

An Appraisal of Parmenides Notion of Being in Understanding African Person

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Abstract

This paper is an appraisal of Parmenides' notion of being in understanding the African notion of personhood. The concept of personhood is a central debate in African philosophy. This has led to two major camps on what constitutes a person. On the one hand, the liberal school conceives personhood from de-emphasizing the role of social relationships. On the other hand, the communitarian school accentuates the role of social relationships in accounting for personhood. In view of this divide, this paper examines the idea of personhood within the theoretical framework of Parmenides' notion of being. This is to ascertain the possibility of an onto-praxeological conception of the African notion of human person. In order to achieve this objective, the paper, using the method of textual analysis, presents Parmenides' notion of being and the African notion of person in order to work out an onto-praxeological notion of personhood. The paper discovers that the immensity of being cannot be exhausted by mere conceptualisation, but in addition through social relationship. The combination of conceptualisation of being and relationship make the realisation of onto-praxeological notion of personhood possible.

Keywords: Parmenides, Personhood, Being, communitarian, auto-praxeological

Introduction

The concept of person or personhood has drawn the attention of a great many scholars in African philosophy, inevitably a diverse volume of literature (Didier, 332). This is a testament to the philosophical cum anthropological visions of what is now commonly called by scholars as systematic African philosophy. Traditionally, the debates in African philosophy regarding the idea of personhood qua personal identity draw their influence from the debates between liberals and communitarians in the Western philosophy tradition (Motsamai, 3). Liberals tend to conceive personhood in a way that de-emphasizes the role of social relationships; while the communitarians tend to accentuate the role of social relationships in accounting for personal identity (Motsamai, 3). More so, the presentation of Africa concept of person accredited as communitarian is also considered as diametrical to the Western concept of a person that is characteristically individualistic (Umeh, 47). In this direction, there is an emerging and telling novelty in the understanding of African notion of person, which is the proposal that forms the topic of this paper: An Appraisal of Parmenides Notion of Being in Understanding African person. In other words, it is the consideration of the African concept of a person from an onto-praxeological dimension. The ontological motif for this paper is the one of the foremost discourses of Being articulated by Parmenides and the ensuing appraisal and criticism of his doctrine.

From the foregoing, this paper does not intend to introduce a new understanding in content of the already established African notion of person. Rather, it proposes a new method or approach through which we can understand from an onto-praxeological dimension the African notion of human person. In order to achieve this objective, the paper presents Parmenides' doctrine of being. In addition, it considers scholarly interpretations of what Parmenides' notion of being is all about. Furthermore, it attempts a critical appraisal of Parmenides theory of being. This is then followed by the presentation of the African notion of person. Finally, the paper shows how Parmenides' doctrine of being is amendable to understanding the African notion of person.

Parmenides' Notion of Being

Parmenides was born into an illustrious family in 510 BC at Elea, a city on the Western coast of Italy. The date of his birth is a matter of historical dispute. He is the initiator of the philosophy school called Eleatic School of Philosophy. This philosophical school rejected the most abundant experience of change and regarded it as illusory. He lived an exemplary life, and his lifestyle was influential that people spoke about “the Parmenidean way of life” (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy). He died probably about 450BC.

An obvious task in this novel proposal is the Parmenidean notion of being, it lurks around the question on how Parmenides unveils being as the fundamental principle? To offer a proper response to this question, one must walk (metaphorically) alongside Parmenides on the path of truth (*aletheia*) and be accompanied by sunmaidens on a chariot to the palace of the goddess. Parmenides wrote in an unusual manner, especially in the style of Hesiod (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy). In Fragment B6, on Being as the fundamental principle, Parmenides writes thus:

It is necessary to say and think that being is. Indeed, being is, and nothingness is not; I exhort you to consider these things. Therefore, I keep you far away from the first way of research, as likewise from the way on which mortals who know nothing err, people with two heads. Really, it is the uncertainty in their bosoms which directs their mistaken minds (Composta, 56).

In fragment B8, he further writes that “only one way remains for the discourse that being is” (Composta, 57). Commenting on the Parmenidean entitative creed, Frederick Copleston maintained that Parmenides' doctrine in brief is, to effect that Being, the one is, and that Becoming, change, is illusion. For if anything comes to be, then, it comes either out of being or out of not-being (48).

The idea of being in Parmenides is not drawn logically through a deductive or an inductive inference. For if being were to be either deductively or inductively inferred, then it follows that it is derived from a principle other than being itself. If this is the case, then, there is change in being. Intuition helps us to know that being is and not-being is not. One can say, therefore, that Parmenides is the first philosopher, who many years before Descartes and others like Bergson, to make Intuition part of his philosophy.

In Fragment B5, we find the pre-emptory statement: “Being and thought are the same thing” (Composta, 57). From this statement, he does not make a separation of being as it is actually from being mentally. This suggests that Being in Parmenides is pantheistic without any indistinguishable properties in thought and speech. Hence, being is one. Culturally, during Parmenides time, there was no idea of creation in Greece. Every existing thing has been uncreated in a sense or reducible to an imaginary phenomenon. To address the problem of fundamental principle, Parmenides posits that being is uncreated. To suggest that being is created means that being is not the origin (arche) or the most fundamental principle. Even if we are to accede that being was not the original phenomenon, then, we have to accept that it either comes from being, or it comes from not-being. If it comes from being, then, it proceeds from being and has always been, it is being itself uncreated. If it comes from not-being, then, it is nothing and cannot be because nothing comes from nothing (Copleston, 48).

Walter Terence Stace on Parmenides doctrine of being, writes that being which is for him the ultimate reality, occupies space, is finite, and is spherical or globe-shape. Now that which occupies space and has space is matter (46). This certainly gives us the scientific definition of matter. One might from this brief exposition tend to infer wrongly that Parmenidean being is immaterial. However, given his culture and the philosophical climate of his time, we can conclusively state that being was material in every sense for Parmenides.

Appraisal of Parmenides Notion of Being

Most philosophers claim that the philosophy of Parmenides, which contains his notion of being, is absolute monism. It is almost identical to the monism of the Dutch philosopher, Baruch de Spinoza. However, there are reservations on the usage of this term, his system cannot be reduced to absolute monism because there is no reductionism in his philosophical system. Parmenides philosophy of being has received an unequal force of positive and negative criticisms. His philosophy is refreshingly enriching, germane, and almost unbelievable to be disregarded due to the conclusions it provides.

We can begin our appraisal positively with the evaluation of Williams Lawhead. He writes thus:

“In spite of their problems, we must not overlook the Eleatics' positive contributions: (1) They were the first to reflect on the logical implications of words and concepts. (2) They had the courage to follow their assumptions to their logical conclusions, even though they seemed counterintuitive. Science cannot advance unless people are willing to forsake the obvious, the immediate, and the commonsensical. (3) They were very influential, even if in a negative way. The rigour of Parmenides's arguments forced Plato and Aristotle to wrestle with them to lay these problems to rest (23).

Parmenides also showed the logical conclusion of his philosophical position (this does not imply that being is inferred in a logical fashion). One can argue of logical coherence and adherence in his

system, in that the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises that being is and not-being is not. Hence, one can agree with Armstrong as Ozumba and Ukah stated in their work thus:

The most striking thing about Parmenides is that he is the first Greek philosopher who reasons. This is because earlier thinkers made no attempt to base their picture of the universe upon logical reasoning or to defend it by rational argument (28).

It can be argued that his system is philosophically sound because of his emphasis on unity in being. For this philosopher, being is unity. There is no contradiction in being. Contradiction or disunity destroys the delicate unified coherence in being. And it is unacceptable. Parmenides philosophy raised our intellect to question the human experiences of change and motion. These experiences are so given as ready-at-hand that we may oftentimes neglect to account for their possibility. He showed ingenuity in trying to come to terms with the non-intelligibility of change and motion. A conclusion we are not constrained to adopting philosophically.

In the model of act and reaction understanding of philosophy, his philosophical position has a direct influence on Plato's theory of the Forms. The Platonic Forms have the details characteristics of being propounded by Parmenides [with the exception of the material nature of being]. Plato was to accept that change and motion were not the motives and foundations of intelligibility. While Aristotle incorporated both the being of Parmenides and the becoming of Heraclitus in his notion of matter and form. The former inspired the determining element in being through form, and the latter the determinable component as a matter. Hence, one can conform with the assertion that “the logic of Parmenides is the starting point of Platonic dialectic, Aristotelian syllogism and the whole foundation of Western reasoning” (Ozumba and Ukah, 28).

The issue with the philosophy of Parmenides lies in his negation of change and motion. Krapeic refers to motion as the most basic and obvious phenomenon in the world (231). The Pythagoreans ridiculed his philosophy for the denial of points and change. This led his disciple, Zeno, to defend the doctrine of his master vigorously. Zeno's dialectical arguments as Composta would refer to them are famous for the denial of change and motion. “The 'matter' of our physical textbooks is just the real of Parmenides; and, unless we can find room for something else than matter, we are shut up into his account of reality. No subsequent system could afford to ignore this, but of course, it was impossible to acquiesce permanently in a doctrine like that of Parmenides. It deprives the world we know of all claim to existence and reduces it to something that is hardly even an illusion” (Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy).

Interpretations of the Parmenides' Notion of Being

The precepts on being announced by Parmenides are remarkably outstanding. The implications of his conclusion urge us to find new meanings and propose particularly new interpretations of his philosophical system and to provide answers to the problems they pose. We cannot diminish the

importance of interpretation in philosophy. Historically, it is pertinent to begin with the Platonic and Aristotelian interpretations. According to Dario Composta:

Parmenides' being is a transcendent concept with various meanings: substance, quality, quantity, place, etc. Hence, I say that the dog "is.", that the dog-kennel "is", and that the size of the dog "is". Substance, quality, place, quantity, etc., are modes of being. Being is a concept which "is spoken in many ways" (54).

Plotinus, the hero of the Neo-Platonic system, offers a mystical explanation. He equated the Being, the One, of Parmenides as the Unum, god of Xenophanes (Composta, 53). This suggests that the Neo-Platonists furthered the Parmenidean doctrine of being through the Platonic Forms by placing one over and above being. The idealistic exposition by philosophers like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Julius Stenzel, regard to be in Parmenides as the product of thought, suggesting that to think is the same as to be (Composta, 53). As already noted that strictly speaking that the Parmenidean notion of being can be materialistically interpreted, this materialistic interpretation was advanced by Theodor Gomperz, Paul Tannery and William Keith Chambers Guthrie by arguing that "being is the sum of material bodies, almost like Spinoza's Substantia" (Composta, 53-54).

Furthermore, Martin Heidegger spearheaded the metaphysical interpretation through his agenda of rediscovering the lost sense of being. In his opinion, the question of being "has today been forgotten – although our time considers itself progressive in again affirming "metaphysics." All the same we believe that we are spared the exertion of rekindling ... a Battle of Giants concerning Being" (1). This suggests why he started his *Introduction to Metaphysics* with the question: "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" (1) This is because for him the question of being is the broadest, the deepest and the most original existential question in the world (2). The logical interpretation maintains that "Parmenides' being is only the copula of a proposition. No being exists before the predication, and hence before grammar and logic. Grammatically, the verb "is" ... is the mental function through which the mind, through particular judgements, unifies bodies' properties" (Composta, 54).

Interpretations of philosophical doctrines are not without evaluations in content and form. It is pertinent to state that this paper impels us to put forward a new interpretation. This interpretation is a proximate goal towards enriching our understanding of the African concept of person. The paper proposes that being in the Parmenidean sense is unity. Being is unity. When Parmenides, as Copleston narrates, gives an account of being, he uses one almost as a synonym of being. The one which is an appellation of being is not of mathematical nature. For, if one (unity) was mathematical or numerical, then there is a procession out of being in terms of change as the Pythagoreans would adduce. We could glean support to maintain that One is not of mathematical nature from the mystical interpretation suggested by the Neo-Platonists that "... understood Parmenides' being to be Xenophanes' Unum, god" (Composta, 53). This paper frowns at a mystical interpretation, but

maintains through this reference that one is not of mathematical nature in Parmenides. He was totally against the Pythagoreans' points and shapes as explanation (*aitia*) of the universe.

The unity that is attributed to being, is unity of ontological and transcendental nature. In the opinion of John Noonan “transcendental unity ... is an attribute of being by which it is undivided in itself and divided from all other beings” (Noonan, 106). The transcendental unity or One corresponds to the idea of Parmenides that being is and not-being is not. This suggests that being cannot be non-being or within being there is no contradiction of non-being. Being is unity means the negation of disunity (which we express as non-being in a qualified sense). Whatever distorts the integral nature of being, is disunity. The negation of being implies indivisibility of being. This indivisibility in being is of paramount necessity for the understanding of the Parmenidean notion of being. To further establish that being is unity, Copleston questioned: “Why does Parmenides say that “It” is complete, i.e., one reality, which cannot be added to? Because if it is not one but divided, then it must be divided by something other than itself. But being cannot be divided by something other than itself, for besides being there is nothing” (50). This testimony of Copleston proves the point that being is essentially unity. One can then argue that being as unity means that being is complete.

How can the relationship between being and unity be described? Is it something added? Or are they convertible? The relationship of being and unity means that “being and unity are convertible and that everything that is one or a unit is a being” (Noonan, 108). In addressing the nature of relation between being and one, Copleston opines for Parmenides that nothing can be added to being, because if anything should be added to being, the added would itself be being (50). We, however, differ in a certain sense from Parmenides when we maintain that being is unity. We do not deny the existence of plurality or multiplicity. Being is unity, does not mean the exclusion of plurality or multiplicity but their incorporation in unity.

African Understanding of Person

To have a grasp of an African understanding of person, one should do a background check to know the why of its articulation. Paul Nnodim gives a situation response for an African understanding of person:

The Pan-African intellectualism and political movements of the colonial era, whose major goal was to decolonize the African mind, required the creation of counter-images to the European conception of person. Consequently, the Pan-African project consciously eschewed Eurocentric, egological retifications in the discussion of African identities, while re-defining differences in a positive sense. Accordingly, African philosophers writing about the conception of person during the colonial era had to distance themselves from Western liberal individualism (80-81).

In the same sense, one can say as Nwachukwu attested that, “this critique should be understood from the scholarly reaction to the indoctrinated system that is pervasive and at the same time incompatible

to the African culture and world-view” (24). We cannot exhaust the immensity and uniqueness of African person through conceptualisation. However, it remains one of the ways to know and to give perspective to African reality. Umeh succinctly explains that in African worldview, human person is not exclusively considered as self-subsistent being, but as a being in solidarity (48). Nwachukwu is of the same opinion, when he described a person as a being in solidarity with others; a being in communion, in fellowship and in need of others (25).

African concept of person entails implicitly a critique of Western colonial image of personhood that is characteristically individualistic. African concept of person swings dialectically between the individual who aspires for personhood and the community laden values associated with African Culture. This suggests that Personhood in Africa is not a given but an acquired. In this sense, personhood as Ifeanyi Menkiti described is the “movement of the individual human child into full personhood, and beyond, as essentially a journey from an it to an it” (326). The phrase from an “it to it” movement may seem vague. Menkiti, however, offers elaborate explanation to show what he meant. “The so-called “ontological progression” begins at birth with the child basically considered an “it” – essentially an individual without individuality, without personality, and without a name” (326). This statement explains the first it. More so, it explains fundamentally the criterion of change as a manifold reality in the acquisition of person. Menkiti called this an ontological progression. We cannot like Parmenides negate the reality of change in the bid to explain African concept of person. The Western concept of person, in the thought of Richard of St. Victor speaks of person from the viewpoints of incommunicability and singularity of existence (Umeh, 47). Menkiti further explained the second “it” from the first “it” thus: “I have maintained that the movement that anchors the metaphysical situation of person is a movement from an it to it, with the depersonalized reference which marks the beginning of existence also making the very end” (327).

Additionally, it can be argued that acquisition of person in Africa is through a relationship or solidarity. This relationship as explained by Anthony-Clarette Nwachukwu is of two folds: a relationship with the Divine and with fellow human beings (26). The relationship with fellow human beings is manifested in the community. Thus, “African personhood is not dependent on a discontinuous casual meeting among persons without bonds” (Nwachukwu, 27). It is not being in any kind of relationship or in quasi-relationship with one another, but it is being in cordial solidaritative relationship with the entire community, in which every individual is emancipated. (Umeh, 51). This solidarity is made manifest in community-based relationships in African, which include among others family, marriage (Umeh, 56-60; Nwachukwu, 33-36). Solidarity is that concrete expression of transcendental unity. It begins from an individual who is in solidarity with himself, transcends himself through a relationship with others who are members of a community.

So far, the dialectical nature of the African person has been shown to include an individual who

aspires for personhood and the intervening community which is the baston of unity. An individual, a being is a unit i.e. a composite being who identifies himself with a community without the contradiction of individualism, non-identification with the community and primacy of self over the community.

Parmenides Notion of Being and the African Notion of Person

The Parmenidean notion of being helps us to have a deeper understanding of the African concept of person. Hence, we can appreciate the existential value of an African person. We make an existential judgement that an African person is. The copula “is” denotes existence. An African person is, in the measure in which he is in solidarity with the community. The existence of an individual as a person is not tied to himself but is in respect to the relationship with the community. If an African person is through his identification and solidarity with the community which enable his acquisition of personhood, what then is his existential status when he is a non-person? It seems that one is faced with a double valued criterion of existence: an existence as person and the existence as non-person (without the status as person).

Philosophically, one cannot accept a double valued notion of existence. This paradox can be solved when one accepts the bold statement of Menkiti that the journey from an it to it begins from birth and moves beyond the natal stage – from birth already, a non-person had already begun the process that moves continuously through solidarity with the community. Therefore, even when an individual is a non-person, he does not have an existence that is different from his existing later as a person in African context. One can then proceed to the next existential judgement that a non-person is not. It is difficult to find in any text the term non-person in the vast literature about person. Do we actually have non-person? Is the non-person different from a non-person in the process of becoming or acquiring personhood? From the judgement about the African person, a non-person is any individual whose existence cannot be referenced in terms of the community. The not-being of Parmenides equals to nothingness, but the non-person in African understanding of person entails not nothingness, but not belongingness or not identifiability to a community.

The existential value implies that an African person exists and his existence is in his identification to the community. Therefore, the beingness of an African person is that ontological progression, the movement of it to it, through which the individual acquires personhood through acquisition of normative values from the community. From this analysis, there is a difference in the metaphysical criteria for personhood. This is in the affirmation of immobility and change, which is not an attribute of being in Parmenides. The African person has an ontological openness, which continues in solidarity with others made manifest in the community. Hence, we can speak from the novel interpretation of Parmenides being of an “ontological communicability.” There is also the realization of change in a person who strives for the attainment of person. Menkiti points out this change when

he clarifies that in order to be a person, there is an ontological progression that begins at birth and moves beyond birth (326). This ontological progression does not in any way contradict the metaphysical unity in a person. It shows that change as an obvious phenomenon is essential for the metaphysical understanding of an African person. Through change, an individual without individuality and personality acquires ontological features in respect to his personal identity.

Parmenidean notion of being speaks of permanence and completeness in being. This criterion of completeness in an African person is a continuous process. An African person maintains the wholeness of his acquired personality in a continuous process of identification through solidarity with the community. The community in this sense can be described as the plenitude of completeness. This is because it determines the nature of the person in question to his personal identity. The void of personality in a person is completely filled by the community, which is the bastion of unity. It can be insisted that community in the African cultural context is that permanent structure that exists when an individual undergoes change in his bid to become a person. In this dialectic, we find a permanence and change. The former the community and the latter the individual who undergoes an ontological progression.

The Parmenidean notion of being allows us to formulate a principle of non-contradiction. This can be stated thus: there is no contradiction between a person and the community. In another sense, this principle can be so formulated: an individual cannot be in non-solidarity and be in solidarity with the community at the same time in the acquisition of personhood. The contradictories are those values that are against the criteria for the personal identity of a person and, by extension, are forms of disunity in the community. The first form of disunity is individualism. It can be argued thus:

To consider human person only from his particularity excludes the solidarity needed for authentic human personality. It promotes the idea of human person as a being-for-itself; suggesting that the existence of a human person is subsistent in itself and as such places self above every other value: solidarity and relationship (Umeh, 50).

Another contradiction is the primacy of self over the community. In the acquisition of personhood, the individual places his needs under the care of his community. More so, he does not elevate his interests above the common good of the community. The community has a primacy over the individual in the context of the African notion of person, but not in a negative exclusive sense. We face an acute problem with the primacy of the community over the individual. It can be argued that the primacy given to the community is not for the interest of the individual persons and as such is against the spirit of human rights (Umeh, 52). Umeh succinctly answered the objection thus:

The primacy given to the community is not against the norms or principles of human rights. The essence of human rights is not just to promote the selfish individual rights of persons but to ensure that every member of the human society lives a life worthy of human dignity. The primacy given to the community is to aid each member of the community actualises his well-being in the welfare of the

community. And as such the primacy given to the community is not against the individual rights of persons, but a fundamental foundation of protecting and promoting such rights (52-53).

Non-identification with the community is another form of disunity. It is often said that no man is an island. Individuals in the African context are not monads. They are in a relationship. This is because “the individual's identification with the community is absolutely indispensable. Identifying with the community guarantees a sort of social security” (Umeh, 50). Non- identification is against the community laden value in Africa.

Evaluation

Parmenides is considered the founder of metaphysical ontology as it has become canonical in academic discourse. However, for Parmenides it is not about theoretical discourse, but actually about being or not being in the affirmation of existence. This is because being challenges the self-image of thought. An intoxicating mystical ecstasy frees Parmenides from the rational pragmatism of everyday coping with the necessary and literally leads him into another world. This reveals how the orientation of life towards the preservation of existence leads to an irritating confusion between being and not-being. And Parmenides abstractive way of thinking made him not to describe being externally, but becomes one and the same with it as a visualisation of the present. In the end, we understand how ontology functions as anthropology.

Parmenides' notion of being is relevant to the understanding of African concept of person. We make an existential judgement, possible through the examination of his notion of being that an African person is, a non-African person is not. More so, we concretely evaluate their existential status enabled with cultural values that are communitarian. The mystery of being, so envelops us that we cannot exhaust the immensity of being by mere conceptualisation. However, we cannot accept the criteria of change which is of negative existential value in the Parmenides notion of being. The dialectical nature of African person that involves an individual with individuality and person through the community can be examined through change and permanence. The individual begins his ontological progression at birth, an accompaniment of his biological life.

Ontological progression is a principle and reality of change. It is relatable with the individual who begins his journey towards becoming a person. The community always is the permanence. It does not undergo this so-called ontological progression. The dialectical nature of African person remains creditable as an exemplary of a synthesis of the problem of one and many in philosophy. The one is the community while the many is the individuals that make up the community.

Conclusion

The philosophy of Parmenides on being offers us a preparatory and tutelary expositions to what

being is. We grasp from the proposition that being is, and not-being is not, a perennial truth of philosophy. This truth has become the cornerstone to every philosophical undertaking from ages past. In this supposition, African philosophy becomes more appreciable within the context of the immensurable treasures that the philosophy of Parmenides bequeaths the intellectual culture. We proceeded from the proposition of Parmenides and move cautiously to the understanding of person from an African perspective.

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