

## **INNOCENT I. ASOUZU'S THEORY OF BEING AND THE ONE-MANY PROBLEM IN ONTOLOGY: AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH**

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### **Abstract**

*Innocent I. Asouzu, while delving into the realm of ontology, identified a crucial issue within the Western philosophical framework and African ontological expressions - the prevalence of an exclusivist and elitist mentality. Asouzu posits that the practical significance of ontology can be revitalized by redefining or re-articulating it through the lens of complementarity/ibuanidanda. In his endeavor to introduce a fresh complementary ontology, Asouzu primarily focused on "What is being?" while overlooking the inquiry into "Why do beings exist rather than nothing?" This narrow approach limits the explanatory capacity of his ontology in elucidating the essence of being within a multifaceted reality. Asouzu asserts that existence entails being in a complementary connection with other absent elements. Yet, he fails to acknowledge that this manner of defining being assumes the very concept it aims to establish, namely, complementarity. Furthermore, by emphasizing the ultimate purpose (i.e., fulfilling a missing element of reality) as the sole criterion for existence, Asouzu understates the structure and organization of intelligible reality, which enables/affords relationality. This study uses analytic and evaluative methods to explicate Asouzu's theory of being. It argues that Asouzu's innovative complementary ontology could enhance its explanatory efficacy by addressing these issues.*

**Keywords:** Asouzu, Being, Complementarity, Ibuanidanda, Ontology,

### **INTRODUCTION**

The quest to understand the nature of being and its constituent elements has engaged philosophers in various epochs and philosophical traditions. This is because understanding being will set the pace for erecting philosophical, scientific, and technological epistemic superstructure that provides the lenses used in understanding and interpreting the world. This shows that ontology which is the branch of general metaphysics has practical relevance. Innocent I. Asouzu has shown great courage and genius in venturing into the herculean task of showing how ontology can have practical relevance.

As an African Philosopher, Asouzu observed that the way philosophy, and particularly ontology, has been done both in Africa and the West has created a lot of

problems that are left unsolved. He pointed to what he called the 'exclusivist', 'polarizing' and 'bifurcating' mindset, that views reality as ultimately or fundamentally made up of independent entities. To be precise, he presents Aristotle's insistence on the subsistent nature of substance and the dependent nature of accidents as an example of this way of viewing reality. This exclusivist mindset sees reality as made up of disparate entities opposing each other. One is tempted to query whether any entity or part of reality can be alone or independent of the whole of reality.

According to Asouzu, we should show concern about this way of thinking because of its effect on our being in the world. The state of things, within the socio-political frame today, seems to be playing out of the consequences of this narrow-mindedness as we attempt to understand and engage with reality. This is the mindset that privileges one aspect of reality over the other, in regards to having an authentic ontological status, and leads to the socio-political 'war' between presumed or artificial or pseudo-opposites. Moreover, this mindset or way of attending to reality gives some form of legitimacy to any attempt to negate a presumed opposite in search of ontological relevance.

In the bid to address this problem, Asouzu proposed a 'new complementary ontology,' as a way of viewing reality that resolves the problem of the ultimate bifurcation of reality. With the complementary mindset, opposites are not seen as fundamentally mutually exclusive, but ultimately mutually complementary. He opines that this would give philosophy/ontology a human face or existential relevance.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, he referred to his work as an attempt to propose '...a noetic propaedeutic or the pre-pedagogy of the mind or human reason itself as the condition of possibility for all rational and ethical discourses, and for authentic human action.'<sup>2</sup> This gives his work an indispensable pedagogic relevance as it emphasizes re-educating the mind to see reality in a new, but more proper way.

This paper observes that Asouzu in his attempt to do ontology, engaged for the most part with the question, 'What is being?'; while saying little or nothing in regards to the question 'Why are there beings rather than nothing?' This raises the question 'Why is being essentially complementary and relational?' Following this observation, this paper explores the unanswered questions and unresolved problems that rear their heads due to Asouzu's neglect; for example, the one-many problem. It shall further explore the possibility of a rational reconstruction of Asouzu's new complementary ontology so that it answers these questions and broadens its explanatory power.

<sup>1</sup>Innocent I. Asouzu, "Ibuanyidanda' and the Philosophy of Essence," *Filosofia Theoretica* 1, no. 1 (2011): 106.

<sup>2</sup>Innocent I. Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda: New Complementary Ontology; Beyond World-Immanentism, Ethnocentric Reduction and Impositions* (Zurich: Lit Verlag GmbH & Co. KG Wien, 2007), 80-85.

## THE CONCEPT OF BEING

The concept of being as the subject matter of ontology developed from Greek presocratic philosophy, precisely from the work of Parmenides', *On Nature*. It is necessary to understand the way this term is used in philosophical discourse to do proper ontology and philosophy in general. Heidegger did great in his analysis of this concept when he pointed out that the concept of being is used to mean two things in classical ontology, namely, in regards to the indeterminate *one* or ground of all that is, and in regards to the determinates, intelligible beings that share the same ground of existence.<sup>3</sup> Eric Perl agrees with this analysis of the concept when he said:

The term 'being,' ... is used to translate Greek  $\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\iota$  or  $\tau\epsilon\iota$ ?  $\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\iota$ , the present participle of the verb 'to be.' Corresponding to German *Seiend* (not *Sein*!) and (philosophical) French *étant*, it thus signifies that-which-is: either, according to context, the whole of reality, all that is taken together as one whole (as in the first question); or a thing-that-is, as in the expression 'a being' (as, in the plural, in the second question).<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Aquinas before Heidegger posited that the idea of the ground of being is being only analogically, since, if it were a being it would be contradictory to call it the ground of being.<sup>5</sup> Hence, he said the concept of being is used for the ground of being only analogically, which is equivalent to the English phrase 'existence itself' or (*ipsum esse*).<sup>6</sup> The Latin *esse* is the infinitive form of the verb *to be*. Eric Perl, commenting on Aquinas, highlights his usage of the verb to be. He points to the fact that *esse* does not mean a thing that is' or 'that which is,' as in the case of the present participle of the verb *to be*, that is, *ens* (or  $\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\iota$  or  $\tau\epsilon\iota$ ?  $\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\iota$  as its Greek equivalent), but rather it is the act in virtue of which a thing is a being ( $\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\iota$  or *ens*).<sup>7</sup> In other words, *esse* in existential usage 'signifies the act of existing (*actus essendi*)'.<sup>8</sup>

There is also an emphasis made to view *being* as an analogical concept. Everything that exists has a being, however, the 'to be' by which they are '...differs according to a higher or a lesser degree of perfection.<sup>9</sup> For example, when we say things have goodness in them, we only mean they all have goodness in different degrees or proportions. Nonetheless, the concept of being remains an enigma within philosophy due to its indeterminate and determinate horizon that sometimes seems

<sup>3</sup>Jussi Backman, "Being Itself and the Being of Beings: Reading Aristotle's Critique of Parmenides (Physics 1.3) after Metaphysics," *Epoche: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (2018): 271-175, <https://doi.org/10.5840/epoche20171220103>.

<sup>4</sup>Eric D. Perl, *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1.

<sup>5</sup>Perl, *Thinking Being*, 152-158.

<sup>6</sup>Perl, *Thinking Being*, 152-158.

<sup>7</sup>Perl, *Thinking Being*, 153.

<sup>8</sup>Perl, *Thinking Being*, 153.

<sup>9</sup>Cajetan Thomas De Vio, *The Analogy of Names and the Concept of Being*, trans. Edward A. Bushinski and Henry J. Koren (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1953), 12.

apprehensible and sometimes evaporates to nothing. The next section will explicate Asouzu's theory of being.

### AN ANALYSIS OF ASOUZU'S THEORY OF BEING: A CRITICISM OF SUBSTANCE METAPHYSICS

Asouzu was not satisfied with the current theory of being or the way ontology is being done, which is done within the horizon of substance metaphysics or what he called the philosophy of essence. Substance metaphysics sees being as essentially having a fixed substance that exists independently. Therefore, a substance is the 'kpim' that underlies entities in the cosmos. More so, substances are seen as opposed to their accidents. This motivated his criticism of Aristotelian Substance Metaphysics and emphasized the need to do ontology in a way that restores its relevance and practicality, as against the abstract and abstruse way of doing ontology that has historically characterized the study of ontology. Additionally, his primary aim is to ground human relationships on a sound ontological paradigm that will afford harmony and peaceful co-existence.

According to him, the sole purpose that underlies his engagement with ontology was '...to regain ontology from the preceding conditions of its relevance, both to science or rational inquiry and to human existential situations.'<sup>10</sup> This would give philosophy/ontology a human face or existential relevance, he claimed.<sup>11</sup> He believed that with the proper complementary mindset and horizon for an articulation of being, humans would be in control of all their ambivalent existential situations, and overcome any form of unintended ethno-centric/ethno-philosophic commitment. He referred to his work as an attempt to propose '...a noetic propaedeutic or the pre-pedagogy of the mind or human reason itself as the condition of possibility for all rational and ethical discourses, and for authentic human action.'<sup>12</sup>

Asouzu criticized Aristotle's articulation of being as essentially polarized, exclusivist, non-complementary, and elitist.<sup>13</sup> This criticism follows all metaphysics formulated within the same ambience of bifurcation that is typical of all substance metaphysics or philosophy of essence. Asouzu observed that Aristotle's definition of being, in his metaphysics, as a substance that has the capacity of independence or subsistence to accidents is a fundamental bifurcation of being.<sup>14</sup> He believes Aristotle's presentation of being is reminiscent of Plato's, especially his elitist approach to interpersonal relationships. He identified one of Aristotle's major objectives as an attempt to show the superiority of Metaphysics over the other

<sup>10</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Asouzu, "'Ibuanyidanda' and the Philosophy of Essence," 106.

<sup>12</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 80-85.

<sup>13</sup> Innocent I. Asouzu, "Fidelity to Western Metaphysics: A Challenge to Authentic African Existence," *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 5, no. 1 (2016): 3.

<sup>14</sup> Asouzu, "'Ibuanyidanda' and the Philosophy of Essence," 83-85.

sciences. And by analogy, it shows the difference between the wise (who study Metaphysics) and the unwise (who do not study Metaphysics), where the wise are destined to rule the unwise. This way of presenting the relationship between the wise and the unwise appears to be in tandem with Plato's elitist philosophy that borders on the philosopher king.<sup>15</sup>

For Asouzu despite Aristotle's criticism of Plato, his presentation of reality is in line with the same elitist, discriminative mindset that undergirds Plato's thought:

With this approach, Aristotle merely cements Plato's Idea of the Philosopher king but gives it a folk ideological scientific connotation and forcefulness. He pursues this idea consistently with such intensity that Plato's idealism turns out to be no match to the polarizing antagonistic type of dualism, which he unfortunately understands as realism.<sup>16</sup>

He believes Aristotle has sacrificed principle at the altar of ideology due to the utilitarian interests that undergird his thought, despite his main motive which was scientific. The path or mindset he emphasized through his metaphysics has become constitutive of how science is done today. This exclusivist mindset factors as a major cause of ethnocentrism in the West.<sup>17</sup> Although Asouzu believes that the mental attitude of most African thought systems is within the ambience of complementarity,<sup>18</sup> yet, most articulation of being by African philosophers is done with an exclusivist mindset that is typical of an Aristotelian Metaphysics.<sup>19</sup> African philosophers have not learned to rid themselves of the exclusivist and polarizing mindset; this is manifest in the ethnocentric commitment that characterizes their articulation of African ontology:

Over and above all, it rests on the ethnocentric inspired assumption that there is a way of thinking that is congenial to all traditional African societies; an assumption that induces the mind to see Africans only from the perspective of a collective either for good or for worst, but more often for worst.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, there appears to be a reduction of ontology to the worldview of a people.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, it can be said that '...all cases of world immanent pre-deterministic concomitant ontologism...' is exemplified by African Metaphysics.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, to surmount this reductionist and exclusivist mindset that characterizes the way ontology is done within and beyond African Philosophy, Asouzu proposes *ibuanyidanda* ontology.

<sup>15</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 141-144.

<sup>16</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 145.

<sup>17</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 145-146.

<sup>18</sup> Innocent Asouzu, "The Complementary Comprehensive Noetic Alternative," *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* 2, no. 2 (2016): 34.

<sup>19</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 180.

<sup>20</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 180-181.

<sup>21</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 207.

<sup>22</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 19.

## IBUANYIDANDA: THE LEGITIMATE HORIZON FOR CONCEPTUALIZING BEING

Ibuanyidanda ontology is essentially a sequel of a prior work developed by Asouzu as the proper and legitimate ambience or horizon for the articulation and conceptualization of being. In his work *Method and Principle of Complementary Reflection: In and Beyond African Philosophy*, Asouzu developed the complementary mode of reflection as his unique presentation of what the traditional African anonymous Igbo philosophers reflected on. Essential to this complementary ambience for legitimate reflection is the principle of complementary reflection, which has a dyad variant, and the imperative of complementary reflection. These dyad variant addresses both the metaphysical and practical dimensions of the complementary principle. Understanding this principle is indispensable for an adequate comprehension of Asouzu's notion of being.

'The principle of integration' which is the metaphysical variant of the principle of complementarity states that 'anything that exists serves a missing link of reality within the framework of the totality.' On the other hand, the 'principle of progressive transformation' which is the practical variant is thus formulated, 'all forms of human action aim towards the joy of being.'<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, while the metaphysical variant portrays the metaphysical implications of the principle of complementary reflection, the practical variant addresses the practical relevance of the principle.<sup>24</sup> This dyad way of presenting the principle of complementary reflection is itself in consonance with the idea of complementarity developed by Asouzu. The two variants should be viewed as complementary aspects of the same principle, with neither conceived independently of the other.

The imperative of complementary reflection formulated thus, 'allow the limitation of being to be the cause of your joy',<sup>25</sup> is indispensable for a proper understanding of the principle of complementary reflection. The imperative is Asouzu's way of enunciating the forceful nature of the practicality of the principle of complementarity. The principle necessarily calls us to action as represented in the imperative. Thus, we could say that for Asouzu if our being is legitimately realized through complementarity, then it is 'good' for us to consciously seek this complementarity that harmoniously orients our being. The imperative appears to be the moral or ethical call of being to all existents to seek harmony in the joy of being. This explains why Asouzu believes that a truly ethical act should not be only good, but the act must be a source of joy for the actor.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 306.

<sup>24</sup>Innocent I. Asouzu, *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection: In and Beyond African Philosophy* (Calabar: University of Calabar Press, 2004), 273.

<sup>25</sup>Asouzu, *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection*, 273.

<sup>26</sup>Innocent I. Asouzu, "Complementary Ethics," *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* 2, no. 3 (2016): 109.

To foster a more comprehensive understanding of the principle and imperative of complementarity, there is a need to clarify certain salient concepts, namely, missing link, joy of being (*jide ka iji*), and limitation of being. Since 'missing link' shall be discussed elsewhere, this section shall consider only 'the joy of being' and 'the limitation of being.'

The notion of the *limitation of being* is derivable from the fact that being expresses itself as missing links in a relationship of complementarity. The fragmentation of being as missing links is an expression of limits whose actualization is dependent on the whole of being, which sets an ambience for complementarity between various limits, boundaries, identities, or missing links. Essentially, the limitation of being refers to the insufficiency of all missing links as existents who can transcend their limitation through complementarity within the framework of the whole.<sup>27</sup>

The *joy of being* cannot be meaningfully and fully articulated without a proper understanding of the limitations of being.<sup>28</sup> Within the context of the limitation of being as missing links '...the joy of being is experienced as the ultimate end determining, defining and driving all missing links of reality.'<sup>29</sup> The joy of being can be understood as that ultimate purpose which is the principle of the determination of all missing links as different identities, and also the principle that drives human action. Taking its implications further, the joy of being is the ultimate principle of the perfection and harmony of being. With these clarifications made above the stage is set for a proper understanding of the principle and imperative of complementarity. Although the concept of missing links is the missing piece yet to be investigated, what has been said suffices for understanding the notion of complementarity as founded on the principle and imperative of complementarity.

Complementary reflection as articulated by Asouzu is an approach to reality that emphasizes the unity of opposites and the harmony of fragments. It sets an ambience for understanding being in all its modes and self-expression in history, and in its essential complementary relationality, in a dynamic and future referential manner. It also emphasizes the fact that all the units/existents in being are in a mutually complementary relationship, which is necessary for their attunement with *being*, and their internal directedness towards the *joy of being*. Complementarity is the only condition for the joy, perfection, and harmony of being which appears to be the ultimate end of all existents in their limitations.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 308.

<sup>28</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 308.

<sup>29</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 307.

<sup>30</sup> Asouzu, *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection*, 47.

## BEINGS AS MISSING LINKS

The concept of *missing links* is unique to Asouzu and essential to his ontology. A good grasp of beings as *missing links* sets the proper stage for understanding Asouzu's theory of being. As promised in the previous section, the idea of beings as missing links will be discussed in this section as the final piece for understanding the necessary ambience for comprehending and articulating being in its essential relationality. The idea of 'missing link' was uniquely and originally developed by Innocent Asouzu in his attempt to define being (ens or ?v), when he said, '...being is that on account of which anything that exists serves a missing link of reality.'<sup>31</sup> His new complementary ontology essentially expresses itself as missing links of reality, which are in a mutually complementary relationship within the context of the whole. However, what then are missing links? Asouzu defines missing links as:

...diverse units that make up an entity within the framework of the whole and as they are complementarily related. They are all the imaginable, fragments, units, components, and combinations that enter into our understanding of any aspect of our world. They are also all the units and combinations necessary in the conceptualization of an entity or the whole. Thus, missing links are, for example, thoughts and the thoughts of thoughts. They are diverse modes of manifestation of being in history. They are categories and the categories of categories. They are the units and the units of units, entities and the entities of entities, things and the things of things. They are ideas and the ideas of ideas, etc. as these can be abstracted and related to each other as conditions of possibility of their perfectibility in a harmonious systemic manner.<sup>32</sup>

The emphasis here on the fragmentation of beings as missing links is hard to miss. This fragmentation is clearly emphasized by Asouzu in his claim that fragmentation is one of the transcendent categories of unity of consciousness.<sup>33</sup> In this vein, the proper way to understand Asouzu's missing links is in the sense of the fragmentation of beings into missing links which are necessarily in a complementary relationship within the context of the whole. At this point, it is hard to read Asouzu's discourse on missing links and not get the sense that identities or entities are legitimately grounded in being, by being parts or aspects of reality.

Missing links are insufficient in themselves, yet, find their joy in that insufficiency – “allow the limitations of being to be the cause of your joy.”<sup>34</sup> This is the proper path to true self-transcendence and authentic self-actualization. Without this interdependence that is the ground for growth/development and meaning, human

<sup>31</sup> Asouzu, “‘Ibuanyidanda’ and the Philosophy of Essence,” 103.

<sup>32</sup> Asouzu, *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection*, 277-278.

<sup>33</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 323.

<sup>34</sup> Asouzu, *The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection*, 273.

life would be meaningless. Beings as missing links express the condition for a true and meaningful existence, as all missing links, in kind and differences, participate in a mutually complementary relationship as they seek harmony in the whole or the joy of being.<sup>35</sup> In this vein, the concept of missing links shows the necessity of relations and context in speaking about beings.

However, missing links are not static but are in a dynamic process of integration, within the context of the whole. The future referentiality, historicity, and relativity of missing links set the compass for viewing its essential dynamism.<sup>36</sup> For the fact that being is conceived as that which has a head and tail-end (*ihe di, nwere isi na odu*), the multidimensionality of being in its dynamism is expressed.<sup>37</sup> The head which is *most important* and the tail-end which is *important* are in a dynamic complementary relationship, towards the joy of being. This is a type of levelled ontology that emphasizes every aspect of a being (essential and accidental qualities) at the level of individual entities and the level of the whole of reality.

#### THE NOETIC FOUNDATION AND PEDAGOGIC RELEVANCE OF IBUANYIDANDA ONTOLOGY

The principle of complementarity, outlined by Asouzu, is presented not only as an explanation for how reality works but also how the mind should work to be in harmony with the state of things. The emphasis is made by Asouzu that the practical relevance of the principles of complementarity depends on how it transforms the human mind to see reality as it truly is. In essence, the human mind must see the world in a complementary way to fully have that internal directedness towards the joy of being, in its essential relationality.<sup>38</sup> Asouzu believes most human problems arise due to the way we attend to reality or the type of mindset with which we view reality or issues at stake. If we do not appropriate our attention to seeing reality in its fundamental dynamism towards harmony or the joy of being, we would only disconnect ourselves from our legitimate ground, which is essential for our internal directedness toward the joy of being. A further consequence is that most of our human problems would remain unresolved. He called this complementary mindset in the Igbo language *obi/mmuo eziokwu* (harmonizing faculty). This mindset is responsible for the being and meaning of all human action and volition.<sup>39</sup>

What Asouzu is proposing here is that the human mind is essential to the way human action unfolds in human history. In other words, the way we attend to the world informs how we act in it. Furthermore, the way we see the world informs how we articulate it in ontology. Ontology fundamentally is a reflection of how we see the

<sup>35</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 267.

<sup>36</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 273-274.

<sup>37</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 273-274.

<sup>38</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 312-313.

<sup>39</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 313-314.

<sup>40</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 314.

<sup>41</sup> Asouzu, "Ibuanyidanda and the Philosophy of Essence," 108, 112.

world or the type of mindset with which we attend to the world.<sup>40</sup> This aligns with his criticism of Aristotelian substance metaphysics which is the product of an exclusivist, polarizing, and elitist mindset. Hence, the ultimate counsel is to re-train the mind to attend to reality in its intrinsic mutual complementary relationship of all missing links of reality. This is necessary if the mind would being-in-control of all its existential ambivalences (*ima-onwe-onye*).<sup>41</sup> Through this control and mindfulness of human ambivalence, human action would be better informed by a proper context. It is at this point that one can see Asouzu directing metaphysics to practical relevance. By articulating being in a way that emphasizes seeing being in its essential relationality, Asouzu's ontology reflects an enterprise of pedagogic relevance. Nevertheless, let's explore how his theory of being can be extrapolated in the domain of the one-many problem in Ontology. The next section will discuss this theme further.

### ASOUZU AND THE ONE-MANY PROBLEM IN ONTOLOGY

The one-many problem in Western thought finds its origin in the arguments of two ancient Greek philosophers, namely, Heraclitus and Parmenides. While Heraclitus claimed that Being is many and is characterized by endless activity, Parmenides claims Being is one and static (unchanging).<sup>42</sup> This raises the question, how is being one yet many simultaneously? For James Blachowicz the one-many problem started metaphysical discourse and reflections.<sup>43</sup> He also warns against taking metaphysical unity and diversity, discussed in the one-many problem, for numerical unity and diversity. The problem '...fundamentally was whether reality was one or many in kind; that is, it was the homogeneity or heterogeneity of physical reality that was the principal issue.'<sup>44</sup> It shall not be taken for granted that Asouzu intended to do ontology in the proper sense of what it means.<sup>45</sup> This means we ought to ask how he attends to and responds to the one-many problem within the *ibuanyidanda* ontology. One strategy utilized by Asouzu was avoiding defining being by recourse to any particular physical property as did the early Ionian philosophers; instead, he claimed that everything that exists in their kinds is fundamentally missing links in mutual complementary relationships.<sup>46</sup> This means that while he acknowledged that being is many, yet, they all serve missing links of reality without any real hierarchical formation.

Missing links should be understood as the fundamental function/purpose of beings in ensuring the joy/harmony of being. It lives out the structure and organization of beings in themselves, as these afford relationality. This approach to defining being as functions is unique to Asouzu and not the approach metaphysicians generally take.

<sup>42</sup>James Filler, *Heidegger, Neoplatonism and the History of Being: Relation as Ontological Ground* (Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2023), 19.

<sup>43</sup>James Blachowicz, *Essential Difference: Toward a Metaphysics of Emergence* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012), 17.

<sup>44</sup>Blachowicz, *Essential Difference*, 23.

<sup>45</sup>Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 251.

<sup>46</sup>Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 266-267.

However, is he justified in doing this, and does his approach answer the one-many problem? For Asouzu to answer the one-many problem, he needs to answer the questions: (a) what is the nature of difference? (b) Is difference essential to entities/things or is it just the manifestation of one thing? How about being more particular with our questions? Does anything cease to exist if everything is just a missing link? If 'being' is a 'missing link', 'non-being' is 'not being a missing link'. How then can one explain the fact that a human being who dies ceases to exist if despite his death he is still a missing link? It is adequate to think in this way since Asouzu gives being missing links as the only condition for anything to be, hence, things cease to exist only when they are no longer missing links, which he claimed was almost impossible.<sup>47</sup> This seems to be the same as saying nothing ever ceases to exist, hence, real change is an illusion. Asouzu does not say anything about what constitutes difference in being, he assumes differentiation and individuation to be the same thing.<sup>48</sup> For sure he is justified in postulating the relationality of being, however, he failed to respond to the one-many problem of being. This is because the mere definition of being as missing links (ultimate functions) does not explain how entities are structured or organized to be anything at all. This takes us back to emphasizing the pedagogic relevance of Asouzu's work; this is the real value of his work in ontology.

### THE PROBLEM OF GROUNDING BEING

If we take being to be fundamentally relational in a complementary way as Asouzu observed, then we are left with the inescapable ontological problem, 'Why is being essentially complementary?' What we get from Asouzu is that missing links are in mutual complementary relations because being is essentially relational. But this is just a circular argument and does not answer the why question. Let us remember that for Asouzu, '...being is that on account of which anything that exists serves a missing link of reality.'<sup>49</sup> This means that being is what makes relations possible. However, being as that which is bounded must be grounded or afforded by that which is beyond being. In this light, the one-many ontological interactions are before being since it is pure relations and the only condition for anything to be.

For more clarity let us go back to being. Being, as 'that which is' in its original denotation, is essentially bounded, determinate, and definite; which means that the ultimate explanation for being is beyond being, to the unbounded, indeterminate, and indefinite. That which is determinate and bounded should not be understood as that which is static.

As has been noted earlier, Asouzu does not respond to the one-many problem rather he assumes that things are different and the same in a fundamental way. The one-many problem is inseparable from the problem of grounding being; hence, it is only

<sup>47</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda*, 263-264.

<sup>49</sup> Asouzu, "Ibuanyidanda' and the Philosophy of Essence," 103.

natural that failing to investigate the one-many problem in being would lead to avoiding the question of grounding being entirely. To be able to answer the one-many problem, he ought to explain how being as intrinsically relational can express itself as entities that are essentially different, since if everything in being were integrated, there would not be multiplicity, intelligibility, and differences. In this scenario, one would not be able to differentiate between a book and a table, consciousness and intelligence would be impossible. Therefore, being needs to be grounded for it to effectively answer the one-many problem.

### **PURE RELATIONS AS THE GROUND OF BEING: TOWARDS THE METAPHYSICS OF AFFORDANCE**

Asouzu ought to provide the ground for relationality but he provided a framework for mutual interdependence and interconnectedness of different entities towards the joy of being. However, it is very pertinent to ground relationality on a sound ontological fitting. James Filler in his book, *Heidegger, Neoplatonism, and the History of Being: Relation as Ontological Ground*, attempted a rational reconstruction of the Neoplatonic tradition's postulation of the *One* as the ground of being. He proposed that the *One* of Plotinus should be viewed as pure relations. Filler asked the question, are relations prior to the relata or vice versa? One should take note that postulating the priority of relata over relations makes things necessarily independent. Following this observation, he outlined the consequences of postulating the priority of the relata over the relations:

If we understand relation as primarily grounded in the relata, and these relata are independently existing substances, then the notion of relationship itself becomes difficult. Where does the relation reside? It cannot reside in either entity independent of the other or else the other becomes an unnecessary participant in the relation. If that which gives rise to the relationship, whatever the relationship might be, resides in one particular entity, then no other entities are necessary for the relationship.<sup>50</sup>

This appears to be the move made by Aristotle. By postulating the priority of relata over relations he made things independent and raised the problem of the possibility of relationality. But if things are fundamentally relational and not isolated, the only option for an explanation is to postulate the priority of relations over relata. In essence, it is pure relations that ground being, and without which there would be nothing.<sup>51</sup> However, Filler believes we need to do more to justify the postulation of the priority of relation over relata. There is a need to attend to the philosophical problem that the ancient philosophers engaged within metaphysics, namely, the one-many problem:<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Filler, *Heidegger, Neoplatonism, and the History of Being*, 11-12.

<sup>51</sup>Filler, *Heidegger, Neoplatonism, and the History of Being*, 11-12.

<sup>52</sup>Filler, *Heidegger, Neoplatonism, and the History of Being*, 13.

Being cannot be a simple unity and neither can it be multiplicity without unity. The One cannot exist without the Many and the Many cannot be without the One. This entails that entities existing independently in themselves cannot be. One by itself cannot exist. But neither can two since two are simply two independently existing unrelated entities. Unless there is a relation between the two, which as we have seen must be a third element that does not arise from either of the two entities by itself, two independently existing entities are no different than a single independently existing entity, and so just as one cannot be many, neither can two (since two independent entities are ultimately no different than one entity). So true multiplicity only arises in the relation between two things, and thus, it is ultimately the case that to exist independently is to not exist at all.<sup>53</sup>

It is hard to miss the emphasis that it is the convergence of both unity and multiplicity that affords relationality and being. John Vervaeke has a unique way of postulating this, he says the relationality of being is manifest in the convergence of the phenomena of the one-ing and the many-ing simultaneously. In other words, emanation and emergence converge at the structural functional organization of a thing, and this essentially creates the affordance for relationality.<sup>54</sup> If we can say that being is fundamentally intelligible then we afford a relation among all of being, since intelligibility is fundamentally relational. The trajectory set by the postulation of the priority of pure relations as the ground of being appears to have a similar goal to Asouzu's complementary ontology, namely, to resolve the problems that arise due to a substance or essentialist metaphysics. However, there is a ground for contrast between Asouzu's complementary ontology and the ontology that postulates the relationality of the ground of being.

When Asouzu postulates being as missing links in mutual complementary relationship, he is not, claiming the priority of relations over relata, although we can see it as a move towards that kind of conclusion. Rather, Asouzu presents relations as between missing links and not ontologically prior to them. It is instructive to note that, for Asouzu being (relata) is that on which account of everything that exists serves a missing link of reality. However, from Filler's argument above it is clear that we cannot claim the relationality in being without grounding the relata in relations, or emphasizing the priority of relations to relata. Thus, unlike complementary

<sup>53</sup> Filler, *Heidegger, Neoplatonism, and the History of Being*, 13-14.

<sup>54</sup> John Vervaeke, Bishop Macimus and Archimandrite Patapios, "Emergence and Emanation," (Saint Photios Orthodox Theological Seminary Podcast, published July 31, 2023), accessed April 15, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guDd2MXvp2U&t=3047s&pp=ygUWZW1hbmF0aW9uIGFuZCB1bWFnZW5jZQ%3D%3D>.

<sup>55</sup> Don Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 11.

ontology, to postulate the ground of being as pure relations is to see the ground of being as that which affords the relationality in being.

Therefore, it is pure relations that afford relationality between and among entities and that open the possibilities for interaction, perception, or cognition. For example, a chair affords sitting, a door affords opening and closing, a keyboard affords typing, and a hill affords climbing or to slide.<sup>55</sup> Beings are not only missing links that are in service of mutual complementation towards totality, comprehensibility, and universality but they are the result of the affordances created by pure relations or the convergence of the 'one' and the 'many'. This underscores the fact that both the structure, organization and the functions of an entity converge to make that entity what it is and can become.

## CONCLUSION

The paper has demonstrated the fact that Asouzu's theory only answers one of the fundamental questions that inform ontology, while he fails to give an account of the second question. He was apt to articulate being from the horizon of interrelatedness, interconnectedness, and interdependence. This is because entities do not exist in isolation but as missing links that are in the service of complementation. This means that *to be* is to be a missing link. With this submission, Asouzu aptly answers what it means to be which he captures in the idea of Ibuanyidanda and its principles of Complementarity.

However, the question of the one-many problem he was absent in this regard. Therefore, to harness the explanatory efficacy of Asouzu's theory there is a need to extend his theory to capture the complexity and complications that this problem poses to philosophers. This entails that if relationality is what characterizes what it means *to be*, then what affords relationality? This paper proposes pure relations as the one that affords relationality. Pure relations are not exclusive from relationality, it is only prior to it. This is because the structure, organization and function of an entity are in mutual service of complementation which affords them to relate with other entities.

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