

Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics: The Idea of Predeterministic Historicity, by Aribiah David Attoe

Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 117 + xxii
ISBN: 978-3-030-91109-6

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In recent years, a number of African philosophers of religion have undermined a previously entrenched view that presents the God of African Traditional Religion (ATR) as omnipotent, omniscient, and all-good (see, for example, Agada 2022a, 2022b). Working on the assumption that early scholars of ATR, like J. B. Danquah, John S. Mbiti, and E. Bolaji Idowu, distorted the African conception of God under the influence of Christianity, sceptical African philosophers like Okot p'Bitek, Kwasi Wiredu, and John A. I. Bewaji proposed the decolonisation of imported Western categories like omnipotence, omniscience, and omni-benevolence in the conviction that the God of ATR is a limited God that cannot eliminate the evil in the world by divine fiat.

In the book, *Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics: The Idea of Predeterministic Historicity*, Aribiah David Attoe goes further than the decolonisation philosophers and proposes an understanding of God that entirely depersonalises the deity within a framework of a materialistic metaphysics that endorses a thoroughgoing determinism. Convinced that African metaphysics has for too long been dominated by a spiritualistic, or non-scientific, orientation, Attoe announces that it is time for African metaphysics to come to terms with the *truth* of a mechanical universe in which intentionality as a feature of consciousness is reducible to brain states and, consequently, to a bodily or material basis. He asks: “[W]ouldn’t it be worthwhile to explore African metaphysics from a logical, scientific and materialistic perspective?” (Attoe 2022a, 7). He begins his project by embracing the relational worldview that underlies much of African metaphysics, ethics, and logic; the perspective that regards things in the universe as interconnected and mutually reinforcing (see, for instance, Ramose 1999). Attoe argues in his book that God is not outside the universal interactive network. God



Phronimon
<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/Phronimon>
Volume 23 | 2022 | #10944 | 6 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2413-3086/10944>
ISSN 2413-3086 (Online), ISSN 1516-4018 (Print)
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is unique only in the sense that he is a first cause of events in the universe as a necessary being.

However, Attoe does not use the term necessity, as most Western philosophers of religion do, to mean a being outside the contingent world-series that is the ground of such observable features of the world as order and motion. Instead, he uses the term to underline his contention that there must be a first cause existing timelessly but in an interactive relationship with a physical space inhabited by entities that are causally traceable to this impersonal first cause (God). A world emerges and is sustained by God, who interacts with beings in the world that, in their turn, enter into ever-expanding relations with each other as new events occur in inexorable causal linkages. In chapter 1, which serves as the introduction to the content of the book, Attoe (2022a, 8) condenses the above philosophical sentiment thus:

Due to these interactive and relational links between states of affairs, a fully deterministic world becomes more apparent, traceable through history, up until the first cause, which determined the trajectory of reality by simply existing in exactly the way it did.

The framework that presents God as an impersonal causal principle that brings new states of affairs into being, through strict interaction with dependent entities, is what Attoe calls the “metaphysics of predetermined historicity.”

In chapter 2, the author sheds more light on his idea of God. The seeming implausibility of the notion of nothingness persuades Attoe that something has always existed. This enduring thing is God. As an *It*, a genderless, non-conscious entity, God is either a simple singular thing in its constitution or a complex thing composed of two or more singular things. A simple singular thing lacks internal differentiation. As a simple singular entity, God exists distinctly and interacts directly with other entities and states of affairs to produce new outcomes in the world. As a complex thing, God is composed of at least two singular things that interact with each other to produce new outcomes. Attoe favours the view of God as a simple thing because this view seems to avoid the kind of anthropomorphic speculations about God’s nature that, according to him, go with the spiritualisation and personalisation of God. Just as God has being, so do other (dependent) entities in the world. Attoe does not clearly articulate what being is. However, he implies, like Asouzu (2007) before him, that the very notion of being is simply a way of describing the universal interactive pattern sustaining a rigid universal determinism (Attoe 2022a, 52).

In chapters 3, 4, and 5, the author pays close attention to the problem of causality and defends his rigid deterministic framework. Subsisting states of affairs in the world are predetermined “because all events emerge as a result of a previous state of affairs, down to ... the first cause—the thing we call God” (Attoe 2022a, 60). Attoe discounts the *why* question that spurs philosophers into finding teleological models and favours a mechanical model of causality. Causality is explained simply in terms of a relational

nexus existing between things in the world. Aware that a conception of the universe in terms of interconnection and mutuality may lead one to imagine experiential centres sustaining diverse interactions, Attoe rejects panpsychism, the view that consciousness is fundamental and ubiquitous in the world. If panpsychism is true, Attoe reasons, then the universe may well be a rational universe. He rejects the idea of a rational universe since what is at play in the scheme of things is a mindless determinism. Things interact with each other not because they have minds but because they are active, and activity is not equivalent to mind.

According to Attoe, if we happen to have the fullest information about the interactions that lead to new outcomes, we can perfectly predict the future and trace events in the present to a preceding event and on to the next in the causal chain until we reach the first cause, God. This is what he calls predeterministic historicity (PDH). The first cause kick-starts a process that begins a rigidly deterministic series. The first interaction involves a predetermined state of affairs, with subsequent outcomes being rigidly conditioned. In anticipation of possible objections to his rigid determinism, which may assert that human consciousness has the distinctive feature of intentionality that indicates the fact of free will, Attoe takes a physicalist stance that reduces mental properties to a neural base. The neural interactions are conditioned by biological mechanisms and environmental factors. There is no room for free will, therefore. Going further, Attoe seeks a materialist base for understanding the concept of moral responsibility. Since humans are rigidly determined, they cannot be morally responsible for their actions. The notion of moral responsibility is merely a social convention that arises from a practical need rooted in human interactions. Society invents the idea of moral responsibility to protect itself and sustain the relations that conduce to human wellbeing. If moral responsibility as a concept is reducible to the system of relations that can be traced through history to a first cause, then a free will is not required for people to act reasonably. Reasonable behaviour is socially determined.

Expectedly, Attoe's view of a rigidly determined universe sustained by an impersonal material God leads him to a Spinozistic ethics that recommends a kind of stoicism the author labels "indifference." Since there is no purpose in the universe but only rigidly determined outcomes traceable to a mindless first event, humans should regard life and death as having no special meaning. While we can always be certain that the universe will not cease to be on account of the eternal endurance of the impersonal first cause, human immortality is no cause for grandiose speculations, as it consists merely of diffusion into the food chain at death where human remains go on to sustain other entities and influence newer outcomes within the vast interactive network sustained by the first cause.

Attoe's rigid determinism is unconvincing. In the first place, the universe Attoe describes is a dated universe without a first cause, despite positing an impersonal God as a first cause. He notes: "We can think of the first cause as either a singular reality or a complex combination of singular realities. In the first instance, we see that such a

singular being, still a being in the world, albeit a formless world, since absolute nothingness is impossible, is a being that is in a necessary relationship with the formless world” (Attoe 2022b, 22). Historical predeterminism traces states of affairs in the world regressively to a point in the history of the universe when God coexisted with more than one singular entity. God is, therefore, part of a dated universe. There is no initial condition that predetermined the course of events in an inflexible unfolding of history. Even if Attoe makes things clearer by stating that the universe he describes is eternal, rigid determinism will still not be true since that initial condition that rigidly determined the future course of history remains unclarified. A mechanical, impersonal universe does not have to be rigidly determined since such a universe can admit to chance occurrences that render knowledge of the future probabilistic. Indeed, Attoe is aware of this because he suggests future research on the compatibility or incompatibility of his metaphysical system with findings in quantum physics.

It will appear that retrospective thinking motivates Attoe’s rigid determinism. When we look back after an event has occurred following a decision of a conscious agent, we are struck by the finality of the occurrence, and we wonder whether indeed there was an option or options available to the actor when a decision was made. Proactive, or forward, thinking is confronted by complexity. This complex situation involves uncertainty and the possibility of novelties actually occurring. The certainty that accompanies retrospective thinking is lost. Attoe (2022a, 87) bravely but unconvincingly appeals to human cognitive deficiency to account for the uncertainty: “This complexity, vast as it may be, does not reveal an indeterminate or probabilistic future, it only reveals the inability of the human observer to cognitively capture this complexity.”

Attoe’s reader may suggest that cognitive limitation itself points to a universe in which conscious entities are epistemologically deficient, one in which novelties occur to broaden the scope of human knowledge. Such cognitive limitation puts a leash on rigid determinism since it becomes obvious that the mechanical perspective (that so well explains the interaction of phenomena in the inanimate sphere) cannot adequately account for the behaviour of conscious beings like humans.

Attoe’s intriguing presentation of God as an “It” makes God simply an entity in the world without any moral force. The “It” is perhaps just a label for a force of nature or some fundamental physical constant, like gravity, or Attoe’s favoured element, energy. Energy intrigues Attoe because of its supposed indestructibility. As a material fact, God is indestructible. This perspective takes an easy route out of one of the conundrums of natural theology, the question of God’s nature, by unwittingly eliminating the very idea of God. Attoe’s materialism leads logically to atheism, an implication he seems aware of but conveniently ignores. He explains his materialism as involving:

[A] thing’s capacity to impress itself on the conscious mind ... direct impressionability and indirect impressionability. Direct impressionability is a thing’s ability to make itself known to the senses, which then feeds our conscious awareness. Indirect impressionability is a thing’s *capacity* to impress itself on a conscious mind through its

effect on other things in the world and its capacity to impress itself on the conscious mind through logical necessity. (Attoe 2022a, 33)

Since a personal God cannot impress its existence on the mind directly, it can only be argued that such a being exists as a logical necessity. Attoe does not weigh the merits of the traditional ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments for God's existence, convinced that these arguments that plead logical necessity are unscientific. Since he discounts the traditional theistic arguments, Attoe is left with the apparently scientific proposition that God is a wholly material thing similar to a construct of physics, like energy (2022a, 8, 30). But if God is essentially a kind of thing open to scientific verification, we will have to turn to science to provide proof of God's existence. This seems highly unlikely since the material thing that Aribiah speculates as being God, lacks all kinds of agency and may be simply a force of nature, a physical constant that may be nothing more than a scientific construct that helps us understand the structure of interacting phenomena in the universe. Thus, Aribiah's God is a disappearing entity. Indeed, this material, impersonal God disappears from sight (as a material thing) and from the mind (as a necessary being). The reader is left wondering, after turning the last page of the book, why Attoe did not propose full-blown atheism.

Notwithstanding the unresolved problems surrounding rigid determinism and the impersonal, materialist God that Attoe proposes, this brilliant book, *Groundwork for a New Kind of African Metaphysics: The Idea of Predeterministic Historicity*, is an impressive new addition to the literature on African metaphysics. It is a bold, original, and challenging book that invites the reader to soberly contemplate a cold, mechanical and, perhaps, ultimately meaningless universe in which even the concept of God does not serve any consolatory purpose.

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