

THE DIALECTICS OF ZENO'S DENIAL OF CHANGE AND ITS COMPATIBILITY WITH AN AFRICAN (ANNAN) THOUGHT SYSTEM

Inameti Lawrence UdoPh.D
Department of Philosophy
Akwalbom State University

Email: inametiudo@aksu.edu.ng & inamsifon2004@yahoo.com
Phone No. 08069007369

Abstract

The focus of this paper is to examine Zeno's denial of change in reality and its compatibility with Annan thought system. This will be done using myth being one of Africa's epistemological tools. Zeno in a bid to defend his master Parmenides against Heraclitus and Pythagoras credos on the possibility of motion/change upheld the thesis of motionless reality through his paradoxes some of which include; the paradoxes of dichotomy, Achilles and the tortoise, the flying arrow and the stadium among others. What was Zeno and by extension the Eleatic Philosophers understanding of change to warrant such conclusion? Can his denial of change/motion be found in African cultures especially Annan thought system? How can we reconcile his thesis with the common sense experience of reality characterized by motion/change? An attempt to address these questions makes this study relevant to scholarship as it intends to further debunk some Western scholar's conception that there is no African philosophy. The paper employs expository, library research and analytic methods of discourse. In its analysis of Zeno's understanding of change as an illusion, the paper argues that his position though contrary to common sense experience is not peculiar to the West, but also evident in Annan thought system as epitomized in some of their proverbs/wise sayings. The paper mentions such proverbs as "ekpuho se ekpuhoagwoikpuhokemfi, "AgwoisibenneitieakpaninnoUdo" "Agwoisinuke Alana eched" "Akpoisikpahakeetokilung yak ebenekaaekailungekebuk" etc as some of the epistemological tools through which Annan demonstrate their denial of change in line with Zeno's thought.

Keywords: Dialectics, Motion, Change, Annan Thought System, African Philosophy

Introduction

The question of whether there is African philosophy depending on how it is being handled might have importance for research into the ultimate reality and meaning of African philosophy of a meta-type (Ijiomah75). In the view of Lucius Outlaw, this question arose as a consequence of a 'Western construct' which suggests that the rationality for doing philosophy is a prerogative of the West (9-44). "Though there has been a withdrawal attitude from such a debate in recent times, yet some historical facts

still show that such a conclusion was hitherto held sway” (Udo 228). This made Ijiomah to opine that:

Despite these caveats what is expected of African philosophers is that they cautiously appraise the kernel of the agenda of the various perspectives in philosophy in order to know how these affect Africans. This can be done directly by analyzing the direction of those intellectual currents or indirectly by conceptualizing topical issues in and about Africa. The second method can be seen as an exercise representing a deconstruction of the Western construction mentioned above (75).

This paper therefore intends to contribute to this deconstruction project first by stating that since man by nature is seen as a rational being (Africans inclusive), to deny him rationality (philosophy) amounts to epistemic pride and discrimination; though this discriminatory attitude is not new especially in matters of social and human relations. As rightly observed by Udoh and Udo, “The world is tied and fed up with the unnecessary discrimination and criminalizing others because of indigenous knowledge system that may not obey the so call scientific processes...” (34). Secondly, the study will excavate the primary cause of such construct as “any discussion on causation is of far-reaching interest to the Philosopher” (Udoh&Udo 32). But most importantly, since this is an issue of sceptical challenge, it needs to be responded to because “...scepticism is not only an indispensable part of epistemology; but that of African philosophy as well, as it gave impetus to scholars to search, discover, articulate and systematize what is today known as African thought system (Philosophy)” (229). It was on the basis of this that Okolo defines African philosophy as; “A path to a systematic and coherent discovery and disclosure of the African in his world of reality; it concerns itself with the history, value etc and the significance these have for him” (10-11). The above view by Okolo in the words of Ijiomah opens up among other things epistemological and metaphysical questions about the traditional African and his world of realities (75). He is expected then to respond to this challenge through a critical reflection on his environment. Oladipo collaborated this view when he said that “the real problem now is about finding ways to make works by African philosophers relevant to the perspective needs and interest of the African society” (13). This is exactly the crux of this research as it attempts to unravel the compatibility of Zeno's thesis of changeless/ motionless reality with an African (Annan) thought system. Such exploration will be done using the mythical tool of proverbs/wise sayings which according to Udondata as quoted by Umoh are;

The refined wisdom of a given people historically (our emphasis) derived over a period of time as a result of observed everyday experiences and interactions involving man, animal, nature and other socio-natural experiences. They are normally short and pithy sayings used to state metaphorically, general truths and realities about all aspects of life (V).

Thus, some Proverbs in *Annan* such as *asagwoisikpahakeetokilung yak ebenekebukke ekailung*, which means that corpse cannot be taken from a small community to a big one for burial simply because he or she came from a small community and

AgwoisiyakaitieAkpaninnoUdo, meaning nobody can exchange the first son's birth right with that of the second son (the first son is always the first son and he is entitled to his rights and privileges no matter his condition), *Agwoisinuke Alana eched* meaning the ancestral boundaries cannot and should not be changed or altered etc connotes the denial of change in within *Anaan* traditional society. This is where Zeno's nullity of motion and by implication change is evident. However, in order to have a clear compass for our research, the notion of motion as change in both Western and African traditions need to be briefly explicated.

A Brief Background to the Concept of change in Western Philosophy

The notion of change (motion) in Philosophy dates back to the ancient period of Western thought as well as the development of science in modern period. It has attracted arguments and counter arguments from ancient time to the contemporary period. While some Philosophers denied change on the ground of absolutism, others settle for the relativity of motion and time; others still see motion as an inherent property of matter characterized by force. But “the relativity of time disturbs the human mind because it contradicts her intuition” (Udo and Archibong 34). Be that as it may, Philosophers of the ancient period accorded enormous consideration to the concept of motion in their bid to unravel what they respectively thought to be the basic substance of the universe. Their theorizations were an attempt to answer the question-*ex qua material constituti mundi* (out of what material is the world constituted?). Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes belong to this fold. Heraclitus stands conspicuous in this aspect too by maintaining that change/motion underlies the nature of the cosmos. For him, all things are in perpetual flux. Consequently, he shifted the compass of philosophizing from describing what things consist of to a new problem namely that of change which became central in Ephesian Philosophy. Other ancient Philosophers like Empedocles, Anaxagoras, the Atomists, Aristotle, Pythagoras etc upheld the reality of change/motion in reality which occurs within space and time with its different complexities and conceptions. This is the reason Udo and Archibong rightly noted that, “The tricky nature of time has been one of the major problems of philosophy alongside its existence” (34).

However, some of the Eleatic Philosophers in contra-position to other pre-socratic Philosophers relegated motion to the realm of deception, illusion and absurdity. For instance, Parmenides of Elea (515-450BC), through one of his Poems titled “On Nature” elucidated that change was simply an illusion of the senses. According to Chris Akpan “Parmenides' starting point is that what we see in experience as change is mere optical illusion, and more so, what we experience as diversity or plurality of entities is also illusionary; for in reality existence is one” (62). The only true being for Parmenides was the 'one' which was infinite and indivisible anchored on his basic principle of “Being is' and 'non being is not'. What the latter implies is that if being itself were to change, it would become something different. In other word, being does not change because whatever comes or arises from being already is; hence there is no becoming. Reality is uncreated, indestructible and motionless, thereby making change impossible.

The above position of Parmenides which explains the Eleatic understanding of change/motion attracted a lot of criticisms, especially from the Pythagoreans thereby giving birth to Zeno's Philosophy. Zeno aligned his idea with that of his master Parmenides that reality is changeless and postulated so many ingenious arguments through his paradoxes to justify his convictions. It is normally said that every philosophical idea is always motivated by the need to address certain problems that affect man and the society. For instance, "the classical utilitarians were motivated by the desire to reform the society by changing corrupt laws and social practices" (Udofia and Udo 56). Similarly, "some actions are born out of and premised on the conditionalities of utility, consequence, inclination or incentive" (58). For the Utilitarians, "this led to their proposition of the principles of utilitarianism which became the ideological foundation of the reform movement instituted by them later christened as 'Philosophical radicalism' which had the aim of testing all institutions and policies by the principle of utility" (56). In Zeno's case the popular opinion by scholars is that his objective was to defend his master Parmenides on the thesis of motionless cum changeless reality. Zeno reasoned that if number constitutes the substance of existing things and cause reality, invariably motion (change) is an illusion because moving from one point to another requires reaching the half way of the point and this process goes on ad infinitum. Jonathan Barnes summarized Zeno's argument thus; "Zeno avers that, if anything moves it certainly performs many tasks infinitely. Secondly, it is impossible that something can perform many asks infinitely, in a finite time, hence nothing moves" (269).

A cursory scrutiny of the logic which underlies his methodology reveals that his idea of the illusion of motion is founded on the supposed infinite divisibility of space, time and distance which a runner has to traverse before motion is authenticated and absolutism. Critically speaking, if as a matter of fact, Zeno's postulations are accepted, it would shake the very foundation of our existence. In addition, his paradoxes show the insufficiency and incapacity of the senses to grasp the true nature of things. They make evident the difficulty of empirically comprehending and explaining metaphysical notions such as motion/change.

The Concept of Change (Motion) in *Annan* Traditional Society

For a traditional *Annan* person, change/motion is an evident feature of the universe. A person moves from one place to another; a man comes into existence and passes away; plants grow and wither away; a person grows from childhood to adulthood with many physiological changes etc. Again, an African (*Annan*) man also conceives change (motion) physiologically in the structural and developmental transformations in the society, migration patterns of African societies as shown in history, the 'passing on' of a person to the great beyond which involves a transition from the physical to the spiritual realm, the belief in reincarnation among others. These perspectives portray that things change in place or position, quality and quantity. Hence there is a wise saying to the effect that *adakakeejoagwo*, *adakeejoagwo*, or *Etokebot aka ikponikpa*. The former means life is a passage from one generation to another, one generation goes, and another generation

comes and the later literally means that the young shall grow (change) from infancy to adulthood. This understanding is in line with Aristotle's definition of motion/change as “change in qualities as in alteration; in quantities as in argumentation and diminishing or change of place as in local motion or a change in substantial form as in generation” (208a 31). Ideally, the Aristotelian definition gives a clear picture of what *Annan* people understand as motion/change which is the characteristic feature of the universe and a permanent feature of man's life. In African traditional societies the concepts of change (motion), space and time are intertwined. It is believed that whatever changes (moves), changes in space and is measured in time. This is the idea that encapsulates most of their experiences and defines their cosmology.

The Denial of Change (motion) in *Annan* Thought System

The rational question at this juncture would be, at what point then do African (*Annan*) deny change judging from the above exposition? To attempt this question, we will make recourse to one of the epistemological tools with which Africans come to relate with their realities namely myth. According to Mbiti, “a traditional African comes to know and hence deal with his world of realities through myth and religion”(31). It was Onunwa who added 'reason' to it (249-260). However, our focus is on the mythical tool and how it leads to the denial of change in the explanation of certain realities within *Annan* community of south south Nigeria. Myth as one of the Africa's epistemological tools according to Ijiomahis of two kinds: open and closed narratives. While an open narrative is a straightforward story, a closed one is a story reduced to a kernel of wisdom (82). Proverbs and wise sayings fall within the latter basically as principles of explanation where the idea of denial of change in *Annan* worldview can be deduced. These proverbs are often used to establish truth where justice is about to be perverted or there is a perceived infringement on the rights of citizen(s). This becomes necessary because as Udo and Inua rightly noted “when infringement occurs, it is not only injurious to the sanctity of the rights of citizens, but called to question the basis of social contract as a foundation of political relationship” (21). Commenting further on the danger of such happening, the authors maintained that “it can lead to arbitrariness, a near recourse to the Hobbesian state of nature (our emphasis) where lawlessness and irresponsiveness on the part of the constituted authority hold sway”(21).

Among the *Annan*, it is traditionally believe that there are certain realities that cannot and should not be changed or altered and this understanding is often expressed mostly through proverbs and wise sayings. Any attempt at such alteration will be visited with severe sanction from either the gods or the community. At this point the cognitive mind of the aboriginal African (*Annan*), especially elders of the community is believed to operates mythically in its attempt to interpret the realities in the environment in search for truth and justice. Little wonder Momo avers that the use of myth in traditional Africa was to explain and to understand the wonders in the indigenous man's environment (155). It is in this sense that the *Annan* people always say that *ufiedadeinungmmmentuenedaha eta ikoAnnan*,; meaning that proverbs are the mechanisms used to analyse, digest,

understand, instruct and summarize *Anaan* ideas/words. They serve as ingredients in *Annan* rhetoric as popular speeches are often wrapped in proverbs drawn from day-to-day observances and experiences in the cultural milieu of the people. Let us at this point give some example of these proverbs (in addition to the ones already mentioned in this paper) in order to excavate their epistemological cum metaphysical implications in relation to the denial of change in certain realities in an African (*Anaan*) worldview as follow:

- (a) *Agwoisinukealangaeched*: No one is permitted to shift or change ancestral boundaries; meaning that no one is permitted to change ancestral principles, laws and values that were laid down by our forefathers for the purpose of justice and development in the community.
- (b) *AgwoisibenneitieAkpaninnoUdo*: Nobody is allowed to exchange the first son birth right with the second. *Akpanadakeitieakpan*: The first son is and must remain the first son no matter the circumstances.
- (c) *Ukodinaamainona afire anyenkennaad*: No matter how intoxicated, a thief never forgets stealing. In other word no amount of intoxication can make him to change from his stealing habit. A thief is always a thief. A follow up to that is the saying: *Etukanyenenoinno item, asukannamakere idem ammo*: No matter the advise you give to a thief, he can never change (refrain) from stealing.
- (d) *Egiedatukanyenakponesimadensek*: Notwithstanding the flamboyant rabbit tail, it still remain a young animal. It does not change.
- (e) *Elim atukanyenabonatidod, ibooghoidod*: Despite being continuously washed by rain, bitter leaves never lose (change) their bitter taste.
- (f) *Akpanikoasedake idem*: Truth is always self-evident, it stands on its own; it does not change neither can it be twisted nor altered.
- (g) *Ayenukumasetikpeukum, ayennsukakaraatikpensukakara*. Again, *isideheEkpeumanafoabietebot*. *Ukumand nsukakara* are trees and it is a common knowledge that each of them cannot change from what it is as it grows.

It should be noted that these mythical/epistemological tools can be used for different explanatory purposes, religiously and rationally without compromising their underlying meaning namely; that change in certain phenomena is impossible.

Conclusion

We have analyzed Zeno's thesis of motionless/changeless reality through his different paradoxes. We have also posited the mythical tool(Proverbs) as one of the epistemological tools in African (*Annan*) thought system where the denial of change is always demonstrated. In terms of similarity we have gathered that the denial of real change in reality is not peculiar to the West, but also evident in African (*Annan*) worldview through the phenomenon of proverbs. The difference lies in the fact that *Annan* people unlike Zeno only deny change in certain phenomena like issues of birth right,

attitude, identity, ancestral boundaries etc as demonstrated in the above proverbs and the like. While Zeno's denial of change (motion) is epitomized through his paradoxes, that of *Annan* is demonstrated through proverbs/wise sayings. This suggests that by denying African rationality the early anthropologists who visited Africa and some present philosophers have misconstrued and still misconstrue traditional African cognitive process and hence have misinterpreted or continue to misinterpret her epistemology (Ijiomah 85 emphasis mine). This is why Mbuy acknowledged Paul Claudel who said that to know a man and his philosophy, one must be born into his life (7). It therefore means that as long as one is ignorant of a traditional African cognitive system, one's judgement or conclusion about it will be in error. The mythical/epistemological tools (proverbs) in *Annan* society are highly philosophical and remain one of the ways a traditional African (Annan) man reacts to his world. The underlying meaning of some of them reveals the denial of change in line with Zeno's thought. Lastly, though Zeno's logic is difficult to understand by virtue of his denial of our common sense view that the world exhibits change (motion) and multiplicity, his idea remains of great significant for mathematics, science and African (Annan) philosophy especially in the areas of research and epistemology.

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