from the ancestor theology compliments the efforts of traditional morality in responding more adequately to contemporary African moral plagues, the foremost of which are corruption, dictatorship, exploitation of the masses. The last testament of Jesus, the proto-ancestor, was the injunction to love. Our affiliation with him guarantees the achievement of fullness of life if and only if we walk in the path he has shown us, the way of the cross. A faith commitment to the way of the cross is an inescapable obligation that follows from the christian vocation. To the extent that such a commitment is faithfully lived, to the same degree will one participate in the life of the proto-ancestor. One would agree with Bujo that if the moral thinking of the African is permeated by these considerations, Africa will surely be at the threshold of a moral re-birth and rejuvenation.

In the remaining part of the book, the author examines the new ecclesiology that follows from this new way of seeing Christ and the challenges it poses to the African clergy and laity. Pastoral approaches to marriage and care of the dying is also viewed in the light of African tradition.

Whoever reads this book will readily agree with Robert Schreiter, who in the foreword to the book, describes Bujo's work as one of those signs of hope. There is perhaps no better way of characterising this scholarly and articulate piece. In a society where the relevance of christianity has often been called to question, Bujo's work is a welcome relief. It is certainly a breakthrough in the search for a genuine African theology, a theology that speaks to Africans. We must note that the ancestors-theology which in my view is Bujo's substantive contribution will require further reflection and development. He admits himself that his work is but an initiation to African theology. Having successfully launched out in this direction, delineating where African theology is coming from and where it is going, one would look forward to seeing more African

theologians taking up the challenge that Bujo has posed in the concept of Jesus as a proto-ancestor.

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