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Consolationism and Comparative African Philosophy: Beyond Universalism and Particularism, by Ada Agada

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Ada Agada is one of the most vocal voices of the Conversational School of Philosophy (CSP). In *Consolationism and Comparative African Philosophy: Beyond Universalism and Particularism*, Agada aims to provide clarity on the philosophical tenets of Consolationism, his project on system building that is central to the future direction and development of African philosophy. The book is divided into three parts: The first part focuses on the universalism-particularism conundrum in African philosophy, the second part is concerned with explicating the basic preoccupations of Consolation philosophy, and the third part focuses on cross-cultural and comparative philosophy which is one of the central themes of conversational philosophy.

In the first part of the book, Agada explores the universalism-particularism divide that characterised the formative historical years of what he terms "modern African philosophy" that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century. This divide is characterised by two struggles (p. 4):

> The first struggle is the struggle of a universal reason domesticated in Africa to produce original philosophical concepts that are traceable to Africa, conceived both as a physical geographical space and an epistemic domain of thought determined by distinctive worldviews of (black) Africans. The second is the struggle to shake off the pervasive and domineering influence of Western intellectual culture in African life, a struggle often expressed in the project called decolonisation.

Against this backdrop, Agada established his defence of ethnophilosophy as "the one true particularist perspective which very early described the future trajectory of African philosophy" (p. 5). Agada favours the particularist position despite the criticisms that have been levelled against it by universalists like Paulin Hountondji, Marcien Towa,

Peter Bodunrin, and Bernard Matolino, to mention but four. Ethnophilosophy has been primarily criticised as lacking analytical rigour by the universalists. In response to this criticism, Agada avers that the radical critique of ethnophilosophy is a result of what he describes as "impatience with the slow evolution of African philosophy" (p. 11). The universalists' impatience can, however, be questioned as one philosophical tradition does not require the (im)patience of another to develop at its own pace. Piggybacking on this defence of ethnophilosophy, he introduces consolationism as a system-building project in African philosophy and as a viable pathway to transcending the universalism-particularism conundrum.

Moving forward, Agada expatiates the motivation for consolationism—his philosophical system—as being a response to "the discontent of the melancholy being" (p. 63) or *homo melancholicus*. The idea of "mood" is central to Agada's consolationist system. It is what the author calls "the fundamental principle in the consolationist system" (p. 62). *Mood* is rooted in "emotion" and it is the unifying principle of the consolationist metaphysics. The consolationist system seeks to answer two primary questions that concern the existential condition of the melancholy being, namely: "(1) Is human life futile? and (2) Is the universe pointless?" (p. 62). In answer to the first question, the author affirms that indeed human life has meaning. However, on the second question, the author errs on the side of caution even as he affirms a hypothesis that supports the pointlessness of the universe. This pointlessness provides the ground for the yearning of *homo melancholicus* in search of purpose. It is this striving that "defines the condition or state of being in a universe characterised by yearning and in which the goal of yearning, which is perfection, is unattainable" (p. 63) which defines consolationism as a philosophical system.

In the second part of the book, Agada lists and critically analyses six basic premises of consolationism. In his analysis of the concept of *mood* which for Agada constitutes the eternal and primary stuff of the consolationist universe, he claims that *mood* is the proto-mind that produces "mindness in things" (p. 87). It is also "a unity of the physical and the minded" (p. 87). Agada further dematerialises and dementalises *mood* by conceptualising it as a "primordial mind-matter interface." Agada's goal here is to blur the traditional line between the material and the immaterial conception of the universe. To achieve this unification, Agada presents *mood* as an "event" that is characterised by "phases of reality," rather than two independent aspects of reality. The problem with this conception of *mood* which is contained in the third premise of consolationism is that it is more or less, a commitment to all and none. By committing to an "eventist state" that asserts neither strong physicalism nor strong panpsychism, the success of Agada's unification goal becomes questionable as he fails to clearly define where *mood* is situated in the physical and minded boundaries. Where an attempt is made to situate *mood* in the Idoma-African concept of *owo* as a "ubiquitous mind-matter essence," Agada leans more to the immaterial or minded aspect of reality as indicated in the fact that the greater force of animation which gives rise to physicality lies with the proto-

mind which is immaterial. This weakens the neutralising effect of the "eventist" phases of reality.

Another interesting claim made by Agada is that "the spontaneous emergence of the universe as an eternal expression of *mood*" is a "tragic eventuality because there was no reason for being to cross the fatalistic threshold of existence" (p. 97). My question to Agada would be: Does the universe—or being in its animated form—require a reason to exist? Would the idea of a reason for existence not impose limitations on the universe, thus supposing a deterministic framework that is incompatible with the idea of freedom embodied by the yearning principle that defines *mood?* Put differently, is the idea of animation and emergence made possible by the inchoate yearning of *mood* not indicative of freedom—even though the said freedom is unattainable? Would the idea of freedom not fit more into the idea of an incomplete universe rather than a complete one? Answers to these questions would provide clarity on the contradictions that seem to overshadow some of the aspects of Agada's conception of *mood*.

Moving forward, in chapters 5 and 6, Agada wades into the perennial problem of evil which has dominated philosophical discussions for thousands of years, and the plight of the melancholy being—*homo melancholicus*—in search of joy at every point in life whose pursuit always fails because of the certainty of death and the impossibility of completeness woven into the fabric of the consolationist universe. On the problem of evil, Agada submits, "Evil erupts necessarily as a consequence of the incompleteness of being, it is a natural phenomenon" (p. 119). Thus, in the consolationist system, "Whatever exists shares in the guilt of existence, therefore" (p. 119). This presupposes evil being built into the world by the nature of its limitations and futile striving for completeness. The consequence of this argument implicates Agada's male God as not just being capable of evil but sharing in the structural evil that is built into the universe. However, Agada's proto-panpsychist conception of the universe fails to engage the position of the atheist whose non-theistic materialistic conception of the universe rejects the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and all-good God whether conceived from the classical theistic perspective or the consolationist incompleteness framework.

In the third and final part of the book, Agada engages the theme of cross-cultural and comparative philosophy by establishing the necessity for dialogue between African and non-African philosophies in the face of a rapidly changing world. The dialogue Agada proposes is anchored on conversational thinking which seeks to open up new perspectives on intercultural philosophy by exploring conceptual schemes across diverse thought traditions for the global expansion of thought in an increasingly multicultural intellectual space. In chapter 8, Agada discusses the notion of being in African and Western philosophies, engaging the metaphysical thoughts of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche from the Western tradition, and Kwame Gyekye, Mogobe Ramose, and Innocent Asouzu from the African tradition to open up new ways of approaching the question of being from a consolationist perspective. Agada also

engages the thoughts of Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger in an existentialist conversation to show the futility of human yearning for perfection in an imperfect universe. Agada's goal in this conversation is to establish how these thinkers compare and contrast with his metaphysical conceptualisation of *mood* as the ultimate reality. One important thing to note in this chapter is the fact that Agada prioritises the event of consciousness over the material body in his order of the implications of the animating principle of *mood*. This prioritisation leans more towards mentalism and establishes the "non-material" aspect of being as the base of the consolationist proto-panpsychist metaphysics.

In the last chapter, Agada puts his comparative project to the test through a comparative conversational analysis of his idea of the intellectual love of God with that of Benedict Spinoza and Asouzu. Here, Agada, in line with the goal of intercultural philosophy, demonstrates through comparison and contrast how Spinoza's and Asouzu's philosophies answer the God-question from a consolationist framework through their affirmation of the limitations of *homo melancholicus* in an incomplete universe. God, in Agada's incomplete universe, exists solely as the highest form of consolation for the *homo melancholicus*. One issue Agada fails to clarify here is why God is apotheosised and prioritised—and metaphysically given the status of perfection—over other entities in a consolationist universe that is fundamentally characterised by imperfection.

The book is written in simple language that provides clarity on the issues discussed, particularly when compared with the author's first work on consolationism, *Existence and Consolation: Reinventing Ontology, Gnosis, and Values in African Philosophy*, published in 2015 by Paragon House. Despite the clarity of the author's language in espousing the basic tenets of consolationism as a viable solution to the universalism-particularism conundrum and other strengths of the book, some weaknesses are worthy of mention. Notable is the lack of a proper distinction between *ubuntu* and complementarism. In the first part of the book, the author equated *ubuntu* with complementarism (p. 36). However, he failed to make a distinction between his understanding of *ubuntu*—as complementarism—as used by Ramose and complementarism as conceptualised by Asouzu. The need for such a distinction becomes necessary when one considers the lack of a single rendition of the meaning of *ubuntu* across the Southern African peoples. One question that runs through the book that seeks an answer from Agada is this: Does the claim that *mood* is a "permanent incompleteness" not implicate *mood* as a complete incompleteness thus making it a perfect imperfection?

Lastly, one might ask: Did the author succeed in establishing how consolationism provides a synthesis that transcends the universalism-particularism divide as pronounced at the beginning of the book? Here, I would say that in line with the consolationist system, his attempt was incomplete. The proto-panpsychist framework of consolationism which Agada presents in an attempt to explain away the universalism-particularism divide through an *eventist yearning organising principle* that implicates

mentalism and materiality in *mood* lacks precision. Agada admits this himself (see p. 159). However, the incompleteness of Agada's attempt does not undermine the originality of his ideas and his stellar contribution to African metaphysical discourse. I recommend this book to everyone as an excellent consolation to the human yearning for knowledge that may never be complete.