

Epistemology of Arrow of God

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Abstract

Investigations of literary materials, generally, follow theoretical models set up by Western scholars, not necessarily for any discriminatory or oppressive reason but that, apart from this being a historical accident, Western presence seems to be coterminous with the history of literary studies. This vivid presence of occidental scholars organically activates the interplay of defining values of the cultural space that shapes Western thought; one of these values being the rejection of the unknown (spirits/gods, faith, and intuition). In *Arrow of God*, this debarred realm features centrally and occupies a space that conditions an integral and meaningful reading of *Arrow of God*. Achebe overthrows the Western paradigm as an incomplete representation of reality in at least a probable African universe and projects a unique bent to the beleaguered discourse on defining African identity. This study follows a qualitative research design; it relies heavily on primary and secondary sources. Data from these sources will be analyzed by means of historical-hermeneutics, and philosophical exposition/analysis.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* takes pride of place in the march of further clarifying the image of the African at least in the world of literature, which though probable is nevertheless a product of real, discrete and extra-mental experiences of the author. It was birthed

at a time when the contribution of Africa to civilization was vehemently doubted at different fronts; a doubt not lacking in intellectual defence and patronage. Achebe considered that the African thought, conceptions, images and emotional ferment can be painted for the world to see on the canvas of English language; and so he presented to the world the uniqueness of the African universe as captured in the values that influenced the creation of the probable world of *Arrow of God*.

What makes up the real or reality for the African? Is it every existent entity or some of it? For the European, it is not all but some entities that make up the known and the knowable, and these entities constitute reality for it. In *Arrow of God*, Achebe boldly takes on the European conception of reality where a wedge is forced between the known and the unknown (e.g. intuition, spirits/gods, and faith). The paper examines the conception of reality in *Arrow of God* as against the Eurocentric paradigm informed by a tradition of epistemological dichotomy; it investigates how Achebe captures the unknown, what western epistemology has jettisoned as improper and unsuitable in its discourse on knowledge as the known and knowable. This investigation is based on qualitative research design. It relies heavily on secondary sources and proceeds by way of philosophical exposition and analysis.

Logic as the Measure of Reality in Aristotle

In the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle does not develop a theory of knowledge in a form as systematic as Plato. The *Posterior Analytics* shows that one would come to an awareness of the conditions necessary and sufficient for the arrival at knowledge (*episteme*) within the ambience of a specific/precise science. Unlike the sceptics, who contest knowledge-claims and call for its justification, Aristotle presupposes the possibility of knowledge. He concerns himself with accounting for the way knowledge occurs in varied areas of mental activities and the manner in which the state of

occurrence links up to other states of cognition of the knower. In Aristotelian epistemology, the knower is in contact with the real world through experience and action. This contact of the knower with the external world is a given. The real (objective) world experienced by the knowing agent exists and is different from the agent, but the distinction is not a bar against knowledge (Taylor 1990: 116-117). He avoids the Platonic dichotomy between the experiencer's planes of sense perception and knowledge. We know that he holds that there are things outside the call of justification (presuppositions) and there are those that enter the sphere of knowledge – this makes up knowledge for Aristotle. One thing that is presupposed in the process of knowing is the laws of thought.

Arrow of God and the Unknown

If there is any knowledge, if there is any claim to knowledge of reality in any way, it must involve the adoption of the dichotomy between the known and the unknown; the known being the capturing of the ambience of objectivity (or truth) as the precise and constant. Reality, therefore, from this epistemological dichotomization, was not the gamut of what *Being* in its totality – what is, what was, what would be, what may have been, and what could be. In any way, it botched Parmenides' framing of the matter at hand as *Being Is*. Western thought has, by this pathway, declared that man (the occidental man) is the measure of all things; of the things that are in that they are and of the things that are not in that they are not (Protagoras). Man arrogates to himself the office of determining what to recognize as existing and what to deny being in existence. But this revolutionary attitude towards knowledge and reality is completely skipped, if not opposed in *Arrow of God*.

To understand the theses of *Arrow of God* is to enter into a mental dissociation with the foregoing occidental paradigm of being and knowledge. Actually, the text opens up with the adoption of a title that captures 'god' as an existent entity. A major concept

that colours the entire novel is that of divinities/spirits in the forms of 'Holy' Spirit (*Arrow of God* 215), 'half-man, half-spirit' (192), 'Ulu,' 'Idemili,' et cetera. It is a work replete with the imagery of the realm of non-human beings or 'man's confrontation with more than man,' which seems to awaken man to a typical philosophical problematic known as interactionism within the philosophy of mind/philosophical psychology and neuroscience. A particularly insightful event is the mystical encounter where Ulu, the god whose priest Ezeulu is, rebukes his priest.

'Ta! Nwanu!' barked Ulu in his ear, as a spirit would in the ear of an impertinent human child. 'Who told you that this was your own fight?' Ezeulu trembled and said nothing...'I say who told you that this was your own fight to arrange the way it suits you? You want to save your friends who brought you palm wine he-he-he-he-he!'... 'Beware you do not come between me and my victim or you may receive blows not meant for you! Do you know what happens when two elephants fight? Go home and sleep and leave me to settle my quarrel with Idemili, whose envy seeks to destroy me that his python may come to power. Now you tell me how it concerns you. I say go home and sleep. As for me and Idemili we shall fight to the finish; and whoever throws the other down will strip him of his anklet' (191-192).

Ulu here has a personality, a will and a voice, and as evident from the text, perceives himself as outranking man. Man is subservient to him. Man can't rise above the gods or spirits at work in the community. He must permanently occupy a place below these gods/spirits. This opens up a similitude of vision also present in classic Greek literary works such as Homer's *Illiad*, *Odyssey* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* where the non-human realm of spirits and gods and magic and witches is explored. How come that in the probable world of *Arrow of God*, an ideological frame on the definition of man fully at work in classic occidental literary masterpieces is incontrovertibly present? Is this a matter of chance

of chain (order)? The philosophical anthropology being displayed here, within *Arrow of God*, places man below the gods/spirits just like the classical Greek works. Like the classic literary works of Greek civilization where man operates below the spirits/gods, man is also below the gods/spirits in the mythologies of the Igbo people.

Ulu, it is significant to point out, is not there in Umuaro as its god and protector from the onset. The people seem to have created him for a functional purpose. While there is a tendency to conceive Ulu as supreme and unavoidable, there is another pattern that runs in the text, a subtle disregard for spirits. It seems paradoxical that the people within the milieu of the text desire to have a deity and find themselves compelled to jettison this same spirit. In the establishment Ulu, it is said that:

... soldiers of Abam used to strike in the dead of night, set fire to houses and carry men, women and children into slavery. Things were so bad for the six villages that their leaders came together to save themselves. They hired a strong team of medicine men to install a common deity for them. This deity which the fathers of the six villages made was called Ulu. Half of the medicine was buried at a place which became Nkwo market and the other half thrown into the stream which became *Mili Ulu*. The six villages then took the name of Umuaro, and the priest of Ulu became their Chief Priest. From that day they were never again beaten by an enemy (14-15).

While this narration goes a long way to fill up a gap in regard to the necessity of Ulu as a deity, the manner of its establishment seems to have provided a leeway for man, not necessarily to overcome it since this is viewed as an impossibility, but to dare conceive of abandoning it by transferring allegiance to some other deity. Two cases immediately come to mind: (i) Nwaka, Ezidemili's supporter declares that the rationale for the existence of Ulu has been overtaken by events. According to Nwaka, 'we have no quarrel with Ulu. He is still our protector, even though we no longer fear Abam

warriors at night' (28). How could Nwaka truly claim that Ulu still protects them when the fear of Abam warriors no longer exists unless he consciously evades stating the obvious redundancy into which Ulu has entered since its functional purpose has been overtaken? It seems that for Nwaka, Ulu has outlived its functional relevance, and has to go. He expresses this view without any apparent dread of possible repercussions, mentioning how another deity that no longer served its purpose had been discarded: '... we have all heard how the people of Aninta dealt with their deity when he failed them. Did they not carry him to the boundary between them and their neighbours and set fire on him?' (28). It would appear that his interest is to transfer the allegiance of the communities from Ulu to Idemili. (ii) According to the tradition of Umuaro, the Chief Priest of Ulu has the responsibility of announcing the yearly new moon; but first, he must eat one sacred yam at the beginning of the lunar month and after almost exhausting his store to declare a New Yam Festival. 'You all know what our custom is. I only call a new festival when there is only one yam left from the last. Today I have three yams and so I know that the time has not come' (207). To punish the people of Umuaro for allowing the white man to carry him away and imprison him, he refuses to consume the sacred yams and so, does not announce the new yam festival. With the people battling between their survival and devotion to Ulu, the Christian church exploits the dilemma and makes it a good opportunity for winning converts. John Goodcountry, the missionary, with some understanding of the significance of sacrifice in Umuaro, and seemingly to release the people of *Umuaro* from the psychological burden of imagining themselves eating yam without any ceremonial offering to their god, he invites them to offer thanksgiving sacrifice to the Christian God and thereafter harvest their yams. The narrator notes towards the end of the novel that:

In his extremity many a man sent his son with a yam or two to offer to the new religion and to bring back the promised

immunity. Thereafter any yam harvested in his fields was harvested in the name of the son (230).

Suddenly, the will of the people in regard to their belief (trust) in Ulu has moved from doubting the reliability of Ulu and Ezeulu to securing their material existence. Standing between the ultimate challenge of famine being physical death in the face of exercising faith/belief (trust) in Ulu, and survival, they obeyed the principle of self-preservation by casting aside Ulu and transferring allegiance to the Christian God whom they barely know. While Mr. Goodcountry thinks he is successful in his evangelical mission in Umuaro, as he writes in the *West African Church Magazine*, the narrator announces that notwithstanding his attribution of this apparent progress to the Holy Spirit he is ignorant of 'the full story ... behind the growth of his school and church' (215). Apart from the above switch to Christianity for reasons of material survival, another proof the people are not clearly in the know of the involvement of the Christian faith is the ambiguity in the idea of harvesting their yams 'in the name of the son' (230). Who is meant by 'son' here? Is it the sons that bore the yams to the church, or Oduche, Ezeulu's son or Jesus? (Wren 1980: 93) How could they be committed to what they had no understanding of? In coming under the protection of the Christian God, Ulu has been abandoned for a similar reason for which he had been set up, namely survival.

Methodology in Arrow of God

The foregoing elucidates the profound epistemic revolution embedded in *Arrow of God*, and how Achebe's text notoriously champions the existence (and possibly, the adoption) of an epistemological outlay at variance with the popular scientific methodology of the West. Can this outlook in *Arrow of God* be proven to be sound and valid? Is it possible to find some rational justification for the perception of being as encapsulating the whole of reality in *Arrow of God* unlike the occidental vision whereby being

is made to adjust in accordance with the prism of objective knowledge as if knowledge precedes existence? Knowledge does not precede existence in that knowledge is always about some existential item. As we proceed, we will find that (i) the popular idea of objective knowledge is distorted, and (ii) while the popular 18th century paradigm of truth and reality (a merging of logic and science) does not validate the undergirding epistemology of *Arrow of God*. A sound and valid epistemic trend involving both logic and empirical science does supply a rigorous basis for affirming the validity of *Arrow of God's* methodology.

One major question may arise with the invocation of empirical science. Is it valid to justify works of art like Achebe's fictional *Arrow of God* by means of scientific epistemology? There is a tendency among scholars in the arts to claim that scientific epistemology does not apply to the arts. I think this to be a fundamentally erroneous response to the challenge posited by the epistemology of the empirical sciences. It smacks of intimidation and inferiority complex to crumple under the trap that claims that scientific paradigm of knowledge does not apply to fiction, to works of art. To this writer, the right response ought to begin with asking the right question: is the scientific paradigm (including its philosophical roots) sound? Can it be stated unequivocally that the methodology of the empirical sciences captures or can capture the whole horizon of natural reality or only its designation of reality? Can it be said that its account of reality includes not only artificial constructs but also the natural life such as human beings and animals? Until this matter is clearly resolved, to claim that popular western epistemology in the forms of philosophical and scientific logic is inapplicable to works of art like *Arrow of God* is to jump the gun. If we demonstrate the fickleness of the popular western paradigm of knowledge by way of *reductio ad absurdum*, then we would have successfully argued that the issue at stake is not that popular western epistemic approach is inapplicable to fiction and other

works of art but to reality as a whole. This could be true, on the demonstration of its inability to capture reality as a whole unless it undergoes structural reconstruction.

Does logic (philosophical and scientific) model reality as a whole or some sections of reality, having in mind that reality as a whole includes nature and human creations? Is it natural reality (nature), which is the first and primary level of reality (the original object of human representational system such as language and thought), or artificial constructions – human constructions such as artificial intelligence and computers that do not belong to the level of nature. Before proceeding with addressing these questions, it is worth noting that though fictions are human constructions, they may not be forced under the second level of reality because they represent possible human worlds—resembling human existence—and thus are far removed from human devising like AIs and automated machines. In this paper, the unknown was delimited to include spirits/gods, faith and intuition. These elements are unsafely unrecognized as valid epistemological agents by the 18th century model of rationality. I say ‘unsafely’ because it serves as a trigger for re-examining the structure of this rationality and juxtaposing it, possibly with findings of modern scholarship.

Does empirical science reject faith? Yes. But can it function in any way without faith? No! Faith is a synonym for *trust*; it is a minimum requirement for any form of thinking (including scientific and philosophical thought) to occur. Faith/belief connotes trust, confidence, a sense of assurance, reliability or certainty, say in a person, a thing, an idea, a doctrine, a religion, et cetera. To engage in any scientific or philosophical reasoning, a man cannot but be convinced about the idea, thing or person in question. For instance, one’s conviction about the words he/she uses enunciate his/her trust in the capability of that word or set of words to serve as a vehicle either for representing thought or transmitting meaning from one person to another. For philosophical logic and empirical

science to take place, man must believe in himself, in one or more of the presuppositions of the field of study, and the possibility of some outcome. In other words, empirical science and its logical underpinnings cannot proceed without presupposing some degree of trust (i.e. faith/belief). At this juncture, one may assert that empirical science and philosophy are like fiction in that they make certain assumptions about things and human beings, and trust in their legitimacy. Notwithstanding the fact of its leaning upon *trust* like myths, rationality still moves ahead to extirpate other characteristically human elements that seem to suggest inconsistency and disorder such as emotion, imagination, power, and will.

Is there a chance that the logic of empirical science and philosophical thinking, which serves as the standard for mathematicizing the universe may well be accounted for in the absence of intuition? At this moment, it appears as an impossibility because empirical science and philosophy, fundamentally as ideas, take place in the human faculty of thought, namely the mind/reason, which is characterized by consciousness, even self-consciousness (Agbakoba 2001: 9-10). The ideas/thoughts handled by the mind are not all sourced at the mind; some are traceable to senses. Other ideas are considered innate – they are not generated with any external aids since present in the human mind from birth. The three laws of thought are considered by Bertrand Russell as innate ideas. But there are ideas that the human mind possesses/captures without the involvement of the senses, which are not the products of conscious reasoning. This is intuition, the human ability to perceive reality not available to the senses; his conscious reasoning cannot proffer any explanation either. Generally, it is taken to mean sudden, unpredictable, unexpected, insightful knowledge, whose origination is unknown yet articulating in one moment assorted data both facts and theories. In the words of Charles Sanders Peirce, it is ‘a cognition not

determined by a previous cognition of the same object and therefore so determined by something out of the consciousness' (1988:66). If the determination of this cognition is not from previous knowledge, which is to acknowledge the non-involvement of the human mind/reason, then do we assume that Peirce means the realm of sense data? No. He actually argues that intuition is determined by a transcendental object (66). Even though the source of the knowledge is neither the senses nor the human mind/reason, the human mind still serves as the receptacle into which this externally but transcendentially determined cognition enters. And the empirical sciences in themselves as instrumentalization and calibration are meaningless except within the ambience of the human mind where the various signs and symbols or measures of its different instruments and equipment are codified into language and conceived as thought. At this juncture, any idea can be interjected from the external and transcendental region of reality. This probably accounts for the Popperian idea that 'science is not a system of certain, or well-established statements; nor is it a system which steadily advances towards a state of finality. Our science is not knowledge (*epistēmē*): it can never claim to have attained truth, or even a substitute for it, such as a probability (1980:278). In other words, what comes forth from science cannot be wholly accounted for in any definitive or conclusive form. This may be appreciated if we understand with Popper, in *Conjectures and Refutations*, that knowledge-growth starts with the imaginative proposal of hypothesis, which is a matter of individual and unpredictable insight. This insight is a reality that we cannot summarize in any rule (Popper 1972:253-292; Edwards 1967:398-399). Empirical science (method and logic) notably proceeds by way of induction in that it attempts to move from discrete entities/facts towards a general principle. Nevertheless, no amount of concrete particulars can add up to any general law or principle; this means that the sum of any infinite number of particular events or facts cannot turn into

a generalizable principle. Hume had noted that there is no number of particular observations collected that can verify any general statement, which highlights the view on the logical invalidity of inductive generalization. Thus we can guess into the world of scientific knowledge as a function, not merely of pure observation and a rationally dependent exercise but generally as mingling itself with mythic thought and fiction in the form of reliance on, or not excluding the role of intuition (sudden, unpredictable insight) from its logic and method. It seems that it may not be able to exclude intuitive possibilities because the human mind is open to intuitive insights whose nature cannot be predicted.

The engagement of intuition within scientific explanation may well serve as a ground for many other assumptions, one of which is the fact that intuition, as earlier noted, is one of the sources of knowledge, apart from the senses and reason. Agbakoba acquiesces to this view (Agbakoba 2004:135-136). To acknowledge that sudden, unexpected insights can break into the mind directly implies acquiescence to the reality of a non-empirical external universe which operations are not controlled by the laws of the predictable universe of the senses or materiality. Peirce qualifies the object from this non-factual region of existence as 'transcendental'. By implication, with Peirce, we can qualify the region from which this original cognition emanates as 'transcendental'. While 18th century rationality does not show interest in the possible contents of this non-factual dimension of life, its parley with intuition may serve as a ferment for investigations and enquiries into that which lies outside the frontiers of empirical sciences. At the moment, I designate this region of investigation lying outside the purview of scientific methodology and its logical presupposition as spirit. A spirit is the realm of existence implied by the reality of intuition that is at once non-factual and non-sensible, i.e. 'transcendental' and also completely different (not contradictory) from human reason. I may

assume that among whatever entity exists in that realm, a consciousness attuned to man's conscious mind actively exists there (and seems to be disposed to engage human beings, if it does not even have need to engage mankind); this assumption is made on the ground that the sudden break-in of insights comprehensible by the human mind could only have been produced by an entity or a subject that possesses consciousness and capable of transmitting data from itself to man. If this is true, then we are dealing with a region of existence where conscious subjects capable of communicating the content of their consciousness, say thoughts, to man dwell. If these subjects can communicate, may we not safely assume that these subjects are persons [*person* herein deployed denotes an entity said to have the moral rights to make its own decisions in life i.e. self-determination, not because it exhibits intelligence, purpose, awareness, self-awareness or consciousness; they are not properties i.e. entities we manipulate or use for our benefit, which implies its deserving of respect (Anderson, 2000)] because man does not have any form of active control over the entities inhabiting that realm, which explains man's sense of 'awe' at the realization of insights that are sudden and beyond his explication, even though his mind can understand it. May be we could call these conscious subjects or personalities *spirits*. Spirits are, to my mind, the region of existence and the kind of entities that Achebe's *Arrow of God* takes for granted since what exists and is known to it includes both the perceptible and imperceptible world. Summarily, I think that as much as science is determined by faith/belief (trust) and intuition, Achebe's *Arrow of God* cannot simply be written off as an epistemological and metaphysical catastrophe assuming entities and processes that are outright indefensible on the basis of reason. Clearly, the epistemology of Achebe's *Arrow of God* to a very large extent follows the empirical science in its presupposition of belief/faith and intuition while spirits are deducible from the potentialities of intuition, a function

of induction lying at the basis of scientific and philosophical discourses.

Conclusion

Arrow of God was a way for Achebe to announce not just the existence and reality of cultural development in Africa but its possibility. This possibility is even more significant than the actual existence of such a culture because while the latter easily passes away as human beings change and make progress in every place and epoch, the former is the precondition (or 'the possibility condition') for the birthing of the latter in that it houses the very raw ingredients, and the props and mechanisms needed for the development of the latter. After all, culture is not the way of life of any people but a way of life of a people—an intelligent and strategic manipulation of an environment by human beings as entities who are intuitively in touch with reality lying outside their minds and bodies though they have souls and bodies. The failure of what is called African philosophy and African Literature lies largely in the perception of culture as a fixed discourse, which immediately evokes the idea of scientific standardization whose flaws have been examined above. Therefore, for the development of thought, philosophy and literature in Africa, the bold leanings of Achebe upon faith/belief, spirit, and intuition to capture the real should be critically explored, and as much as possible followed through since it favours a road map of investigation that is holistic in nature.

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