

The human will debate between western and Yoruba philosophical traditions

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ABSTRACT

Discourse on human will has a long history in the Western philosophical tradition; in fact, this history is as old as the history of Western philosophy itself. In this regard, the discourse on human will remains evergreen, with changing subject-matter from one period to another. With regard to subject-matter, the discourse on human will has significant implications for other intellectual disciplines that deal with the study of human species. As such, the paper centres on the most recurring debate in the history of the discourse on human will. The paper re-examines the various controversies that have been generated by the question whether the human will is free or not. To date, this question has had serious implications for the way we construe existence in all forms. The paper re-considers the debate within the bounds of two distinct thought-systems in the Western and Yoruba philosophical traditions. Within the context of Western thought, the paper focuses on doctrines that have evolved in the attempt to address or respond to the question whether the human will is free or not. The reason for dealing with doctrines rather than individual scholars is that it avoids the unnecessary repetition of arguments. The paper examines the works of some scholars in the Yoruba tradition who have contributed to the discourse on the fundamental question; however, these contributions misrepresent Yoruba thought. Thus, the paper argues that the question of whether human will is free or not does not arise in the Yoruba philosophical system. Analytical and phenomenological methods of research are adopted in the paper. The analytic approach is important to achieve the twin goal of explanation and clarity of concepts and issues; that is, the method will afford us the opportunity to engage with the literature and subject it to critical exposition. The phenomenological approach is significant as an interpretative tool for interrogating oral account that would properly account for the notion and conception of the human will in Yoruba thought.

Keywords: human will, determinism, non-determinism, quasi-determinism.

Introduction

In the Western intellectual tradition, the dominant discourse on the human will is whether it is free or not to perform its attributed function of initiating deliberate choice and action. In other words, discourse on the human will in Western philosophy has taken the form of a debate among thinkers in all fields that constitute knowledge, and has been live since antiquity; this debate concerns whether or not the will is free in carrying out its attributed duties.

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Since this discourse is so dominant in Western thought, it is interesting to examine Yoruba thought on the same issue in order to establish how dominant it is within that culture. Thus it is pertinent to revisit this question as it occurs in Western philosophy. However, a consideration of all the thinkers that have contributed to the discourse in one way or another is not possible because they are too numerous to be accommodated in this paper; therefore, rather than being concerned with individual philosopher's contribution to the discourse, we are concerned with the fundamentals that allow us to categorise them into various stances on the question.

In Yoruba thought, the question of whether the human will is free or not does not in fact arise; however, this does not mean that this important question eludes people. In fact, from our study, and as we hope to demonstrate, in contrast with the discourse in Western philosophy, in Yoruba thought the human will is paradoxically ascribed both free and unfree attributes. That is, a response to the question in Yoruba thought takes the form of quasi-indeterminism. By quasi-indeterminism, we mean that the human will is as free as it is unfree, as well as possessing the additional attribute of not exhibiting these traits in some circumstances, namely while initiating decisions and actions.

The question of the human will in western thought

The doctrines of pre-determinism, determinism, indeterminism, and non-determinism are popular in Western intellectual discourse on the human will. Principally, the question that each one attempts to address is whether the human will (as a constituent part of human ontology) is free or not to engage in the act of initiating deliberate choice and action. As a matter of necessity, it is important to review this question in Western philosophy in order to demonstrate the claim of each doctrine.

Pre-determinism (or fatalism) – this doctrine holds that “human choice and action have no influence on future events, which will be as they will be regardless of whatever we think or do” (Craig, 2000, p. 274). This view of pre-determinism suggests one of two things: either that the human will has been fixed from the beginning of time, or that the human will as ontologically conceived (as an immaterial constituent of human nature) is a misconception.

Determinism (or hard determinism) – this doctrine claims that “human actions and choices, without exception, are totally determined” (Feinberg, 1989, p. 342). This suggests that the process of making decisions and taking actions is predictable; that is, a decision does not occur as a first cause, rather it occurs as a result of the pre-existent criteria for a specific decision's being made having been met. This doctrine denies that we are either in control or capable of exercising our will freely.

Indeterminism (or soft-determinism) – this doctrine holds that as humans, some of our actions and decisions are

functions of human free will, while some others are causally constrained. Cogently stated:

It is only in the human realm that the indeterminist wishes to press his case. Reflex actions are 100 percent caused, since with regard to them we are not active but passive; the only area in which universal causality does not hold is in the realm of actions, the things we do. With regard to these actions – or at any rate some of them – no one will ever be able to predict them, no matter how such physiological and psychological knowledge we get about their antecedent conditions, because the causal principle does not apply to them (Hospers, 1967, p. 324-325).

Here it is clear that indeterminism does not argue against determinism completely, but only partially. In fact, indeterminism as outline above delineates the boundary of human actions and decisions that can be determined in distinction from those that are of free will.

Non-Determinism (or freewillism) – this doctrine is the “belief in freewill, which amounts to the conviction that human beings are endowed with the capacity for choice of action, for decision among alternatives, and specifically that, given an innate moral sense, man can freely discern good and evil” (Marcoulesco, 1987, p. 419). As it appears, the doctrine favours absolute freedom of the human will, wherein the will is not restrained in any form or capacity from initiating decision and action.

In other words, supporters of non-determinism (or the freewillists) affirm that human decisions and actions are autonomous choices among a number of possibilities. Against this background, a fundamental tenet of this doctrine is that humans are aware that each and every decision they take and action they perform is a free and deliberate initiative of their will, rather than the result of some previous events, decisions, or actions.

The question and some scholars on Yoruba thought

The accounts of most scholars on Yoruba thought with regard to the question of whether the human will is free or not clearly show that they are all cases of *misplaced articulations*; in other words, these accounts contain many inaccuracies, including the misapplication of terms, mis-utilization of doctrines, failure to properly appropriate conceptual equivalences in different cultures (in this case the Yoruba and Western cultures), flagrant imposition of categories of one culture unto another, and so on. Each of these inaccuracies or combinations thereof lead any intellectual account to be categorized as a case of *misplaced articulation*.

A consideration of the works of some of these scholars will vindicate our claim. For a start, the article "The Yoruba Conception of Destiny: A Critical Analysis" by Samuel Ade Ali is important. In the article, the primary aim is to establish that "[o]ri is a quasi-metaphysical entity which authenticates the uniqueness of a person in Yoruba thought" (Ali, 1994, p. 100); whether or not he succeeds in this objective is not an issue here; what is of paramount concern is the incorporation of Western doctrine(s).

According to Ali:

Ori and the idea of predestination or human destiny as one of the important tripartite elements constituting the nature of a person in Yoruba [...] implies the idea of causal explanatory paradigm in relation to human personality in Yoruba thought and this give rise to several conceptual problems such as the paradox of the alterable and unalterable destiny (1994, p. 100).

In the quote above, we see that there is a clear problem of conceptualization; first Ali takes *ori* in Yoruba thought to be identical with the idea of destiny as it appears in Western thought. Contrary to this view, *ori* is not identical with destiny; rather it is only a bearer of destiny (Gbadegesin, 2004, p. 314-315). The second problem, which is most important for our purposes here, is that the scholar seems to assume one of two things: (i) that the concept of the human will eludes the Yoruba people, and therefore, there is no need to demonstrate whether there is a will or not in Yoruba thought; and (ii) that the idea of human will is implicit in the idea of *ori*.

As a result of these conceptual problems, Ali therefore posits that

However, I maintained that the idea of causal determinism suggested by the Yoruba notion of destiny [...] is not a rigid one that makes human destiny autobiographically or naturally unalterable. Rather, it is an explanatory paradigm which coheres with the reality of responsibility, freewill and the use of reasoning faculty (1994, p. 100).

In line with this position, he posits that:

I propose and defend the claim that the Yoruba are better seen as soft-determinists rather than determinists or fatalists as some scholars on African studies would want us to believe (Ali, 1994, p. 100).

In another article titled "African Conception of Man and the Paradox of Alterable and Unalterable Destiny in Yoruba Metaphysics," Ali posits that:

In the final analysis, it is argued that the Yoruba people, given their paradoxical no-

tion of human destiny, are freewillists. They are because their conception of human destiny regards freedom as well as reason as two features which are not only immanent in the nature of man but are also basic to the survival of man and the actualization of human destiny (2007, p. 48).

In placing the two articles by the same author side-by-side, one obvious problem is that he claims in the first that the Yoruba system of thought favours soft determinism (indeterminism as explicated at the beginning of this paper), and then that it favours freewillism (non-determinism) in the second. This inconsistency regards where the Yoruba stands in respect to the question as treated in Western philosophy. So this must have been largely due to what the scholar himself identified as the "paradox" in Yoruba thought.

Ali's inconsistency started with his failure to properly identify the Yoruba equivalent of the human will. In addition to this, he employs Western concepts and terms to interrogate the Yoruba worldview, which is originally characterized by paradoxes.

In particular, the scholar thinks that *ori* is or embodies the human will. In fact, the scholar sticks to this idea and thinks that it is unnecessary to actually investigate whether the Yoruba have any conception of human will separate from *ori* or as a constituent attribute of *ori*. Unambiguously, we can see clearly that the contribution of this scholar, from a Yoruba perspective, cannot but be regarded as misplaced articulation regarding the question of whether the will is free or not.

The articles of Balogun are also of utmost interest to the present work. The first is titled "The Concept of *ori* and Human Destiny in Traditional Yoruba Thought: A Soft Deterministic Interpretation" and the second is titled "*ori* as the Sole Determinant of Human Personality in Traditional Yoruba African Thought".

In the first article, the author's principal concern is "to establish and strengthen the argument that the Yoruba are soft-determinists in their understanding of and belief in, the concept of *ori* and human destiny" (Balogun, 2007, p. 117). How far he achieves this aim may not be as important as the arsenal of Western categories he deploys to interrogate Yoruba thought regarding *ori* rather than human will.

At the outset, the scholar appears to want to demarcate the boundary between discourse on the human will and that of *ori* in Yoruba thought, when he supposes that "*ori* [,] which is of immediate concern to us in this paper, represents the individuality element in a person" (Balogun, 2007, p. 118). This sounds very much like an attempt to delineate between *ori* and the human will in Yoruba thought, and this continues to be the case since he asserts that "*ori* has nothing to do with moral character, and as such it does not affect all of human actions and/or inactions, in fact, nowhere in any of the ancient Yoruba scriptures is there the claim that moral character can be pre-determined by *ori*" (Balogun, 2007, p. 125). Without any further articulation, this shows that the author is at the

point of separating issues of *ori* from that of the human will in order to appropriately employ the Western categories of fatalism, determinism, hard-determinism, soft-determinism, and freewill.

However, he does not continue with this in subsequent paragraphs, but instead fashions the rest of the article in such a manner as to display misplaced articulation. This misplacement begins to rear its head when the author submits that “the Yoruba posit the concept of *afowofa* [...] as explanation for some of the problems that befall a person” (Balogun, 2007, p. 126).

Whatever he meant to say here, we must acknowledge that it is true that the Yoruba people talk about *afowofa* (self-caused); but the author himself fails to realize that *afowofa* does not just happen; it is in fact a descriptive word that captures the consequence(s) (particularly negative) of one’s deliberate decisions and actions initiated by one’s own will. That is, without the human will that initiates action and decision in a person, any discourse on *afowofa* will not arise, because the concept of *afowofa* is an indication that a person’s will must have led the person to a situation or condition that is described as *afowofa*.

Furthermore, most importantly, Balogun posits that

The Yoruba traces the course of some events to the individual person who performs the action and not any supernatural force outside of man. Such actions are located in the realm of natural and are empirically observable. It is for this reason that people are punished for wrongdoing because they are believed to be responsible for their actions. This then suggests that in the analysis of the concepts of ori or destiny, the Yoruba falls within the gamut of what is called ‘soft-determinism’ in metaphysical terms. The nature of ori and human destiny in Yoruba belief is neither fatalism in the strict sense of it, nor hard determinism. The Yoruba conception of human destiny is indeed soft-deterministic in nature (Balogun, 2007, p. 126).

Glaringly, this submission shows that the author himself qualifies the entire contents of his article as misplaced articulation. The first thing we should observe from the above is that in the thinking of this scholar, just like in the thinking of the scholar we considered first, the Yoruba concept of *ori* is synonymous with the Yoruba conception of the human will. Here, we think this is what is largely responsible for the misuse and mis-appropriation of Western notions (or metaphysical terms, as he calls them) of determinism, fatalism, soft-determinism, and so on.

Although, outside this glaring fact of misconception about *ori* and the human will, one would have expected this scholar to be conscious of how these Western categories should apply; in other words, the way the scholar sets out to achieve his aim, never mind the title of the paper, suggest

that he is aware that discourse on any of the Western terms of determinism, indeterminism, soft-determinism, hard-determinism, and fatalism relates to the human will.

We now turn to the second article by Balogun, because it “is a follow up” (Balogun, 2010, p. 1) to the first. In this article, Balogun’s thesis is to defend the position that “it is the combinations of the functions of ‘ori’ [...] ‘okan’ and ‘ese’ that jointly determine and constitute human personality in Yoruba thought” (Balogun, 2010, p. 1).

In the course of the article he stumbles on Kola Abimbola’s submission that “discussing ‘ori’ (Inner head) in relation to moral responsibility and autonomy as some scholars have done is misplaced” (Balogun, 2010, p. 7). Balogun might have then retraced his steps and moved away from further misplaced articulations. That is, he finds a clear enough pointer to demonstrate that discourse on determinism, indeterminism, and the likes in relation to *ori* instead of the human will is misplaced.

In sum, the works of the two scholars that have been considered here (and others not considered) on the issue of whether the human will is free or not in Yoruba thought, vis-à-vis the Western categories of determinism, indeterminism, and so on, are misplaced on the following grounds:

- (i) None of them demonstrates a clear understanding of the Yoruba conception of the human will.
- (ii) No one among them thinks of dichotomizing, or even that there is a dichotomy, between *ori* and the human will in Yoruba thought.
- (iii) By extension, they all confuse the ontological nature, status, and function of *ori* and the human will, which they see as synonymous.
- (iv) Each one mis-utilizes Western terminology to interrogate an important concept in Yoruba thought; they also impose these terminologies in their exploration of Yoruba thought on the human will question.

Thus they perform *misplaced articulations*. We now move on to an investigative and interpretative articulation of the traditional Yoruba worldview concerning the question of whether the human will is free or not in the proper performance of its function of initiating deliberate decisions and actions in the human person.

Yoruba indigenous knowledge system and the question on the human will

Above, we showed that the word *afowofa* (self-caused) is descriptive in the sense that it is employed in Yoruba to convey the negative consequences of choices arising from any individual’s human will. This simply indicates that Yoruba thought favours the position that the human will is absolutely free, which is called non-determinism in Western philosophy. This is evident in Yoruba proverbs like

'Boti wu oloju ni i se oju e' (One handles one's eyes as one so desires)

and

'A kii pe ki omode ma d'ete, b'oba ti le da igbo gbe' (No one should stop a child from having leprosy, such child only need to be ready to reside in the forest).

These proverbs clearly show the Yoruba belief in non-determinism because each reveals the exercise of free-will by individuals; in fact, the second proverb clearly calls one to exercise one's freewill in the form of a readiness to take responsibility for the consequence(s) of one's actions and decisions. If the consequence(s) of one's actions/decisions turn out to have negative effect on one, this is where the idea of *afowofa* comes in, to describe such an effect.

Further supporting the view that the Yoruba belief on the human will question is one of non-determinism, the *odu ifa Obara ofun* (Adewale-Somadhi, 2009, p. 55-56) gives credence to this in its claim that

*Ahere oko a b'idi jeere jeere
Agbalagba ejo ni i fi idobale ara re wo'le
D'ifa fun Babalawo meta
A bu fun Olumoran mefa
Nje ta ni agba
Imoran ni a nko da, ki a to da Ifa*

The hut in the farm with a big buttock
Old snake debases itself crawling
Divined for three Babalawos
Divined for six clairvoyants
The day they staged a superiority contest in Ile Ife
Who is superior?
Ifa is superior
Decision must be made first before one consults Ifa

The above *odu* is a clear demonstration that Yoruba thought on the question is better classified as non-determinism, especially considering the last line of the *odu*, which states that a *decision must be made first* before one consults ifa.

However, there is evidence suggesting that the Yoruba thought also at times favours pre-determinism, determinism, and indeterminism; that is, evidence abounds in the Yoruba worldview that people think about the freedom/unfreedom of the human will in terms of all the other doctrines of Western philosophy we have considered.

As pre-determinism, Yoruba thought supports the doctrine that the human will is a constituent part of a person that initiates decisions and actions that have been fixed in the pre-existent life of that person. Here, a person's will acts out scripts that have been written for an her in a pre-existent world; in this sense, whatever decision and action is initiated by the human will, the outcome will always be what has been

written. As evidence, it is common among the people to hear proverbs like

'Riro ni ti eniyan, Sise ni t'olorun' (A person ponders and thinks, but the almighty acts accordingly).

and

Bi a gun ata l'odo, Bi a gun ata l'olo, Iwa ata ko padai' (If pepper is grinded in the mortar or on the grinding stone, none changes the nature of the pepper).

In these proverbs, we can see that the message conveyed in each is that what will be will be, no matter how hard we endeavour to change the situation. In clear terms, the first proverb states that one's existence is designed to be lived according to the dictates of the designer – the Supreme Being.

In addition to the above, the *odu ifa Ika oturupon* (Adewale-Somadhi, 2009, p. 75-76) reveals support for pre-determinism in Yoruba belief in that:

*Ka sangbo sansan bi aladaa
D'ifa fun ajinife omo Olofin
Ka rin hooho bi eledun
D'ifa fun Sadoyanyan omobinrin Ode Owu
Tori ki won ma ba a ji mi fe
Mo fi ide werewere se eke ile
Tori ki won ma ba a ji mi fe
Mo fi ide gbaragada se ase ilekun
Won tun wa ji mi fe bee be...*

To clear the land fast
Divined for Ajinife who was Olofin's son
To walk about naked like an axe
Divined for Sadoyanyan, a female citizen of Owu town
To prevent being made love to without my consent
I bolted my doors with studded brass
To prevent being made love to without my consent
I bolted my doors with large studded brass
In spite of those precautions, I was still made love to

In this *odu*, we can see that all efforts to prevent a situation from happening do not change anything: what is design to happen actually happened.

But we also find indeterminism – the doctrine that the human will initiates some decisions and actions freely while some of its decisions and actions are caused. Yoruba belief also gives support to this doctrine. For instance, the following proverbs articulate indeterminism in Yoruba thought:

Ti a ba wo didun ifon, a o wo r'a d'egun' (If we are to consider the sweetness of scratching the skin, we shall have to scratch to the bone)

and

'*Lehin oku la a je akara itufo*' (We consume burial's bean-cake only after the death of someone).

Clearly indicated in the proverbs above is that individuals are free to act as desired, but that there are factors that limit the exercise of this freedom to act. As a point of clarification, the first proverb indicates that there is a limit to our freedom while the second additionally conveys the message that it is not in our purview to take decisions or actions in some situations.

Furthermore, the *odu ifa Ofun Nogbe* (Adewale-Somadhi, 2009, p. 111-112) clearly reveals that Yoruba thought supports indeterminism. This is because the *odu* shows that at some points in time in this material world, individual will initiates decisions and actions that are caused, and at some other points it explores the freedom associated with it. According to this *odu*:

Ti a ba wi fun ni
Ti a ba gbo
Aye a ma a ye ni
Ti a ba wi fun n
Ti a ba gba
Aye a ma a ye ni
Awi igbo
Afo igba
Babalawo ode lo se ifa fun ode
Ode nre gbo ije, eluju ije
Won ni k'oru bo
Ki o le r'ere mu bo
Ki o ma mu oti
Keke-loju omo ode Egba
Alabaja lorun omo ode Esa
Porogun matuyeri omo odo oluweri
Oni jaye nre le ijaye
Orogun ile f'awo mi lo mi

When one is warned
 And one listens and accepts the warning
 Life will be easy and comfortable for one
 When one is warned
 And one respects and obeys the warning
 Life will be easy and comfortable for one
 Refusal to listen
 Refusal to heed warning
 Ode's Babalawo gave him a fixed *ifa* medicine
 When ode was going to the forest for his usual seven days hunting expedition
 He was advised to make sacrifice
 So that he would be blessed from the expedition
 He was forbidden liquor
 Tribal-marks-on-the-face, citizen of Egba
 Tribal-marks-on-the-neck, citizen of Ijesa
 Porogun matuyeri child of river goddess
 Ijaye citizen is going back to Ijaye
 Senior wife revealed the secret of my true identity

In support of determinism – the view that all our actions and decisions are the results of previous knowable causes, Yoruba belief also claims that

Aiku ekiri, a o ko le fi awo re se gbedu' (Without the death of *Ekiri* [a kind of animal], no one uses its' skin to construct the *gbedu* [a kind of drum])

and

'Adaniloru f'agbara ko ni' (The wickedness suffered by someone make her a stronger person).

These proverbs advance the message that individuals' conduct and decisions derive from determinable causes. This is especially so in the case of the second proverb because it is impregnated with the idea that the effect of being strong results from the cause of the wickedness that one suffers in the hands of others. Also in support of this view, the *odu ifa Ogunda irete* (Adewale-Somadhi, 2009, p. 66-65) speaks thus:

Kukunduku a b'ewe gerugeru
Opo oogun a gun' mo galegale
Bi o ba lopoo ogun, bi o ba l'eke
Eke o ni je o je
Inuire je ju ewe lo
D'ifa fun Ooni Alanak'esuu
Eyi ti ko gbudo ko ohun ifa sile

Sweet potato with fresh leaves
 Possession and knowledge of too many charms and spells intoxicate
 If you have potent charms and spells and you are dishonest
 Your dishonesty will render the charms and spells impotent
 Honesty and goodwill work better than charms and spells
 Divined for the king Ooni Alanak'esuu
 Who must follow ifa's advice and injunctions.

We can see that Yoruba thought is so rich that it also gives support to determinism as a metaphysical doctrine in relation to the question of human will. On this note, we may go on and on providing evidence from Yoruba thought that supports any of these doctrines in Western philosophy on the question whether the human will is free or not; and this may lead any onlooker to conclude that thought on the issue is inconsistent.

We must point out here that it is not a crime for a cultural intellectual tradition to be embedded with evidence and support for multiple doctrines on an issue. The idea of personhood (see Makinde, 2007; Akintola, 1999; Oladipo, 1992; Awolalu and Dopamu, 2005 [1979]; Abimbola, 1971; Idowu, 1962, and others) in Yoruba thought has a useful purpose to

serve in this sense: the conception of the freedom/unfreedom of the human will in Yoruba thought remains salient and paradoxical in this worldview.

The above observation notwithstanding, there is evidence in Yoruba thought that can give credence to all known doctrines in Western philosophy; and in spite of the fact that the initiation of decisions and actions in individuals remains a paradox (both in the pre-existent and physical existence of a person), the Yoruba position on the question can best be described as quasi-indeterminism.

By quasi-indeterminism, I mean that the Yoruba belief is neither for nor against the (im)possibility of a free/unfree human will; in other words, the Yoruba belief is devoid of this question. This contention is explicitly established by the Yoruba expression that *Aditulaiye*, meaning life is paradoxical (or is a paradox).

The paradoxes of life, as held in Yoruba thought, explain the intermittent shifts of the Yoruba position on the question of whether the human will is free or not. These alternatives on the question of the human will in the material world (even in the pre-existent life of human beings) are not combinable in any of the available doctrines in Western philosophy. Therefore, by quasi-indeterminism, we mean that the elements of freedom and unfreedom (as well as neither) characterize the human will question in Yoruba thought.

Conclusion

We have examined the human will question as it exists in Western philosophy by demonstrating the various metaphysical doctrines that characterized the discourse. We specifically articulated that in the Western intellectual tradition the question is constituted by four main doctrines: pre-determinism (or fatalism), determinism (or hard determinism), indeterminism (or soft determinism), and non-determinism (or freewillism).

In the paper, we demonstrated that some of the known analyses of the Yoruba perspective are misleading. These contributions are misleading because scholars have mis-equated the human will with *ori* in Yoruba thought.

In this connection, we are able to show that the idea of the human will is not elusive in Yoruba thought; and *ori* is not the Yoruba equivalent of the human will (see Shitta-Bey, 2014, for the Yoruba equivalent and conception of the human will). In sum, the paper has shown that the Yoruba belief in the human will question cannot be pinned down to any of the known metaphysical doctrines in Western philosophy; rather the Yoruba belief on the question is best categorized as quasi-indeterminism.

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