

## PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO GOD-DEFINITION QUESTION: THE CONTEXT OF MERCY

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### **Abstract**

*It is difficult to define God. This definitional intricacy is dependent on two factors: the complexity of definition as a term and the obscurity of God-question. The resultant effect is the divergent voices concerning the nature of God as represented by theists, atheists and agnostics. This research, nonetheless, aligns with theists and so argues for the possibility of attaining a definition of God: via affirmativa (affirmative way), via negativa (negative way), via conjunctiva (way of conjunction) and via analogia (way of analogy). Of specific note, it underscores via analogia as the optimum definitional option for God-definition problem. Further, this research notes that the complexity of God-definition question dovetails into contextual definition of God - that is, definition of God from any of his attributes. In this work, the stress is on his attribute of mercy. But the discourse on God from the aperture of mercy, though perspectival, is inkling into an exhaustive theistic definition of God. It subsists as one of the gateways to a more realistic definition of God. Consequently, it complements and reinforces other attributive definition of God essentially and ontologically. Ipso facto, mercy corroborates other divine attributes. Such harmony constitutes the index for conceiving justice-mercy relationship.*

**Key Words:** God, Mercy, Justice, Definition, Analogia.

### **Introduction**

Can one actually define God given the fact that definition is often fraught with many problems? This constitutes one of the basic epistemological questions that have agitated the minds of thinkers down the ages. It is a basic fact of human beings' academic life experience that there is never a consensus among thinkers on any particular field of life. What obtain most often are divergent views, at times contradictory rather than complementary. This accounts for describing many disciplines as multi-definable. For instance, philosophy has as many definitions as there are philosophers. Each thinker attempts to define it from his perspective. Each presents his definition as the final, and of course, as the perfect update of the previously held definitions. On the contrary, it is a common experience that the reverse is the case. Claims and counter claims by various proponents of various disciplines have led people to cast doubt on the legitimacy of certain disciplines. Philosophy has, because of such problem attracted a question like: why philosophy? Some even describe it as scandalous: a situation

where a discipline which proffers to offer solutions to human predicaments fails to initiate such therapeutic exercise from within; that is, by first healing itself.

God-definition question is caught up in similar definitional web as described above. There are as many definitions of God as there are thinkers on such issue. Some gave theistic interpretation to it. Embodied here are the pantheists like Baruch Spinoza; the panentheists like Alfred North Whitehead, F. Cranse, C. Hartshorne; the fideists such as William of Ockham; the idealists like Plato, Hegel, Schelling, Fichte; the Spiritualists like Leibniz, Henri Bergson; the immanentists like Maurice Blondel; and the ontologists like St Anselm. Others include: Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and so on. There were likewise some who adopt atheistic stand, such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Sigmund Freud, Jean Paul Sartre, to name but a few. Similarly, there are thinkers who maintain neutral ground. In this camp are the agnostics like Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Voltaire, and Bertrand Russell; the sophists like Protagoras, Gorgias; and the logical positivist like Alfred Jules Ayer. But whichever position one adopts has its implications and complications.

At a narrower level, the attempt to define God from the pedestal of mercy is also fraught with myriad of problems. Just like God-definition question in general, most often the divine attribute, mercy, used of God can be taken from various dimensions. It can be seen as a description of the limitations of God and so a depiction of weakness on the side of God. Similarly, it can be perceived as a corruption of majesty and supremacy of God. To this last frame of mind, the concept, mercy, illustrates a deliberate intention of God to compromise his divinity and his immutable throne of justice. At the same time, there is the tendency to conceive mercy as a positive attribute, and in fact, as an inherent quality of God. The aim of this work, however, is to weigh the above conflicting views about mercy. To achieve this objective, this work undertakes a critical consideration of the possibility or impossibility of God-definition question from the aperture of his attributes. The above justification is required as a guarantee of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of God-definition question from the aperture of mercy. As rational inquiry into the concept of mercy is incomplete without reference to its impact on human beings, this work likewise discusses the place of man in this "mercy-defined-God" inquest.

### **God-Definition Question**

In this context, 'God-definition question' deals with man's rational attempt to articulate the reality, God, within the spectrum of human understanding. The

focus here is on how man can rationally understand God. But the difficulties pervading and paralyzing such intellectual inquiry are the abstract and contentious nature of the reality under consideration. As a reality, God is within the circumference of the supra-sensible. Realities of that nature have not only bent epistemology towards idealism with a partial or even a total mistrust of senses; but have as well attracted the hatred and utter rejection of counter-idealist theorist. Metaphysics is not spared. Metaphysics' claim to investigate into such realities has inspired philosophers like Hume and his cohort to advocate for committing metaphysics of that nature to flame. "The only abstract objects of the abstract science of demonstration are quantity, number and all attempts to extend this more perfect species of knowledge beyond these bounds are mere sophistry and illusion." (Hume, 63). The same frame of mind was expressed by Alfred Jules Ayer when he notes:

We may accordingly define a metaphysical sentence as a sentence which purports to express a genuine proposition, but does, in fact, express neither a tautology nor an empirical hypothesis. And as tautologies and empirical hypothesis form the entire class of significant propositions, we are justified in concluding that all metaphysical assertions are nonsensical. (Ayer, 24).

It must be noted that adherence to the above concept of metaphysics is counterproductive. "Theology in particular ends up neglected together with occult, emotions or even insanity." (Petryk Zadarnowski, <http://jantar.Org>). Then conscious of the above problem surrounding inquiry into meta-empirical realities, it is relevant to cast doubt on the possibility or impossibility of God-definition question; given the experiential facts regarding the difficulties humans encounter in their attempt to define temporal realities. Consequently, in the face of this apparent definitional paralysis, complicated by the irresistible penchant for demystification of God-definition question, suffice it to consider in some details the impossibility and possibility of embarking on such epistemological/metaphysical issue. Yet, it is relevant to note that this work is not concerned with the proof or argument for God's existence. Already, this work takes such inquiry as unnecessary as existence of God is considered here as a presupposition.

### **Impossibility of Defining God**

Definition of God is a controversial one. The controversy is predicated upon two factors, namely: on the ground of paralysis of definition; and on the nature of God as divine.

## **Paralysis of Definition**

To define denotes a limitation, circumvention of reality in the midst of comity of realities. It is to create a boundary between a given reality and other realities. Definition can also mean digging into a given reality to uncover or discover what lies inside it. The excavation into the nature of reality is not identical with Michel Foucault's archeology of knowledge. Foucault had under his principle of exteriority sustained that "...we are not to burrow to the hidden core of discourse, to the heart of the thought or meaning manifested in it; instead, taking the discourse itself, its appearance and its regularity, that we should look for its external conditions of existence, for that which gives rise to the chance series of these events and fixes its limits". (Foucault, <http://www.appstate.edu/~stanovskydj/discourse.pdf>). What he actually meant is that in human beings' interpretation of reality, the inquirers are only "...to look at the surface of what is said, rather than to try to interpret language in terms of what stands behind it, be that hidden meaning, structures, or subjects". (Kelly, Mark, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/foucault/>). Thus, Foucault calls for rejection of such notions as tradition, influence, development and evolution, and 'spirit. He rather insists:

We must question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognised from the outset; we must oust those forms and obscure forces by which we usually link the discourse of one man with that of another; they must be driven out from the darkness in which they reign. And instead of according them unqualified, spontaneous value, we must accept, in the name of methodological rigour, that, in the first instance, they concern only a population of dispersed events. (Foucault, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/>)

The notion of definition in this work is akin to *deconstro-reconstructive* process. This process is similar to Habermas's idea of reconstruction which is the act of "taking a theory apart and putting it back again in a new form in order to attain more fully the goal it has set for itself." (Habermas, Jurgen, 95). Habermasan definition as expressed above comprises two processes: deconstruction and reconstructive. But deconstruction is here understood in the sense of Heideggerian *destruktion* - destruction (Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, 88). In Heideggerian framework, destruction is conceived in contrast to Nietzschean demolition but rather in the context of dismantling or liquidating (Heidegger,

*What is Philosophy?*, 71-73). It can also be conceived in the sense of Derridean *deconstruction* - even though he tried to dissociate himself from that idea (Derrida, *Letter to a Japanese friend*, 270-276; Derrida, *The Time is out of Joint*: 14-41). Deconstruction is similar to Husserlian *abbau* - dismantling or unbuilding (Mishara, 35. Cf. Hua 11/125). It is equally akin to Emmanuel Levinas' idea of openness to the other. *Deconstruction* "...is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word analysis itself, which etymologically means, "to undo" - a virtual synonym for "to de-construct." (Barbara, 1981).

But *deconstruction* as used in this work is much deeper than the above original meaning of analysis, for it involves in-depth inquest into the totality of being and accommodates the metaphysical realm of existence which the latter (analysis) does not recognize. This is why Barbara writing on deconstruction in relation to text affirms: "The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another." (Barbara, 1981)

In this context, it is apparent that deconstruction involves..."discovering, recognizing, and understanding the underlying - and unspoken and implicit - assumptions, ideas, and frameworks that form the basis for thought and belief." Deconstruction provides the intellectual window for possible rational separation of the substantial domain of realities from mere accidents.

Deconstruction makes feasible the identification of the *definienses* for onward integration into a meaningful whole, which subsequently illuminates and unveils the specificity of the *definiendum* as a separate entity, through the reconstructive process. "The work of reconstruction takes a serious account of how and where systems of the past indicate the need for reconstruction in the present moment". (Dewey, John, xi). In reconstruction, the *definienses* are eventually gathered not indiscreetly but in rapport with the principle of ontological similitude. The stress at this level is not on apparent similarity of the *definienses* but rather on the identification graduated on the intrinsic nature of the realities. Emphasis on ontological similitude is essential in this perspective as a caveat against arbitrary integration of *definienses* to constitute a definition of a *definiendum*. This last process brings to climax the *deconstro-reconstructive* process required for the definition of anything: be it at stipulative, lexical, précising, theoretical or persuasive definitional platform, respectively. It is of note that Ballard considers

the aforementioned definitional platforms as the "five types of definition." (Ballard, 57). So, definition does not deal with just the phenomenal aspect of realities. Rather, it considers both the phenomenal and the noumenal facets of realities. From the phenomenon, one proceeds to the basic or intrinsic features of the realities in question (the noumenon). Definition is hence a com-penetration of the phenomenal and noumenal phases of realities. It is the integration and articulation of these two aspects of one and the same reality into a rational whole. This articulation can be done in four ways: via *affirmativa* (affirmative way), via *negativa* (negative way), via *conjunctiva* (way of conjunction) and *via analogia* (way of analogy).

In affirmation, one highlights the highpoint of the reality under investigation. The concentration at this point is on the constitutive elements of the reality in question. This approach goes to emphasize qualities that are specific about the issue or being under consideration. In a simple language, under affirmation, the inquirer deliberates on highlighting what a given reality under discourse is: the positive indicator about the reality. In contrast, under negation, the inquirer begins by pointing out what the reality is not. The definitional thrust in this purview is on those qualities or appellation that can never be attributed to the reality in question. Realities possess certain attributes that primarily belong to them as distinct beings. To discuss these realities outside these fundamental attributes constitutes what can be described as a robbery in the ontology of being. This implies a kind of denial to a being what belongs to its intrinsic nature, which in strict interpretation signals a deliberate attempt to obscure the being. Ontologically, such attempt at best, can be described as a trespass into the domain of the indestructible: for being can never be destroyed or annihilated ultimately.

In-between *via affirmativa* and *via negativa* is *via conjunctiva*. Under *via conjunctiva*, the inquirer describes or discusses the phenomenon in relational perspective, by comparing and defining it from comparative perspective. The investigative search is directed in this context on the basic relationship between a given reality and other realities. In this viewpoint, a given reality is defined as a member of other realities. Class factor plays outstanding role here. A given reality is considered in the comity of related realities. The idea behind this definitional approach is the understanding that no reality is occupying a monadic status. Each exists as a reality among other realities of similar or the same class. A typical instance here is the concept 'man' which can be defined as a rational being (*via affirmativa*); a being devoid of mortal soul (*via negativa*); and as a being

belonging to the class of mammals (*via conjunctiva*). A reality can also be defined *via analogia*. This lies between the principle of univocation and equivocation. Analogy may be defined as:

...the use of a term to designate a perfection or analogon found in a similar way in two or more subjects or analogates, in each of which the perfection is partly the same and partly different. In univocal predication, predicates have an absolute meaning and can be accurately and distinctly defined in themselves. But strictly analogous predicates cannot be so defined; their meaning is proportional to the subjects of which they are predicated. The reason for this difference is that univocal terms arise by a complete abstraction from the particular subjects in which the perfection is present, so that the difference in the subject does not enter into their meaning. Analogous terms, on the other hand, arise by the incomplete abstraction known as separation, and on this account they retain a relation to a primary subject. A consequence of this is that there is no clear meaning for an analogous predicate, since it must always include in its definition a reference to the subject from which it was derived. (Wallace, 88-89)

However, what captures empirical realities most is the first one (*via affirmativa*). It does not give room for confusion or conflicting situation. The way of negation states what a thing is not. But what a thing is not is not specific to that reality. There are other realities which possess the same description. For instance, human being can be defined as a reality who is not God. But other realities can equally be described thus, since they are not God. Similarly, definition by conjunction is deficient as it offers a relational definition of reality which is not the sole and sacred property of the phenomenon. By indicating that a particular reality belongs to a class of being, the inquirer is not specifically giving unique information about the being in view. At most, the information it offers can best be described as a stepping stone towards the realization of the fundamental about the reality at issue.

The fact of the paralysis of definition does not stem from the four dimensions of engaging into definition issue discussed above. The problem, nevertheless, is based on the dual arguments that the term definition is a misnomer; and the related contention that no word has a meaning unless when viewed from a context. The thesis that definition is a misnomer sustains that it is impossible to define a thing. Instead, what is advocated is description, so that every definition is per se, a description of a sort. Following this argument, to talk about definition is a mistake in term. It is a mistaken displacement of the concept of description

for that of definition. This mode of reasoning conceives every definition as a scratching of a reality from a particular standpoint; which in its estimation is insufficient to stand as having captured the essence of the reality under discussion. Thus, every attempt to define a term or a concept only ends in unveiling an aspect of the reality. For this frame of thought, the described aspect cannot subsist as the whole but remains a part of the whole.

Similar definitional attitude is that which conceives definition as contextual. For this mode of reasoning no word has a meaning outside a context. The contextual consideration of words renders every attempt to define such words or realities an entry into the domain of the '*impossible*.' Nonetheless, the major implication of this mode of thinking about definition is that it frustrates all efforts at objective consideration of any reality whatsoever. The meaning of every reality is judged from a particular epistemological and metaphysical binocular. What is taken as the meaning of a particular word can change with change in the context in which it is perceived. At this, the whole idea of objectivity of truth is brought to serious dispute. It implies that one cannot talk of objective truth. Rather, what takes precedence is relativism and subjectivism. Following this trend, nothing has an objective meaning. Every meaning is contextually considered and judged. The Protagorean theorem comes into play here. Thus, "man is the measure of all things, of those that are that they are, of those that are not that they are not." (Protagoras, Fragment 1. In. Copleston, 87). Another negative impact of the above attitude to definition is the fact of endless search for context on which to base one's definition of a term or reality. In this understanding, every definition requires a context to be meaningful. Then, the background itself requires another framework to justify itself and this continues to infinity leading to *regressio ad infinitum* (regression to infinity), and *ipso facto regressio ad absurdum* (regression to absurdity). In this situation any attempt to define a thing amounts a fruitless inquiry into endless search for justification for the legitimacy of the term or reality in question. The consequence of this for God-definition question is that such intellectual project is at most descriptive of an abortive investigation into the rational articulation of God. Hence, it conceives the idea of achieving a definition of God as similar to what Shakespeare describes as a story told by an idiot signifying nothing.

### **The Nature of God as Divine**

The central issues to be considered in this segment are the infinity of God and finitude of man. God is conceived as an infinite being. The infinitude of God is expressed in every of his attribute since "*agere sequitur (esse)* -action follows

being." (Bretzke, James 13, <https://books.goggle.com.ng>). Of course, the afore-highlighted statement is in tandem with the cliché: 'as a being is so it acts.' By virtue of this philosophical position, as God is infinite, everything about him follows suit. That being the case, to seek for the definition of God implies an effort at grasping his essence in its infinitude. In this context, definition indicates an intellectual quest and ascent into the essence or the *quiddity* of a reality. In the case of God, it represents humans' honest intellectual endeavours to grasp what could be considered as the key to understanding the reality of God. This key constitutes the kernel or "*the kpim*," (Iroegbu, 373) of God. In a more specific Igbo terminology, it can be described as the "*kpom-kwem*" of God. The *kpom-kwem* of God designates the nucleus or the DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) of God. It is the point of points which provides the wide vistas for accessing God-reality issues. Through this divine aperture, it is possible to expand one's scope and visions about God. To have succeeded in the intellectual ascent to this realm of epistemological/metaphysical apprehension of God is indicative of success in the establishment of indubitable legitimate philosophical foundation of God-reality question. But the apparent impasse encountered in this intellectual discourse is the tension between the limitedness of human intellect which inquires into this limitless divine essence.

The complexities above harp on the possibility or impossibility of capturing divine essence with finite human intellect. It questions how man, a finite being, can access the *quiddity* of God, using limited and deficient human intellect and reason. The situation exacerbates on realization that whatever is perceived is conceived according to the mode of the perceiver. Put in an articulate Aquinine rendition: "For it is clear that whatever is received into something is received according to the condition of the recipient (*Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*). (Aquinas, Thomas, 1a, q. 75, a. 5, [http://www.documenta-catholica.eu/d\\_1225-1274-%20Thomas%20Aquinas%20-%20Summa%20Theologiae](http://www.documenta-catholica.eu/d_1225-1274-%20Thomas%20Aquinas%20-%20Summa%20Theologiae)).

What Aquinas actually sets out to affirm is that:

...knowledge is regulated according as the thing known is in the knower. But the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower. Hence the knowledge of every knower is ruled according to its own nature. If therefore the mode of anything's being exceeds the mode of the knower, it must result that the knowledge of the object is above the nature of the knower. (Aquinas, Thomas, 1a, q. 12, a. 4, [http://www.documenta-catholica.eu/d\\_1225-1274-%20Thomas%20Aquinas%20-%20Summa%20Theologiae](http://www.documenta-catholica.eu/d_1225-1274-%20Thomas%20Aquinas%20-%20Summa%20Theologiae)).

In effect, it implies that divine essences are only perceived by human intellect according to the mode of human intellect. Consequently, this approach raises the question of whether what man grasps is divine essence or mere semblance of divine essence which is a product of man's conjectures. In this framework, God is created in the image and likeness of man. This mode of thought is clearly expressed by Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach in his work *The Essence of Christianity*: "What was formerly contemplated and worshipped as God is now perceived to be something human." (Feuerbach, Ludwig Andreas, 13). This implies that "man - man is the mystery of religion - projects his being into objectivity." (Feuerbach, Ludwig Andreas, 30). Subsequently, "the yearning of man after something above himself is nothing else than the longing after the perfect type of his nature, the yearning to be free from himself, i.e., from the limits and defects of his individuality." (Feuerbach, Ludwig Andreas, 281). By implication, "all divine attributes, all the attributes which make God, God, are attributes of the species - attributes which in the individual are limited..." (Feuerbach, Ludwig Andreas, 152-153). Sequel to Feuerbach's notion of God, "a really finite being has not even the faintest adumbration, still less consciousness, of an infinite being, for the limit of the nature is also the limit of the consciousness." (Feuerbach, Ludwig Andreas, 2). Hence, what man conjectures is a mere expression of disfigured and corrupted nature of God or at most, a very limited notion or idea of God. Invariably, human's bid to grasp the divine essence, following the logic above, ends up in the construction and conception of admixture of God. This, in the terminology of natural sciences, can be described as kind of "philosophical alloy". Here, it designates invalid and unwarranted philosophical fusion of the divine essence and man's fabrication of the same.

Man from this perspective can be ascribed as incapable of accessing into the innermost or the quiddity of God. The best he can achieve in the above frame of thought is a corrugated and besmirched mixture of the divine essence and the intellectual construct of the knower: an essentially distorted intellectual modification of God. Then, if what is perceived is a misconstrued and warped nature of God, one can sustain that definition of God is a myth. Subsequently, the inevitable logical conclusion is that man has no faculty or capacity for such meta-empirical or metaphysical engagement. In effect, the human's rational attempt to define God ends up, a banal intellectual exercise in misconstruction of God: a kind of muddling up or *complexification* of God-definition question. But before one concludes and resigns to the above idea, suffice it to wade into the idea of possibility of God-definition question.

## **Possibility of God-Definition Question**

Aristotelian-Thomistic epistemological tradition upholds and propagates that humans possess faculties for knowledge both at the sensitive level and at intellectual plane. Man is capable of knowing things in their particularities. He is equipped with five external senses: the sense of sight (vision), hearing (audition), touch (feeling), taste (gustation) and smell (olfaction). Each of these senses has a corresponding sense organ. The ear is responsible for hearing. The body opens humans to sense of touch and feelings. The tongue empowers him to access the taste of things; and with the nose he perceives smells. "...The senses indeed do not know being except under the conditions of here and now." (Aquinas, Thomas, 1a, q.75 a.6). The validity of the external senses as legitimate epistemological apparatus is attested by the fact that "... if a sense be wanting, the knowledge of what is apprehended through the sense is also wanting. For instance, a man who is borne blind can have no knowledge of colours." (Aquinas, Thomas, 1a, q.84, a. 3).

At the same time, humans are endowed with four internal senses: common sense (*sensus communis*), phantasy (or imagination), estimative senses and memorative powers. Aquinas sums up the functions of these internal senses as well as their nexus with the external senses thus:

Therefore, for the reception of sensible forms, the "proper sense" and the common sense are appointed...But for the retention and preservation of these forms, the phantasy or imagination is appointed which is the store house of forms received through the senses...For the apprehension of intentions which are not through the senses, the estimative power is appointed; and for the preservation of them, the memorative power, which is a store-house of such intentions... ((Aquinas, Thomas, 1a, q.78, a. 4)

The common sense is the direct link between the external senses and the other internal senses. It performs the role of unification of the sense data provided by the external senses, distinguishes, divides, arranges and rearranges them into a meaningful whole. The external senses conceive different aspects or qualities of a reality but it is the common sense that assembles these different dimensions or qualities of the one and the same reality as this or that reality. In order to make available the information obtained by the common sense, humans possess also the imaginative sense or phantasy. Through this sense, humans are endowed with the capacity for conservation and reproduction of the object of the common sense, even when the known (physical object) is not present to the knower (subject).

The estimative sense or particular reason is an instinctual power in humans which enables them to gather things in consideration of their presumed values or to avoid things in relation to their assumed risks. For Aristotle, it is called power of nature or instinct. Finally, memorative power brings to consciousness the data of the past. It does not negate the temporality of this data in the event of recasting this past memory. To differentiate it from intellectual memory, memorative sense is also called the sensuous or sensitive memory. In general, like the external senses, the information obtained at the level internal senses is fraught with materiality. It has not yet reached the level of intellection which is the domain of things in their universality. At the level of the senses, be it in the external senses or in the common senses, the human mind is yet to attain the status of being able to permeate the innermost depth of reality to grapple with what Kant calls 'things in themselves' or in Aristotelian-Thomistic phraseology, 'the substantial form' or in Platonic rendition, the 'form' of things.

As superior of other primates, especially, of animal kingdom, humans have the capacity for intellection. This capacity is the intellect which is "cognitive faculty, which apprehends non-material things and apprehends material things in a manner free from the limitations of sense-cognition." (Gleen, Paul. J. 65). According to Aquinas, the intellect is of two kinds: active and passive intellect respectively. The information contained in the common sense is abstracted by the active intellect as impressed specie. In turn, the impressed specie is taken to passive intellect as expressed specie. "The interplay of this active and passive intellect makes the potentially intelligible species to be an actively intelligible species. This takes place via the intellectual knowing process." (Nnaemedo, Bartholomew, 32). At the level of intellection, humans are not only capable of knowing things in their particularity. They are able to know things in their first principles - universalities. The level of intellection is the level knowledge is communicable. What one actually communicates is not the particularity about things but rather their universal principles. This is why immateriality is at the root of knowledge. The veracity of the above truth claim is authenticated by the human being's capacity for conceptualization or ideation, symbolization and abstraction. Humans know not just this particular tree or this specific man; they also know the general about the specific realities. Thus, man can talk about the *treeness*, humanity, man, and good, and so on. All these are various instances of ideation and demonstrations of humans' capacity for universalization.

When the human mind captures reality, it does this according to human epistemic ability. The discourse about the possibility of God-definition question borders on the possibility of man's rational attempt to know or understand God. It gravitates on humans' ability to know God using humans' limited epistemic faculties. The stress is whether humans can understand God as humans and not as God knowing himself. All the same, this work is of the view that humans can attempt to define God. Such definition falls within any of the four definitional dimensions already outlined above: *via affirmativa*, *via negativa*, *via conjunctiva* and *via analogia*. Man can strive to define God by reference to what he thinks God is not. Man can equally make an effort to define him with reference to what he thinks he is. He can as well endeavour to define him by resorting to class comparison. But *via affirmativa* and *via conjunctiva* require *via analogia* as an indispensable complement. In this sense, humans attempt to define God by moving from positive human attributes, and predicate the same to God in a superlative degree. Obviously, the predicable human attributes in this context may be infinitesimally small. It may be considered as an apparently negligible facet of the reality. Yet, it does not follow from this that the attribute per se is insignificant. The relevance of a reality does not consist in its material quantification but rather subsists on its intrinsic quality. A thing can be of a magnificent quantity but of little quality compared with another of its kind, of the same genus, but of superior and compelling quality.

Therefore, granted that what is captured by the human intellect may be smaller than the actual object or reality existing out there, this does not vitiate or destroy the authenticity of captured or realized being in question. Even though it is not the totality of the reality in question, yet, it offers what can be regarded as the epistemic or the ontological DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) of the reality under consideration. It implies that just as the DNA can enable a scientist have an in-depth interpretation of a reality when thoroughly analyzed, the captured aspect of a reality can guarantee an inquirer a similar interpretation of a given reality. The knowledge under dispute in this perspective is not comprehensive of the reality under discussion. Nobody has ever succeeded in grappling with the exhaustive knowledge of any reality whatsoever. Every reality has a "yet" and a "not-yet". There are certain aspects of realities that are known and there are likewise certain facets of them that are yet to be known. That is why philosophical inquiry is never a concluded issue but rather something in *fieri* (in the making). Human investigative nerve stands the chance of being atrophied in the instance where man claims to have arrived at the apogee of knowledge. For instance, Hegel thought that by positing absolute spirit he has achieved the

height of philosophical inquiry only for his thought to be critiqued by philosophers after him. Hence, the attributes of realities, just like DNA of animal species is inking into the nature of realities. From these attributes further investigations into the comprehensive nature of realities are feasible.

The implication of the above statement is that God-definition question is not a *fictio-mentis* (mental image). Of course, this work had earlier hinted that it considers the existence of God as a presupposition and as datum. Therefore, the argument as to whether or not God exists is outside the scope of this work. Rather, the thesis is whether from the attributes of this presupposed God, humans can define God. So this intellectual discourse sustains that God-definition question is not only possible but analogically demonstrable. From the divine attributes, it is possible to graduate into a probable definition of God. It also admits that no singular quality or attribute is comprehensively exhaustive of God; instead each provides a useful and indispensable aperture into a better assessment of God-definition issue. The divine attribute can be divided into three: entitative, operational and transcendental attributes respectively.

The entitative attributes have their originating locus from the "God's being as *Esse per se* or *aseitas* (self-existence)". (Iroegbu, Pataleon, 111). It includes: simplicity, infinity, unicity, incorporeality (supra-spatiality), immutability, eternity (or supra-temporality), impassibility, immensity, ubiquity (omnipresence), omnipotence (infinite causality or sovereignty), omniscience, infinite truth and infinite goodness. On the other hand, operative attributes discusses the immanent activities of God in the world. This embodies: infinite intelligence, voluntariety (will), causality (consciousness, enjoyment, immanence, wisdom, conservation, and concurrence), freedom, personality, eternal law (government) and providence. Finally, the transcendental qualities of God deals with the general attributes of being but applicable to God in superlative degree. Involved here are: distinctness, exemplarity (similarity), intelligibility, delectability and order - beauty. (Ott, Ludwig, 30-48; Iroegbu, Pataleon, 123). Notably, the divine attributes outlined above are analogically derived *via affirmativa*, *via negativa* and *via conjunctiva*.

## **Mercy in General**

The word mercy can be conceived from various perspectives. For instance *Dictionary.com* views it from five standpoints, which include:

Compassionate or kindly forbearance shown toward an offender, an enemy, or other person in one's power; compassion, pity, or benevolence: 2.The disposition to be compassionate or forbearing: 3.The discretionary power of a judge to pardon someone or to mitigate punishment, especially to send to prison rather than invoke the death penalty. 4. An act of kindness, compassion, or favor: 5.Something that gives evidence of divine favor; blessing. (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/mercy>).

The nuances above show that the concept 'mercy' is a very broad term that is applicable to many fields of life. Thus, it has political/legal, psychological, theological, philosophical as well as social dimension respectively.

From legal perspective, mercy is conceived against the backdrop of clemency administered by an authority to a subject as a way of tempering justice with mercy. In his discourse on the prerogative of the executives, Locke underscores the idea of the prerogative that is due to the executive to enable him extend clemency to those areas where law may be silent; provided they are for the good of the society. Thus, he writes:

Many events may occur in which a strict and rigid adherence to the laws may do harm; ... so the ruler should have a power to mitigate the severity of the law and pardon some offenders. Since the purpose of government is the preservation of all as much as may be, even the guilty should be spared when this will do no harm to the innocent... The word 'prerogative' is the name for this power to act according to discretion, for the public good, without the support of the law and sometimes even against it. (Locke, 59-60).

Legal conception of mercy, however, presents mercy as an impersonal quality that does not stem from the nature of its administrator. It negates that mercy ought to constitute "...the willingness to help those in need simply because they are in need. (Juliana M. Casey, 538).

The true nature of mercy is made clearer by a recourse to its etymological derivatives: *chesedh* (according to the Old Testament Hebrew bible: Exodus 34:6; Tobit 12:8; Psalm 103:8) and *elos* (as seen in the New Testament Greek or Aramaic bible: Matthew 5:7; Luke 15:11-32; Luke 6:36; Ephesians 2:4; 1 Peter 2:9-10). For biblical experts, *chesedh* "is an untranslatable word (Barclay, William, 103). Likewise the New Testament use of the Greek word, *elos*, to translate mercy in most English versions of the bible, is broader than the word mercy suggests.

(McKenzie, John L, 567). "*Chesedh*, mercy, means the ability to get right inside the other person's skin until we can see things with his eyes, thinks things with his mind, and feel things with his feelings." (Barclay, William, 103). St Augustine treats it as "... a certain feeling of compassion in our hearts, evoked by the misery of another and compelling us to offer all possible aid..." (Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* ix, 5). Consequent upon St Augustine's position, Aquinas argues: "Mercy takes its name "*miser cordia*" from denoting a man's compassionate heart [*miserum cor*] for another's unhappiness." (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 30. a. 4. Available in: <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa>). This implies that *chesedh* is not just a superficial identification with the person in need of mercy. Rather, the one who shows mercy first enters into the world of the recipient of mercy in order to give mercy not just on the basis of legal requirement but as he would expect to be treated if found in the same circumstances.

Viewed from the above outlook, mercy can be defined philosophically as that quality which enables its possessor to penetrate the 'world of the other as the other.' The administrator of mercy in this context does not see the recipient of mercy from an impersonal viewpoint. Instead, he considers the said recipient as 'his other self.' It is on this note that Pope Francis in his discourse on the *Year of Mercy* writes:

In this Holy Year ... Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism! (Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, 15)

The one who administers mercy can possess it in two senses: as an 'inherent' or 'ontological possessor' or as a 'participatory possessor.' The ontological possessor has mercy as his 'intrinsic or innate attribute. Occupying the ontological domain is God, for he possesses mercy as part of his essence. On the other note, man is characterized as a participatory possessor of mercy. Thus, whereas God shows mercy as a part of his desire to com-penetrates and incarnate in the world of man, alternatively humans demonstrate mercy to others as a participation in this self-diffusion of God's personal identification with humans. This indicates that mercy is not only an inbuilt quality but also relational in character. Mercy (*chesedh*) "is expected as a normal part of good human relations." (McKenzie, John L, 565). In

this sense, mercy is understood as a term whose meaning is clearly manifested in its concretization in real life. Its theoretical value is justified and authenticated by its relational character. Actually, in real life situations, no human being can dispense with mercy. Consciously or unconsciously, human beings infringe the right of others. A person who is a victim of such circumstance can turn out to be the perpetrator of the same or similar act in future. This makes every human being, a potential dispenser and recipient of mercy, respectively. With such disposition, the language of mercy is inevitable for sustained human relationship in the society. Each, hence, finds himself immersed in an intractable thrust towards identification with others in their various life situations; the apparent relationship deadlock notwithstanding. This implies that commitment to mercy towards each other is a *sine qua non* and indeed one of the bedrocks of every human society.

### **Mercy and God-Definition Question**

Among the operative attributes of God is the principle of causality which comprises divine concurrence and others. By virtue of divine concurrence, God sustains in being all that exists through his principles of justice, mercy, love, to name but a few. But this poses the question of whether the divine attribute of mercy is a depiction of strength or weakness in God. Thus, the discourse on the reality of mercy in this section focuses on two areas, namely; mercy as a depiction of lack on the part of God, and mercy as revelatory of God.

### **Mercy as Depiction of Lack on the Part of God**

At face value, the concept 'mercy' evokes a sense of weakness on the part of God. Often, it is taken as a pejorative term employed by humans to illustrate the possibility of weakening God through human's plea for compassion. In logical parlance, this approach to mercy not only ensnares humans in the fallacy of *argumentum ad misericordian* (appeal to mercy), but subsequently entraps God in ontological compromise: a devaluation of God's impeccable and incorruptible attribute of justice. God, in this context, is conceived as a supra-sensible reality whose nature is characterized by justice and unreserved readiness to execute prescribed punishment on offenders irrespective of the human beings involved. This line of thought has no place for the weakness of man or human frailty. God envisaged on the above note, to think of him as possessing such a quality as mercy is considered as a devaluation of his supremacy. Such a tolerance is taken as God stooping to the level of creatures; not in the sense of incarnation, rather in the light of the reduction of the divinity of God in order to accommodate humans and their frailties.

The ascription of mercy to God as above adumbrated, amounts attachment to him, a quality that is extraneous or extrinsic to his nature. Mercy is understood here as an attribute that is accidentally annexed to God, of which dissociation of such quality from him portends no danger. In fact, to detach mercy from God is like robbing him of a quality whose inherence in his nature conceals rather than reveals his nature. Hence, dissociation of mercy from God is regarded as an exercise in de-concealment of the Concealed-God.

When mercy is conceived as an extrinsic quality in God, its detachment from God is considered as of no substantial effect to the nature of God. This implies that a comprehensive definition of God does not necessarily require the inclusion of his attribute of mercy. God-definition question is resolvable in this parlance without reference to his attribute of mercy. A journey into an exhaustive appreciation and understanding of God does not essentially require such features which are more to the province of mortality, of which mercy is a typical instance in this consideration.

### **Mercy as a Definition of God**

Mercy is considered in this viewpoint as a strong attribute of God. It is no longer a mark of negation or denigration. Alternatively, it is a depiction of God's omnipotence. On the strength of the above background, the Collect of the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time of the Year depicts God's mercy and forgiveness as revelatory of the beauty and the almightiness of his power. (Sunday Missal, 341). Poetically, William Shakespeare articulates the above idea thus: "The quality of mercy is not strain'd, - it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest, - it blesseth him that gives, and him that takes: 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes The throned monarch better than his crown." (Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene I). In Aquinine rendition: "It is proper to God to exercise mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way". (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 30. a. 4. In. Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, no. 6). The proof that mercy is a strong quality is evident from practical life experiences. In practical life, it is easier to retaliate than to show mercy. It is more difficult to repress or sublimate anger than to revenge. Therefore, God's possession of mercy perfectly and even points to his supremacy than to his weakness. This sense of understanding mercy considers it as a quality that is intrinsic to God's nature. As an intrinsic quality in God, mercy is considered a positive quality. It is no longer a derogatory attribute applicable to God as a diminution of his omnipotence. Rather, mercy is taken as an attribute which

characterizes God substantially. The idea of the intrinsic nature of God's mercy further identifies mercy as an inseparable reality about God. Being an inherent quality in God, mercy constitutes one of the definitive attributes of God. To be God is to be merciful. To conceptualize God comprehensively, his attribute of mercy can never be bypassed. To imagine a God devoid of mercy is to think of a defective God, who per se is not God. The moment God can be conceived without mercy; the implication is that what is at issue is no longer one and the same God but rather a deformed version of God. Possibly, it can be described as a contextual God: a definition of God that can never subsist as an exhaustive notion of God. The resultant effect is that it does not make sense to think of God without mercy.

As a dynamic being, God expresses himself in action: action reveals being. Thus, as a being, God cannot but manifest his quality as a merciful God. A being which has natural appetency for a particular type of life cannot but exhibit that tendency. So, the idea of mercifulness on the part of God presents him as a being who cannot but exhibit mercy; not out of weakness, rather as an inescapable living-out of his nature as a merciful God. To live authentically, is to diffuse his mercy to other beings in need of it. Not to diffuse such equals a relapse into inauthenticity. Here God is caught-up in the inescapable web of inevitable tendency to diffuse his mercy. But the phrase 'being caught up in the web' as used here is not descriptive of limitations on the part of God or the existence of another being superior to God impelling him to operate outside his nature. Instead, it denotes the fact that as mercy constitutes an essence of God; he cannot but exist essentially as a merciful God. In this sense, mercy defines God not as his singular attribute, but as one of his other attributes.

Identification of God as mercy raises the question about the place of human mercy vis-à-vis God's mercy. The question ranges from whether human mercy is identical with God's mercy, to whether it is superior to it, or vice versa. Nevertheless, the identification of God as mercy reveals the character of God as a being that does not only possess mercy to the fullest in the sense that there can be a time when he can be deficient of it. God is mercy per excellence. Mercy is a quality that belongs to God's nature essentially. Human mercy is only a participation in the divine mercy. What this means is that the concept, "mercy" is only applicable to man analogically. The depth of human mercy is dependent on the degree of man's relationship with God. Just as the closer an iron or a metal piece is to fire the hotter it becomes; correspondingly, the closer human beings are to God, the more they are diffused with the mercy of God; ipso facto, the

more they are endowed with his mercy. Conversely, the farther they are from God, the farther they are from his mercy. In sum, human mercy is only man's expression of the depth of divine mercy in man's life. As created and contingent beings, humans possess mercy extrinsically whereas God possesses it intrinsically. Whereas mercy and humans are separable, mercy and God are inseparable. One can envisage a man devoid of mercy but to think of God outside mercy is incongruous with God's nature. In fact, it is not heretical and atheistic to affirm that one of the things God "cannot do" is to cease from being a merciful God. Nonetheless, the phraseology "cannot do" does not entail limitation on the part of God, but rather a depiction of the immutability of divine essence of which mercy is one of them. Part of God's nature is mercy. So, 'a divine nature bereft of mercy' is incompatible with God's nature.

From the foregoing, to deliberate on the issue of God's mercy, implies a tacit or an explicit discourse on the recipient of this diffused God's mercy. The recipient in this perspective is no other reality than human beings. To God belongs fullness of mercy. And for humans to maintain a recipient status in this divine-human engagement indicates a lack on the part of humans: the direct beneficiaries of divine mercy. This shows that humans' lack of mercy defines God's fullness of mercy. In the God-man mercy question, the osmotic pressure of mercy is on the side of man as an entity desirous of mercy which he fundamentally requires for fulfillment. This follows the law of diffusion which is always from the area of higher concentration of the object to be diffused to the region of lower concentration of the same (object). On the other hand, God necessarily imparts mercy in consonance with his nature which cannot but diffuse mercy. Hence, one can authoritatively surmise that God's mercy is desired as a remedy for its fundamental lack in humans. Correspondingly, it is given as an inescapable aspect of divine nature whose part of his essence is mercy. As a living reality, God cannot but live out his nature as mercy per se: diffusing and dispensing this nature on humans who cannot but desire mercy as a complement to his being. Therefore, it is not superfluous to affirm that mercy defines God; ipso facto, lack of mercy in humans defines God as a being with plenitude of mercy.

Mercy as a definition of God cannot be conceived as an extensive definition of God. Rather, it constitutes an aperture to God-definition question. It provides a necessary and inevitable initial point for God-definition question. Through the in-road created by such vision of God, an inquirer can proceed to a fuller definition and comprehension of God. Viewed as one of the gateways to God-

definition question, mercy is considered as "a" definition of God and not "the" definition of God. The articles "a" and "the" are carefully chosen to drive this message home. What is implied in this context is that God-definition question can also be approached from other dimensions, depending on the attribute one wants to emphasize. Each of these apertures is but a perspective to understanding God. None can subsist as a fundamental definition of God. Yet no definition of God can claim perfection if any of the attributes is sidelined. Each of the apertures can be compared to the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) of living organisms: though imperfectly since each DNA is capable of furnishing one with fundamental information about the individual concerned; whereas each attribute only gives an aspect of the reality.

### **Mercy and Justice**

The pertinent question to ask here is whether the idea of God's mercy vitiates his divine justice or whether it complements it. The justice of God demands that the good are rewarded and the bad punished. Each receives proportionate reward or divine retribution respectively. Not to mete out such divine justice signals a lack on the part of God and denial of justice on the side of humans. Such is echoed especially when the justice expected is in view of some positive effects. But the aspect that posits greater problem is a situation where justice expected is punitive. It becomes a problem when, instead of receiving a presumed desired punishment, a culprit ends up, either evading it completely or receiving a blessing in return. Under such circumstance, people are usually baffled and mistake the reversal of divine justice as a kind of weakness on the part of God. However, God can be ascribed with the above appellation, where justice of God is considered in isolation from his other attributes, especially, that of mercy. In such a case the reversal of the divine justice order has no just cause. That means God ought to abide by his principle of justice for him to subsist as a just God. By this principle, a culprit can never be acquitted and discharged without appropriate retribution. To act otherwise is to toe the line of favouritism and partiality which are inimical to the nature of God.

However, in a situation where the justice of God is treated alongside his other attributes, the concept of divine justice is accorded an in-depth understanding, and in fact, a new coloration. Such scenario obtains when a guilty pleas for God's mercy. At this juncture, the application of divine justice appears impaired. But it must be admitted that such conception of God's justice is only a product of misunderstanding of the working of his justice. But this frosty idea is dissipated when one realizes that just as the justice of God demands that the guilty is

punished, the plea for mercy makes certain justice requirements on God. At this point, mercy and justice of God intermingle. Hence, the possibility of reversal of the divine justice arrangement takes its bearing from the plea of mercy on the part of the supposedly recipient of divine justice. The justice of God prescribes appropriate divine reward or punishment to whoever is concerned. In the event the individual concerned solicits for clemency, it is incumbent on God to respond accordingly. What is fundamental in this context is that the justice of God is applicable to both the derailed and the repentant wrong doer. Thus, justice it is to reward right behaviour and punish bad ones. Similarly, injustice it is to resist truly repentant person and still punish him as if he has not done away with old habit. This implies that God is required to administer justice whenever somebody performs an act that requires such; be it engagement in good acts or disengagement in bad through prior plea of divine mercy.

The crux of the above argument is that should somebody perform an act that attracts divine justice of punishment, justice demands that God responds accordingly. Again, whereby a person pleads for mercy, justice again demands that God responds accordingly. This shows that divine mercy does not vitiate divine justice, rather it complements it. It helps to unveil it. When God exercises his divine mercy, it is always an illustration of his justice. What is central in each case is justice. Divine justice it is when God punishes somebody for wrong doing. Likewise, divine justice it is when God retracts his punishment on somebody on the ground that the person concerned pleaded for mercy. Not to respond to such plea for clemency is not inconformity with divine nature. It is hence congruous to affirm that mercy and justice corroborate and complement each other; and so, are never contradictory.

### **Conclusion**

It is indubitable that attempt at exact definition of any aspect of reality is always fraught with difficulties. This perplexity is more when the reality in question is a supra-sensible reality. The above difficulties and perplexities notwithstanding, to deny outright definition to any reality on the ground of the conflicting views of academics or on the basis of the obscurity of the reality under discussion is unsatisfactory. Even the knowledge that a reality is complex or obscure is itself a kind of definition of the reality: even though it could be regarded as a definition in the loose sense of the word. Likewise, to stick solely to contextual definitional approach to reality, and in effect, deny the possibility of objective definition of the same reality is also logically indefensible. Of course, even the affirmation and endorsement of relativity in definition is itself an attestation of the feasibility of

objectivity in definition. One cannot affirm the objectivity of his 'relative standpoint' and go further to dispute the objectivity of others' 'objective standpoint' without enmeshing himself in an inescapable epistemological web of self-contradiction. In the same vein, this work is of the view that mercy as a definition of God is not isolated and insulated from the above definitional quagmire. Granted there are many who hold contrary position with regard to the possibility or the impossibility of 'God-definition question' on one hand, and definition of 'God as mercy' on the other hand, this work affirms that God can be defined from the purview of mercy. Mercy in this context is conceived as an inherent attribute of God which belongs to his operative attribute of divine concurrence.

As an intrinsic quality in God, mercy is constitutive of God's nature. It is not an accidental modification of God or something extraneous to the nature of God. Rather, mercy is a quality whose separation from God impairs the rational conception of God fundamentally. To talk of God outside the context of mercy is akin to conception of humanity that is devoid of the capacity for rationality, auto-transcendence, self-consciousness and the likes. Similarly, detachment of 'mercy' from the overall attributes of God deprives him of one of his defining qualities.

Definition of God in the context of mercy neither diminishes nor denigrates his divinity. God as mercy defines the superfluity of his divine nature as a being with superabundance of compassion. It equally situates man as a being who is not only deficient in mercy, but also as one who stands in need of being perpetually fed from the continuous overflow of God's mercy. In a nutshell, God's mercy is sufficient not only to upgrade humans' basic lack of the same (mercy), but also to accommodate man's lapses. These fundamental lacks and lapses negatively contrived often push humans to retire into revenge in place of forgiveness, tolerance and understanding. In contrast, when the lacks are positioned in their proper perspectives, they constitute catalysts for the reversal of the aforementioned negative imports of the pejorative conception of mercy.

There is the possibility of com-penetration of divine justice and divine mercy; a marriage which is often misconstrued as an evidence of compromise on the side God. Under such entanglement, mercy dissolves into a justification of justice of God in diffusing the proposed retribution for offence committed by a repentant offender. In this light, the previously mistaken marriage of justice and mercy of God now graduate as an illustration of his impeccable application of his divine

justice. Thus, justice constitutes the fulcrum around which both mercy of God and his justice revolves. Consequently, justice demands that the good be rewarded. Justice also requires the bad is penalized. The same justices demands that repentant person be pardoned and not punished as already prescribed. Pardon of that nature is never an expression of weakness on the part of God but rather a triumph of his principle of justice and a demonstration of his omnipotence.

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