Jim Unah on the Ontological Difference between Spirit and Spirits in African Metaphysics: An Appraisal.

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Abstract

This work is motivated by the confusion associated with the understanding of the concept of Spirits and spirits in the African context. The aim is to critically analyze Jim Unah's idea of the ontological difference between Spirit and spirits, with the view to clearing the confusion noted here. With the method of textual analysis, Unah's views of the ontological difference between Spirit and spirits is critically analyzed. It is shown that Unah discusses the meaning of Spirit and spirits saying that these words are the same thing as Being and beings, Force and forces. He made reference to Kagame's African philosophy as well as Placide Tempel's account of Bantu philosophy, where Spirit and spirits are referred to as Force and forces. Bantu philosophy, for instance, captures Spirit as NTU, the being in process from which all other beings gain existence. Unah argues that the ontological difference between Spirit and spirits, Being and beings, Force and forces, lies on the fact that while Spirit, Force or Being (NTU) is a process, spirits , beings or forces refer to entities. His establishing this difference is a welcome development as it highlights the major difference between African metaphysics and Western metaphysics. Our position in this work is that scholars of African philosophy should endeavour to consider this difference when comparing African philosophy with Western philosophy.

Keywords : metaphysics, African metaphysics, Ontology and African Ontology

Introduction

The human mind is an amazing and essential tool that academic disciplines require to handle issues that affect mankind. Metaphysics as one of the core branches of philosophy that is concerned about man and the world. Unah (1996: 46) states that metaphysics arises from wonder. He says "By ontological wonder we mean an extraordinary kind of perplexity. This extraordinary kind of perplexity about nature of things (i.e. man and the

world) in turn gives rise to fundamental questions. A reflection on the baffling features of man and the world- the ontological wonder –gives birth to philosophy." According to Olatunji (2019:168) "The point must be made here that every system of meaning is a product of the mind, the soil upon which metaphysics grows. Metaphysics is unavoidable." Unah (1996 : 62) concurs by saying " …in philosophy one is ever doing metaphysics either directly or indirectly, affirmatively or negatively, constructively or destructively, for a repudiation of metaphysics is not possible without a metaphysics of some sort."

African metaphysics is a branch of African philosophy that studies the African notion of reality and existence. Ontology occupies a central position in African metaphysics. Different worldviews present different perspectives of reality. It shows that their socio-cultural backgrounds influences their worldview and reality is perceived differently. Culture affects the worldview of people as it provides the norm , values and identity of a people. Africans are people with great regard for culture which involves sets of traditions and beliefs. Metu (1987 :50) in defining a people's worldview says that " A people's world-view has been described as a complex of their beliefs and attitudes concerning the origin, the nature, structures, organizations, and interaction of beings in the universe with particular reference to man."

The aim of this work is to present Jim Unah's ontological difference between Spirit and Spirits in African metaphysics. African metaphysics is the branch of African philosophy that studies the reflections of reality by Africans. According to Omoregbe (2007 :22),

> The whole of reality in African traditional philosophy is constituted by a hierarchy of beings of two categories, namely, spiritual beings and corporeal beings. These two categories of beings exist in two corresponding kinds of world, namely the spiritual world and corporeal world. These two worlds although different in nature are not completely separated, for there are links and interactions between them. Those living in the spiritual world are interested in, and often intervene in the affairs of those living in the corporeal world. There are frequent contacts between the inhabitants of the two worlds.

Africans like the Westerns reflect on fundamental issues that concern them. Philosophy is a reflection on human experiences. It is an activity that entails this act of reflection that uses human experiences as raw materials. As observed by Omoregbe (2007 :4), " Human experience is thus the source of the reflective activity known as philosophy. This experience could either be man's own experience of himself (subjectivity) or his experience

of the world around him (objectivity)." In order to approach this subject matter, we have divided this work into three sections. Section one deals with the nature of African metaphysics. The second section is on Spirit and spirits as forces. Section three centers on the ontological difference between Spirit and spirits.

Conceptual clarifications

To give appropriate focus to this work, it is necessary to clarify the following key concepts of Metaphysics , African metaphysics, Ontology and African Ontology.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is one of the core branches of philosophy. Metaphysics is the study of *reality* (i.e. Being) in its most primary and general character, in contradiction with its outward and particular form (Ogbinaka , 2013 : 56). Etymologically, it is derived from two Greek words *meta* meaning (after) and physika which means physics or nature and put together forms *Meta ta physika* meaning "after the things of nature". The word 'metaphysics' was originated by Andronicus of Rhodes who classified Aristotle's works as *ta meta ta physika biblia* which means "the books that come after the [books on] physics" under the title Metaphysics. This was after the death of Aristotle. Aristotle called his work "First Philosophy", "Theology" or sometimes "Wisdom". Onyeocha (2009:153) elaborately asserts,

> Metaphysics is the science of being , its attributes its principles and its categories. It is , in other words, that part of philosophy that is concerned with the basic issues of reality, existence, personhood, and freedom versus determinism . Aristotle calls it "first philosophy" because it concentrates on the first or most basic issues of life. It grapples with such questions as what reality is, whether it is limited to the physical , material world alone, or whether reality could exist in the mind and what difference there is if any, between reality and appearance, etc.

Metaphysics is divided into four branches namely : Cosmology, Cosmogony, Ontology and Theodicy. Cosmology studies the structure of the universe. Cosmogony is the studies the universe's origin. Ontology is the study of Being. Theodicy is the study of God's nature and existence.

African Metaphysics

African metaphysics is a branch of African philosophy that studies the African distinctive notion of reality and existence. The African like his western counterpart is interested in the world around him and ponders about what accounts for reality. Idjakpo (2002: 153) defines

African metaphysics as the summation or totality of solutions found to the problem of reality or it may be regarded as the African man's questions about reality and the answers which he gives to the question. African metaphysics is therefore the African man's reflection on his reality.

Ontology

Ontology is the branch of metaphysics that deals with all that concerns being, its nature and attributes. Ontology is the study of being as being which is to understand being for what it is. Unah (2016: iv) says that "Ontology –the study of being- is the analysis of the structure of the world of man in all its complexities, in all its contradictoriness, in all its porousness and precariousness." Eboh (2011:77) puts it thus, "Ontology is the branch of metaphysics that deals with the nature of being . It studies the nature of being in general, especially essence and existence, how being is one but at the same time many, the general principles of being: causality, act and potency, matter and form, the principle of individuation, the transcendental attributes of being, etc."

In metaphysics, the problem of being is a foremost question that transverses different periods in the history of philosophy. This problem of being was first proposed by Parmenides of Elea, a pre-Socratic philosopher who attempted to explain the nature of reality. For him, whatever is, is being. Being must be one, eternal and unchanging. Unah (2016 :7) observes that "The word "Being" is much the same as the word "Reality" in traditional metaphysics. So, for Parmenides the terms "Being", "Reality" and "the One" refer to the same thing." Being is therefore whatsoever that is in existence and is best described than defined. Al-Farabi (1985: 91-115), An Islamic scholar puts it thus:

> Being cannot be defined , for it is self-evident, fixed in the mind, precedes all other concepts and is the simplest of all. It is the simplest because to define a concept, is to analyse its content , and Being, having the least content, resist all efforts to resolve it into simpler thought elements. To try to define it by words, serves only to make our minds attentive and directed to it, and not to explain the concept which is clearer than the words by which it is defined.

African Ontology

African Ontology is a branch of African metaphysics. It refers to the African metaphysical beliefs about the nature of being in the African world. The African worldview is the way Africans perceive the world. According to Ekwunife (2011: 25), "Africans view the world as an intricate co-penetrating and highly structured two realities – the visible and invisible. The spiritual beings inhabit the invisible world which has the Supreme Being, creator of

the worlds as the head and next to Him are divinities, other spirits and ancestors while the visible world is occupied by man. These two worlds are distinct yet there is no dichotomy between them." Ebelebe (2009:1) states about the two realms that they both "exist in an organic unity with no sharp distinction between the two" and "the beings and forces in these two realms interact with one another". There exists an interconnectivity between the beings. At the center of these two worlds is the human being who benefits from both worlds.

The Nature of African Metaphysics

African metaphysics is a branch of African philosophy that studies the African distinctive notion of reality and existence. It is the African way of interpreting and interacting with beings and reality. In defining African metaphysics, Unah (1996:338) says "African metaphysics as the thinking on reality which is predominant among Africans. We can say that African metaphysics is the study of (the) African man's thinking about what constitutes reality". African metaphysics is divided into two branches namely Ontology and cosmology.

a) Ontology - The Ontological branch of African metaphysics, just like as in the western metaphysics, addresses reality and being . The African's concept of being covers every aspect of his life with the Supreme Being as the highest being. Iroegbu in his *Uwa* Ontology defines being as *Uwa* which means the 'world.' He says, My perception of reality in its different aspects is synthesized in my perception of *Uwa* . *Uwa* defines being. It summarizes being and beings for me. It englobes all beings in the bosom of *Uwa-being*. Iroegbu (1995:338). Being is the totality of African's perception of reality. For Iroegbu, Being is belonging as a thing is, because it belongs. He holds that To be is to belong, To belong is to be. Iroegbu (1995 :374). He believes that what a being is, is its activity of perching (belonging) and he gives an illustration using the Igbo principle of *Egbe bere Ugo bere* which is translated to mean let the kite perch, let the eagle perch .To perch means to hold on to something and the act of perching is the process of acquiring being. To perch therefore is to become. The African just like other people asks questions about himself and the world. The western concept of being which can be traced to the early pre-Socratic philosophers who each sought for the primal element. Parmenides of Elea in his search for the nature of reality became the first to conceive the concept of Being where for him whatever is, is being. This problem of Being transverses the different periods of Western philosophy.

This explanation of reality led to many metaphysical schools of thought like the idealists, materialists and some philosophers viewed reality in one primal element while others saw

many primal elements as reality. Aristotle (2001: 1028b4), in his First Philosophy which was later called Metaphysics addressed this question of being. For him, the theory of being states that a substance is the foundation of anything in the world and everything depends on it. According to him, "What is being? is just the question, what is substance. In other words, he saw a substance as the basic element of the world. The African metaphysician believes in a unifying element that makes things happen. This unifying element permeates every sphere of his life. As Unah (1996 : 340) puts it, Hence the African asks in a humble tone of voice. "What is this ultimate cosmic principle by reason of which things come to be?" He simply seeks to know the ultimate principle which permeates every nature whatsoever. Another feature in African Ontology is Force. Force refers to that which connects everything, physical or spiritual. It is believed to be embedded in being by the Supreme Being.

b) Cosmology –. The Cosmological branch of African metaphysics has to do with the origin and nature of the universe. African cosmology refers to the way the universe is viewed by Africans. Africans believe in the existence of two worlds: physical and spiritual. These worlds have distinction yet they influence and interact with each other. In the (African) Igbo cosmology there are two worlds namely, the physical and spiritual worlds. These worlds are considered one continuous interacting life. The physical world is the dwelling of man known as *Elu uwa* while the spirit world is called *Ala Muo* . Nwala (1985:30) in describing the two worlds says:

> The universe is basically structured into two main inter-related parts according to Igbo traditional ideas. (a) *Eluigwe* –sky (b) *Elu-uwa* – Earth (Also called *Ala*). These two are believed to be equal in extension. Apart from this, there are two realms or order (or spheres) of existence. (a) *Ala Muo*- the spirit World or supernatural order (b) *Ala madu* - the human world or visible order.

For the African there exist a vital force or Spirit that permeates everything in nature. Spirit or vital force is primordial in African conception of reality and it aptly describes the Being of every nature or that which inheres in all natures as some theories in African metaphysics agreeably illustrate. (Unah, 1996 :340)

Spirit and Spirits as Forces

In African metaphysics, spirit and spirits are aspects of being and being itself is regarded as force . Unah (2002 :265) states that the "African concept of being is force; that what is, whatever form is endowed with force; that mind and matter have never been apart; that forces interact, intermingle and interpenetrate into one another in an egregious sense"

Unah (340-341) explains that theories in African Metaphysics are founded on being as force. He writes that :

> Scholars in the positive study of African philosophy are in agreement that the African metaphysical concept of being is force or Spirit. Alexis Kagame, a Bantu of Rwanda origin, presents a concept of being that is built on a theory of force. According to Kagame there are four ontological categories of Force which condition all reality. Whatever exists, whatever can be thought of is conditioned by one of these categories which he calls Muntu, Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu.

Unah says that each of these categories of being identified by Kagame described certain aspect of reality such that all reality can be subsumed under them. A look at what Unah is saying shows that in African metaphysics, spirit is the same thing as force or being. Therefore, the concept of Spirit and spirits implies that there are categories of being and force. Thus the African metaphysician can talk of Being and beings, force and forces, as well as spirit and spirits. In further explaining the categories of being, Unah notes that category Muntu is the force which all forms of intelligence (be it God, gods, the living and the dead) partake. Category Kuntu is the force which permeates all non-intelligent nature such as plants, minerals, tools, etc. which as "frozen forces" await the bidding of intelligent forces (the Muntu) for their activation. Hantu is the category of force which makes events and motion of all sorts possible. Category Kuntu, the fourth, is the force which governs all modalities such as beauty, ugliness, laughter, and other emotions. In each of the four categories there is the determinative stem, NTU. (Unah , 1996 :341)

According to Unah (1996:341) Spirit, Force or Being is different from spirits, forces or being, this signifies the ultimate universal principle which makes it possible for things to be. He writes that Kagame called this principle NTU. In his words,

> NTU is the ultimate cosmic principle or Force which permeates every nature. NTU, is Force or being itself. NTU is the ultimate determinative Force of all forces. NTU permeates everything including particular forces. While beings are forces NTU is Being or Force itself. NTU is that Force in which beings or forces have their being.

Unah further states that NTU expresses the relationship between Being and beings on the one hand, and the possibility of being on the other. Hence, he writes that in other words, NTU expresses, for Kagame, the interaction and interpenetration of forces on the one hand , and the dynamic character of reality on the other. Unah (1996 : 341) says that NTU as the

cosmic universal Force does not have a separate and independent existence from its occurrences. He quotes Jahn's rendition of Kagame as speaking of NTU thus ,

> NTU is the universal force as such, which , however, never occurs apart from its manifestations. Muntu, Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu. Ntu is Being itself, the cosmic universal force, which only modern rationalizing thought can abstract from its manifestations. NTU is that Force in which Being and beings coalesce.

Unah continues to say that NTU is not something that is over and above the things that are, nor can it stand apart from beings that are. According to him, NTU cannot be isolated and identified or revealed as a being. NTU permeates with equal primordiality as Muntu, Hantu, Kintu and Kuntu. NTU is that Force which makes being be. Unah (1996:342) notes that NTU is not God, but that "point from which creation flows" However, he argues that to suggest that NTU is God is to reduce it to the status of an entity or a being. Hence, he maintains that NTU is not a being but the all-pervasive principle which makes being be.

On the relationship between NTU and God, Unah makes reference to Placide Tempels' idea of hierarchy of beings in Bantu philosophy. According to him, Placide Tempels says that the Bantu metaphysical notion of being is force and that being for the Bantus is conceived within the category of forces. Unah observed that Temples also holds concerning Bantu philosophy, that Force is the reality which exists in everything and in every being in the universe. He goes further to quotes Tempels (1959 :49) as saying that "Force is that reality by reason of which all beings have something in common, so that the definition of this reality may be applied to all existent forms of being".

According to Unah, Tempels holds that in Western thinking in order to arrive at this reality or force, which is the common denominator of all beings or which is identical in all beings, one must of necessity eliminate the particularizing traits of the individual beings. Furthermore, Unah observes that Temples proceeds to show that within the framework of Bantu ontology, the all-embracing element which permeates all elements and all forms of being is force. According to him, it is this force, this reality which conditions all experience that metaphysics studies.

The Ontological Difference between Spirit and spirits

The ontological difference between Spirit and spirits refers to the difference in the mode of and level of existence of Spirit and spirits. The question here is does the Spirit have a different mode of existence from spirits? And does its existence at different levels compared to spirits? In answering this question, Unah makes reference to Kagame's four

categories, that is , Muntu, Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu, with NTU as the determinative stem. He also refers to Tempel's Bantu ontology where he talks of Force as the Being of beings, and in Anyanwu's Theory of African world-view where he speaks of vital force or forces as existing in an inseparable continuum of a hierarchical order. In addition, Unah (1996:348) makes reference to Idoniboye's concept of Spirits, where he talks of Spirits as unembodied. He argues that from these references, there are sufficient indications that there is an ontological difference between Spirit and spirits, Force and forces, Being and beings.

Unah further argues that the thinkers referred to above, and indeed the average African already operates with a consciousness of reality of the ontological difference between Spirit and spirits. He notes that it is this ontological difference that Heidegger claimed had been woefully omitted in the classical ontology of the West. According to him, the ontological difference for Heidegger is the difference between Being and beings. The ontological difference for us is the difference between Spirit and spirits or Force and forces. Unah points out that it is around this questions of the ontological difference that the main problem of metaphysics revolves. According to him, the nature of metaphysical thinking predominant among people depends on whether or not they treat Spirit as a spirit, which he sees as confusing a process with an entity. It is then obvious that for Unah, the ontological difference between Spirit and spirits consists in the fact that while Spirit is a process, spirits are entities.

In demonstrating his view that the ontological difference between Spirit and spirits lies in the fact that while Spirit is a process, spirits are entities. Unah (1996 : 348-349) again makes reference to Kagame's theory as well as to Temples' account of Bantu philosophy. He writes that:

> Beginning with Kagame's theory of NTU as the determinative stem of the four categories of Muntu, Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu under which all reality in whatever form or essence are subsumed, we can distinguish a universal process at work in every nature or in every aspect of reality. NTU is not an entity but that which permeates everything. NTU is a nonentity, a no-thing which makes entities or things to be what they are.

Unah explains the implication of Kagame and Tempel's account to be that the level of existence of Spirit is higher than that of spirits, its mode of existence is such that it permeates spirits such that the existence of spirits already presupposes the existence of Spirit. Hence, Unah notes that NTU (Spirit), is not something independent of these four categories under which every form of reality, namely, Muntu, Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu,

are brought. In his words, NTU is a process that exhibits itself in aspects such that if what we did not know yesterday were to be manifested today as something , it would still be a participation of NTU. NTU is not this thing or that thing but what makes a thing be, such that whatever can be thought , encountered, imagined, dreamed, hallucinated or wished is a manifestation of NTU. (Unah, 1996:349)

Unah maintains that NTU is that no-thing or nothing, because it is not an entity, from which things spring. So NTU is Force itself, Being itself or Spirit itself. As regards Tempel's account, Unah notes that Temples has spoken of Force as Being itself in Bantu ontology. He says that Force is the supreme principle of individuality, plurality and unity. According to him, Force finds expression in practically everything that is. Force permeates everything, every thinking, every idea, every utterance, every event and every preoccupation. Force is the enduring, sustaining process that makes things possible. Unah (1996:349) also observes that in Anyanwu's theory of African worldview, everything – animals, spirits, plants, minerals, the living and the living-dead, stones , etc., have vital forces. He continues to say that vital force is what makes anything be. According to him, every aspect of reality or every perspective has a vital force. Unah further hints that for Idoniboye, Spirit is unembodied or disembodied in its pure state. He states that as unembodied, Spirit is not a thing or any entity or as an aspect in the same way that a spirit can be an entity, thing or aspect of reality. According to him, a spirit partakes of Spirit in its pure state, Spirit as unembodied, in its pure state, is the cosmic process that makes things be.

According to Unah (1996:350) we speak of Force itself as distinct from a force or forces, Spirit as distinct from a spirit or spirits. He maintains that a spirit is an entity the same way a force is an entity, but Spirit itself or Force itself is not an entity but a process or possibility of being. According to him, there is a difference between a possibility of being, between what makes a thing be, and a thing. In his words,

> From the way force itself or Spirit itself is treated by thinkers in African Metaphysics it is clear that they think reality as a process, as dynamic rather than as a fixed entity that is static. Thus , where the ontological difference is made clear, reality is treated as a process. But where the difference is omitted, reality is frozen into a static entity.

Unah (1996 :351) expresses the view that we can also witness the ontological difference between Spirit and spirits from the idea of hierarchy of being in Bantu philosophy. He argues that although bantu ontology insists on the polyvalence, inevitable presence, of forces in everything, it also insists that such forces are in a hierarchy and are constantly with one another. According to him, in Kagame's analysis of four categories of Muntu,

Kintu, Hantu and Kuntu, we see that forces are of different classes and essence. Category Muntu, for instance, represents forces endowed with intelligence. Forces in the Muntu category are apparently higher in virtue of their being vested with intelligence. It is in this category that you find God, human beings, ancestors and the likes. 'Muntu' is not primarily man, but what the English , according to Tempels, would call 'person', with the connotation of vital force endowed with intelligence and will. Hence God is regarded by the Bantu as the 'great Muntu'. Unah (1996 : 352) notes that this meant , according to Temples, that God is the Great person. The great, powerful and reasonable living force. In relation to other forces, says Tempels, God is one who increases force. He is the creator and sustainer of the universe. And for the first founder of the different clans in the world. God is the supreme force who communicates vital force. Unah also says that after God comes the first fathers of the different clans. These arch-patriarchs were the first to whom God communicated his vital force, with the power of exercising their influences on all posterity. They constitute the most important chain binding men of God. They are spiritualized beings, beings belonging to a hierarchy, participating to a certain degree in the divine Force. (Temples, 1965: 61-62)

Unah continues to say that next to the hierarchy are the dead members of the community in order of their ancestry. These, according to Tempels (1965: 66) form a chain in the hierarchy of forces through which the " the elders exercise their vitalizing influence on the living generation".

The living human beings follow in rank to the dead. After the human forces which operate on the scene come other forces such as animals, plants and minerals. Within a class in the hierarchy, be it ancestral, human or animal or plant, there is also a sort of sub-hierarchy as some humans or animals or plants are superior to or stronger than others. As stronger force normally influences the weaker and the "latter is more or less at the service of the former" (Unah,1996 : 349)

Unah concludes that in fact, even inferior beings, such as inanimate beings and minerals, are forces which by reason of their nature have been put at the disposal of men, of living human forces, or of men's vital forces.

Conclusion

The ontological difference between Spirit and spirits showcases the distinction between Western metaphysics and Bantu conception of reality. While the western man conceives the transcendental notion of being by divorcing it from its attribute, 'force', the African, exemplified by the Bantu, makes no such distinction. This is because 'Force' for the Bantu,

is a necessary, inseparable ingredient of being. Being for the Bantu, cannot be defined without the concept 'Force' or Spirit. Both are inextricably bound together. Without the element 'force', 'being' cannot be conceived. That is also why while the West entertains a static conception of being, the African, especially the Bantu, maintains a dynamic view of reality.

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