BOOK REVIEW

Joseph M. Nyasani
The African Psyche
Nairobi, Theological Printing Press Ltd
1997, 150 pp

Kibaba Makokha*

Philosophy in General

Philosophy like any other discipline has its branches, each of which is the concern of specific philosophical problems. The main branches of Philosophy are: logic, which deals with correct reasoning; epistemology, which inquires into the nature and claims about knowledge; axiology, which deals with values in general, including ethical and aesthetic values and metaphysics which is the main focus of this essay. This is because The African Psyche is a treatise in this field.

Etymologically, metaphysics is derived from two Greek words, meta and physika meaning that which comes after or beyond physics. Thus, metaphysics by applying the basic principles that underlie the workings of human mind such as the principle of contradiction, the principle of sufficient reason etc., endeavours to come to terms with questions of ultimate concern such as the beginning and destiny of the universe. Indeed, metaphysics, like philosophy in general, tries to account for the why of things.

Language and Choice of Topics

The African Psyche follows both in logic and content another book by the same author, The Metaphysics of the Cosmos and Related Recurrent Issues of Metaphysics (1996). In these two volumes, the author tries to simplify some of the obviously “abstract and difficult” subjects for ordinary minds. In fact, the greatest strength of The African Psyche lies in the way the author demystifies intricate metaphysical problems bringing them to the level of comprehension of non philosophers. Written in a very impressive language, though pervaded by Latin jargon, the book articulates most complex topics with ease.

Additionally, the author’s choice of topics of discussion is not only apt but current. He delves into metaphysical problems that relate well to our day to day living. This way, he demonstrates that metaphysics is still alive and relevant in our endeavours to comprehend reality. To the students of philosophy, it is a reminiscence of the positivist rejection of metaphysics as the basis of knowledge. The argument was that metaphysics dealt with the essence of things, which were imperceptible to our senses. This was the intellectual arrogance of this school of thought which arose out of the fascination, even obsession with the success of the natural sciences.

The Subject Matter

The first chapter, implicitly sets the main objective of the book. It addresses a rather controversial subject - the mind. The author puts his case very strongly that human minds in the world do not...
differ in their ontological reality. Rather, they differ merely in accidental circumstances. This difference is often underwritten by cultural biases and prejudices. This is what that English empiricist, Francis Bacon called, idol of the tribe. The author intends to correct the widespread myth that Europeans have inherently superior minds than other people. Touching on the old and controversial metaphysical problem of the relationship between the mind and the body, he argues that the mind and the body are "separate substances both functionally and teleologically" (p12). And he upholds the view which elevates the mind to the level of necessary substance and the body to mere contingent reality. This is for the obvious reason that the mind enjoys immateriality and perdurability. Seen thus, both the Christian and Islamic belief in immortality of the soul seem to have some rational basis. To illustrate this, it is important to give a simple example that many of us take for granted. During burials, one often hears speakers in reference to the dead, say "our brother/ sister (or whoever) who has departed" even when the deceased or the body still lies in the casket. Underlying this is an intriguing metaphysical problem of existence.

Having extolled the importance of the mind over the body, the author states the fundamental functions of the mind which is the transformation of nature. But he hastens to clarify that given the uniqueness both in its character and operation, the mind in carrying out this function either builds or destroys. This is a truism which need not be gainsaid for examples abound in all human civilizations and epochs. This point is however instructive in that we can visualize the mind in terms of power. And since the author prescribes discipline as a conditio sine qua non for transformation of African societies, it could have been quite fitting if he had briefly discussed how the destructive power of the mind can be restrained. One way of doing this is perhaps by sharpening the mind's sensibility to moral values i.e the conscience. The contention of this paper is that at the core of Africa's problems is not really lack of discipline in terms of what the author calls 'managing perceptual time' but rather, exercise of 'power' unguided by an ethic which as we all know can be very destructive in any human civilization.

In a major part of this book, the author is at pains to explain what he sees as African's alienation and apish behaviour. For example he writes"...(the) African would so easily be prepared to abandon his tradition and to condemn many of his traditional practices in preference to the imported cultural commodity" (p 95). This subject is not obviously new and many theories or explanations have been floated to account for this behaviour. The author endeavours to provide a metaphysical explanation, suggesting that there is something inherent in the African mind that makes the African so gullible and vulnerable in face of alien culture. But he does not pinpoint what is or what is not inherent in the African psyche that is responsible for this pitiable condition. Rather, he lapses into the old familiar thesis that colonialism was responsible for the African mentality of self-hate, adding that this was exacerbated by the African zealous mentality of respect for authority. This addendum merely begs the question; what is or is not inherent in the African mind that is responsible for this? It would also have been interesting to read the author's views on whether this apish mentality is also manifest in white-Africans e.g. those in Southern Africa who have lost roots in Europe.

It is clear, however, that when people are confronted by an overwhelming and oppressive culture they respond in different ways ranging from open confrontation to more subtle ways as wanting to be like the dominant group. For example, the famous curly-kit hairstyle of relaxing the hair started in American ghettos as a response to white subjugation. The concept of "honorary white" in America also captures this point.

On the role of superstitions and social taboos in integration of African societies, the author argues that African institutions and communities are collapsing because taboos and superstitions
have lost sway on the people. Again this point sounds obvious but it points to a need to articulate the underlying meanings and rationale of these taboos and superstitions. Taboo \textit{qua} taboos can only hold when shrouded in mystery, but once the myths around them are removed, they may not make sense on the surface. There is a need, therefore, to reconstruct these superstitions and taboos with a view to explaining their underlying rationale. In this regard, metaphysics can play a major role, bearing in mind that every action seems to be underpinned by a system of thinking. Metaphysics should endeavour to elucidate the fundamentals of this foundation. In the case of Africans, the role of sages who actually understand the rationale behind these taboos and superstitions should be underscored.

The book also discusses Africa’s self-inflicted problems. This notwithstanding, we should transcend the ‘apologetic approach’, of justifying ourselves to, and blaming all our shortcomings, problems and weaknesses on foreigners. This is not, however, to say that the foreigners have not played a role in our present tribulations. However, it is by sheer boldness that we can attain the author’s dream, in relation to socio-economic transformation, namely that:

\begin{quote}
... it may be necessary to wall in Africa in order to carry out a thorough and undiluted cultural revolution-through this revolution new vistas and visions may begin to emerge and to supplant the old mentality of wallowing in the mud of the receiving end only (p.156).
\end{quote}

On a positive note, defending the Africans, the author posits the view that dignity is indifferent to social, economic and political conditions into which a human being is born believing that “man is conceived through and in dignity and persists in that condition uninterruptedly throughout his existence” (p.89). This conviction is contentious and offers two points of critique.

Whereas social, economic and political conditions may not be a necessary condition for human dignity, they do constitute a sufficient condition. Thus, there is a way in which the absence of material things and/or conditions not only affect but actually ‘take away’ the dignity of a human person. Consider, for example, the case where a person is put in a condition totally devoid of material needs such that he/she is reduced to a life of begging in the streets. That very condition reduces the value of life, which \textit{ipso facto} means a life devoid of dignity. On the other hand, if a person wallows in excessive material things, making him have no respect for humanity \textit{qua} humanity, that person, arguably loses dignity as a human person; he/she becomes dehumanized so to speak.

Secondly, in light of recent developments in science and technology, we are faced with the stark realities of in vitro fertilization, cloning of embryos and genetic engineering which means we can easily produce babies ‘artificially’. Given this scenario, the conviction that “man is conceived through and in dignity” becomes problematic. What would be the fundamental metaphysical foundation of such dignity? This is a current serious metaphysical and moral question that should provoke students of both philosophy and religion.

Finally the author’s analysis of this rather weird behaviour of “night - running” that is prevalent in some African communities could be of interest to the reader of the text. The author interprets this phenomenon of “night - runner,” (\textit{Omurogi} in Ekigusii language of Kenya) in psycho-analytic terms, thus seeing night-runners as psychopaths. “Night - runners” as understood (they happen to exist in my community) and as the author explains are not malignant. They are simply weird fellows bent on terrifying their victims. Otherwise they are very normal, ordinary members of the community during the day. In \textit{lubukusu} language they are called \textit{babini} which linguistically distinguishes them.
from *balosi-* witches—who are motivated by evil intent. That they exhibit psychopathic behaviour is true, but this may not adequately explain this phenomenon. There could be some socio-metaphysical conditions that underly this phenomenon. Could it be comparable to the phenomenon of *halloween* in America, where people dress weirdly and do ‘funny’ things including scaring others? This could be an interesting question of debate.

**Conclusion**

After reading the text under review, one would be tempted to assert that most of Africa’s problems are self-inflicted and add that they are insurmountable. This is debatable. However, this book is compulsory reading not only for philosophy students but anybody interested in understanding the basis of some of the problems that bedevil this continent and, of course, efforts being made to resolve them.

* Mr. Kibaba Makokha is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, Kenyatta University, P.O Box 43844, Nairobi, Kenya.