



## Rethinking Human-Environment Relation in the Light of Sartre's and Asouzu's Ontology

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### ABSTRACT

We intend, in this paper, to unravelling the relationship that exists between human and the environment as well as the implication such relationship has, using the ontological systems of Jean Paul Sartre and Innocent I. Asouzu. This is necessitated by the fact that the environment is undergoing serious degradation and that something needs to be done to remedy this worrisome challenge that humankind is facing. Hence, our position is that relationship is central to handling this and that the kind of relationship that exists between humans and the environment has an ontological undertone. It is on this note that the ontological theories of Sartre and Asouzu, from two distinct philosophical traditions (Western and African philosophy traditions) are employed to highlight and rethink the human-environment relationship. Our argument is that Sartre's ontology could lead to more environmental challenges if followed, while Asouzu's ontology has implication for a more environment friendly disposition. Hence, we argue that Asouzu's ontology should be the ontological theory upon which we should build human-environment relationship in order to save and sustain the environment.

**Keywords:** *M. indica*; phytochemical, antimicrobial, histopathological, haematological, wound healing

### iSTEAMS Cross-Border Conference Proceedings Paper Citation Format

L. Uchenna Ogbonnaya & Eric Ndoma Besong (2018): Rethinking Human-Environment Relation in the Light of Sartre's and Asouzu's Ontology. Proceedings of the 13th iSTEAMS Multidisciplinary Conference, University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, Ghana. Vol. 2, Pp 87-94

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The way people look at the relationship that exists between human and the environment is based on the people's ontology. For some people it is only human beings that are real and are conscious of what is happening around hence they tend to pay respect to humans and neglect other beings around. With this mindset, they go ahead to treat the environment and all other realities that constitute the environment with disdain. They see them as object that can only be manipulated for human gain. They do not see the environment as that which should be treated in the manner that humans are treated. All these are based on the fact that the environment and other things that make up the environment are considered to be unconscious and incapable of reacting to maltreatment. This work does not see things in this light. Rather, it is of the view that both humans and the environment are in existence and need each other to promote their well-being. It is with the view of bringing out this point that the ontologies of both Sartre and Asouzu are understudied. The rationale for understudying or studying the ontology of Sartre and Asouzu is because both of them postulate two distinct ideas of being.

For instance, Sartre's ontology pays attention to the human being simply because it is the only conscious being. It sees other beings, including the environment as unconscious and therefore did not reflect much on them in the course of his philosophizing. Asouzu's ontology is of the opposite side of the coin. It sees all beings as serving missing links of reality. This can be taken to imply that each of these beings is important and in a way are conscious. It is around these two ontologies that this paper will oscillate in order to show us how to relate properly with our environment.



## 2. SARTRE'S NOTION OF BEING

Jean-Paul Sartre is a philosopher of the Western philosophy tradition, who put forward an idea of being which is very captivating. He is an existentialist as well as a proponent of phenomenology. This is the point Joseph Omoregbe makes as he notes that, "Sartre's ontology is a phenomenological ontology, for Sartre is an outstanding phenomenologist, an existential phenomenologist" (2011: 203). What this entails according to Ogbonnaya, "Sartre was an existential phenomenological ontologist" (2013: 59). As an existentialist he seeks to address human challenges but employing phenomenological method as he notes that being is that which manifest itself.

The point that Sartre seeks to make is that being is not an abstract reality but a concrete entity. In this way, he attempts to develop an ontology that goes beyond the dualism that pervades Western philosophy tradition in the writing of other philosophers before him. It is in this light that he quips that "the dualism of being and appearance is no longer entitled to any legal status within philosophy" (1958: xxi). For him, being is that which is; it is not an abstract entity as the idealists assert about it. Ogbonnaya substantiates this point as he posits that "It (being) is a visible, physical object. Being, for Sartre, is that which is within the physical, visible world" He also notes that in being there is no distinction between appearance and essence" (2013: 59). In his words: "we can equally well reject the dualism of appearance and essence. The appearance does not hide the essence, it reveals it; it is the essence" (1984: xxii). This is because being cannot be distinguished from either its essence or existence. Thus, for Sartre, being is that which manifests itself as concrete reality and inasmuch as it does exist it takes its essence.

However, did he end at reconciling essence and existence of being? Or does he resolve the dominant bifurcating and polarising mindset in Western notion of being? Following the above assertions, the answer might be yes! But one needs to look at an in-depth view of his elaborate notion of being before drawing any conclusion. Sartre, he discussing his notion of being notes that there are two kinds of beings, namely the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself. He sees being the being-in-itself (L'etre-en-Soi) as that which has no consciousness and hence is termed 'unconscious being'. It is this being that he refers to as object in the cosmos which has no 'within' or 'without'. It is infinite, full of itself, compact, dense and plenitude. It is not in need of any synthetic unification (1984: 26). It is solid (massif) and synthesis of itself and indissoluble (Sartre 1984: viii). It is that which is solidly and massively what it is, like stone, chair, etc.

The being-in-itself, according to Sartre, is a being that is devoid of potency and without any reason for its existence, contrary to Aristotle's notion of potency and act. Likewise, he rebuffed Immanuel Kant's thing-in-itself in that concrete phenomena could be assigned any ontological status, by saying that "There is no longer an exterior for the existent if one means by that a superficial covering which hides from sight the true nature of the object" (Sartre 1984: xxi). That is to say, nothing exists beyond the phenomena appearance as being-in-itself is phenomena. It exists even without an observer. The being-in-itself is a passive active object around man, which debars him from actualizing his abilities. All you can say of it is that, it is; it has no meaning except in and through man.

Being-for-itself is a conscious being and it is its consciousness that renders it different from other things and its relations to another being – being-for-itself. According to Olatundji A. Oyeshile, "Sartre identifies the being-for-itself with being of consciousness. The chief characteristic of being-for-itself is its activity. It is incapable of being acted on from without, and it consists in and is exhausted by its own intentional, meaning conferral acts" (1997: 186). The for-itself-apprehends other beings other than only itself. It has the quality of self-transcending and is always separated from itself by nothingness which is bestowed upon it by its being and which it attempts to overcome in order to fulfill or recognize itself (Oyeshile 1997: 187).

This being-for-itself of Sartre is not only a conscious being but also being that is free, autonomous and responsible. Sartre's for-itself is the being of subject, not of object, facts or ideas. This being is aware of its selfness. Its awareness of itself is a way of constituting itself by affirming or negating others. This is possible by separating itself from others as it keeps itself at a distance from them. This creates a gap, an emptiness or nothingness in a being, which carries the "power of negation which constitutes its being. Thus, the conscious being carries within itself an emptiness which perpetually separates it from itself and everything else" (Omoregbe 2010: 90). What this entails is that being-for-itself is linked with emptiness, negativity and nothingness, which it aspires to surmount.



This being-for-itself, for Sartre, is the human being. The human being is the conscious being, which has the capacity of affirming or negating the being of others, which it sees as unconscious beings. These beings for Sartre, are incapable affirming their own being. They are incapable of asking the interrogatory 'why' question, which the human being is capable of (1984: 619-620). This implies that the human being is the being that is conscious of itself (Sartre 1936: 40) and the being of others. It is based on this that "the for-itself ... attempt(s) to turn the other into an object or allow itself to be objectified by the other" (Copleston 1963: 363). Another point to note is that the being-for-itself in being conscious of the external world affirm his/her consciousness or existence (1984: xxviii). It is in this way that it defines and gives the in-itself (other non-human unconscious realities). Hence, a table is table because its usefulness as such and its definition and meaning given by the conscious human person. What Sartre is saying that non-humans (being-in-itself) is and have meaning relation to human, the conscious for-itself.

In this ontology of Sartre, there is an idea of the we-consciousness but in an exclusivist sense. This is apparent as humans transform other realities to objects while they remain the subject of the relationship. This implies that the we-relationship is one of conflict (1984: 429), where humans are oppressors while non-humans are the oppressed (being-in-itself). Herein, Sartre's put forward a bifurcating and polarizing ontology.

### 3. ASOUZU'S NOTION OF BEING

Asouzu's idea of being has its root in his concept of complementarity, which he says has bearing with the Igbo word *Ibuanyidanda*. *Ibuanyidanda* is an Igbo aphorism which is taken from an Igbo work song which reads: 'bunu bunu ibu anyi danda', meaning 'lift it, lift it, no load is insurmountable for Danda, the ant'. This is due to the complementary nature of danda, the ant that always work together. It is complementary idea that Asouzu employed in articulating his ontology which is aimed at bridging the artificial chasm, and overcome all forms of bifurcating barriers, which the mind imposes on the relationship between substance and its accident (Asouzu, Asouzu 2007: 253). It also "explores a method and principles for coalescing the real and the ideal, the essential and the accidental into a system of mutual complementing units" (Asouzu, 2012: 101). This is to say "*Ibuanyidanda* ontology attempts to penetrate and grasp being, and with it ultimate reality through mediation or via the instrumentality of mutual relations" (Asouzu 2012:102). In line with this complementary system of thought, Asouzu defines being as "*that on account of which anything that exists serves a missing link of reality*" (2012: 103). Within this context, to be is to be in mutual relationship with other existents. To be is not to be alone (*ka so mu adina*).

Trailing the above understanding, being is that which have head and tail-end (*ihedi, nwere isi na odu*) (Asouzu 2007: 11). Therefore, what is must be grasped within a vortex of mutual free interaction without encapsulation, bifurcation and exclusiveness. Also, to be being or to serve as missing link of reality is to have meaning within "a complementary framework" (Asouzu 2007: 253). It is in this light that Asouzu being as consisting of substance (abstract aspect) and accident (concrete aspect), which are inseparable dimensions of being, where substance is used to describe the thing that is most important (*ihe kachasi mkpa*), and accident, the thing that is important (*ihe di mkpa*) (Asouzu 2007: 254). Likewise, for Asouzu, to be is to be in control (*ima onwe onye*) and it is to be in control of the tension laden existential situation which is caused by the phenomenon of concealment. The moment one is in control, one realizes that to exist is also to give others a chance. This is because "Being in control does not mean being in charge like a boss or issuing dictates in form of an omniscient being" (2007: 348). Rather, it is being in mutual complementary relationship with others since every reality is missing link. Here, the ego has been able to assert itself beyond the drive arising from mere primitive impulse" (2007: 332) and seek the interest of others. Hence, For Asouzu, "being in control (*ima onwe onye*) is the only radical way in which being shows its relevance in any situation" (Asouzu 2007: 335) as he/she displays full autonomy.

Also, for Asouzu, being is that which is future referential since it is striving towards unity (2007: 121). Therefore, "there is need to consider the diverse units that are involved in any given context, not only with regard to their historical conditions" (Asouzu 2007: 121), for being to be understood. This brings out the fact that being keeps manifesting itself as it relates with other beings or serve as a missing link to other beings. This leads to integration of each "modes of self- expression of being into one framework of mutual interrelated units" (2007: 57), since they all lead to get full meaning and authentication of being. Hence, to be is to be in future referential relationship since being is dynamic and not static. It is germane to note that if being is to strive towards unity such being must be a conscious being and one of such being is the human being. It is the being that has the capacity and bifurcate and polarize between beings. This is apparent in the prevalent anthropocentric worldview. This work places human beings at the centre of the universe.



It makes human the Aristotle's substance. For Asouzu, anyone who is engaged in such a view of reality is suffering from *ihe mkpuchi anya* – phenomenon of concealment and the ambivalence of human tension. With this the mind is beclouded with an impede vision of reality. Here, the individual does not see other reality as members of a whole – the cosmos. That is to say, there are no transcendent categories of unity of consciousness (rendered in Igbo as *akara obi/akara mmuo*) (Asouzu 2007: 327) operational in the person's mind. For Asouzu, the mind needs to attain a state of transcendent categories of unity of consciousness, which help the mind go beyond challenged existential tensions (*Inaugural Lecture* 50) and leads to 'complementary mindset' (*obioha*). This prevents the mind from erring or erring culpably (Asouzu 2007: 324; 2011: 56)

This enables the human mind to adopt what Asouzu calls the harmonizing faculty of all missing links, rendered in Igbo language as *obi/mmuo eziokwu*. *Obi/mmuo eziokwu* is a form of intelligence or wisdom that ensures that human actions remain equilibrated. It is in contrast to *obi/uche aghugho*, which is a negative wisdom that tends towards bifurcation and polarization. Now even when the transcendent categories of unity of consciousness remains active and keeps the mind healthy and fit, there is still need to keep these transcendent categories alive through the process of existential conversion or complementary transcendental existential conversion (Asouzu 2007: 327). In this state, the mind recognizes missing links as modes of beings serving each other in mutual complementary manner. Here the mind can be said to have risen above the ambivalent tension-laden existential situation.

It is at this point, the mind begins to see its limitations that stand in need of complementation. Hence, Asouzu posits in his *ibuanyidanda* imperative that "allow the limitation of being to be the cause of your joy" (Asouzu 2007: 328). In this situation, the actor is conscious of its relative condition which it shares with other missing links in a future referential dimension. This leads to the development of a global mindset (*obioha*). This in turn leads to *obioma* (benevolence), *obiebere* (merciful heart), etc. All these are made possible because the harmonizing faculty (*obi mmuo eziokwu*) has taken control over hegemonic absolute reason. These transcendent categories of unity of consciousness are regulated by "the truth and authenticity criterion" which states that "never elevate any world immanent missing link to an absolute instance" (2011: 45). Indeed, this is a criterion for determining the unity of being and consciousness in the existential situations (2004: 310). This promotes a totalizing and more comprehensive authentic idea of being that has implication for effective interpersonal relation. This is made feasible through what Asouzu terms 'noetic propaedeutic' – a pre- and re-education of the human mind that was at first mis-educated to bifurcate reality and absolutize the human being in the cosmos.



#### 4. SARTRE'S AND ASOUZU'S NOTIONS OF BEING AND HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT RELATIONS

The notions of being in Sartre's and Asouzu's metaphysics have some implications for human–environment relationship. Their ontologies can be used to explain the relationship that exists between humans and the environment (nature). Their Ontologies do not deny the fact that there is a relationship between humans and nature. Sartre holds that there are two kinds of beings namely being-in-itself and being-for-itself. He sees being-in-itself as unconscious and not capable of relating with other beings. This type of being can be likened to the environment (nature). Sartre does not see being in itself as important and does not give much time or space to it in his philosophical work. On this point, Sartre's philosophy is like the philosophies of most other Western philosophers who focused all on the human and gives little place to the environment.

Like others, Sartre sees being-in-itself as unconscious being. This, indeed, is his view of the environment or nature which is believed as not having the capability of relating with other beings. Since, the environment is the same as being-in-itself following the position of Sartre, it is not important in terms of the relationship that exists between humans and the environment. In this relationship, the environment being unconscious is incapable of relating with the human being, it is only the human being which Sartre sees as being-for-itself that has the capacity to relate with other beings. The human being does not only relate with other beings but decides and defines what being-in-itself is. The human being by implication defines what the environment is based on his/her needs. Since, human being regards the environment (being-in-itself) as unconscious he/she decides its fate in order to benefit him/ her.

This Sartrean ontology, which has bearing on human-environment relations, posits that human is more important to the environment in this relationship, has a lot of adverse effects on the human being. Based on the fact that human being is seen as superior to the environment, human therefore use the environment for their own selfish motive not minding the disastrous effect it has on the environment. This lack of concern for the environment that is fostered indirectly by Sartre's philosophy in its neglecting the environment is really helping humans to have the justification of not giving special attention for the environment which in turn is gradually destroying the environment in many ways as well as affecting the human being indirectly (Ejizu and Awajiusuk 13). The adverse effects no doubt consume human beings who are both the cause and the beneficiary (Ariole 165).

All these environmental problems that are plaguing humans today are because humans do not see the environment as serving a missing link of reality even when the environment solve the problems of humans such as providing human needs. Hence, "The relationship of human beings and their environment need special attention" (Osuji 147). This is where Asouzu's Ontology differs from Sartre's ontology, which do not give room to the environment (being-in-itself) in his philosophy. Asouzu's ontology gives room for all forms of being, be it being-for-itself or being-in-itself. This is simply because, for Asouzu, "anything that exists serves a missing link of reality". Hence, being-for-itself and being-in-itself serve as missing links to each other. In the same vein, humans and the environment serve as missing link to each other. They complement each other in one way or the other. They are members of the same whole and each of them serve each other in order to maintain balance of the whole.

Thus, being for Asouzu does not exist alone. It always exists with others- others which it sees as important as itself. In the same manner, the human beings and their environment co-exist and are in mutual service to each other. The environment is as important as the human beings. The environment serves a missing link to the human being. It complements human beings as it provides the needs of humans. This brings to one's knowledge the fact that humans are not in any way self-sufficient. They all have their limitations that they cannot meet themselves. They therefore need other beings such as the environment to complement them. This, the environment has been doing but humans do not take this into cognizance in their philosophizing. But Asouzu's principle of integration which states that "anything that exists serves a missing link of realities" can be said to include both humans and the environment. This is because "anything that exists" is not limited to any kind of being. Thus, anything could be humans or the environment. With this one can say that Asouzu's ontology takes into consideration all forms of beings; including humans and the environment.



Following this position of Asouzu, one can say that since the environment and humans are serving missing as link to each other, there is need for mutual complementation and service. In this way, the environment should not be what should only service humans' needs without humans' taking care of the environment. Hence, humans need to service the environment as the environment service humans.

This is because both humans and the environment have limitations which need mutual complementation from this is in keeping with Asouzu's imperative of the principle of harmonious transformation, in which the human mind allows "the limitations of its being to be the cause of its joy" (2004: 280). In this way, all world immanent realities in their fragmentation are limited and this limitation that is the cause of their joy. This is because their limitations lead to sorting, pairing and relating with other missing links which complement their limitations. It is in this manner the humans and that environment relate with each other.

In this wise, humans actions are not supposed to be directed only to fellow humans but the environment, which humans serves missing link with. This agrees with Asouzu's principle of progressive transformation which asserts that "all human actions are geared towards the joy of being". Hence, when humans see the environment as serving missing link with them, they will learn to take care of the environment. It is only in this way that their joy may be complete. This is because when the environment is taken care of, all forms of natural disasters such as "global warming, great floods caused by melting icebergs and rivers overflowing their banks, desert encroachment, extreme temperatures, to mention but a few" (Owosho 85), will disappear and humans will be joyous for taking the action.

In all, it is apparent that Asouzu's ontology creates "awareness on the need to protect and sustain the environment for integral human development" (Ehianu 81). This is due to the fact that in taking care of the environment humankind is serving the whole in which he/she belongs alongside the environment and serving his/her self. But Sartre's ontology leads to ecological disaster with dire consequences (Mbonu 59). Hence, Asouzu's ontology is more human- environment oriented than Sartre's ontology which is strictly human oriented. This Sartrean ontology which sees the environment (being – in – itself) as unimportant follows after Western ontology, which is based on dualism, and sees the environment as purely made up of matter, devoid of spirit – the conscious aspect of being. This ontology also sees human being as consisting of spirit which makes it conscious.

Whereas, Asouzu's ontology is based on African duality of both matter and spirit. Hence, anything that exists has head and tail-end (*ihedi nwere isi na odu*). Based on this, both humans and the environment have head (spirit) and tail-end (matter). This is why they are conscious and are aware of their limitations and move towards eliminating these limitations through mutual complementation and service to each other. If human beings have this consciousness they will take care of the environment. This is obtainable when humans develop a complementary mindset, which is made possible through existential conversion and noetic propaedeutic.



## 5. CONCLUSION

The environment has been discussed in the light of two philosophers – Sartre and Asouzu. Sartre represents Western philosophy tradition, while Asouzu represents African philosophy tradition. Here, their ontologies have been employed to note that relationship is fundamental to the sustenance of the environment. It has been argued that if the bifurcating and polarizing ontology of Sartre which enthrones humans (being-for-itself) above non-humans (being-in-itself), of which the environment is inclusive if followed it will lead to environmental degradation since the relationship that humans will have with the environment is in an exclusivist sense. Hence, we call for an employing of Asouzu's complementary ontology as a theory of being articulated from the African place. This is because it can help humans understand that they are in mutual complementary relationship with the environment and that they need to take care of their environment since the environment and other non-human realities are missing links to the human being in the cosmos. Hence, just as humans need the environment and other non-human realities to survive, they also need humans to care for them. This is the mutuality that is required to sustain the environment.



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